

### ***The National Privacy Phone-In***

Since its establishment in 1975, the ALRC has been committed to improving community access to the law reform process by encouraging individual members of the public and community groups to make submissions on current inquiries.

With the growth in use of email and the internet, the ALRC has been increasingly flexible about the form in which submissions are made—for example, many submissions now arrive in the form of a short email or a message submitted through the Commission's website.

On 1 and 2 June 2006 the ALRC took this process a step further by inviting members of the public to telephone the office to provide their views and experiences of privacy protection in Australia.

This initiative—the National Privacy Phone-In—attracted widespread media coverage, which prompted an enormous community response. In total, the ALRC received 1,343 responses by telephone and via the website.

The majority of respondents (73%) nominated telemarketing as their main concern. This was possibly influenced by the fact that a number of media stories about the Phone-In focused on telemarketing as a possible concern. Other prominent issues raised by callers (who were able to nominate more than one concern) included: handling of personal information by private companies (19%) and government agencies (9%); protection of privacy in the internet age (7%); identity cards and smart cards (7%); and problems accessing and correcting personal information (7%).

The people who contacted the ALRC provided valuable stories about their experiences of privacy breaches and protection. The views expressed include support for both extending and reducing the scope of privacy protection:

'For almost two years I have been receiving text messages on my mobile phone in relation to nightclubs in Melbourne. I have never given my number out to these organisations and don't know how they obtained it. I have called on about three separate occasions to ask to have my number removed.'

'I worry about privacy laws becoming too restrictive and making access to information difficult especially in an emergency.'

'My previous real estate agent gave out my personal details (including phone number) to another person in a block of units who wanted something from me. The harassment that resulted forced me to move from the block.'

'I do not appreciate the fact that I can not access or speak to anyone about family finances, bank accounts, etc in my husband's name even though I am the one who manages the finances, etc for my family.'

'I am concerned about the invasion of privacy which occurs on a regular basis in medical and dental practices (and probably elsewhere). On a number of occasions I have been in a busy waiting room of a medical practice, when the receptionist takes a call from a patient, and in a voice that is audible to all in the waiting room, names the patient and proceeds to give the results of medical tests over the phone (e.g. 'Yes, Mrs Jones, we have received the results of your bowel cancer tests and they are positive').'

