

GST challenge on legal aid

The Minister for Justice, Michael Tate, has challenged the Coalition to exempt legal aid from its Goods and Services Tax.

Senator Tate made the challenge during a speech to open the *Legal Aid, Legal Access* conference in Sydney last week.

He said the tax would deny about 16,000 low income earners access to legal aid.

Senator Tate said the additional cut of \$10 million in legal aid funding proposed by the Coalition would mean

the loss of funding for 8,000 cases.

He said legal aid was available to the most financially disadvantaged with the current threshold so low that two-thirds of people who qualify for legal aid are Social Security recipients.

"I believe the rule of law is in jeopardy if a class of economically deprived citizens have not got access to the legal advice necessary to survive in our law-ridden society," he said.

Senator Tate said if the GST was implemented it would be devastating for legal aid commissions, legal

practitioners and clients.

"The funding cut would represent a repudiation of the various State and Territory agreements with the Commonwealth for funding the commissions and may well lead to the States taking the opportunity to reduce their own funding to match the Commonwealth reduction.

"It [the GST] represents an assault on all the principles of social justice which have underlined the efforts of those in the legal aid community for almost 20 years," Senator Tate said.

Traditional opening of legal year

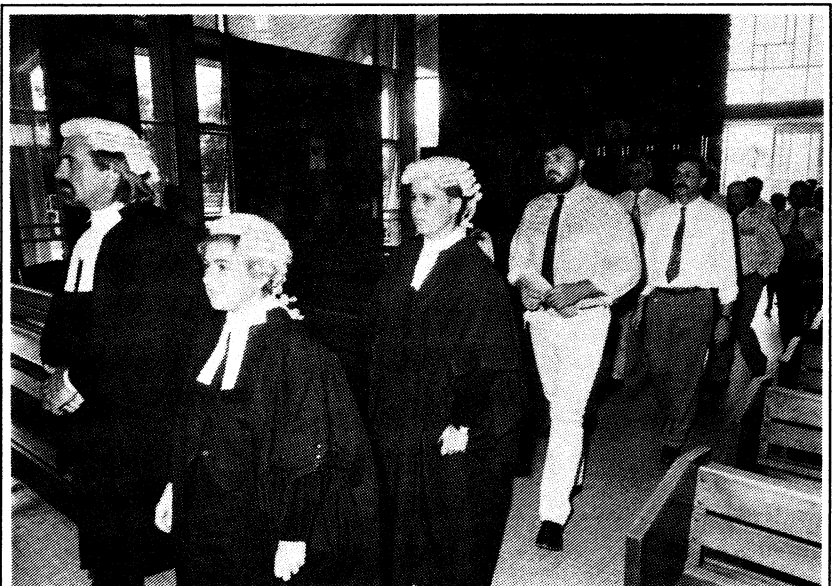
The legal year opened with the traditional church service in both Darwin and Alice Springs last month.

In Darwin an ecumenical service put together by a small group of practitioners was held at the Uniting Church. The service was conducted by the Moderator-Elect, Ron Brandt, and readings were presented by the Chief Justice, the President, John Stirk, and Vivien Holmes from the Department of Law.

The Chief Justice hosted drinks at his home for practitioners and guests in the afternoon.

In Alice Springs the service was held at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Church.

The Alice Springs service was followed by a luncheon at the Sheraton Hotel addressed by Jim Howard, the Chief Executive Officer of the new Office of Courts Administration.



The procession into Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Church in Alice Springs. Photo courtesy of the Centralian Advocate.