

# Room to improve

Law Week has been and gone and can only be described as a success.

Mr Justice Drummond was very well received in both Darwin and Alice Springs and his addresses to school and uni students were much appreciated.

Law Week will become a most prestigious event if we can continue to have guests of Drummond J's calibre.

I take this opportunity to thank all the practitioners who donated their time, the Law Week Committee and particularly ABC Regional Radio, 8-DDD FM and HOT100, all of whom made a significant contribution to public awareness of the law and of Law Week.

The outstanding success of Law Week was probably the Lawline, a 008 number for free legal advice.

In six hours our

46 calls, the breakup of which was: Family Law 19, Financial/Probate/Small Claims 10, Property 5, Medical 2, Commercial 2, Conveyancing 1, Civil 1, Criminal 1, Industrial Relations 1, dodgey 1. Most calls were from Darwin with a couple from Alice Springs and Gove.

The advice/talkback sessions offered by the radio stations were excellent because they appealed to different listening audiences and, no doubt, different types of legal problems and, again, I thank those stations for their support.

I recently attended a meeting with the Executive Officer, Jim Campbell, convened by the Law Council of Australia to examine the image of the profession and to combat increasing media attacks on solicitors, particularly in southern states.

The meeting identified the issues which result in negative publicity for the profession and agreed that where criticism was just, the practices or rules involved be changed or reviewed in the public interest.

Where criticism was unjust, it was mainly the result of lack of understanding and the meeting resolved that it was up to the profession, as a group, to market itself aggressively. One of the greatest problems identified was complaints resulting from a lack of communication skills. The meeting agreed that Law faculties should introduce communication subjects in undergraduate courses.

A proposal to establish a national Code of Ethics was endorsed.

Positive initiatives were then identified, namely ADR, *pro bono* work, legal aid, legal expenses insurance, litigation funds, the Australian Advocacy Institute, national admission,

uniformity of laws and speculative or success fees ("contingency" fees being negative because of the association with the US experience).

A working group was established to prepare a strategy for national implementation.

The Society issued a joint media release with the Attorney-General about an amendment to the Public Purposes Trust Act which would allow for a \$200,000 seeding grant to establish the Legal Aid Contingency Fund.

Moves such as these are positive and reflect well on the profession. Obviously, they also alleviate some of the hardship suffered by litigants who cannot afford to fund actions.

I am hopeful that an amendment can be presented to parliament in time for the next sittings.

Whilst in Canberra, Jim also attended a meeting to thrash out the differences between the Law Institute of Victoria and the Law Council of Australia (reported in the last issue of *Balance*).

At the end of the meeting, differences between the bodies were not resolved, so a task force was established to examine the structure of the Law Council and the way it represents the two branches of the profession.

It will also review the Law Council's Operations and will meet three times before it reports to a special general meeting of the Law Council on 1 August.

In the interim, the Law Institute of Victoria has been asked to defer its withdrawal from the Law Council for two months pending the recommendations of the task force.