

Speaking fearlessly

Amidst the chaos of the her last day in office and the public release of the Anti Discrimination Commission's report into Aboriginal interpreter services, outgoing Commissioner Dawn Lawrie JP took the time to talk to *Balance*.

For someone who has worked steadfastly for human rights and equal opportunities, it is fitting that Ms Lawrie's final project was the inquiry into the provision of an interpreter service in Aboriginal languages by the Northern Territory government.

The report of the inquiry concludes that "failure to provide the (interpreter) service is discriminatory, harsh, unjust and unreasonable."

"People's lives are being affected on a daily basis by the inability to communicate the most basic and pressing needs", said Ms Lawrie.

As she sees it, an Aboriginal interpreter service "is a fundamental right being denied Aboriginal citizens in the territory yet being offered to other citizens. It can't be allowed to continue."

She hopes the release of the report will be the catalyst leading to the establishment of the interpreter service.

Ms Lawrie spoke to *Balance* about the other achievements of her office in the six years of her term.

"I believe the Anti Discrimination Commission (ADC) has worked hard to make the Anti Discrimination Act generally known. We have put in place effective procedures to help solve injustice for all areas of the community.

"I have a saying: what used to be 'not fair', is now 'not lawful'. That's a big difference in the way the community deals with discrimination.

Judging by the flowers that arrive at her office during the interview, and the thank you phone calls made live to her on 8DDD, Dawn Lawrie was recognised and supported strongly by the community in her work.

She remains committed to the work of the ADC, stressing the important role of the Commission in providing an independent arena for dealing with discrimination.

"The Northern Territory is pretty egalitarian.

However, in light of fact that there is only one house of parliament here, with no other avenue for checks and balances, it is absolutely vital that we have an independent authority like the ADC to deal with injustice.

"There is a big difference between the ADC and the ombudsman for example, in that the ADC can make orders, and not just take complaints.

Ms Lawrie expressed strong support of legal practitioners who speak out against discrimination.

"It behoves the legal profession to speak out fearlessly when they hear of any injustice. I appreciate many members of the judiciary and legal profession have spoken out on a range of issues before. It is vital for the profession to continue to do so. We need to bring home the need to be ever vigilant against injustice."

She also recognises there is room for improving the accessibility and fairness of the legal process.

One of Ms Lawrie's pet 'hobby horses' is her frustration at the exclusive nature of the language used in the legal system.

"Legislation should be in plain and intelligible English. Legislation is the law of the land - for everybody to understand. The rules of the Court need to ensure the proceedings are understandable by the public."

Ms Lawrie also believes court facilities need to be more 'people friendly'. "Child minding facilities - that are taken for granted in other areas - are sadly lacking in the courts. This is another example where the fairness of the courts could be improved upon."

When asked what advice she has for her successor, Ms Lawrie responded with a characteristic laugh; "keep a sense of humour."

Ms Lawrie will take up a position as Goodwill Ambassador for the territory with the Australian Council for Reconciliation. The Law Society wishes her well in her new post.



Government inaction "inexplicable": Report

The Office of the NT Anti Discrimination Commission has called on the government to ensure the establishment of an Aboriginal Interpreter Service is accorded highest priority.

The call comes with the release of a report produced by outgoing Commissioner Dawn Lawrie, critical of the NT government's inaction over the issue to date.

"The failure to provide a service is inexplicable, given the number of recommendations provided to government over the last 20 years, and the election commitment in 1994 to establish such a service."

The Report makes the following recommendations:

- that the service be centrally administered through the existing Northern Territory Interpreter and Translator Service.
- that the delivery of the service be coordinated through the existing centres in the regions.
- that funding be provided to those centres both for the coordination and delivery of interpreting services and for continuing training and support for interpreters and clients (the latter may be on a cost recovery basis)
- that the office of Aboriginal Development initially be given the brief to coordinate the implementation of those recommendations endorsed by government.
- that as part of their core responsibility the media coordinators attached to territory health services develop a public education program targeting both users of the service and Aboriginal communities on the role of interpreters.
- that all NT government agencies be required to report on their use of the service in their annual report to parliament.