

Judge Irwin, Chief Magistrate

**Launch of Cooktown Courthouse
extension and refurbishment
Tuesday 2 December 2003, 12.45pm**

172 Charlotte Street, Cooktown

(Acknowledgement of distinguished guests)

It is with great pleasure that I accepted the Attorney-General's kind invitation to accompany him here today to participate in the launch of the new-look Courthouse at Cooktown and I take this opportunity to thank him publicly for this.

The Department of Justice and Attorney-General is to be congratulated on the completion of this much-needed extension and refurbishment to the Cooktown Courthouse – which is part of a larger project that has seen a number of court houses in the Far North Queensland region receive improved facilities.

Magistrates Courts play a significant role in the community. The vast majority of all civil and criminal matters in the state jurisdiction are dealt with in the Magistrates Court. The Magistrates Court also deals with

- domestic and family violence protection matters,
- applications for child protection orders,
- small claims,
- minor debt claims,
- coronial inquests,
- peace and good behaviour orders,
- traffic matters including applications for work licences, and
- the list goes on.

The circuit magistrate from Cairns visits Cooktown once a month to conduct court to deal with these kinds of matters.

Many of Queensland's current and more-recently-retired magistrates spent some time working from the Cooktown Magistrates Court Office in the dual role of Clerk of the Court and Acting then-Stipendiary Magistrate. In 1996, the Cooktown Magistrates Court Office evolved into a QGAP office. As part of the Queensland Government Agent Program, the staff at the Cooktown Courthouse give assistance and advice in relation to virtually any problem or query concerning Queensland government services.

The staff, other visiting professionals and members of the public will now be afforded much more comfort. The size of the building has more than doubled. Growing from the original four rooms – and I would imagine the verandah was also a much-used place for conducting interviews and the like – to now nine rooms with holding cells, rooms for solicitors to conduct interviews, facilities for victims of domestic violence.

I expect that the visiting magistrate will also appreciate the provision of chambers. The day of a magistrate, and in particular a magistrate on circuit, can be very demanding and there is often a need to be able to find somewhere quiet to think.

Additionally, the clerk who accompanies the magistrate on circuit will be grateful for the modern court recording facilities that have been installed.

With the work that has been done, this building has been brought into line with the standard expected of today's justice system. There is much more room in all areas of the courthouse - public waiting areas, registry and courtroom. The staff have their own facilities and amenities, there are public toilets and covered public waiting areas, there are disabled toilets and provision for disabled access. Security has been improved, which will be appreciated by all who use the new court house.

In completing this extension and refurbishment, the Department of Justice has also ensured that the building's colonial heritage has been retained. All involved are to be congratulated on this achievement. It is a design which I expect will greatly suit the tropical climate of Cooktown.

And the improvements to the Cooktown courthouse are to continue. As the Attorney-General has advised, closed circuit television facilities are to be installed. The use of this technology to enable child witnesses and sexual assault victims to give evidence from a separate room in the court is of benefit not only to those witnesses but to the overall operation and effectiveness of the justice system.

In an article which Magistrate Robert Spencer kindly provided to me, recently-retired Magistrate Lawrie Mellors had reported that on the 10th of April in 1885, the Cooktown Town Council carried the following motion:

A wire be sent to the Premier in Brisbane requesting him to supply arms, ammunition and a competent officer to take charge of same, as the town is entirely unprotected against the threat of a Russian invasion.

A cannon gun (cast in 1803), three cannonballs, two rifles and one officer were sent.

While perhaps a little humorous today, this goes to show that our regional communities are, and have always been, dependent on the state for the provision of basic community necessities. It seems the state government was able to meet those needs in the late 19th century as it has met today's needs with the provision of this new courthouse. We have certainly moved a long way from the days that the Clerk of the Court here was also Harbour Master and equipped with a rowing boat for that purpose, and fresh supplies arrived only once a week.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to be present at the opening of this newly improved building. I am sure that all who use it will find it a great enhancement to the previous structure and the temporary offices that were used during the construction.

Thank you all.