

## **ADDRESS AT BUSINESS LEADERS FUNCTION FOR WOMEN'S LEGAL SERVICE, GADENS LAWYERS, FRIDAY, 17 AUGUST 2012**

Premier; Chief Justice; Attorney-General Bleijie; Shadow Commonwealth Attorney-General, Senator Brandis; Senator Waters; the Hon Jane Prentice MP; Judge Searles, Magistrate Strohfield; Mr Paul Spiro of Gadens Lawyers; country song-woman, Maroochy; Elders past and present of the Turrbal people; and friends of the Women's Legal Service.

One in three Queensland women is affected by violence and at least one in four Queensland children has witnessed violence against their mother or step-mother.<sup>1</sup> In 2010-2011, the Women's Legal Service helped over 4,000 women who were either victims of domestic violence or involved in complex family law disputes.<sup>2</sup> But the Women's Legal Service alone cannot ensure that women and their children are safe, respected and valued in a fair and just Queensland community.

Oppressed women are more likely to take steps to positively change their lives and their children's lives when they see that capable women are playing their rightful role in all social institutions and at all levels: policing, the legal profession and judiciary, government and public company boards, and the legislature. In that respect, I note with pleasure the presence of Chief Justice Diana Bryant, Senator Larissa Waters and Jane Prentice MP. Thank you for taking on your challenging roles in public life and for your support tonight.

Despite your efforts, women still have a way to go. In my patch, the bar and the courts, it is notable that only 20.3 per cent of members of the Bar Association of Queensland are women. I have recently completed my annual report to Chief Justice de Jersey. When it comes to Court of Appeal appearances by barristers, last year only 10.3 per cent were women. This percentage has remained steady for the past three years but it is a slight improvement on 6.2 per cent four years ago. That is why, for

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<sup>1</sup> See Queensland Government, *A Queensland Government strategy to target domestic and family violence 2009–2013: Consultation Report* (2008) 8–12. See also Queensland Government, *For Our Sons and Daughters: A Queensland Government strategy to reduce domestic and family violence 2009–2014* (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Women's Legal Service, *Annual Report: 2010–2011*, 16; Private Communication, Natalie Davidson, 17 August 2012.

some years now, the Bar Association of Queensland, many firms of solicitors and the Queensland government have embraced the equal opportunity briefing policy. Be assured, there is nothing radical about this policy. It requires only that those adopting it, when briefing barristers, consider whether the best barrister for that particular case is a woman. It also requires an annual review of the number of women barristers being briefed. It costs nothing but it does make a difference. I commend it to you all.

I also noted in my report that past shortcomings in the performance of the State Reporting Bureau's interaction with the Court of Appeal have been overcome and it is now performing effectively in this sphere. As Chief Justice de Jersey noted yesterday, the Bureau's accurate and timely recording and transcription of Queensland court proceedings is essential to the administration of justice. It is central to the appellate process which I oversee. Consideration is being given to replacing it. The judges and the legal profession must be closely consulted before any decision is made. The public must be assured that any replacement or major restructuring will provide at least as efficient and as cost effective a service as at present, and without any unforeseen and unwanted consequences. Otherwise an essential pillar of the judicial arm of government will be undermined. This evening's focus is raising awareness about a community legal service and its lawyers and staff who directly help Queensland's most vulnerable, ensuring clients' voices are heard in gaining access to the rule of law. I think we all understand the present need for economic restraint, and the many demands on the tightened public purse. But it is important to also remember that every dollar spent on existing community legal services, and the Women's Legal Service is but one, saves many more public dollars later. All our community legal centres are a sound investment for the government and the community.

I have long been a member of the Women's Legal Service and am honoured to speak tonight. I sincerely thank you, Premier, for the \$250,000 per year commitment over the next three years. It is a lifeline, not just for the Service but for the many Brisbane women and children whom it helps. It also means the Service can re-open its regional and remote legal advice line for isolated Queensland women.

Demand for the Service is growing. It needs more than even this generous Queensland government support. It needs the support of you all, either as individuals or through the organisations you represent. Donations are tax deductible. I urge each of you to do what you can financially. You can also help by building awareness within your employment and community networks about the Service, its work and the devastating and insidious effects of domestic and family violence. It hurts not only its primarily women and children victims, but the whole community which bears the economic burden of increased health costs and lost productivity.

This evening marks the forging of even stronger support links between the Women's Legal Service and government, the legal profession, the universities, service organisations like Zonta and the Indigenous community. Together we can ensure the Women's Legal Service continues to assist vulnerable Queensland women and children, to the benefit of us all.