

OPENING REMARKS*

THE HON PHILIP RUDDOCK MP, ATTORNEY-GENERAL OF AUSTRALIA

Introduction

Good morning and welcome to the Second National Pro Bono Conference. I regret I am not able to be with you in person today.

In one form or another the legal profession has been involved in pro bono work for many centuries. I can well recall some 30 years ago as a young solicitor with my partners in our Sydney practice undertaking work for indigenous people as part of our community responsibilities.

So I want to take this opportunity to make it clear that like my predecessor I am a strong supporter of the legal profession being involved in pro bono work.

It has been two years since the First National Pro Bono Conference was held in Canberra. At that time our understanding of pro bono issues was quite limited. We knew that a large amount of pro bono work was being carried out.

We knew that there were lawyers across the country that were donating their time and expertise. And we knew that the profession was committed to helping disadvantaged people have access to legal representation.

But at the same time there were many things that were not fully understood about pro bono work. In particular, we did not know how to harness and make the most of all that effort. It seemed that pro bono work was being undertaken in a fragmented and unstructured way. And there was a need for strategies that would facilitate and nurture the pro bono services that were on offer.

Progress in Pro Bono

Well it's now two years on - and I understand that real progress has been made.

The Government established the National Pro Bono Task Force to examine the key issues affecting pro bono work in Australia. And arising from the Task Force's recommendations the Government has provided seed funding to establish the National Pro Bono Resource Centre.

The Centre is a significant achievement. The Government is confident that it will continue to make an immense contribution to the development of pro bono services. It will promote work throughout the legal profession. It will assist and support pro bono service providers, providing much needed resources and information. And it will promote

* via video

the value and importance of pro bono law to community organisations and to the general public.

The success of the National Pro Bono Centre depends on its ability to work with the legal profession to identify and remove barriers to pro bono work. I have been advised that the Centre has been consulting with lawyers and organisations around the country.

With the right combination of goodwill, hard work and cooperation, the Government is confident the Centre will succeed in its endeavours and that the delivery of pro bono services will be greatly enhanced.

Importance of Pro Bono and the Work of the National Pro Bono Resource Centre

It is important that we recognise and appreciate the vast amount of pro bono work that goes on.

In 2001-02 it was estimated that 2.3 million hours of pro bono work was carried out. This represents an enormous personal, financial, economic and social contribution by the legal profession.

We have now reached a point where many firms no longer regard pro bono as a 'sideline activity'.

It is becoming clear that the effective delivery of pro bono services is enhanced by law firms and community legal organisations working together in a collaborative and cooperative way.

Protocol on Pro Bono Conflicts and Government Work

An important issue the Centre is looking into is pro bono conflicts and Government.

It is important that governments address the perception amongst lawyers that providing pro bono legal assistance in matters against the Government makes it less likely they will be asked to undertake Government legal work.

It is my belief that, subject to the usual conflict of interest rules, it is irrelevant whether or not legal providers have acted pro bono for clients against the Commonwealth.

Future Directions for Pro Bono

Of course pro bono is just one part of the delivery of justice in Australia. As well as pro bono work, legal aid, community legal services and fee for service all contribute to our justice system.

They all meet different demands and address different circumstances.

The Government has been a strong supporter of pro bono and has actively assisted with the establishment of the National Pro Bono Resource Centre.

But Governments can only do so much.
Ultimately, the Centre's future is in the hands of the legal profession.
It must meet the needs of its stakeholders.
And it must be able to draw upon them for its ongoing funding and support.

The commitment of major legal firms to pro bono work has its counterpart in the business world where companies are recognising the need to take on social responsibilities.

To support and encourage this, the Prime Minister has established a Community Business Partnership. The Partnership's purpose is to develop and promote a culture of corporate and individual social responsibility. Like pro bono work, community business partnerships contribute to community cohesion and a better Australia.

Conclusion

In one form or another, the legal profession has been carrying out pro bono work for centuries, as I've observed earlier.

I assure you that the Government will continue to recognise the profession's pro bono effort. And I am confident that the provision of pro bono services in Australia will continue to be promoted and enhanced through the dedication of individuals, firms and organisations.

This conference is a great opportunity to share experiences and contribute to discussions of this important topic.

Welcome - I am sure you will enjoy your time here at the Second National Pro Bono Conference.