

Ferae naturae by Maria Ceresa, Executive Officer

Whatever happens in the republic debate two things are for sure. One; our attention has been focused, even for a microsecond, on things national and two; there will be more room in our mail boxes for other junk mail.

A national focus is not all bad. The Northern Territory may be fiercely proud and independent but that doesn't mean we don't heed or need our counterparts down south or even in Queensland.

In fact as we move towards a travelling practising certificate and a national code of conduct, information exchange and cooperation between law societies will intensify and there is much the Northern Territory can gain.

This month's meeting of the Conference of Law Societies and the Law Council of Australia in Canberra reaffirmed this.

Take the GST for example. The Law Society has entered negotiations with the

Law Institute of Victoria to bring up an expert who can talk practical sense on the new tax. The intention is to run seminars that will show a practitioner in simple terms how to implement the system. At the moment there seems to be more questions than answers on the GST. It is envisaged our expert will have cut his or her teeth on the practitioners of regional and rural Victoria before coming north with an easy guide on collecting the tax and more importantly, when and where and how to apply for tax credits. Planning is under way for seminars across the Northern Territory and legal practitioners will be advised as soon as dates have been set.

Other matters of interest to the NT include the development of uniform practices on costs, the proposals for incorporation of legal practices in New South Wales and a proposed national legal



Maria Ceresa

quality framework.

National organisations are also extremely important when it comes to handling matters such as the High Court's recent decision on cross vesting and assaults on the independence of the judiciary.

This month the Australian Bar Association meeting in Canberra, attended by the Vice President of the NT Bar Steve Southwood, unanimously condemned mandatory sentencing regimes in the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

A 'meeting of meetings' - the 1999 Australian Legal Convention

Access to justice, tax reform, business and family law, evidence gathering in East Timor and court room technology were among the topics of discussion for the 460 lawyers who attended the Australian Legal Convention in Canberra.

To a backdrop of Floriade and spring warmth, lawyers gathered in a "meeting of meetings" and to hear addresses given by Australia's Chief Justice Murray Gleeson, Federal Attorney General, the Hon. Daryl Williams and outgoing President of the Law Council of Australia, Mr Fabian Dixon.

Chief Justice Gleeson warned the Convention of the consequences of a lack of legal aid funding on the justice system and litigants.

"The expense which governments incur in funding legal aid is obvious and measureable. What is not so obvious, and not so easily measureable, but what is real and substantial, is the cost of the delay, disruption and inefficiency, which results from absence or denial of legal representation. Much of the cost is also borne, directly or indirectly by govern-



Dr Gordon Hughes, the new President of the Law Council of Australia.

ments. Providing legal aid is costly. So is not providing legal aid," he said.

The Hon. Daryl Williams told the delegation there is a clear need for a new Court to take away a portion of the workload of the existing Family Court.

"The Government's goal of reducing the cost of litigation and delay cannot be achieved by appointing magistrates to existing federal courts. Similarly the alternative of appointing more registrars in the Family and Federal Court is also unsatisfactory as a long term solution."

Fabian Dixon spoke of the changes in the profession over the past two years, highlighting the impact of the information age on the justice system as a 'revolution' in court room and legal procedures.

The Australian Legal Convention coincided with the Law Council of Australia Annual General Meeting. At that meeting Dr Gordon Hughes, partner with the intellectual property group, Blake Dawson Waldron in Victoria, took up Presidency of the Law Council.



Federal Attorney General, Daryl Williams AM QC MP.