

Secretary's Overview

The Department's performance for the year 1996–97, as detailed in this report, was creditable both in terms of the significant outcomes of the commercial operations and the many advances made in relation to policy development. There was much interest during the reporting period in the outcome of the reviews of the Attorney-General's Legal Practice, the Australian Protective Service (APS) and Auscript, and the Government's response to the National Committee of Audit recommendations on the administration of bankruptcy laws.

In recognition of the importance of strong and effective leadership to the success of the Department, the theme of this year's annual Professional Leadership Conference was *Living the Leadership Model*. This built on the work of the first leadership conference held the previous year. Leaders within the Department have been asked to provide staff with a greater capacity to contribute, ensuring their work is both stimulating and enjoyable.

In recognition of the diversity of its workforce, the Department has continued its active role in relation to equality in employment programs during the year. In October 1996 the APS won the open category in the third Australian Public Service Equality Awards, with its workplace planning initiative *Changing the Culture*. The core Department was one of two runners-up in this category for its gender awareness initiatives, including the appointment of a special adviser to the Board of Management on gender issues and the establishment of a Gender Advisory Committee. In June 1997 a carers' room was opened in the Robert Garran Offices, enabling staff to carry out normal work duties while caring for a dependent.

The performance of the commercial operations of the Legal Practice was particularly notable in the face of the challenge of competition from the private sector in the legal services market. The high regard in which the Legal Practice is held by its clients is evidenced by the significance and complexity of matters entrusted to the Practice and by the survey results reported in the Review of the Legal Practice.

The Practice has pursued strategies to work with clients to identify their needs and expectations and to improve the quality of its legal services and products. During the past 12 months the emphasis has been to establish a network of trained Quality Sponsors and Facilitators and to begin the process of examining both our work practices and the way we deliver services and products to our clients. A Quality Council has been formed to provide national leadership and facilitation of the design and implementation of an overall Quality Plan.

Practice Development, which is responsible for driving the Quality Program, has put in place targeted marketing strategies through a focus on systematic collection and analysis of marketing information.

The Civil Law Division has been active in developing possible structural models for coordinating alternate dispute resolution services in family law. A discussion paper is to be released for public consideration in the latter half of 1997. Meanwhile, legislation providing a permanent mechanism to resolve the constitutional impasse in relation to the decision-making functions of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission was passed by the House of Representatives on 19 June 1997 and was introduced into the Senate on 27 June 1997.

The Criminal Law Division has made significant progress towards the implementation of a Model Criminal Code and the adoption of a cohesive and consistent body of criminal law, particularly following the proclamation of the Commonwealth Criminal Code on 1 January 1997.

Work undertaken by the Division has improved the effectiveness of cash transaction legislation, deterring and detecting tax evasion and money laundering. The Division has also been actively promoting international cooperation in combating criminal activity through the extension of mutual assistance and extradition arrangements.

The Information and Security Law Division represented Australia at the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) Diplomatic Conference on Copyright in Geneva in December 1996 and at other WIPO forums. The success of the Australian delegation was evidenced by the treaties adopted by WIPO being largely consistent with Australia's negotiating position.

The Division also represented Australia on the OECD Committee of Experts on Security, Privacy and Intellectual Property Protection in the Global Information Infrastructure and on the Committee on Cryptography Policy Guidelines. Both committees were chaired by a Deputy Secretary of the Department.

The Protective Security Coordination Centre (PSCC) contributed significantly to the success of visits by foreign dignitaries including the US President, Secretary of State and Secretary of Defence; the Chancellor, Federal Republic of Germany; the Japanese Prime Minister; the Vice Premier and Justice Minister from the People's Republic of China; and Foreign Ministers from Vietnam and Indonesia.

The PSCC has established an Olympic Security Coordination Unit and provides the Commonwealth member to the Olympic Security Working Committee overseeing security for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games.

The Insolvency and Trustee Service, Australia (ITSA) has pursued a strategy of enhancing public awareness of bankruptcy by providing the community with access to high-standard information on the causes of insolvency, alternative courses of action and insolvency practice. ITSA produced a range of pamphlets and conducted public information and education presentations in major cities and regional areas for the benefit of community groups, insolvency practitioners, financial counsellors and professional, business and financial institutions.

In 1996 the Government decided that Commonwealth legal aid funds should be used to provide assistance only for matters of priority under Commonwealth law and within priorities determined by the Commonwealth. This decision presented Legal Aid and Family Services with the difficult and sensitive task of renegotiating agreements with all States and Territories for legal aid funding arrangements to apply from 1 July 1997. Service level agreements were also negotiated with the National Association of Community Legal Centres for each centre funded by the Commonwealth, to enhance the quality of services provided by community legal centres.

The improved performance of Auscript has been particularly satisfying, given the climate of uncertainty leading to the Government's decision of May 1997 to sell Auscript. With declining demand for recording and transcription services, Auscript has achieved excellent results in marketing advanced technology, including voice recognition software and electronic publishing.

The Australian Protective Service (APS) is the first security organisation in the world to have achieved certification as a Quality Endorsed Company and to hold relevant licences as having complied with the requirements of ISO 9001/9002 in both its administrative and operational areas.

A survey of stakeholder perceptions undertaken for the APS in February 1997 indicated that the service enjoyed a good relationship with its clients. Police services and key agencies in the Commonwealth protective security network regarded the performance of the APS as 'very good'.

The Department, through the Office of Law Enforcement Coordination (OLEC), is playing a pivotal role in the National Campaign against Violence and Crime to provide the framework and strategic leadership, research and strategies for a safer Australia. Throughout the year OLEC coordinated the National Agreement on Firearms Control, which has resulted in over 400 000 illegal or restricted weapons being removed from the community and established uniform licensing and registration requirements.

The Support Group continues to provide reliable and timely advice in a range of areas including finance, personnel and property and targeted secretariat, ministerial, internal audit and general office services. A high level of reliance is placed on management information systems maintained by the group.

Effective information technology systems are critical to the efficiency of departmental operations and, in relation to the Legal Practice, to gaining a competitive advantage. Benchmarking comparisons with organisations of similar size and nature to the Department and other legal practices have confirmed that the Department's information technology services have achieved good to superior levels of performance and a high level of user satisfaction.

Following the Government's consideration of the recommendations of the Review of the Attorney-General's Legal Practice and the subsequent decision to create the Australian Government Solicitor as a statutory authority from 1 July 1998, work commenced on the administrative separation of the Australian Government Solicitor from other elements of the Department from 1 July 1997.

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