



National Association of Community Legal Centres Inc (NACLC)
Tel: 61 2 9264 9595
Fax: 61 2 9264 9594
Web: www.naclc.org.au

MEDIA RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Thursday 6 September 2012

NACLC is greatly concerned by Queensland Attorney-General Jarrod Bleijie's recent comments that money earmarked for community legal centres (CLCs) should not be used to pay for lobbying campaigns on political issues. ('Audit to look at where the legal buck stops' by Chris Merritt, The Australian 31 August 2012)

The Australian quotes Mr Bleijie as saying "Community legal centres should be delivering front-line legal advice ... [and] not participating in the public domain for government policy changes."

"CLCs have been providing free legal advice and assistance to disadvantaged people in Australia for forty years. With this 'front-line' experience, CLCs are ideally placed to advise the broader community and indeed government on the impact of laws and policies that affect our clients and communities." said Michael Smith, Convenor of the national peak body of CLCs, the National Association of CLCs.

CLCs always have and always will, identify and campaign for change when a law or policy is unfair. Speaking out when laws and policies adversely impact on disadvantaged people is a fundamental part of CLCs' holistic service delivery," Mr Smith said.

"With our close community connections and informed by our clients experiences, CLCs are in a unique position to identify injustice and campaign for ordinary Australians. We particularly advocate on behalf of people who are not in a position to speak for themselves," Mr Smith said.

Mr Smith explained, "Many of the targeted reforms led by CLCs have prevented legal problems occurring, saving major costs to individuals and government services. They have improved the effectiveness of law and policy, benefiting taxpayers and society. Most important, they improve access to justice.

The Australian Government has explicitly committed to allowing legitimate debate. The joint Commonwealth and State funding program for CLCs, (the Community Legal Services Program), distinctly allows Centres to engage in advocacy and public debate even if the Commonwealth is criticized.

If the Commonwealth recognises the benefits of CLCs' policy and law reform advocacy, what does the Queensland Government fear?"

Mr Bleijie's comment that CLCs should refrain from campaigning for reform sits oddly when he has himself endorsed community advocacy in relation to campaigns in his electorate of Kawana: (Community Advocacy Pays Off for Local Projects' Media Release 14 June 2011) and has even urged concerned constituents to "take it to the streets" ('Join Us in Hospital Protest, says Bleijie', Media Release 28 July 2009).

“CLCs advocate for everyone’s right to take issues of concern to them ‘to the street’ but not everyone always has the capacity to speak out, especially to governments and other big businesses: that is why CLCs will always be there to advocate for them,” said Mr Smith.

Ends

About NACLCL

NACLCL is the peak national organisation representing CLCs in Australia. Our members are the state and territory associations of CLCs that, together, represent around 200 CLCs nationally. NACLCL’s purpose is to assist disadvantaged and marginalised people in the Australian community obtain access to legal service.

For further information or to arrange an interview contact National Convenor Michael Smith 0421 437 883