

Opening of the ACT and Commonwealth Ombudsman Shopfront

Prof. John McMillan

Commonwealth & ACT Ombudsman

This year marks the 15th anniversary of the office of ACT Ombudsman being established in the Australian Capital Territory. The event coincides, fittingly, with the opening of a Shopfront for the ACT and Commonwealth Ombudsman, and the first public display of the new and refreshed logo for the office.

We are delighted to have been joined by special guests to mark these events. Mr Jon Stanhope, the ACT Chief Minister and Attorney-General, will officially open the Shopfront. Two of my predecessors – Professor Dennis Pearce (the first ACT Ombudsman) and Mr Ron McLeod – have also joined us. May I also extend a special welcome to members of the ACT Legislative Assembly, and to the large number of representatives from ACT Government agencies, and to community group representatives.

The opening of a Shopfront is an important event for the Ombudsman's office, symbolically as well as practically. Each year in the Commonwealth Ombudsman role we receive close to 20,000 inquiries and 10,000 other approaches, and in the ACT Ombudsman role we received a further 960 complaints and 700 other approaches. Most of those complaints, inquiries and approaches come through telephone, mail and increasingly via the internet.

The opening of a Shopfront is nevertheless an important step for the office in reaffirming that public accessibility is a vital aspect of our work, and that visibility is a key component of our relationship with the public. The opening of a Shopfront signifies the continuing commitment of the office to be active in the community in dealing with problems that people encounter with government. Many of the problems that come our way stem from communication difficulties occurring between members of the public and government agencies. In ways like this, symbolically and practically, the Ombudsman's office is committed to keeping a focus on the issues of visibility, accessibility and communication.

I am delighted at the attendance today of so many people from ACT Government agencies. Your attendance signifies that there is a sound working relationship between our offices that is equally important in nurturing a high standard of government service delivery to the public. Our belief is that the Ombudsman's office, in the work it has undertaken with government agencies in Australia for nearly three decades, has stimulated significant improvement in government administration – in areas as diverse as internal complaint handling, transparency, record-keeping, communication with the public, sensitivity to individual needs, and government accountability generally. By fostering improved government administration, we can strengthen the confidence that the community can have in the integrity and professionalism of government.

Finally, before introducing the Chief Minister, may I say that I am pleased that we can coalesce four events today – celebrating 15 years of the ACT Ombudsman, opening a Shopfront, displaying our refreshed branding, and launching the Dennis Pearce Essay Prize for ACT college students.

These events are linked as well to the role of the Commonwealth Ombudsman. Our belief is that both the Commonwealth and ACT Ombudsman roles are enhanced by the combination of both functions in the one office. For the ACT government administration, it has meant a connection to a system of external oversight with greater resources, experience, research capacity and tradition than would otherwise be possible in the ACT. For the Commonwealth, it has meant that the Ombudsman is exposed to a greater diversity of government administration, such as community policing, corrective services and public housing functions. It is especially valuable that the exposure to the community service functions of government occurs in the national office of the Ombudsman.

The ACT Ombudsman role is one that we take seriously. It is a role that we are pleased to celebrate today. I now call on the ACT Chief Minister and Attorney-General, Mr Jon Stanhope, to open the ACT and Commonwealth Ombudsman Shopfront.