



Speech by

Neil Roberts

MEMBER FOR NUDGE

Hansard Tuesday, 18 May 2004

LEGAL PROFESSION BILL

Mr NEIL ROBERTS (Nudgee—ALP) (5.59 p.m.): I want to make a very brief contribution on another very progressive reform introduced to this parliament by our Attorney-General. It follows on from some major reforms which were introduced into the parliament last year, and I specifically refer to the 2003 Legal Profession Act which, amongst other things, established a new independent office of the Legal Services Commissioner who will be responsible for receiving and managing the investigation of complaints against lawyers. It also introduced for the first time a requirement for barristers to hold practising certificates and also hold professional indemnity insurance. Additionally, the act facilitated Queensland's participation in the national legal professional scheme which covers issues such as the use of practice certificates issued in other states.

There is one particular issue in the bill that I want to make some positive comments about, and that is on the ability of lawyers to enter into multidisciplinary practices with other professions which I believe is a very progressive step forward and one which will be very well received by consumers. This one-stop shop approach, as it has been referred to by other speakers, has the potential to provide significant benefits not just to consumers of legal and other professional services but also for those legal practitioners who enter into those arrangements. I believe it will provide opportunities for significant cost savings in those practices in areas such as administrative support, bookkeeping and so on, and front office support. It has also been said that it is probably of more benefit to people in regional areas, but I believe that this type of practice will also provide significant benefits in city areas.

With the opportunities of such practices to save money, we look forward to those practices passing on those cost savings to consumers. It in fact will provide in some instances a competitive advantage to them, and one would hope that at least a share of that advantage will be passed on in terms of lower prices for some of their services. For practices that do enter into these arrangements, the bill does provide additional protection to consumers. For instance, legal practitioners in those services would be responsible for the standards of all legal services provided by the practice and additionally will be ethically responsible for the conduct and suitability of other non-legal partners who will be offering other types of services. Customers must also be given full disclosure of the services being provided and the person providing those services. Some additional regulations will be developed prior to the implementation of those particular provisions.

I also want to make a very brief commentary on the contribution that many solicitors and lawyers in fact make to the community in a range of areas. There is a tendency at times to criticise the legal profession for some of the stances it takes on particular issues, but I know of many people in the profession who do in fact give a lot back to their local communities in what is referred to as pro bono work—in essence, they provide free legal services. I particularly want to recognise those legal practitioners who work week after week in a local free legal service in my electorate, the Nundah Community Centre Legal Service, which provides free preliminary advice to constituents on a range of matters. I have had the opportunity since I was elected to refer to this service many people who simply could not afford the up-front fees that might be required to get some basic legal advice or indeed those who just wanted a little bit of

basic guidance and may not have had the confidence or knowledge of how to approach a lawyer in full private practice.

I want to recognise and thank those many legal practitioners who support in particular the Nundah Community Centre Legal Service and hope that that service will continue to provide good service to my constituents. This bill does continue down a path of progressive reform of our legal profession and, accordingly, I commend the bill to the House.