

House of Assembly

Wednesday 07 November 1979

Mr AIRD (Franklin) - I have much pleasure in supporting the motion moved by the honourable member for Denison, Mr Green, and I oppose the amendment as moved by the Opposition. I find the last speaker's comments rather bewildering. In fact over the previous three years funding for the Australian Legal Aid Office has been cut back.

It is only in this past year of funding that it has been increased. So the Federal Government has allowed the effectiveness of the Legal Aid Office to be diminished. When we talk about legal aid, we are talking about the people who can most benefit from the law by having access to the law, not by a capacity to pay, Excuse my convoluted way of expressing myself, but I am a bit nervous.

We are talking about every person in the community having access to the law without having to rely on the capacity to pay. The Fraser Government has denied a large section of the community access to any form of legal aid because it has not provided the facilities throughout the community for people to be aware of the legal aid offices.

When we talk about a commission or the Law Society's facilities to help disadvantaged people, we are talking about a system where the people were not aware of - and still do not know about - these facilities.

When I was working as a youth worker with the State Youth Support Scheme there were many instances of unemployed people who, through no fault of their own, were not aware of the Legal Aid Office .or the Law Society. In one instance one boy whom I knew ended up on remand for two days not knowing his rights.

It was no fault of members of the Police Force. He just did not understand what they were talking about.

It was only when we found out where he was that we could explain to him in a language which he understood that he could have access to a lawyer and therefore defend himself.

Incidentally, he got off the charge, which I was rather pleased about.

It is the disadvantaged people - the pensioners, the people on fixed incomes, and the unemployed - whom I am really concerned about.

In fact I get quite angry when members opposite say that this side of the House does not care, because I care a great deal about these people - Mr Mather - You had better support our amendment then.

Mr Groom - It is his maiden speech, Bob. Mr Mather - I beg your pardon. Mr AIRD - I will acknowledge that remark, just so it is recorded in 'Hansard'.

I have been distracted, much to the amusement of Mr Baker. Mr Baker - No, I am not amused at you. Mr AIRD - I am just trying to regain my train of thought. I was talking about my anger - I am even more angry now!

The Labor Party is a caring party and we care about what is happening to the disadvantaged people in our community. When you say that we are putting this motion up for political purposes, in a sense that is true because the only way we can help the disadvantaged sections of our community is by political action. The Fraser Government has been quite remiss in the way it has treated all disadvantaged sections of the community, not only in relation to the law but in relation to health care and other 1479 things.

I feel that, when you say that we put this up as a political exercise, you are ignoring the people about whom we care a great deal and are quite prepared to work very hard for. It amazed me when the honourable member for Denison, Mr Bingham, said that the law has now been taken out of local personal litigation and that departments are now taking up the cudgels and taking people to court.

That, if I may say, is a very middle class view of the law. It is very hard for people with very few social skills and with very little income to have proper access to the law and to the courts. I showed a great lack of social awareness that the honourable member did not seem to consider the more disadvantaged people of our community. I have much pleasure in supporting the motion.