

# THE JOB IS A PRIVILEGE: COMMISSIONER TOM STODUKLA

Almost one year into his job as Anti Discrimination Commissioner Mr Tom Stodulka considers himself privileged. He firmly believes as a Commissioner he is working in one of the most dynamic and exciting parts of Australia. *Balance* spoke to Mr Stodulka about his first twelve months in office.

"It is very challenging and rewarding work. Very few communities in Australia are involved in bigger issues than we are here in the Territory," said Mr Stodulka. "The issues are in your face a lot more in Darwin than they are in other capital cities because of the nature of the environment we live in. The population is tiny but the issues are great."

Mr Stodulka took up his position in August 1999 having previously worked in the Territory as policy director at the Attorney Generals Department and as Deputy Ombudsman (NT).

Naming the five key issues he has grappled with over the past eleven months he lists: mandatory sentencing; interpreter services; systemic issues in consumer matters; the promotion of non-government and government agencies working together; and the enhancement and promotion of Anti Discrimination education programs.

"Everyone will do this job differently," said Mr Stodulka. "I am interested in the power of the grass roots — meeting and working together and finding common ground. Its not enough for the Anti Discrimination Commission to acknowledge a problem we need to work towards solving that problem."

With a strong background and training in mediation Mr Stodulka is committed to establishing and facilitating dialogue as means of seeking a resolution. A major component of his job is fostering links within the community and between

agencies, both government and non-government.

"There are so many fantastic networking opportunities. It is time-consuming but it pays a thousandfold every time. We can't wait for governments to keep providing the support. It's got to be provided by communities, agencies like ourselves, schools and the wider communities. It comes back to rights and responsibilities. It can work. It can be a positive," he said.

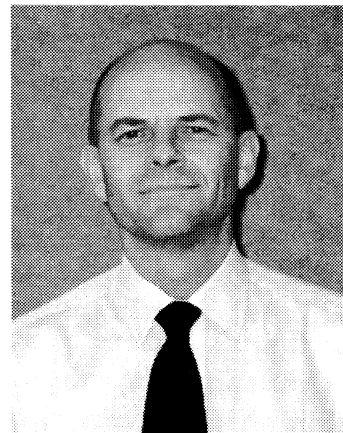
"Some people ask why we buy into the mandatory sentencing debate. I think wherever there is division in the community if you are involved in the field of anti-discrimination you have to be mindful and see what opportunities there are to bring people together."

Mr Stodulka is confident that mandatory sentencing will go. "I think there will be a wider recognition that the alternatives that will be put in place are going to provide the solutions for both the community and the government. At the moment we are stuck with mandatory sentencing. but it is contrary to the way Australians deal with things in a humanitarian, rehabilitative and restorative way," he said.

He is enthusiastic about transformative justice and the expansion of diversionary programs for juveniles.

Mr Stodulka argues placing more power with NT police is not a move to be feared. "If the police don't have a relationship within those remote communities then I think we have got a major problem. If all we are doing is giving a police person a greater power to be aware of diversionary programs that can be a very positive thing," he said.

Mr Stodulka argues it is crucial that processes for decision making on matters such as the expansion of diversionary programs or the



development of an Aboriginal interpreter service be transparent and inclusive.

When it comes to interpreter services, Mr Stodulka sees there is uncertainty in the community about the current state of affairs. "Establishing the service has been a long drawn out process. There has been a lot of confusion out there. The confusion still exists and confusion creates further division. There needs to be transparency."

Consumer issues are also a primary concern for the Commissioner. His office is following the example of the NSW Anti Discrimination Board and the Department of Consumer Affairs who work together on consumer type activities. "People are paying far too much already because of the tyranny of distance here but if people are paying more because industry can get away with it something has to be done," said Mr Stodulka.

Despite working closely together with other agencies and community groups, an essential ingredient of the success of the Anti Discrimination Commission is the ability to remain independent according to Mr Stodulka.

"We have obligations to respond to the whole of the community, which has to have complete confidence that you and your office will always be independent and able to respond fairly at all times."