

Saturday, 27 June 2020

Law Council President, Pauline Wright, statement regarding sexual harassment in the legal profession

All comments are to be attributed to Law Council President, Pauline Wright.

At today's board meeting of the Law Council of Australia, Directors unanimously called on the Federal Government to amend the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth), to close gaps and ensure that victims of sexual harassment in the workplace can be protected with a comprehensive legislative framework that extends to judges, other statutory office holders and barristers.

There was also unanimous endorsement of the Law Council's long-standing call for the government to establish a Federal Judicial Commission.

The Law Council has been urging the creation of an appropriately constituted oversight body to deal with complaints against judicial officers which is at arms' length from the executive government, to ensure the independence of the judiciary and the separation of powers, since 2006.

For the good of the legal profession, the standing of the judicial arm of government and for the confidence of the communities we serve, however, the time has come for a robust and transparent process that can consider complaints against judicial officers, whether they relate to allegations concerning capacity or conduct. If the information which has been disclosed this week does not make clear why an independent oversight body is necessary, then it is unclear what will.

The Law Council is liaising with both government and the judiciary to urge action in relation to this important issue.

Unanimous endorsement by the Directors was also given to convening a national round table, bringing together relevant decision-makers from across the country, to share best practice and programs, with the idea of selecting and developing a blueprint for action to address sexual harassment in the workplace and the advancement of women in the legal profession.

Other actions endorsed by Law Council Directors include prioritising the development of protocols relating to the standards of judicial behaviour in the courtroom.

The attrition rate of women lawyers is high, and experiences of sexual harassment are a key reason why women leave the law. This is damaging and costly – for individuals, for firms, and for the current and future standing of the legal profession.

The Law Council is committed to ensuring a diverse and inclusive profession which facilitates a positive experience for all members, and which thereby delivers quality services and justice.

ENDS

Contact: Dr Fiona Wade, P. 0403 810 865 E. Fiona.Wade@lawcouncil.asn.au

The Law Council of Australia is the national voice of the legal profession, promoting justice and the rule of law.