

No legal centre meetings in Brandis' diary

Misa Han and Katie Walsh

A long-running battle between Attorney-General George Brandis and the opposition over freedom of information came to an underwhelming end after his ministerial diary revealed he had not formally met community legal centres before slashing their funding.

A 34-page extract of Senator Brandis' diary from September 2013 to May 2014 has no record of him meeting with community legal centres before cutting \$6 million from their funding, \$15 million from legal aid commissions and \$43 million from advocacy services in the 2014 budget.

The saga began when the Attorney-General's office refused shadow attorney-general Mark Dreyfus' freedom of information request for the diary entry, saying it would take too much time to collate. This prompted Mr Dreyfus, who was critical of the funding cuts, to take Senator Brandis to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, leading to an unusual showdown when Mr Dreyfus, QC, appeared before the tribunal to grill Senator Brandis' then chief of staff Paul O'Sullivan.

The matter ended up in the Federal Court where the full bench ruled in September that Senator Brandis must hand over the diary.

Last week Labor threatened to file for contempt of court proceedings against Senator Brandis if he didn't hand over the diary immediately.

A letter from Senator Brandis' chief of staff James Lambie suggested the

Key points

Senator Brandis 'regularly met representatives from the legal assistance sector'.

Mark Dreyfus says it should not have taken three years to release the diary.

evidence of the diary was not conclusive because it was "not a record of meetings or appointments" and excludes meetings and appointments made spontaneously or on short notice. The diary excludes telephone calls, teleconferences and meetings or appointments the Attorney-General arranges himself, the letter said.

"Therefore, absence of reference to a meeting does not mean the meeting did not take place," the letter said. "For these reasons, the document is not a record of the Attorney-General's meetings or appointments ... No record of meetings and appointments exists, or has ever existed".

A spokeswoman for Senator Brandis said he regularly met representatives from the legal assistance sector and he made seven visits to legal assistance providers last year.

Mr Dreyfus said it should not have taken three years and "thousands of dollars of taxpayer money" to release the ministerial diary.

"It should not have taken this long. All the while, we were wondering what



Attorney-General George Brandis handed over his diary leading up to the 2014 budget. PHOTO: ANDREW MEARES

Senator Brandis had to hide – and it appears to be nothing. There is, however, no evidence that Senator Brandis met with representatives of legal assistance services before slashing their funding – the purpose of the original request," he said.

"This entire episode was deeply

unnecessary. I should not have had to take the Attorney-General to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, and then fought him in the full court of the Federal Court, for this."

Senator Brandis came under fire last year when Solicitor-General Justin Gleeson resigned saying their relation-

ship was "irretrievably broken" after Fairfax Media revealed he was not consulted on key issues, including the constitutionality of the government's move to revoke citizenship of dual citizens, on marriage equality and on the release of correspondence between Sir John Kerr and the Queen in 1975.

Law school deans link arms in fight to preserve aid funding

Katie Walsh

Deans of law schools across the nation have combined to lobby the federal government to stop cutting funds to legal assistance, which they say will deny access to thousands of people and pressure the private sector to plug the gap.

Pressure is building on Attorney-General George Brandis from across the legal profession, after corporate law firms warned they could not fill the void and the Australian Bar Association launched a campaign to promote access to justice through proper funding.

"Reduced funding will mean diminished service capacity, which will have flow-on effects throughout the sector

and ultimately on the effective and efficient administration of the justice system as a whole," warn 33 law school deans from across the nation in an open letter to the federal government.

Federal funding to community legal centres is due to fall by 30 per cent from July 1, in a funding cliff the Coalition blames on the former Labor government's failure to provide for funding beyond four years. Labor argues the funding program was consistent with common four-year cycle budgeting practice and is pressing the government to extend it.

The debate over blame is of little consequence for the sector, which now faces very real cuts threatening the

existence of some and the ability of others to help those in need.

The law school deans warn the cuts will undermine their "ability to educate the next generation of lawyers about the importance of access to justice in Australia", by threatening strategic relationships with community legal centres to offer clinical programs in which students can cut their teeth.

"We call on the Australian government to reverse the cuts and invest in the legal assistance sector to promote access to justice for people across Australia," the deans write.

Among the 33 signatories are Western Sydney University's Professor Michael Adams, University of Western

Australia's Associate Professor Natalie Skead, UNSW's Professor George Williams, Adelaide's Professor Melissa de Zwart, and University of Canberra's Associate Professor Lorana Bartels.

"Law schools are part of the wider legal community which understands how important it is to support access to justice," Melbourne Law School dean and signatory Carolyn Evans said.

Clinical experience provided "invaluable support to vulnerable people who might otherwise be denied legal support", she added.

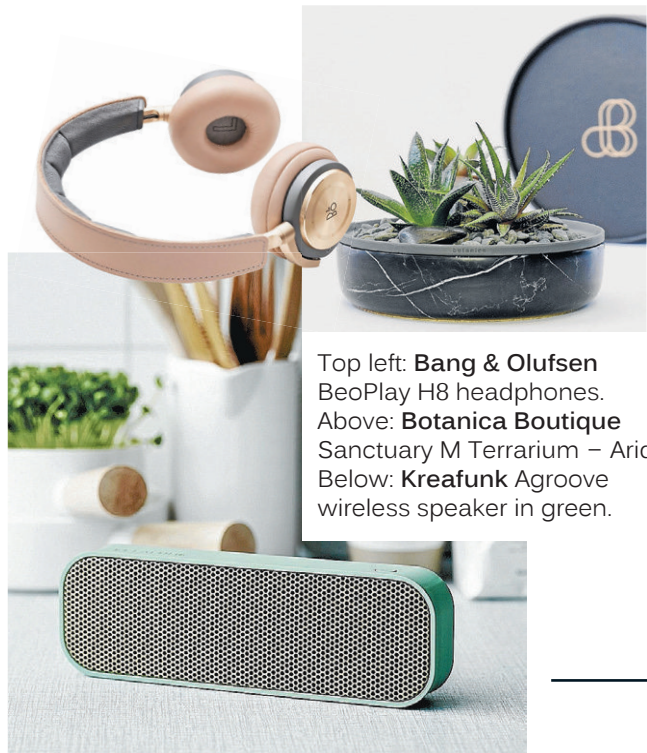
Community Legal Centres Queensland director James Farrell said clinical legal education was important for building a lawyer's "empathy and prac-

tice skills" in addition to the critical support it provided.

"We know that thousands more people will miss out on legal help with these federal funding cuts," he said.

"The impact of these funding cuts have been recognised by lawyers, community organisations, domestic violence services, churches, and now the deans of Australia's law schools."

On Friday night, Senator Brandis succumbed under threat of a contempt of court order to a freedom of information request from shadow attorney-general Mark Dreyfus, releasing his diaries, which revealed he had not engaged in extensive consultation with the legal assistance sector about cuts.



Top left: Bang & Olufsen BeoPlay H8 headphones. Above: Botanica Boutique Sanctuary M Terrarium – Arid. Below: Kreafunk Agroove wireless speaker in green.

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