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Media release: for immediate release 16 May 2014

Removal of Disability Discrimination Commissioner a Disgrace

Australian Lawyers for Human Rights (ALHR) has criticised the Australian Government's decision to cease funding a national Disability Discrimination Commissioner. The Government's budget, announced earlier this week, declared it will make 'savings ... by reducing the number of special-purpose Commissioners [at the Australian Human Rights Commission] from the current seven to six'.¹

'This is a very worrying development', said ALHR's President Nathan Kennedy. 'The Government obviously has its responsibility to address the national budget', accepted Kennedy, 'but the fact that cuts were targeted at a specific position rather than divided equally across relevant positions and bodies is a disgrace'.

Kennedy added 'Australia has been at the forefront of addressing disability discrimination, including in the development of international standards and also the situation nationally. This progress may not have occurred but for the input of Australia's Disability Discrimination Commissioner'.

Graeme Innes AM has been Australia's Disability Discrimination Commissioner since December 2005.

The Government's budget statement also identified that one of the Commission's two priorities for 2014-2017 is 'working with business to improve productivity and promote best practice in respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms'.² Kennedy noted the supposed priority of the Government and Commission and commented: 'The irony is

¹ Senator Brandis Attorney General, *Portfolio Budget Statements 2014-15*, Budget Related Paper No. 1.2, Attorney-General's Portfolio, p194 www.ag.gov.au/Publications/Budgets/Budget2014-15/Pages/PortfolioBudgetStatements2014-15.aspx

² *Portfolio Budget Statements 2014-15*, Budget Related Paper No. 1.2, Attorney-General's Portfolio, p193.

that Commissioner Innes, and his team at the Commission, have worked extremely constructively with business over many years in removing the impediments and barriers to people with disabilities from engaging in normal life as most other Australians do'. Commissioner Innes has led or contributed to various initiatives, including the development of the National Disability Strategy, the *Disability (Access to Premises - buildings) Standards 2010*, and the establishment of Liveable Housing Australia.

Commissioner Innes has vast experience which will be lost to the Commission if this funding decision is not changed. The Commissioner was a Member of the NSW Administrative Decisions Tribunal; the NSW Consumer, Trader and Tenancy Tribunal; and the Social Security Appeals Tribunal. He was Chair of the Disability Advisory Council of Australia, and the first Chair of Australia's national blindness agency, Vision Australia.

ALHR calls on the Government, and all members of the Australian Senate, to review this budget decision and find other ways to deal with any valid budgetary shortfalls which does not involve cutting the Disability Discrimination Commissioner.

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ALHR (Australian Lawyers for Human Rights) is a network of Australian lawyers active in practicing and promoting awareness of international human rights standards in Australia. ALHR has a national membership of over 3000 lawyers and law students, with active National, State and Territory committees.