



OFFICE OF THE INDEPENDENT COMMISSIONER AGAINST CORRUPTION (NT)

Statement by the Independent Commissioner Against Corruption, Mr Michael Riches

3 August 2021

I do not generally seek public attention through the media. I would prefer to let my work speak for itself. Nevertheless in light of recent media commentary and speculation about my office, I feel compelled to make this statement.

Four weeks ago I commenced as the Independent Commissioner Against Corruption for the Northern Territory. I am honoured to have been appointed to that position. I think an effective anti-corruption agency is an important tool in ensuring ethical and accountable decision-making in government.

Having been in the role for such a short period of time, I am still learning the way in which my office has operated in the past in order that I may set a path for its future.

Fundamental to that future is public confidence. Both the public, and those who work in public administration, must have confidence in this office. If that confidence is eroded so too is my ability to be effective.

It is for that reason I have decided to make this statement.

This office commenced in November 2018. It has been operating for less than three years. Establishing an entirely new agency from scratch is a monumental effort. I owe a debt of gratitude to every individual who was involved in its establishment.

I have been impressed by the staff. They are motivated and committed to their duties. They are enthusiastic about the future and the positive impact that this office can have on public integrity. That is pleasing.

There are a great many opportunities that I can already identify which I hope will have a positive influence on public integrity. But as I have already said, there is little prospect of having that positive influence unless this office is trusted.

I have not previously commented upon activities conducted by this office prior to my commencement. I will continue to decline to do so, save to say the following.

Those who work in my office must act with the utmost integrity. I demand nothing less of myself and my staff. Anyone who cannot or will not meet that expectation has no place in my team.

Where allegations of impropriety are made about my staff or me, they will be taken seriously. It matters not to me who made the allegation or the circumstances in which the allegation is made. What matters to me is the integrity of this office, which must be above reproach.

I encourage, and in some cases direct, individuals to come forward and provide me with information. Making a report and providing information to this office takes courage. Indeed one of the objects of the ICAC Act is to protect 'persons who put themselves at risk of harm by exposing or reporting improper conduct'. A person's willingness to make a report will inevitably be influenced by the person's perception of the integrity of this office.

Individuals must trust that when they come to the ICAC the information they provide will be treated in confidence, and in accordance with law. They must trust that those in the office will at all times act with the utmost integrity.

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I would be surprised if anyone did not agree that that is of fundamental importance.

The matters that have been raised over the last week will be investigated. I will cooperate fully with those investigations.

As with any investigation, these processes must be allowed to run their course. I should not, and will not, speculate on the outcome of any investigation into allegations against staff within my office, in the same way that I will not speculate on the outcome of an investigation that I conduct.

In the meantime I want to reassure public officers and the public that my integrity and my independence will be fundamental to how I discharge my duties. I will demand the same of my staff.

I did not take on this role to win a popularity contest. I took on this role because it is important. I am firmly of the view that an effective anti-corruption agency can make a significant positive impact on integrity in public administration. I want to be able to get on with that important work.

As Commissioner I will focus on four important functions. First, I will only investigate the most serious allegations of improper conduct. Matters that I do not consider warrant the direct use of this office's investigative resources will be referred to another agency and, if I think it necessary, I will oversee the way in which that agency deals with the matter.

Second, I will drive a renewed focus on working with agencies to improve their integrity. I am firmly of the view that agency heads are responsible for ensuring their agency operates with integrity and that processes are in place to ensure that those who choose to operate without integrity will be identified and dealt with. I see my role as working with those agencies to assist in that objective, whether that be through education, evaluations or oversight.

Third, I want to ensure that whistleblowers have adequate protections. Over coming months I intend to review the guidelines issued by this office pertaining to whistleblower protection and to better understand agency approaches to protected disclosures.

Finally, I will expand our ability to communicate with those in public administration and the public by analysing our information and producing resources of value. Those resources will assist in identifying trends or themes of concern, enabling me to notify agency heads of ongoing risks, and to bring to the public's attention our activities and our observations.

There is a lot of work to be done. But I am committed to building upon what has already been achieved and for this office to be trusted for its integrity, expertise, professionalism, fairness and willingness to engage with other agencies and to investigate without fear or favour.

I will have more to say about the activities of this office at a later time.

ENDS