

ly and the possible earnings of a person, to send such a letter," Mr Geschke says.

"To send such a letter indicates a lack of life experience and understanding."

The case was among the 2959 complaints against government departments that were dealt with by the Ombudsman's office during the past year.

Ironically, Mr Geschke reported one of the men who received a letter was the natural father and had been contacted by the mother's solicitor before the department became involved.

But the man had at first denied he was the natural father and only acknowledged paternity when he received the department's letter.

Mr Geschke said the department should have carried out a preliminary investigation before contacting all the men and the form of the letter should have been dramatically modified and then checked by an officer-in-charge.

But he acknowledged the department had sent an apology to the Queensland man after he called the department to protest about the letter.

"Unfortunately in your case, a search revealed a number of people of the same name whose age indicated they could be the person we were searching for," the department wrote in the letter to the man.

"In most instances it is felt that the letter is irrelevant to their circumstances and most people disregard it. However, we are aware that such a letter can cause distress and uncertainty as it has in your situation."

As a result of the complaint and the Ombudsman's investigation, the department has promised search procedures would be reviewed.

In explaining the incident, the department told the Ombudsman's office consent of the natural father was required within 48 hours of the mother's consent.



Dr Allen and an impression of Space Marketing Inc's preferred night sky ... 'no laws to stop dozens of billboards being launched' — Picture: GREG NEWINGTON

AUSTRALIAN astronomers are planning to launch an international protest to prevent night being turned into day by a constellation of gleaming, moon-sized advertising billboards orbiting the Earth.

Plans by the United States company Space Marketing Inc to put huge collapsible billboards measuring 1km by 400m into low-Earth orbit were no joke and were more advanced than many people assumed, the president of the Astronomical Society of Australia, Dr David Allen, said yesterday.

Apart from threatening astronomy worldwide with their glare, they could also be far more intrusive

than was generally realised, he told *The Australian* yesterday.

"The moon is as black as a piece of coal, yet think how brightly it shines when it is full," Dr Allen said.

"These billboards would not only appear as large as the moon, or even larger, but would be made from reflective material which could potentially shed more light than a full moon."

The SMI plan involves launching huge, collapsible panels made from the ultra-tough, high-technology fabric mylar into low-Earth orbit, and then inflating tubes round their edges to display the sponsor's symbol or message.

The panels will cost \$US15 million (\$21 million) to \$US30 million to build and launch and will orbit the Earth at a distance of 300km once every 90 minutes. They will stay aloft for 20 to 30 days before burning up on re-entry. The company anticipates they will be most easily visible at sunrise and sunset, and the sponsor's message will be clearly visible to the naked eye.

Dr Allen said the ASA would ask the Federal Government to lodge a strong protest with the US against the plans, arguing that space, like Antarctica, ought to be kept free of unnecessary pollution. It was high time regulations like those

protecting the Antarctic were drawn up, he added.

"The billboard plan has been greeted with complete horror here at the Anglo-Australian Observatory," he said.

"What we really fear is that if one goes up, there are no laws to stop dozens being launched. If the technology advances, huge space billboards could even be put into permanent or geostationary orbit."

Apart from being crass and intrusive, they would deprive humanity of one of its greatest heritages — the night sky and stars, he said.

"There is a big aesthetic issue here. The public is gradually being sepa-

rated from the night sky by city lights, so that when people go into the bush they are amazed at the stars they see.

"To deny that experience to all humanity forever would be a terrible mistake."

British astronomers have also reacted strongly against the space billboards. The director of London University Observatory, Dr Derek McNally, described the plan as "a potential disaster for astronomy".

Prominent US astronomer Dr Carl Sagan has branded the proposed billboard "an abomination" but it has the support of the US space agency NASA. — JULIAN CRIBB

prepared, outstanding debts owed to councils were not pursued, and some councils had made personal loans totalling \$103,000 to people for various reasons, including funeral costs.

The Auditor-General's report on the councils shows gross irregularities, weaknesses and inadequacies in financial controls, including: **SHORTAGES** in council collections of \$27,000.

LACK of pay sheets and timesheets for wages of about \$519,000 and \$90,000 respectively. Cash wages of more than \$7000 overdrawn without explanation.

PAYMENTS to creditors of \$872,000 not supported by documentation.

THEFT of cash wages in transit, \$44,000. **STOCK** and cash shortages amounting to more than \$277,000.

The Opposition said the Government had failed to address the councils' poor financial practices over a lengthy period.

But the Minister for Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, Ms Warner, said the councils would receive training in financial management.

Accused seeks stay of war crimes trial

LAWYERS for the second man in Australia to be tried for war crimes will seek a permanent stay of proceedings in the case as early as Monday.

Ethnic German Heinrich Wagner has denied charges of murdering 19 part-Jewish children and being involved in the murder of 104 Jewish adults in Ukraine during 1942 and 1943.

The hearing in the Supreme Court of an application for a stay in the Wagner case will follow the acquittal on Tuesday of war-crime accused Mr Ivan Polyukhovich.

Mr Polyukhovich, 76, yesterday sought a return to private life more than three years after being charged at his Adelaide home over the deaths of Jews during World War II.

Mr Polyukhovich was found not guilty by a South Australian Supreme Court jury of murder.

Editorial — Page 10

Member of Joh defence denies role in jury probe

By CAROLYN COLLINS

A KEY member of Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen's defence team yesterday denied to an inquiry he had been involved in investigations of jury panels before the 1991 perjury trial.

Mr Robert Butler, who said he had prepared the bulk of the case, told the Original Justice Commission inquiry a private investigator had been hired to do the job so the defence could stay at "arm's length" from "a touchy legal area".

But Mr Butler, whose company Trial Consultancy Pty Ltd had been retained by Sir Joh's instructing solicitor, Mr Max Mead, said the team had not monitored the investigations to ensure there was "no muck-up".

Mr Butler took the witness-stand yesterday after falling twice earlier this week to be exempted from having to give evidence.

He told the inquiry's commissioner, Mr William Carter, QC, he had not known private investigator Mr Phil Walliss, a former Victorian police officer, had intended to conduct a telephone poll of potential jurors.

Mr Butler said he had been surprised and annoyed to learn two days before the trial Mr Walliss had contacted jurors directly.

The inquiry, which is investigating whether the jury selection process in the trial was manipulated, has heard this "muck-up" was the reason the defence applied to have the first jury panel, codenamed Z, discharged.

Mr Luke Shaw, who was later revealed to have links with the National Party, told the foreman of the replacement jury which failed to reach a verdict and led to the trial being abandoned.

Mr Walliss gave evidence on the first day of public hearings that while he had not revealed his "technique" to Mr Butler, he had told him he was going to conduct a telephone survey.

Counsel assisting the inquiry, Mr Russell Hanson, QC, put to Mr Butler he had known Mr Walliss was going to ring jurors and "close his eyes". Mr Butler rejected this.

The hearing is continuing.

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