



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

BILLS

Appropriation Bill (No. 1) 2015-2016

Consideration in Detail

SPEECH

Thursday, 4 June 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Fletcher, Paul, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr FLETCHER (Bradfield—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Communications) (12:18): The member is absolutely right that there is very strong community sentiment throughout regional and remote Australia about the need for improved mobile coverage, and I have certainly had the opportunity in the member's own electorate, as well as in some 40 other electorates around the country, to meet with Australians who are very frustrated about the fact that the previous government kept talking about how much money it was putting into the National Broadband Network but seemed to have its hands over its ears when it came to the question of improving mobile coverage in regional and remote Australia—so much so that, extraordinarily, it was the policy under the previous government that NBN Co was discouraged from engaging with the mobile operators to consider, for example, whether NBN backhaul could be made available to mobile operators to increase their penetration into regional and remote Australia, and there was very little going on in terms of co-location of mobile base stations onto NBN fixed wireless towers.

That was the policy of the previous government. As the member has rightly highlighted, the coalition have taken a very different approach. We took to the last election a policy commitment to spend \$100 million on improving mobile coverage in regional and remote Australia. Since coming to government the minister has asked me to take responsibility for this program. We have been working through it in a speedy but methodical fashion. We issued guidelines late last year after consulting extensively with both the industry and the community.

One thing we did was say to Australians, 'Please nominate locations around Australia which you believe have inadequate mobile coverage and locations in regional and remote Australia which do not have mobile coverage and which, in your view, need it.' Some 6,000 locations were nominated and established on a public database. We then said to the mobile network operators: 'Please come forward with your proposals. Which of those locations would be ones that you could cover with a new base station? Tell us how much you will spend on that base station. Tell us the total capital cost of that base station. Tell us how much money you want out of the government's fund. Tell us whether you have been able to secure funding from co-funders, such as state governments, local councils and private businesses.' I am pleased to say that, as has been publicly announced, a number of state governments have made funding commitments—for example, the New South Wales government has committed \$25 million, the Western Australian government has committed \$35 million and indeed the Victorian government announced shortly before submissions closed from the mobile operators that they were committing money as well.

So let us look at where we are up to. On 19 April, the closing date for the three mobile operators—Telstra, Optus and Vodafone—to submit their proposals, they gave us a list of base stations that they propose to build and provided the information that I specified before. We are now going through a process of determining which base stations will be funded in accordance with the guidelines. We are on track to be able to announce the results by 30 June.

A division having been called in the House of Representatives—

Sitting suspended from 12:22 to 12:42

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The question is that the proposed expenditure for the communications portfolio be agreed to.

Proposed expenditure agreed to.

Debate adjourned.