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National Broadband Network Committee

Report

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Ley, Sussan, MP

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Ms LEY (Farrer) (17:15): I am pleased, as a member of the Joint Committee on the National Broadband Network, to speak in this debate in the House today and to make some comments about the recommendations, but also some reflections as a rural and regional member of this parliament. Given the serious and urgent issues about broadband, wireless and mobiles or any sort of communication in rural and regional Australia, I think those experiences from the electorate of Farrer should be reflected in the context of today's debate.

The member for Chifley talked about this side of the House attacking NBN Co., making negative comments and denigrating the process. What I would say is that I am actually tired of making excuses for NBN Co. There can always be reasons why things do not get done on time, presented on time or provided in a thorough enough manner, but what the government seems to be doing over and over is just making excuse after excuse for this incredibly well-resourced company, which is moving towards using \$50 billion of public taxpayers' funding.

I know the issues are that it is off balance sheet, it is an investment, it will provide a return and so on. It is rationalised away that it is not really government spending to the level that you might think. But it will not provide a return unless people pay for the NBN—what they believe the NBN is worth and what the NBN actually charges them as householders. We continually receive information that indicates that those costs are going to be quite high. Why would you, as a householder, pay \$100, \$120 or \$150 a month for something that you are already getting for quite a bit less than that? Sure, there might be a few more bells and whistles; but, if you do not want those bells and whistles, why should you pay more? There is just so much lose, lose, lose in this for the constituents that I represent.

The opposition spokesperson for communications, the member for Wentworth, put it very well in his remarks a little while ago when he said that, under a coalition, we would not target areas that already have fast broadband. It seems like a no-brainer but it is one that the government and NBN Co. cannot get right. We would target underserved areas first. We would not overbuild high-speed networks that already have high fibre cable—

Mr Perrett: High fibre?

Mr Mitchell: High fibre? Healthy!

Ms LEY: Fibre optic cable. I am happy for the government to correct my momentary lapse there, but that will not save them from the real criticism of NBN Co. and its lack of activity in regional areas.

I will just go back to my seat of Farrer, which covers a third of all New South Wales. The NBN fibre rollout plans to reach—just wait for it, members of the government—0.12 per cent of my electorate by 2015. That is 0.12 per cent, which is just the city of Albury—a city that already has pretty good, pretty sufficient broadband technology.

On 9 December 2009, when announcing the Regional Backbone Blackspots Program, Minister Conroy said that the 6,000 kilometres of fibre in the ground will benefit 395,000 residents in more than 100 regional communities. But what he did not say was 'when'. It was a cruel hoax, because everybody got so excited. People who were waiting for this got so excited. But they are not excited anymore. They are seriously disappointed. He did not say 'when'. The backbone network was completed in time to be part of the infrastructure for the future, and the backhaul is something that the government has done that I do support and I thank them for it. The backhaul runs parallel to the Murray from Echuca-Moama, right up to Mildura, north to Broken Hill, passing through or nearby at least half a dozen major urban communities. How many were announced in the initial three-year NBN rollout? Zero. None. Confusion by being snubbed in this way is particularly felt, can I say, in the major inland cities of Mildura and Broken Hill—and I want to focus on Broken Hill; it is in my electorate. It was not just local residents, by the way, that were confused. Even the government's own spriker for the NBN was staggered. Peter Blasina, otherwise known as the Gadget Guy, said he was shocked when Broken Hill was not in the rollout:

I thought that Broken Hill would be connected to the NBN before I was connected in Sydney ... If I was in Broken Hill I'd be getting a group together and knocking on Steven Conroy—

the minister's—

door.

If we thought it would do any good that is exactly what we would do, but we know that it would not do any good.

The confusion even extends to the NBN's own people, because, when quizzed why Broken Hill was not in the initial rollout, a spokesperson for the NBN Co. said it was because the technology was not ready. This is how incorrect that statement was. The local council had already dug up a local footpath at the corner of Blende and Chloride streets at its own cost, watched as the fibre-optic cable was laid and refurbished the nature strip over it. That was in early February, six weeks before NBN's rollout announcement. Adding some insult to all of this is the wall-to-wall advertising blitz the government is spending taxpayers' money on in these local markets, telling us all how wonderful the world will be one day. I forgot, Madam Deputy Speaker—and you will be pleased because you would have had to rule it an unreliable prop—the little cardboard NBN truck that I have in my office, which I sometimes say to people is as close as my electorate will ever actually get to the NBN. The actual NBN truck was at Parliament House last week, I think. It popped up in Albury as well. I think it even went to Deniliquin. So there is no expense spared on the advertising for the NBN in the regional areas that are not even slated to get it in the first rollout, and goodness knows how long after 2015 it will be before they might even be mentioned as being part of the rollout. What confusion!

The truck rolled up in Deniliquin last month. Everybody was saying, 'What does this mean? Does this mean we are getting the NBN?' The drought support van was an initiative of the member for North Sydney when he was the Minister for Human Services. He said we should travel the drought affected areas of rural Australia. We should take good people from Centrelink—social workers and drought support officers. We should visit the small towns that we do not often see and we should even have a little satellite dish on the roof so we can get people's application processes happening from within the truck. That drought support truck, which morphed into a Centrelink truck, which I occasionally see on the dusty miles in the far west of New South Wales, did a really good thing. This NBN truck is just a sick joke. It cannot tell anybody when the NBN is coming, it cannot give any comfort to anyone about when faster broadband might enter their lives or their homes and it certainly cannot tell anyone what any of this will cost, either for the community as a whole or for people as individual householders. People are waiting so much longer than they need to under this government. They are going to pay so much more than they should. This gigantic, monstrous overinvestment is such a tragic waste of public dollars.

I know that there will be criticism from those opposite, and there are criticisms regularly from people on telecommunications blog type websites who send me snaky little emails saying: 'But you in the coalition didn't vote for the NBN.' No, we did not, but that does not mean that we would not bring fast broadband to people's homes with fibre to the node. We certainly would not overbuild areas that already have fast broadband. Our policy would have seen so much happen so much faster. So, when I fight for my communities and I say, 'Where is the NBN? Why has Broken Hill, a town of 20,000 people with incredible regional investment opportunities, been so overlooked?' it is not because I think the NBN is the best solution, but, if this government is spending all these taxpayer dollars on this in many cases gigantic white elephant, I do want to see some improvement in communications in the areas that I represent. Until we come to government, if indeed we are lucky enough at the next election to do so, and start fixing up this mess, I have to deal with what I have. I have to deal with what is in front of me and so I will continue to fight for the communities that I represent to appear on the map of this government and of the people in NBN Co., who seem so willing to do its bidding. I want to touch on the recommendations. I want to thank, by the way, my colleagues on the committee and the chair, the member for Lyne, and say that we on this committee are in the process of uncovering some serious failings, I believe, in the processes, the management and the rollout, which after all is what we are here to report on.

I just want to look at recommendation 3, which is quite close to my heart. It says:

The committee recommends that the NBN Co as soon as possible, provide further key information on its website in a user-friendly format ... This information should include:

The date of the commencement of work in individual service areas;

The progress of the rollout in the service areas (expressed as a percentage);

The exact date of completion of the National Broadband Network rollout in each service area;

Information about how to connect to the network; and

A list of retail service providers active in the service area.

We made many good recommendations but I really want to highlight this one because, from the minute the NBN became a sort of reality in people's lives I thought, 'Well, there should be a website, because there's always a website.' You should be able to go to the website, type in your postcode and use the services of Google Earth to focus on your street. You should be provided with information on a website run by a company that is spending up to \$50 billion of taxpayers' money. It should tell you what you can expect, when you can expect it, who might be delivering it, what it might cost and who you can talk to about it. But nothing like that exists. There is this dense sort of nonsense and motherhood statements about what fast broadband means but nothing that really is user-friendly. So I am glad we have got that recommendation, and I really encourage NBN Co. to pay close attention to it.

We had a group of recommendations relating to services in regional and remote areas. I particularly highlight recommendation 9, which is:

The committee recommends that the NBN Co revise its terminology and language to clarify community understanding of what the three National Broadband Network services can and cannot support, to enable the community to prepare for the network's services appropriately and become fully informed.

As I said, it is dense language, a meaningless truck which cannot really tell people anything and cannot really explain anything.

Recommendation 10 is:

The committee recommends that the NBN Co include in its web-based interactive rollout map specific information on the provision of voice services for communities in fixed wireless and satellite access areas.

The reason that is necessary is that it has never occurred to anyone in this government, and it probably has not occurred to anyone in the NBN, that there are areas where we do not have sufficient voice communications and we do not have sufficient mobile services, and that maybe a voice over internet protocol is the way that we could achieve some of that. So do take note, please, NBN Co.: there are areas of Australia where you will be coming with this project that do not even have a decent mobile signal, so voice communication is probably a priority for them areas before anything else.

While regional and remote Australia has been spruiked as being very well looked after, it certainly has not been. I quickly want to conclude by talking about some evidence that was presented to a public hearing we had in Sydney relating to the rollout in the Berrigan Shire. The director of corporate services from the Berrigan Shire Council spoke to the committee and indicated—

A division having been called in the House of representatives—

Sitting suspended from 17 : 28 to 17 : 41