



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Telecommunications

SPEECH

Monday, 12 September 2016

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Questioner
Speaker Chesters, Lisa, MP

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Ms CHESTERS (Bendigo) (10:40): It is rare to actually stand in this place and see a government celebrate a program that has been proven to be a disaster. The previous two speakers from the government side did not even mention the Auditor-General's report into this program, which has just proved again what Labor has been saying from the beginning: this program is nothing more than pork-barrelling and this program is a lemon that failed to deliver value for money or the service that is required to regional Victorians.

I represent a regional electorate, the Bendigo electorate. We have received one tower that has been built under this program. At that rate, it would take this government over 100 years to fix the blackspots in Bendigo if in one term they build one tower. For that tower, all they did was attach it to an NBN tower that was built when Labor was in government. That is the great success this government is delivering in the Bendigo electorate!

We are not the only Labor electorate that missed out under this program, which the Auditor-General's report has now proven. There was the member for McEwen's electorate and the member for Ballarat's electorate. What do all these regional Victorian electorates have in common? Oh, wait: they are Labor electorates. This government used this program to pork-barrel their own seats.

That is what has been proven by the report released by the Auditor-General last week. What did the report say? That the Mobile Black Spot Program provided very little new coverage. Isn't the whole point of the blackspot program to fix blackspots, which means fixing the mobile phone blackspots by making new coverage areas? It did not deliver value for money. Aren't the Liberals all about value for money? You will do it for Defence manufacturing; you will send uniform contracts overseas to China. There will be value for money for the manufacturing of Defence uniforms, but you will not deliver value for money for the blackspots program.

Insufficient attention was paid to local issues and community needs, yet you claim to be the voice of regional Australia. This is what your own Auditor-General's report has said about your own program. The parliamentary secretary changed the minimal coverage requirements in the draft guidelines, but the person responsible removed this requirement. So we actually had the department suggesting that there be a change to the minimum coverage requirements and then this government's own parliamentary secretary changed it. You wonder why you have had this damning report.

This report vindicates Labor's approach to dealing with the blackspots problem. We have advocated that there needs to be co-location. For what we have in Bendigo—that one tower—we want to see things like that rollout across the country. What Labor committed to in the election—which the previous members have ignored—is the same amount of money to this program, but what we have also said is this program needs to be redesigned. It needs to put need first. This is what this government has not done. Instead, what it has done is pork-barrel its own seats. We need to make sure that we are addressing the needs of areas in our communities. We need to make sure that we are supporting our growth corridors, like in the member for McEwen's electorate, in my electorate, in the member for Ballarat's electorate and even in Corangamite, the electorate of the member who just spoke.

We did not commit to base stations based upon pork-barrelling to win seats and win polling booths. What we said is, 'We need to structurally redesign this program,' because we knew it was a lemon. We knew it was not delivering value for money. We knew it was not delivering new coverage, as the government claim. For all their ranting and raving, for all of their grandstanding about, 'We will fix mobile phone black spots,' they have failed. To design a program that does not deliver new coverage—what a spectacular failure! Yet what we have seen in the second week is the government members absolutely ignoring that and trying to be the champions of this program.

People in regional Australia know this government is failing to fix the mobile phone black spots issue. This is an issue that comes up over and over again. As we get closer and closer to summer, people start to get anxious. There are days in the regions where SOS is all you have on your mobile phone, but they are not getting a program

from this government. They are getting a program that is rolling out slowly, is not creating new coverage and is pork-barrelling the government's own seats. If this government were serious, it would take on board Labor's proposal and join with us in redesigning the program the mobile phone coverage that regional Victorians need.