

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Broadband

Mr TANNER (Melbourne) (3.33 p.m.)—There are certain things about the modern world that the Prime Minister just does not get: he does not get climate change, he certainly does not get cultural and racial diversity and most particularly he does not get broadband. Over the past months we have been seeing a very painful transition, a very slow evolution in the Prime Minister's attitude to telecommunications and the modern world. Gradually before our eyes he has been dragged out of the world of the crystal set and the two cans with the bit of string in between into the world of modern telecommunications, but he has not quite got there yet. He has not quite evolved to a point where he really understands what broadband is, let alone what the government ought to be doing to ensure that all Australians, regional as well as metropolitan, have access to the decent high-speed broadband services that they both want and need.

You can see it at the dispatch box. You saw it again today. Every time the Prime Minister is questioned about this issue, you can see that he is uncomfortable. He fidgets, he reads his lines, there is no passion, there is no clarity and there is no coherence; it just is not his issue. He does not get it. He does not understand it. We saw it today when I asked a question on the government's WiMAX network proposal. First he refused to answer the question. He simply refused to comment or to respond to the question. Then the Deputy Prime Minister passed him a bit of paper with some lines on it and that enabled him to say something about it. Of course, he then proceeded to talk about the comparison between the government's proposal and our proposal and about exchanges. The trouble is, exchanges were the primary delivery mechanism for the old world. Under the government's broadband proposal, it will be base stations and under our fibre proposal it will be nodes. Yet the Prime Minister's mind is still stuck in the world of exchanges—a telling illustration of how he just does not get it on broadband, in the same way that he just does not get it on climate change and he does not get it on cultural diversity.

The Prime Minister's view of broadband, of telecommunications, is back 20 or 30 years ago in the old world. He has come up with his new version of the bush telegraph but unfortunately it is not quite as efficient or effective as the traditional bush telegraph; it is simply a cobbled-together, second-rate, half-baked strategy that is designed to look as though they are doing something. The Prime Minister and the government do not understand that the world of telecommunications has changed irrevocably, but most importantly, the Prime Minister does not understand that country Australia has changed also.

In the Prime Minister's mind, country Australia is still the world of Dad and Dave. It is still the world of blokes with crumpled hats with corks on them and the handkerchief tied on the head, and women in those homemade cotton dresses. That is the Prime Minister's view of country Australia. He does not understand that country Australia has changed dramatically. In his mind, country Australia is still as it was when he watched *Dad and Dave* on Channel 7 in the early 1970's. Let me give you a synopsis of one of the *Dad and Dave* episodes to illustrate my point:

Life at Snake Gully has been updated with the arrival of television and a ladies hairdresser. Mum has acquired some modern appliances and Dad battles with the generation gap.

That is the country Australia that the Prime Minister understands. That is what he thinks is out there, beyond the North Shore of Sydney, when he thinks of country

Australia. So in the mind of the Prime Minister he is knocking on Dad and Dave and Mum's door with a shiny new appliance called broadband. Unfortunately, he does not understand what it is and he does not understand that it is a dud. He does not realise that what has been put forward by the government is a second-rate solution for people in country Australia.

His Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts has the same problem. On *The 7.30 Report* last night when the minister was asked to extol the virtues of the government's broadband proposal for country Australia her answer was, 'You can take the laptop down to the shed and it'll still work in the shed.' Well, isn't that fantastic? Those people in the tourism industry who are running major resorts and big hotels in regional Australia will be rapt to know they can take the laptop down to the shed! That will be critical to their businesses! The people running major wineries no doubt will be excited to know that they can have broadband in the shed, too! There is a mentality deep in this government about country Australia that is about 40 years out of date, and its broadband proposal is an illustration of that in technicolour.

The government strategy on this issue and on so many other issues is very simple: look like you are doing something. Whether it is climate change, the unfairness of Work Choices or the chronic underinvestment in education, where we have seen for years no vision, no leadership and no forward agenda, all they have is a bit of window-dressing, a bit of catch-up, a bit of responding to the political pressure that has slowly built up not because of the opposition but because of the content of the issues, because of the merit of the issues. Australia needs high-speed broadband to compete with the rest of the developed world and in our region. We need to tackle climate change. We need to lift our game on education. It is the natural pressure from those issues, coupled with advocacy not only by the Labor Party but by many others, that is putting pressure on the government. And their response on each occasion has been simple: look like you are doing something.

Yesterday it all came together in the broadband announcement: cobbled together, a second-rate response, a careful calculation of electoral impact and the misinformation about Labor's policies. Only a few months ago we had government members in here saying that there is no problem and that 'people all around Australia are not telling us there is any broadband problem'. Notwithstanding OECD rankings that have us trailing the pack on any serious broadband measure, notwithstanding the opinions of people such as Rupert Murdoch, James Packer and David Kirk, and notwithstanding expert commentary from many other people, the government was saying, 'Look, there's really not an issue here.' Now they are in complete panic mode, not because they fear for Australia's future and not because they are worried about the future of your kids or your business but because they are worried about their political future.

Let us look at the WiMAX proposal that is at the forefront of their solution for regional Australia. Firstly, the government cannot tell us just how wide the radius of its impact will be. The communications minister said 50 kilometres and Optus said 20, and the Prime Minister today appeared to concede 20 kilometres. Secondly, they are claiming either that it will be up to 12 megabits per second or that it will be 12 megabits per second, or in the case of the Deputy Prime Minister today it will be over 12 megabits per second. The reality is that it will be in that zone only when usage is modest and is not congested, when the weather is good and when people are fortunate to have appropriate terrain, because hills and mountains and things like that get in the road of wireless signals.

So, in effect, the maximum offered by their system when it is not raining, when there is no congestion and when people do not have difficult terrain is the same as the minimum under Labor's proposal. It duplicates Telstra's 3G network, and is actually likely to be smaller than Telstra's 3G network. The technology being used has only been deployed to fewer than a million users all around the world, so the likelihood of complications and difficulty is high and the price is still completely unclear. If fibre is delivered in the cities, most of those in regional Australia who get the WiMAX alternative will in effect have a second-rate, el cheapo alternative. The government are claiming that their \$950 million worth of public money poured into this is good value and that Labor's \$4.7 billion worth of public money proposed for a near-universal, high-speed fibre network is a waste. There is a reason for the difference in the amounts: in telecommunications you get what you pay for. When you do it on the cheap you get a cheap outcome, and that is effectively what the government has done.

In not understanding the significance of broadband in regional Australia the government does not understand how crucial it is that business opportunities are opened up in regional Australia based on equal capability in broadband. Businesses being able to choose where to locate and being able to take advantage of cheaper land costs and less congestion in regional Australia will always ask themselves: can I get telecommunications services that are equal to the quality, scale and speed that I can get in metropolitan Australia? How are we going to encourage businesses to locate in regional Tasmania, the Hunter Valley, the Iron Triangle, North Queensland and Gippsland, and the Bunbury region in south-west Western Australia? These are all areas where significant new economic growth is occurring and where there are new opportunities for small businesses—not 'Dad and Dave' out on the farm but a whole range of often very sophisticated economic activities. How on earth can we encourage businesses to take up those opportunities if they are going to get second-class broadband compared with what they would get in the cities? There is a quiet economic revolution going on in many parts of regional Australia, and the Prime Minister has no idea that it is happening. He simply does not get it.

Last week in a speech I referred to the prospect of Australia becoming the developed world's night shift and to the fact that we will be able to do things, courtesy of high-speed broadband, for other developed countries because we will be in normal working hours when they are in the middle of the night. The communications minister responded by saying: 'What are you talking about? It's already happening.' Well, I have got bad news for the government: it is only happening in very rare instances, because the telecommunications capability is simply not there. With the proposal that the government has put forward, I think about electorates such as the electorate of Lyons—it is in very hilly circumstances, the weather is not necessarily always fantastic and can be a bit troubling, there is rough terrain, and there are lots of small businesses. How are they going to get by with this proposal? I think that they will not have much of a chance.

The leaked email from the staffer for the communications minister said it all: 'Maps provided for the cabinet.' Were they maps of existing broadband coverage? Were they maps of economic regions? Were they maps of the less settled areas of Australia? No, they were maps of electorates. Now, I wonder, when you are dealing with a complicated telecommunications proposal and you are trying to solve a big national problem with broadband, why would cabinet be considering maps of electorates? I wonder why they were doing that. Of course, we all know the answer. We saw the answer in the balance of the email, where it listed the 40 priority electorates for getting the information out, which just happened to be 40

government-held seats—a significant proportion of them metropolitan seats, not regional seats—and they just happened to be the seats that are most under threat electorally. So it is nothing about doing the right thing by the nation. It is not about solving a huge national problem. It is simply about solving a political problem for the government.

Finally, where you see the full desperation and panic is in the government's description of Labor's policy. In an op ed in the *Australian* today the communications minister describes Labor's proposal, which is for 98 per cent of Australians. She says that our proposal 'ignores regional areas' and that it will pay one of our leading communications companies to build a fibre optic network in metropolitan areas in just five of our leading cities. There is actually a proposal on the table of that kind, but it is not our proposal; it is the government's. Her statement is a bare-faced lie. Labor's plan—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)—The member for Melbourne will withdraw that comment.

Mr TANNER—I withdraw. It is a bare-faced untruth. Labor's plan involves—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Melbourne will withdraw 'untruth'.

Mr TANNER—I just did.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—No, you did not. I ask the member for Melbourne to withdraw.

Mr TANNER—I withdraw everything. The proposal by Labor involves coverage for all of Australia: 98 per cent of Australians will have coverage of a minimum of 12 megabits per second. It is the government's proposal that involves only five major cities getting fibre optic—nowhere in Tasmania—only five major cities getting the true broadband network and the rest of Australia has to put up with a cobbled together, bits and pieces operation which will not meet the test of comparison with what is going to be available, if they succeed, in metropolitan Australia.

Their claim that Labor's position threatens the superannuation of soldiers is simply despicable. There is a legal obligation on the part of the government, with or without any Future Fund and with or without their policies or our policies, to fulfil its defined benefit superannuation obligations, and that legal obligation will be honoured no matter who is in government—no matter that they take \$5 billion out of the Future Fund for higher education or that we use the Telstra shares to finance a broadband network. Their misuse and playing of political games with soldiers and police for this purpose is simply despicable. The total picture can be summed up with one word: desperation—a government that is out of touch, stuck in the past, out of ideas and desperate to win. (*Time expired*)