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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

Main Committee

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Digital Economy

SPEECH

Monday, 16 November 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Monday, 16 November 2009 Page 141 Questioner Speaker Saffin, Janelle, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Ms SAFFIN (Page) (9.00 pm)—Before I speak about the two issues I want to speak about in the grievance debate, I want to say in response to the ‘mere male’, the honourable member for Hume, that I—as a president of North Coast BreastScreen, as it is now called—wholeheartedly endorse the comments that he made about Professor John Forbes. I know his work very well. So thank you.

I rise to speak on two matters that cause me some grief—yes, that I am aggrieved about. One is the poor state of Australia’s performance as a digital economy—inherited by the Rudd government, leftover from the Howard government. The second issue is tasers and their potentially lethal impact on vulnerable persons socially and physically. I will firstly talk about the digital economy. The OECD statistics indicate that Australia is 16th in terms of broadband penetration, 20th in terms of the average monthly subscription price for broadband and 3rd most expensive for fixed line services for SMEs. The World Economic Forum ranks Australia 14th for network readiness, 16th for the total number of broadband internet subscribers per 100 population, 20th for monthly high-speed broadband subscription charges, 25th for accessibility of digital content, 35th for the quality of competition in the internet service provider sector and 29th for the lowest cost of broadband. These statistics are available on the OECD and World Economic Forum websites and they are on the department’s website as well.

It is really quite a disgrace that, in this day and age, we have this situation. There were many attempts at policies—well, not even policies, but various position or policy papers—by the previous government, but there was no national, overarching program about broadband and there were also longstanding problems with the telecommunications sector that were left by the previous government. The government’s clear objective with the National Broadband Network is to connect 90 per cent of all homes, schools and workplaces with optical fibre—fibre to the premises. That will provide broadband services to Australians—those 90 per cent—with speeds of up to 100 megabytes per second in urban and regional towns. The network will connect all other premises with Next Generation wireless and satellite technologies, able to deliver 12 megabytes per second or better.

In my electorate and other places, the Leader of the Nationals, the honourable member for Wide Bay, has been telling people that the government had reneged on its commitment—that they would miss out, they would have low speeds et cetera, et cetera. In fact, the 2007 election commitment was pretty clear. It was about 98 per cent of Australians having broadband connected at speeds of 12 megabytes per second. So the NBN, the \$43 billion investment in NBN, to be rolled out over eight years, will actually improve greatly on that election commitment. It is important that that gets put on the record.

At a local level I am working with and supporting local government and the Southern Cross University council to say that right across the whole North Coast we are ready to take up on the mainland the rollout that has happened in Tasmania. One statistic that I think some of us are not aware of is that 38 per cent of people used the internet for their last contact with government in 2008, which is double the number from 2004. Again, that is on the department’s website. Turning back to my local area, I recently had the pleasure of hosting my colleague the federal Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, Senator Stephen Conroy, during a visit to Grafton in the south of my electorate. The senator had made a promise during the 2007 election campaign to return to the city during its famous Jacaranda Festival and he was as good as his word. He came when the festival was on to see the beautiful jacarandas in bloom. We held a working lunch at the Grafton Regional Art Gallery which was attended by a capacity audience of local government representatives, business leaders, academics and health professionals from the Northern Rivers and Mid North Coast regions. Participants included the Mayor of the Coffs Harbour City Council, Councillor Keith Rhoades, Lismore’s mayor and the Chair of the Northern Rivers Regional Organisation of Councils, Councillor Jenny Dowell, the President of the Grafton Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Mr Jeremy Challacombe, and Summerland Credit Union Chief Executive Officer Margot Sweeny. The minister outlined future regional opportunities and benefits under the Rudd government’s \$43 billion National Broadband Network rollout and took many questions from the floor. The NBN is our ambitious project to wire up Australia for high-speed broadband. As Senator Conroy indicated, it has been very well received in Tasmania, the first state to receive it. This network promises digital technology

that will revolutionise our daily lives in the way that we do business, practise medicine and educate our young people in one of the fastest growing and most dynamic regions of Australia, which is where I live.

Southern Cross University's Executive Dean, Faculty of Business and Law, Professor Mike Evans, and its Professor of Information Technology, Peter Croll, have been building a strong case for the New South Wales North Coast to be a high-priority area for the mainland rollout. As of last year, an estimated 541,320 residents lived in the 13 local government areas from Greater Taree to the Tweed, and this prime sea- and tree-change destination is projected to grow faster than the state average over the next few decades. Southern Cross University, working in collaboration with Coffs Harbour City Council's Economic Development Office, believes that a robust telecommuting strategy will create resilient and connected communities in business, health care and education and in responding to natural disasters.

While the minister acknowledged that many regions around Australia would be competing for priority, he urged the university, local government and the private sector to keep working together to put forward a compelling business case. To this end a meeting is being held tomorrow, Tuesday 17 November, at Southern Cross University's Lismore campus to further develop what is called our resilient regional communities concept and to bring that into reality.

It was not all work and no play in Grafton. We gave Senator Conroy a quick drive—and it was a quick drive—down Jacaranda Avenue, which was in full purple bloom, before he had to catch a flight back to Sydney and Melbourne. I thank local government and also in particular Southern Cross University for taking the initiative in the area of making sure that we are ready. What we are saying is that we are ready to receive this rollout as we are well positioned. We want to be one of the first regions, as I am sure every honourable member here wants their region to be one of the first, so I am jumping in quickly and saying, 'Hands up as we're ready'—and we are ready because we have got the information, data and technical expertise and we have got local government onboard. Having local government onboard is a key issue, one that the minister impressed upon the local community.

I did say I wanted to talk about tasers. I have one minute left so I will devote one minute to them and come back to them in another debate. The first thing I want to say—this comes from the Braidwood inquiry, which was done in Canada—is that it has been clearly shown that people who have certain health conditions or a certain health status are really at risk. The Braidwood inquiry looked at the use of tasers. It was conducted in Canada after a death there. It showed that patients with cardiovascular disease were at a higher risk of ventricular fibrillation. The inquiry found that studies had been conducted under extremely controlled circumstances, and that is not how tasers are used on the street.

The second thing I would say is that 26 people have died in Canada since 2003, after stun weapons were used against them. That is from an Amnesty International report and Amnesty International—(*Time expired*)