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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Federation Chamber**

**GRIEVANCE DEBATE**

**National Broadband Network**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 23 November 2015**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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<b>Questioner</b>	<b>Responder</b>
<b>Speaker</b> Marles, Richard, MP	<b>Question No.</b>

**Mr MARLES** (Corio) (16:46): There is no issue which gains more attention within my electorate of Corio than this government's failed efforts in rolling out the National Broadband Network. We are at a point within our community in Geelong where we are becoming seriously disadvantaged by not having access to the kind of modern infrastructure which is going to define societies going forward. Quite frankly, we are at a point now where as a country we are lagging right behind. The current Prime Minister, when he was the Minister for Communications—and indeed prior to that when he was the shadow minister for communications—talked a big game, but when it comes to delivery Australia has been left short.

Back in April 2013, the then shadow communications minister, now the Prime Minister, spoke about not delivering fibre to the premises and about how, instead, his fibre-to-the-node and multitechnology model would be faster, cheaper, rolled out faster and just as good for the purposes of the Australian public as fibre to the premises. The situation now is failure on all of those measures. In April 2013, the now Prime Minister talked about his model costing \$29.5 billion, a figure he described as being conservative. A few months later in December, when he was now the Minister for Communications, he announced a \$12 billion blow-out in that figure, but again said at that point that he thought the numbers in the overall program were conservative and achievable. In August of this year, he added another \$15 billion to that blow-out and again said that Australians could have confidence in the numbers. All of this of course is a joke. We can have no confidence in any of that. We have seen a rolling disaster when it comes to the cost of this plan.

It has also, as is being felt by those in my electorate, been a rolling disaster when it comes to the delivery, and the timeliness of the delivery, of the service that had been originally promised. Back in April 2013, the now Prime Minister said that this would all be rolled out such that everybody would have access to fibre to the node by the end of 2016. But, of course, that time line has now been more than doubled, and we are talking about a time frame of 2020 before we actually see Australians getting access to what is now promised to be a second-rate service. All in all, it represents a disaster when it comes to how this has been delivered.

We were promised transparency when it came to how the nbn co would actually work, and yet we have not seen any of that transparency. Indeed, it has been the opposite: we have seen a situation where there is in this area of policy—like in so many other areas of the government's policy—a shroud of secrecy and spin overlaying this area. We still see basic financial information, such as financial forecasts for CAPEX, for OPENX and for revenue in relation to the NBN not being released publicly. This runs totally contrary to the kind of transparency which the now Prime Minister promised when he was the shadow minister and then the Minister for Communications.

All in all, I think that what we have witnessed here is communications and the National Broadband Network being the collateral damage of the current Prime Minister's ambition to get the top job. In all those years while he was focused on getting the top job he was neglecting Australians and, particularly from my point of view, those people in my electorate who are existing currently under a substandard broadband environment. This represents an enormous failure on the part of the now Prime Minister as the Minister for Communications. I can only say in relation to Minister Fifield, the new Minister for Communications, that he has an incredibly difficult job in restoring that state of affairs.

I have spoken on how the policy has played out at a national level but, of course, all of this has wrought a particular local impact in my electorate of Corio. I have had many constituents come to me, complaining about their lack of internet access and their ability to get the sort of information and data downloads that they need in a modern environment. Indeed, in many respects—as in the case of Rachel Drady last year—we actually saw the situation getting worse because the existing network is now completely clogged up as people are coming onto it. The need for the NBN to be in place is absolutely preeminent and we are seeing worse situations—worse data speeds—than we have seen in years past.

It was only when we were able to highlight the case of Rachel Drady in the *Geelong Advertiser* that she was able to gain any access to the internet in a completely urban part of Geelong, Herne Hill. We saw a similar situation with the Cerepinko family, who I visited earlier this year. They were really struggling to get access to the most basic internet services. There was a failure of communications policy when it comes to the rollout of the NBN.

We have seen it in respect of our schools—Geelong Baptist College and Kardinia International College have both approached me about their inability to get proper broadband connection for their schools. Of course, we are finding increasingly that education needs to be done online. The disadvantage in not having a good online connection for a school is much more significant today than it was 10 or 15 years ago because back then we were not living our lives online in the way that we are now. It is just basic, essential infrastructure in order educate our children in this day and age, and we are seeing Geelong schools miss out.

We are also seeing Geelong businesses miss out. Again, they have come and spoken with me about their inability to be able to exchange the kind of data that they need to in the timely way in which they need to. As a result, Geelong, as a place to do business, is nowhere near as attractive as it could be if we had a modern communications infrastructure environment.

That really brings me to the critical point here, in a sense. We do have a vision of what should be our future, just an hour to our north-west in Ballarat. Ballarat was one of the first parts of mainland Australia to have fibre to the premises rolled out under the National Broadband Network that Labor was putting in place. As a result, Ballarat is a connected city, whereas Geelong is a disconnected city in terms of communication, access to the internet and access to broadband. The ease with which a whole lot of businesses can operate is so much greater now in Ballarat than it is in Geelong, and we are seeing a situation where we are losing people who would come and invest in Geelong but instead go to Ballarat because they have modern infrastructure where our city does not.

Now we have been promised a rollout of the National Broadband Network in Geelong beginning in the third quarter of next year, and in suburbs like Belmont and surrounding areas from 2017. Of course all of that is after, whichever way you look at it, the next election—and there should be no coincidence in that. But we can have no confidence in that kind of timing. There is no credibility to this plan at all. What this plan suggests is that we will have this technology rolled out in front of a million houses by June of next year, and then there is the promise of something like 6.2 million houses benefiting from the rollout in the two years after that. It is simply incredible; it is not going to happen in that time frame. What it represents is an absolute disaster in terms of the way in which this government has managed its communication policy.

Labor is the party of optic fibre. Labor is the party which championed the National Broadband Network from the outset and championed it on the basis of fibre to the premises being a fundamental need of a modern society. We can see that future right here in the present when we look at Ballarat, but right now Geelong is the victim of the short-sighted, hopeless policy as it has been carried out by this Turnbull government.