

## Graeme Gibson,

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7<sup>th</sup> August, 2000.

Senator the Hon. Richard Alston,  
Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts,  
Parliament House,  
CANBERRA ACT 2600.

Dear Senator,

I write concerning the current situation with telecommunications in the Singleton Shire generally, but particularly in my home village of Broke and environs.

Broke is a burgeoning viticulture and tourist growth area. Whilst there may well be only a relatively small resident population, the tourist trade attracts many visitors. Broke has, even now, well in excess of 100 commercial tourist beds in its guest houses, cottages and Bed and Breakfast homes. This is expected to grow significantly when potable water is made available to Broke, which could happen as early as next year.

Broke was the first New South Wales wine growing subregion recognized by the Geographical Indications Committee of the Australian Wine & Brandy Corporation. There are currently in excess of 50 vineyards in the direct area, together with several cellar door wine tasting areas and at least three wineries.

Hundreds of jobs have been created in the tourist and viticulture pursuits and, with the imminent supply of irrigation to water to Broke from the Hunter River, it is expected that at least another 300 jobs will be created in these industries. Other industries are also growing, including the Olive producing industry.

With the slowing of the coal mining industry in the Singleton Shire, and the movement of the mines away from Singleton towards Muswellbrook, it is anticipated that Singleton Shire will be very reliant on the growing tourist trade, and it is expected that the Broke area will be the jewel in the Shire's crown when it comes to tourist attraction.

Difficulty arises, however, with the poor communications available. This is true not only for the residents of Broke, but for those of us who attempt to run our own businesses (particularly those Viticultural companies who travel from vineyard to vineyard conducting their work), for tourists who need to be able to stay in touch with their homes and their own businesses in the cities, and for those who run businesses both here and in other areas sharing their time between the two places – and this is becoming a common occurrence.

1. Telephone. The telephone lines in our area are unable to adequately accommodate current technology. Internet connections continually fall out and connection speed is painfully slow (12,000 bps to 14,400 bps). I noted in the press last week, that there is currently a roll out of optic fibre cables occurring in Australia.

- I would appreciate your advice as to when it is anticipated that the Broke area will have access to modern high speed lines, and what your Government is doing to ensure that our region will be properly catered for in this regard. It appears to me that

there is no excuse for rural communities not to have the same access to fast telephone lines as those residents of cities.

2. Mobile telephone access. Access to the mobile network is patchy, in the Broke area, at best. We must appreciate that people are now reliant in both their personal and in their business lives on mobile telephone access. Those of us who run a vineyard and also run a business often cannot access the mobile network whilst in the vineyard. Personally, I cannot access the mobile network either in my vineyard, or in my home. There are many of us in that situation.

Additionally, those who are looking to tour in and to stay in our area, often require access to both the mobile network and to speedy Internet access.

Finally, farming is acknowledged as being a dangerous occupation. Those who might suffer an injury, sudden illness or accident on their farms in the course of their occupation have no access to the mobile network to summon urgent help.

- I would appreciate your advice as to what steps are being taken by your Government to ensure that mobile telephone access will be available to rural Australia, and particularly to the Broke area.

3. Television reception. Again, television reception in the Broke area is patchy at best. Most of us have elected to purchase satellite dishes and decoder boxes rather than have very poor quality reception. Some of us have spent thousands of dollars on aerial systems, only to find that reception still can't be obtained. Others have to rely on relatively expensive private satellite television providers.

- I would appreciate your advice as to what steps are being taken by your Government to ensure that Television reception, particularly the ABC which we should all have access to, is available to all rural communities, particularly to the Broke community.

4. Radio Reception. Reception of both AM and FM radio is difficult, particularly at night. The only radio reception available at my home is Muswellbrook 981, Newcastle ABC and 2BL, the latter only in the day time, and then sometimes with difficulty.

- I would appreciate your advice as to what steps are being taken by your Government to ensure that comprehensive radio reception, particularly the ABC, is available to all rural communities, particularly to the Broke community.

I would appreciate your early response to each of the matters raised above.

Yours faithfully,

Graeme Gibson.

cc Joel Fitzgibbon, Esquire, Member for the Hunter, 45 Vincent St., Cessnock NSW 2325