

## PREFACE

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On 5 March 1998, the Minister for Regional Development, Territories and Local Government, the Hon Alex Somlyay MP, referred to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and the External Territories an inquiry into communications to and within the Territories. The specific terms of reference are on page xi.

The terms of reference of this inquiry encompass the nature and adequacy of modern communications required in the External Territories and the level of strategic planning being undertaken by both the public and private sectors to address future communications needs to and within these Territories. The External Territories include Norfolk Island, Christmas Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands and the Antarctic Territories. In this context, communications include postal, telecommunications, broadcasting and on-line services.

There are technical issues concerning the provision of the infrastructure framework (undersea cables and satellites) necessary for modern communications. There are economic issues of the cost and maintenance of these services and how they will be paid for - by private or public funding, user pays or on a cross-subsidy basis - and there are national legislative requirements covering such matters as community service obligations and international regulations and agreements.

As Australia confronts the sale of public utilities, the technological, economic and legislative issues converge. In the increasing trend to private providers, there are implications for the delivery of the community service obligations, particularly for small, remote communities where the market does not readily provide services. In this respect, Australia's External Territories have each had unique histories and face varying issues as they attempt to enter the Information Age.

In the 38<sup>th</sup> Parliament, the Committee received 40 submissions, mainly from the External Territories themselves, but also from the government departments responsible for territory affairs and communications, the regulatory authorities for communications and broadcasting, the communications carriers and the broadcasters. Two public hearings were held in Canberra in June 1998 and the Committee visited both Norfolk Island and the Indian Ocean Territories in June and August respectively in order to hold public hearings and discussions with the communities.

The Committee found these visits invaluable in clarifying for them the problems faced by these communities and in identifying the important role modern communications has in lessening the distance and isolation of people in these areas. The Committee was grateful to all the people of the territories for the hospitality they received during the visits.

With the dissolution of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parliament before the Committee could finalise its report, the matter lapsed. However, the Minister for Regional Services, Territories and Local Government in the 39<sup>th</sup> Parliament, Senator the Hon Ian Macdonald, re-referred the matter on 10 December 1998.

As it was almost six months since the last evidence had been taken, the Committee resolved to re-call the main departments for a final public hearing and sought updated information from all persons who had previously made a submission. The final hearing was held in Canberra on 4 February 1999.

The Committee expresses its sincere appreciation to all those people who contributed to the inquiry by making submissions, attending the public hearings and assisting with the inspections undertaken by the Committee.

The Committee is grateful to those staff who contributed during the inquiry including:

<b>Secretaries:</b>	Judy Middlebrook (from December 1997 to April 1998)
	Margaret Swieringa (from April 1998)
<b>Inquiry staff:</b>	Matthew James
	Bev Forbes
	Margaret Atkin
	Penne Humphries

Senator Julian McGauran  
Chairman

March 1999