

Additional Comments – Australian Greens

The majority report reads as a balanced summary of the evidence submitted to the Committee, and the Australian Greens are largely in agreement with it. We are even reasonably comfortable with the majority's sole recommendation concerning the public release of the underlying assumptions and calculations that resulted in the Implementation Study, and their use in a cost-benefit analysis. Putting these details in the public domain would be a worthwhile exercise in transparent governance and would facilitate a more informed public debate.

As we have made clear in the committee's previous reports, we do not subscribe to a view that a cost-benefit analysis would result in an unequivocal answer about the value of the government's plans for the NBN. It would involve some highly speculative predictions of benefits and their arbitrary and abstract monetisation. Provided that these leaps and assumptions were explicitly acknowledged and explained however, such an analysis could be a useful articulation of precisely what considerations have informed the government's decision to proceed with this project. Those considerations would then undoubtedly be endorsed, challenged, re-evaluated, augmented, etc in the public debate, which is a healthy symptom of an open and democratic political culture and may well give rise to useful new insights and suggestions.

In our contributions to the committee's previous reports, we raised the issue of the geographic and socio-economic 'digital divide' and the importance of building bridges across it. During the most recent round of submissions and hearings, some interesting comment was made on the ubiquity of online services that is relevant to this issue. ACCAN remarked, in the context of endorsing the Implementation Study's recommendation that the Universal Service Obligation (USO) be reviewed, that we are already well on our way toward ubiquity:

Online services are already a practical necessity in everyday life because there are so many basic transactions that are exclusively or preferentially performed online. Access to the internet is already a matter of social inclusion.¹

The Northern Territory Minister for Information, Communications and Technology Policy urged the Government to pursue ubiquity to make the NBN 'a truly visionary and transformational nation building initiative'. The Minister cautioned against the Implementation Study's cost-saving recommendation that premises only be connected to the NBN on demand, commenting that:

The fundamental value proposition of the National Broadband Network isn't so much its speed (although important), but its potential ubiquity...

1 Australian Communications Consumer Action Network, *Submission 138ii*, pp 5–6.

It could connect the 25-30 per cent of homes that are not internet connected and enable a whole range of services, including some government services, to be delivered to householders regardless of whether they have subscribed to a retail broadband service or not.

...every child's school computer could be substantially enhanced if they could all use them on an education internet at home.

...governments and other organisations could deliver services to homes, rather than continually expanding hospitals, prisons and schools...

To ensure the success of Smartgrids and government delivered services to the home, I would welcome an exploration for ubiquitous National Broadband Network connections.²

If we place these two contributions side-by-side, it is clear that ubiquitous access to a national broadband network is in the interests of social inclusion and it enables the more transformational benefits the Government hopes to achieve with the NBN. A truly ubiquitous network offers the potential for significant government savings on service delivery, better demand management in our energy sector, enhanced education outreach, and many other benefits, while simultaneously ensuring that the socio-economically disadvantaged are not left behind. We strongly recommend that the government gives due consideration to this fortunate alignment of interests. This might be achieved through a revamped USO, or via some other mechanism. The outcome is obviously the important point.

Senator Scott Ludlam

2 Mr Karl Hampton MLA, Minister for Information, Communications and Technology Policy, Northern Territory Government, *Submission 132*, p. 2.