



PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF
AUSTRALIA

**Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service
Standards) Amendment Bill (No.2) 2000**

Report by the Senate Environment, Communications,
Information Technology and the Arts Legislation Committee

AUGUST 2000

Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

**Telecommunications (Consumer Protection
and Services Standards) Amendment Bill
(No.2) 2000**

**Report of the Senate Environment, Communications,
Information Technology and the Arts Legislation Committee**

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TELECOMMUNICATIONS (CONSUMER PROTECTION AND SERVICE STANDARDS) AMENDMENT BILL (NO.2) 2000

Introduction

1.1 On 28 June 2000, the Senate referred the Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2000 to the Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Legislation Committee (Selection of Bills Committee Report No. 10 of 2000). The Committee was required to report to the Senate by 25 August 2000. The Committee sought an extension from the Senate to report on 29 August 2000.

The Bill

1.2 The Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2000 amends Part 2 of the *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999*, the part of the Act that establishes the universal service regime for telecommunications. The universal service obligation (USO) ensures that the standard telephone service (ie. voice telephony), payphone and other prescribed services are reasonably accessible to all people in Australia on an equitable basis, wherever they reside or carry on business. The complementary digital data service obligation (DDSO) underpins access on request to a 64kpbs (or comparable) data service.¹

1.3 As part of the sale of the second tranche of Telstra in 1998, Parliament allocated \$150 million (referred to as a “Social Bonus”) to provide untimed local calls in remote Australia (the Extended Zones). In accordance with decisions announced by the government on 23 March 2000², the *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Amendment Act (No. 1) 2000* amends the existing universal service regime to give the successful tenderer for the provision of untimed local calls to a particular region, the certainty that it will become the regional universal service provider (USP).

1.4 In his second reading speech for the earlier legislation, the Minister indicated that a further Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Amendment Bill (No. 2) would be introduced to implement the government’s other decisions. More substantive than the first Act, this second Bill seeks to implement all elements of the government’s USO package announced on 23 March 2000.³

1.5 The key objectives of the Bill include:

- amending the universal service regime to improve its general operation, particularly in relation to contestability, costing and funding;

1 Explanatory Memorandum, Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2000, p. 2

2 For further details, see Explanatory Memorandum, Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2000, pp. 2-3

3 Explanatory Memorandum, Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2000, p. 3

- undertaking two pilot schemes in regional Australia to trial the competitive supply of services under the USO; and
- extending the funding base for the USO and DDSO to include carriage service providers as well as carriers.⁴

The Committee's inquiry

1.6 The Committee advertised its inquiry in each State capital newspaper as well as in *The Weekend Australian* and *The Financial Review*. Details of the inquiry were also placed on the Committee's homepage on the Internet.

1.7 The Committee received 7 submissions, 5 of which went to the core of the issues addressed in the Bill. The list of individuals, organisations and agencies making submissions is at Appendix 1 to this report. All submissions received are publicly available through the Committee Secretariat.

Public hearing

1.8 The Committee held a public hearing in Canberra on 18 August 2000. The list of witnesses who appeared at the hearing is at Appendix 2.

The evidence

Contestability

1.9 Most witnesses expressed broad support for the introduction of contestability for the USO subsidy. For example, Vodafone commented that the Bill helps to overcome a "huge hurdle ... in providing services in rural Australia" by opening up the subsidy to competition, thereby allowing all carriers to have "an equal opportunity" in accessing the subsidy through provision of services in rural Australia.⁵

1.10 Vodafone also stated that customers would be the major beneficiaries of the changes to the legislation by having a choice of carrier as well as a choice of technology. In Vodafone's view, this would result in an increase in the range of services.

1.11 Cable and Wireless Optus also supports USO contestability for similar reasons.⁶

1.12 The Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU), however, voiced its concerns with the Bill, in particular with what it described as a "dismantling of a very

4 Explanatory Memorandum, Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Amendment Bill (no. 2) 2000, p. 3

5 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1

6 Cable and Wireless Optus stated at hearing:

We think it is going to provide benefits to customers in rural and remote areas. They will be able to have a choice of carrier and a choice of services that they wish to access. We think that this contestability will open up service provisions so that better services will be provided across the board. (*Transcript of evidence*, p. 30)

important asset for Australia, ... the national telecommunications system".⁷ The CEPU commented that:

One of the things that cannot be walked away from is that this universal service obligation is a loss service. It is a nonsense for people to be saying that competition for a loss service will have people vying to enter into it in the way that it is provided now.⁸

1.13 The CEPU contended that, even if customers were given greater variety of carriers and technologies through contestability, the competition for loss-making services would inevitably lead to increased USO costs.

1.14 The Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DoCITA) stated in its evidence that there appears to be fairly broad support for change to contestability and for the broad direction of the legislation package. Where there are differences of view, these tend to focus on second and third order implementation details rather than on the broad principles.⁹

1.15 The Department explained that the government is introducing contestability by means of a staged approach, and hence the proposed pilot scheme allows for flexibility for 'fine tuning' as the system is implemented. The staged approach that has shaped the design of the current arrangements relies on key principles of the primacy of consumer interests, and ensuring that a responsible approach is taken to the costs of the USO and to the industry as a whole.¹⁰

Incentives for Telstra

1.16 A number of witnesses expressed concern that, if Telstra were displaced as the sole USP, it would have no commercial incentive to maintain its infrastructure over the period that it was not providing the universal service. For example, the CEPU stated:

... [Telstra] would not be unhappy not to be the principal provider in these loss-making areas, particularly if they can 'cherry pick' the main customers in those areas. Once they were not, why would they maintain any infrastructure in those areas? ... They would get out of there fast. They do not want to be there now because it makes losses. As soon as someone else was the principal universal provider they would be out of there: they couldn't wait.¹¹

1.17 Telstra indicated in its evidence that, in the event that it was not successful in bidding for universal service provision, any decision on maintaining existing infrastructure would be made on a commercial basis. Telstra commented:

There are costs of maintaining infrastructure. If we no longer have to be there and we have sunk assets, the financial decision is somewhat different than an ongoing

7 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10

8 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10

9 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 36

10 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 36

11 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12

responsibility to provide service there. ... It would be almost an area by area, infrastructure by infrastructure, customer by customer proposition for us to consider.¹²

1.18 In its evidence to the Committee, DoCITA clarified some issues in this regard. The Department stated that a condition of the Extended Zone tender is that the successful tenderer will become the USP on an ongoing basis; the tender would not be relet at the end of a three-year period, as some witnesses appeared to assume. The Department commented that the tender documentation makes it clear that, no matter who wins the tender, one of the obligations they accept is that they become the Primary Universal Service Provider (PUSP), “basically forever”.¹³

1.19 DoCITA explained that the Minister would need to exercise his powers to designate another carrier to be the PUSP, which is a disallowable decision. The PUSP has no right to discontinue service for any reason.¹⁴

1.20 The Department addressed the question of Telstra’s decision not to maintain its infrastructure if it did not win the tender by stating that the government would accept that decision and at this stage had no intention at all of interfering with Telstra’s opting to vacate the field.¹⁵

1.21 However, DoCITA also refuted the suggestion in Telstra’s submission that the proposed process will perpetuate a system with USO that acts against investment in infrastructure. Instead, the Department argued that contestability would encourage Telstra to increase its investment. The DoCITA witness commented:

I would have thought that a system which said, ‘Here are some incentives for people to enter the market and to start providing services’, is in fact completely the opposite of that. There could be an argument that at least under the current system Telstra provides services in a particular year and at the end of the year they get paid a lump sum of money irrespective of the level or standards at which they provide the services. If the level and standard get covered off in regulation, there is very little incentive for Telstra to invest at the moment. ... I would have thought that a system that has got an incentives-based approach to things, where you actually have to try to get customers and retain customers and focus on customers if you want to get the universal service money, is much more likely to generate investment and focus on consumers, which is one reason why the government has, I suppose, gone down this path.¹⁶

Costings

1.22 A number of witnesses raised the issue of cost barriers that are to be overcome in providing services to rural Australia, which are more expensive than service provision in metropolitan Australia. The CEPU, in particular, voiced concern that competitive tendering

12 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24

13 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 36

14 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 37

15 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 42

16 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 42

would bring no savings to the community, but would likely lead to increases in the total costs borne by industry.¹⁷

1.23 Vodafone acknowledged the cost barrier as an issue, but regarded this as an opportunity to work on economies of scope. In particular, Vodafone believes that, for the same order of magnitude of capital outlay, its revenue would increase quite significantly through economies of scope by being able to bundle a mobile service with a standard telephone service.¹⁸

1.24 Cable and Wireless Optus, however, expressed some concern that the current approach to USO contestability will not work in practice, as new entrants will be reluctant to enter and unlikely to compete in USO areas. Cable and Wireless Optus believes that the costing model will overcompensate Telstra for the risk and stranded assets which in turn will drive up the USO costs in pilot areas. Such costs will impact back on the industry, driving up costs generally. Therefore, Optus submits, USO costs will increase as contestability is introduced, rather than decrease, and benefits to consumers will not be delivered.¹⁹

1.25 Telstra also expressed difficulties with costing of the USO, commenting that the obligation should properly be viewed as a tax on industry. For this reason, costing and funding arrangements are important in determining the size and incidence of that tax. In this context, Telstra is critical of the costing process as envisaged by the legislation, claiming that there has not been a year since 1991 that the process has worked. Telstra commented:

Costs do not disappear because the legislation says you do not recognise them. It merely meant that Telstra had to pay the unrecognised amount – 100 per cent of that tax – and everybody else contributed a share of the recognised amount. That is, if you like, the history. Going forward, there is not even a cost concept in this Bill, and to us that is extraordinary. We have a requirement on Telstra, at least in the near term, to be the carrier of last resort of the primary universal service provider throughout Australia, and yet any concept of cost recovery does not exist in the legislation ... We would like the legislation to reflect that the supplier of a universal service does receive the costs of supply.²⁰

1.26 Other carriers who gave evidence opposed the payment of a premium subsidy to Telstra as carrier of last resort. Vodafone described the position in this regard as the level of risk and exposure that a carrier has in providing services in rural Australia. In Vodafone's submission, the risk to Telstra of losing customers and incurring economic loss as a consequence is potentially less than the cost to Vodafone. Vodafone envisages a high level of retention by Telstra of customers in rural areas and estimates its risk in winning customers from Telstra to be at least equal to Telstra's risk in retaining its customers.²¹

17 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11

18 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2

19 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30

20 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22

21 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6

1.27 Therefore, Vodafone argues that for Telstra to receive a premium on top of what a competing USP receives is “just funding inefficiency within Telstra”.²² In its view, that premium could act as a disincentive as it would make it harder for Vodafone to compete.

1.28 Cable and Wireless Optus similarly contends that the premium payments to Telstra are unnecessary as they only increase the cost of the USO. Optus does not believe that Telstra needs to be the carrier of last resort or the PUSP, and is prepared to undertake that role for no additional compensation.²³

1.29 On this issue, DoCITA indicated in its evidence that it is examining ways of improving the machinery of the legislation to overcome the sorts of problems with payments raised by Telstra.²⁴

Arbitrage

1.30 Telstra expressed particular concern that the entry of competing USPs into the field opens up opportunities for forms of competitive distortion, such as arbitrage.²⁵ Telstra supplies local call resale at a nationally averaged rate, by regulation. Price controls require it to nationally average its untimed local call price. Telstra’s concern is that a competitor with no infrastructure could use that nationally averaged price and supply universal services through resale, thereby collecting a subsidy as if they were providing infrastructure to an area yet merely reselling Telstra’s service that Telstra could be supplying at below cost.

1.31 To remedy this situation, Telstra suggests that a USP that relies on resale should not receive a USO subsidy. Further, Telstra proposes that the ACA and the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) align their approaches to network costing in USO areas to avoid any effect on competition in contestable areas that would arise from costing differences.²⁶

1.32 DoCITA does not share Telstra’s concern that competing service providers would try to build their entire business based on reselling Telstra’s network, describing the likelihood of this as “extremely remote”.²⁷ The Department believes that building a business based purely on arbitrage, particularly in regional areas, would be a “very difficult business ... to sustain”.²⁸ Such a business would need to rely on an agreement with Telstra on access and interconnection for use of Telstra’s facilities. In the event of arbitrage, DoCITA argues that Telstra would approach the ACCC immediately to have the access arrangements varied. The Department commented:

Telstra take the view in their submission that, because they have nationally averaged rates for doing things, somebody else will come along with a nationally averaged rate and try to take advantage of that to build a business. I would not

22 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7

23 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30

24 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 43

25 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21

26 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22

27 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 44

28 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 44

want to prejudge the ACCC's views on this, but if there were a dispute about that access and interconnection agreement in terms of conditions, that it would be in the long-term interests of end users. Telstra would probably have quite a strong case to say that, in this case – where there are universal service subsidy arrangements applying and this person is clearly just trying to use the system to build an arbitrage business – it is not in the long-term interest of end users. Telstra could probably go to the Commission to seek to have that varied.

I think that the very fact that Telstra could do that would act to discourage people from coming in to try to build a business solely or largely on the basis of arbitrage. ... The ACA would have to look at any arrangement like that to make sure it was fair to consumers.²⁹

Pilots

1.33 Vodafone, in particular, welcomes the trial scheme in pilot areas provided by the Bill. The pilots would enable Vodafone to trial innovative packages in rural areas which would provide the carrier with statistical and other information to test its belief that some customers may prefer a mobile service over an untimed local option. Vodafone regards the pilot scheme as presenting only limited risk to the government with the consumer as the beneficiary due to the option of moving to an alternative service if that meets the particular needs of customers.³⁰

1.34 Cable and Wireless Optus suggested that the first pilot should be introduced in areas close to where providers have existing infrastructure, to attract new providers to enter the market.³¹

1.35 Telstra supports the trial as potentially informative of technical capabilities; the costs of service delivery; and the willingness of customers to accept price and quality trade-offs.³²

1.36 However, Telstra cautions that Parliament needs to have feedback on whether the contestability pilots have been successful or not in order to decide on the Minister's proposal for areas where contestability will be introduced.³³

1.37 The CEPU raises a similar concern about legislative ambit in the Bill when entering into the post-trial environment. The Union comments:

... [W]e believe that these trials need to be viewed with a great deal of scepticism and caution. As a minimum, there needs to be provision in the legislation itself – not just a policy statement by government, but provision in the legislation – for a review of their outcomes – we would suggest within a three-year time period of them having started – and that the Minister ... should not be able to proceed to

29 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 44

30 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3

31 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 33

32 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20

33 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20

declare any other new areas contestable until that review has been conducted, a report tabled in the Parliament and the subject of full debate.³⁴

1.38 DoCITA indicated in its evidence that the Bill takes a holistic approach to the trials scheme and continuing implementation of the contestability model. The Department stated:

Basically, what the Bill does is set up a framework for introducing contestability over time. It does not specifically identify: here are the pilots and here are later stages of the process. The government has made announcements that it proposes to start these two pilot areas but the Bill in fact does not make the distinction between pilot areas and other areas. ... We would take the view that all of the provisions of the Bill are required both to do the pilots and for the ongoing arrangements. ... Effectively what the Bill does is establish an overall system. It says: here are the overall arrangements; here is a default contestability scheme.³⁵

1.39 DoCITA advised that there are no formal arrangements in the Bill to conduct a review process at the conclusion of the trial period. The Department is proposing to monitor the pilots by means of administrative arrangements. While the details of these arrangements have yet to be finalised, DoCITA provided the following comments with the regard to the process:

In very broad terms, [the criteria] are going to be issues like: how administrable are they going to be; how are the administrative arrangements working; how effective have we been in getting competition to come in; what do the costs in broad terms look like and how have the costing arrangements worked; how do things look from the consumer perspective; and in particular what is the level of consumer understanding about the process. Effectively, we will look at how workable have the arrangements actually been and how successful have they been both in ensuring that we continue to have the universal service provided in an effective way and also in increasing choice for consumers at the same time.³⁶

Discretionary Ministerial powers

1.40 Telstra, in particular, was concerned at the wide discretionary powers given to the Minister and the ACA in the legislation, with no reference to matters to be considered or evaluated in making a particular decision.³⁷

1.41 DoCITA indicated that many of these issues are being addressed, explaining that the government intends to move some amendments to the Bill in the Senate:

... [T]he government will be moving some amendments to the Bill. Those amendments will be covering off matters such as consequential and transitional. Currently there are not any consequential provisions and transitional provisions between the old regime and the current one.

We will also be incorporating all of the amendments that were made by the Senate in relation to Universal Service Bill (No. 1) so that the Bill reflects and

34 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11

35 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 37

36 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 38

37 *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 19-20

incorporates those issues that the Senate had a view on last time. We will probably be including some further provisions with some further penalties. There is a penalty regime built into the current Bill in the sense that everything in the Act is a licence condition and so carriers are required to comply that way. We will also be incorporating some specific penalty provisions in relation to certain aspects of the legislation. One other matter, which we will probably be incorporating as amendments, is that during the drafting process there were a couple of oversights. A couple of Ministerial or ACA determinations which were not disallowable which probably should have been, and they will be incorporated in those amendments as well.³⁸

Alternative Telecommunications Services

1.42 The CEPU raised its concern that the ATs do not appear to be necessarily subject to any regulatory price controls. The Union stated:

It is not clear whether they will be subject, for instance, to customer service guarantee provisions or where they will sit in relation to the customer service guarantee. For instance, these services may be mobile services which are not at present captured by the customer service guarantee ... Particularly in the area of pricing, we never tire of saying that the USO is not really a function of costs, it is the subject of prices, because if the USO provider were free to charge any price ... for the services offered, there would be no reason not to charge at least at a recovery level and there would not be a loss and there would be nothing to be funded. So if a provider can offer alternative telecommunications services in lieu of the USO and still be subsidised or given some sort of payment for doing it, it opens up the possibility of their charging perhaps more for a certain service than is currently the regulated price under the price capping regime, or at least alternatively trading off service quality against price and so squeezing more out of the service offering.³⁹

1.43 In this context, Telstra raised the issue of a competing USP delivering an alternative service at a higher or lower level of quality than the standard service that the PUSP is obliged to deliver. In Telstra's view, this could result in a situation where carriers delivering different services at different cost structures with different levels of features all receive the same level of subsidy.⁴⁰

1.44 DoCITA clarified in its evidence that the Bill allows for the possibility of a primary universal service provider being able not only to supply the standard telephone services as defined in the legislation but in addition – without derogating from its obligation to supply that standard of service – provide alternative telecommunications services. The standard of those alternative services would be a matter for the provider to submit to the ACA and for the authority to take account of in deciding whether to approve that service.⁴¹

1.45 The Department commented that the Bill specifies a process for the ACA to consider proposals for ATs by comparing services currently available in the marketplace and

38 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40

39 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16

40 *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 20-21

41 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 39

assessing the basic requirements of consumers. The additional services have to meet the fundamental requirements of the USO, including provision of the standard telephone service, which in turn requires voice telephony. The ACA would also have regard to technical standards applying to provision of the standard telephone services in respect of matters such as noise, delay, and data rates.⁴²

1.46 DoCITA stated further that the Bill (at clause 13Q(2)) requires the core providers to submit a marketing plan for their ATS with certain mandatory specifications. The Department commented:

The ACA, for example, make judgments about to what extent they think the ATS will be able to meet the universal service obligation for the area concerned, that those services are of general appeal and appropriate for filling the obligation, that they set out appropriate terms and conditions on which the equipment, goods and services are to be supplied, that they set out appropriate arrangements for the marketing of those services to people – in other words that consumers are informed about the services, and that there are appropriate procedures in place effectively about the supply of those and for customer complaints.⁴³

Public health and safety

1.47 One submission, from the Maleny Residents' Action Group (Submission No. 7), alluded to public health and safety concerns that it has raised with Telstra in relation to a mobile telephone base in the township of Maleny in Queensland. The submission expressed concern that digital technology may hold potential risks for public health and safety that have yet to be subject to independent scrutiny and research to assess any possible short and long-term impacts.⁴⁴ The Committee notes the submission's comments but they are more relevant to the Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee's current inquiry into Electro-Magnetic Radiation.

Conclusion

1.48 Having considered the Bill and the issues raised in submissions received and in evidence at hearing, the Committee makes the following recommendation:

Recommendation

The committee recommends that the Bill be passed.

Senator Alan Eggleston

Chair (LP, WA)

42 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40

43 *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40

44 *Submission No. 7*, p. 1

APPENDIX 1

SUBMISSIONS TO THE

TELECOMMUNICATIONS (CONSUMER PROTECTION

AND SERVICE STANDARDS) AMENDMENT BILL

(NO. 2) 2000

- 1 Cable & Wireless Optus Limited
- 2 The Eros Foundation
- 3 Telstra
- 4 Department of Communications IT & the Arts (DOCITA)
- 5 Vodafone Australia
- 6 Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU)
- 7 Maleny Residents' Action Group

APPENDIX 2

WITNESSES WHO APPEARED BEFORE THE COMMITTEE

Vodaphone (Submission No. 5)

Mr Christopher Dalton

Mr Dominic Arena

CEPU (Submission No. 6)

Mr Colin Cooper

Ms Rosalind Eason

Telstra (Submission No. 3)

Mr Mike Bradley

Mr Graham Phillips

Cable & Wireless Optus (Submission No. 1)

Ms Judy Anderson

DOCITA (Submission No. 4)

Mr Chris Cheah

Mr Simon Bryant

Mr Philip Mason

APPENDIX 3
DOCUMENTS TABLED AT PUBLIC HEARINGS

FRIDAY 18 AUGUST 2000, CANBERRA

Cable & Wireless Optus

- C & W Optus Network
- Comments

FRIDAY 25 AUGUST 2000, CANBERRA

Telstra Corporation Limited

- Answers to question on notice asked by Senator Lyn Allison

**TELECOMMUNICATIONS (CONSUMER PROTECTION
AND
SERVICE STANDARDS) AMENDMENT BILL (NO.2) 2000**

LABOR SENATORS' REPORT

AUGUST 2000

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Labor Senators acknowledge the fundamental importance of the Universal Service Obligation in ensuring the equitable delivery of telecommunications services to rural and regional Australia.

Labor Senators condemn the Government for its continuing push for the full privatisation of Telstra, a policy that will inevitably see a decline in services to rural and regional Australia.

Labor Senators note that the Government has sought to portray competitive tendering of the Universal Service Obligation as both the solution to the decline of services to rural and regional Australia following on from the partial privatisation of Telstra, and as an argument for full privatisation.

Labor Senators note the Government's own admission of the limitation of the scope of its competitive tendering policy by requiring Telstra to remain as the Primary Universal Service Provider ('PUSP'), or carrier of last resort, in the two proposed pilot project areas.

Labor Senators believe that the Universal Service Obligation ('USO') must be upgraded in the future to encompass access to minimum digital data services, and condemn the Government for continuing to ignore the growing need for reliable data services for Australians in remote or isolated communities.

In this context, Labor Senators support the trial and proper evaluation of USO contestability on a local, regional or niche basis.

Labor Senators recommend that the *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2000* be amended to:

- provide for a public and independent review of the two trials and subsequent report to Parliament, that review to take place before further Universal Service Obligation contestability decisions are considered;
- retain Telstra as the national PUSP and to remove the provisions allowing a carrier other than Telstra to become a PUSP;
- remove the ability of the Government to appoint a carrier other than Telstra as a PUSP for an area if an agreement is entered into under either section 56 or 57 of the *Telstra Corporation Act 1991* as currently permitted by the Act. This will ensure that Telstra continues as the PUSP for all of Australia, including for those Australians living in the extended outer zones, approximately 80 percent of the Australian landmass.
- require a PUSP or Competing Universal Service Provider ('CUSP') who offers an Alternative Telephone Service ('ATS') to fully inform customers of the different service and price arrangements available under the ATS as compared with the Standard Telephone Service ('STS').
- require a PUSP or CUSP to publicly consult on initial and subsequent marketing plans where an ATS is materially different from any ATS that has been previously approved.

- provide that the level of USO subsidy received by a PUSP or CUSP is proportionately lower if the standard of service available under an ATS is lower than the standard of service available under the STS.
- require the Minister to receive advice from the ACA before setting the level of USO subsidy.

INTRODUCTION

The *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2000* ('the No.2 Bill') provides for the repeal and substitution of the universal service regime in the existing Part 2 of the *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999* ('the Act').¹

Part 2 of the Act currently imposes a Universal Service Obligation (USO) on Telstra to ensure that standard telephone services (ie. voice telephony), payphones and prescribed carriage services are provided to all people in Australia on an equitable basis, wherever they reside or carry on business. The complementary digital data service obligation (DDSO) underpins access on request to a 64 kbps (or comparable) data service.

Part 2 of the Act also provides for the funding by telecommunications carriers of the cost of providing the USO and the DDSO.

The Government has been exploring options for the introduction of contestability for the provision of the USO.

On 23 March 2000, the Government announced a number of initiatives in relation to the provision of universal service in Australia and of untimed local calls in remote Australia. In broad terms, the Government said it would:

- (a) enhance industry certainty by enabling the Minister to determine a universal service provider's net universal service cost (NUSC) in advance for 2000-01 and subsequent financial years, for up to three years in advance;
- (b) undertake a competitive selection process to award the \$150 million allocated for the provision of untimed local calls in remote Australia (the Extended Zones), with the successful tenderer subsequently becoming the universal service provider for the area;
- (c) amend the universal service regime to allow for contestability of its provision;
- (d) undertake two pilot schemes in regional Australia to trial the competitive supply of services under the USO with Telstra as the carrier of last resort; and
- (e) extend the funding base for the USO and DDSO to include carriage service providers as well as carriers.²

The *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Amendment Act (No. 1) 2000* ('the No.1 Bill') amended the Act to implement decisions (a) and (b).

The No.2 Bill and the *Telecommunications (Universal Service Levy) Amendment Bill 2000* ('the Levy Bill') seek to provide the legislative framework necessary to implement the Government's other decisions.

1 Explanatory Memorandum, p.2.

2 Explanatory Memorandum, pp.2-3.

On 23 August 2000, the Government announced that the two USO contestability trials would be conducted in:

- the Greater Green Triangle of south-west Victoria and south-east South Australia, expanded to include the Central Goldfields and Greater Bendigo; and
- North-east New South Wales and the Queensland Downs, stretching from Kempsey in New South Wales, inland, to Caloundra Shire in Queensland.³

The Government has determined that the provision of payphone services and the DDSO will not be contestable. It has also determined that Telstra will provide a safety net service, by continuing as a carrier of last resort or Primary Universal Service Provider ('PUSP') in the two trial areas.

LABOR SENATORS' OVERALL POSITION

Labor has publicly stated its cautious support for the trial and proper evaluation of USO contestability on a local, regional or niche basis.

Labor Senators recognise that contestability may provide better service to customers in USO areas, while reducing the cost to industry through a reduction in the USO Levy.

However, Labor Senators also acknowledge that USO contestability may not have this outcome. In particular, Labor Senators recognise the views of the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union that:

*... the Government is venturing into unknown and highly problematic territory.*⁴

Accordingly, Labor Senators believe that any move to contestability of the USO must proceed on a cautious and considered basis.

Recommendation 1:

Labor Senators support the trial and proper evaluation of USO contestability on a local, regional or niche basis.

The No.2 Bill goes well beyond that necessary to implement the two trials proposed by the Government. In fact, the No.2 Bill would permit a move to full contestability of all aspects of the USO, albeit subject to parliamentary scrutiny through disallowance of most of the key decisions.

Labor Senators are concerned that USO contestability should not be extended until the two trials have been properly evaluated. Telstra's submission supports this view "*as a matter of public policy due diligence*".⁵

3 Media Release, Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Senator the Hon. Richard Alston, 23 August 2000.

4 Submission 6, p.2.

Recommendation 2:

The No.2 Bill should be amended to provide for a public and independent review of the two trials and subsequent report to Parliament, that review to take place before further USO contestability decisions are considered.

PRIMARY UNIVERSAL SERVICE PROVIDERS

The No.2 Bill establishes Telstra as the PUSP, or carrier of last resort, for all service areas and for all USO services until such time as another person is declared the PUSP. A declaration that a carrier other than Telstra should become the PUSP for a given geographical area and service will be a disallowable instrument.⁶

Labor has publicly stated that, if contestability is to be introduced, Telstra should be the PUSP for all parts of Australia. Australians are entitled to expect that Telstra, as the national carrier, will continue to be there for them.

Labor Senators believe that the introduction of competition is just that, a means to provide competition for Telstra in the provision of basic telephone services. It should not be used as an excuse or reason to allow Telstra to withdraw from providing these services altogether.

Accordingly, Telstra should continue to be required to make its services available to customers across Australia. Not only will this ensure that basic telephone services continue, it will also help to ensure that competition occurs in those areas where other carriers decide to offer their services.

Recommendation 3:

The No.2 Bill should be amended to retain Telstra as the national PUSP and to remove the provisions allowing a carrier other than Telstra to become a PUSP.

In this regard, Labor has criticised the Government's failure to require Telstra to continue as a Universal Service Provider if it fails to win the \$150 million tender for the provision of untimed local calls in the extended outer zones. These zones make up approximately 80 percent of the Australian landmass.

The No.1 Bill automatically makes the winner of the \$150 million tender the sole PUSP for that area. Unlike the proposed two trials, there is no provision for Telstra to continue as the PUSP. Accordingly, if it does not win the tender, Telstra will not be required to provide a safety net service for the 40,000 customers in the outer extended zones.

As Telstra's representatives told this Committee:

MR BRADLEY: We would then look at the provision of services in those areas on a commercial basis.

5 Submission 3, pp.4-5.

6 Explanatory Memorandum, pp.3-4.

SENATOR BISHOP: What does 'on a commercial basis' mean?

MR BRADLEY: It means we may not service every customer in those areas. We will have to assess that as we get there. In those outer extended zone areas, some of our infrastructure is quite new and some of it is quite old; some of it has high costs and some of it has lower costs; some of the customers are more profitable and some are less profitable, and some are quite loss-making. So I suppose it is a matter of going through those circumstances and deciding where we can legitimately provide service.⁷

This change has occurred despite a lack of consultation with or the consent of the 40,000 Australians living in the outer extended zones. Because of the strict probity requirements surrounding the tender, those Australians will not be consulted before the tender is awarded.

The tender will not deliver customers in the outer extended zone choice and is inimical to Telstra's status as the national carrier.

Labor Senators are also concerned that the Government may exclude Telstra as the PUSP from other areas of the Australian landmass without seeking the approval of the Parliament. Agreements, such as that relating to the provision of untimed local calls in the outer extended zones, entered into under either section 56 or 57 of the *Telstra Corporation Act 1991*, are not disallowable. Subsection 20(2) of the Act deems the successful tenderer to be the regional USP for the area and services covered by the agreement.

Recommendation 4:

The No.2 Bill should be amended to remove the ability of the Government to appoint a carrier other than Telstra as a PUSP for an area if an agreement is entered into under either section 56 or 57 of the *Telstra Corporation Act 1991* as currently permitted by the Act. This will ensure that Telstra continues as the PUSP for all of Australia, including for those Australians living in the extended outer zones, approximately 80 percent of the Australian landmass.

ALTERNATIVE TELECOMMUNICATIONS SERVICES

Both PUSPs and CUSPs will be able to seek the approval by the ACA of a marketing plan to supply one or more Alternative Telecommunications Services ('ATS') in fulfilment of the USO. The ACA must be satisfied that the ATS will appropriately fulfil the USO before an ATS can be offered to customers. The ACA must also be satisfied that the marketing plan appropriately deals with relevant matters.⁸

⁷ Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Legislation Committee, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 18 August 2000, p.24.

⁸ Explanatory Memorandum, p.4.

The Department has accepted that an ATS may be of a lesser standard than the Standard Telephone Service ('STS') (ie. it may not include untimed local call access).⁹

Customers will have the option of whether they accept an ATS or default to the STS.

Both Telstra and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union expressed concern that customers may not be fully informed about the consequences of accepting an ATS.¹⁰

The Government has stated that this concern will be addressed in the proposed marketing plans, although there is no direction to the ACA to this effect.

Labor Senators believe that this is a matter that should be put beyond doubt by being clearly spelt out in the legislation. Labor Senators believe that customers should be able to make informed decisions about the suitability of an ATS to their circumstances.

Recommendation 5:

The No.2 Bill should be amended to require a PUSP or CUSP who offers an ATS to fully inform customers of the different service and price arrangements available under the ATS as compared with the STS.

PUSPs and CUSPs may be required to consult publicly on their marketing plans. The No.2 Bill contains no guidance to the ACA as to when this consultation should occur. This should be clarified.

Recommendation 6:

The No.2 Bill should be amended to require a PUSP or CUSP to publicly consult on initial and subsequent marketing plans where an ATS is materially different from an ATS that has been previously approved.

STANDARD TELEPHONE SERVICE

PUSPs will be required to provide the Standard Telephone Service. However, CUSPs are not required to offer the Standard Telephone Service, although they may do so if they wish.

The Department accepted in evidence that the provision of an ATS could cost less than the provision of an STS but would attract the same level of subsidy.¹¹

This breaches the principle of competitive neutrality.

9 Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Legislation Committee, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 18 August 2000,, pp.39-40.

10 Submission No.3, pp.7-8.
Submission No.6, pp.7-8.

11 Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Legislation Committee, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 18 August 2000,, pp.39-40.

Telstra has proposed that the level of subsidy should be reduced in proportion to the degree to which an ATS falls below the standard of the STS.¹² This would reduce the obvious market incentive for PUSPs and CUSPs to push customers to accept an ATS of a lower standard than the STS as a means of generating profit, rather promoting means of delivering the STS or an ATS in a more efficient way.

Recommendation 7:

The No.2 Bill should be amended so that the level of USO subsidy received by a PUSP or CUSP is proportionately lower if the standard of service available under an ATS is lower than the standard of service available under the STS.

ARBITRAGE

Telstra expressed concern that competing Universal Service Providers could engage in arbitrage through the reselling of Telstra's STS.¹³

The Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts expressed the view that building a business based purely on arbitrage would be a "*very difficult business . . . to sustain.*"¹⁴ The Department argued that, in the event of arbitrage, Telstra would approach the ACCC immediately to have the access arrangements varied. The Department argued that it would not be in the long-term interest of end-users of telecommunication services for arbitrage to be permitted. The Department also argued that resale should be allowed in some circumstances.¹⁵

Labor Senators accept the Department's evidence and will monitor whether the Bill creates actual and sustainable examples of arbitrage. If arbitrage does occur and is not subsequently prevented by the ACCC, Labor Senators would support reconsideration of this issue.

UNIVERSAL SERVICE SUBSIDY

The Minister will determine USPs' subsidy entitlements for up to three years in advance. Subsidies will be able to be determined in respect of one or more service obligations under of the USO in respect of one or more service areas. Because of their fundamental importance to the operation of the scheme, such determinations will not be disallowable.¹⁶

Labor Senators have previously stated their support for this approach.

12 Submission 3, pp.7-8.

13 Op.Cit, pp8-9.

14 Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Legislation Committee, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 18 August 2000,, p.44.

15 Ibid.

16 Explanatory Memorandum, p.5.

The Minister will be able to request the advice of the ACA in setting subsidies. The Minister's request will be able to specify principles, including the methodology, the ACA is to have regard to in preparing its advice. Use of the current methodology (efficient provider avoidable cost less revenue forgone) will be an administrative matter.¹⁷

When the Committee considered the No.1 Bill, the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union raised concerns that the Government's approach reduces the role of the ACA in developing and administering a methodology for the calculation and collection of the USO cost and Levy.¹⁸ The CEPU repeated its call in its submission to the current Inquiry.¹⁹ Telstra also expressed concern about the potential lack of consistency in setting the USO.²⁰

For these reasons, Labor Senators have consistently argued that the Minister should receive advice from the ACA before setting the level of USO subsidy.

Recommendation 8:

It is recommended that the No.2 Bill be amended so that the Minister is required to receive advice from the ACA before setting the level of USO subsidy.

SENATOR MARK BISHOP
(A.L.P., W.A.)

SENATOR THE HON. NICK BOLKUS
(A.L.P., S.A.)

17 Op.Cit.

18 Submission to the Committee, June 2000.

19 Submission 6, pp.4-5.

20 Submission 3, pp.8-10.

Australian Democrats Minority Report

Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Amendment Bill (No.2) 2000

Senator Lyn Allison

Contestability in the provision of services under the USO is something which the government has portrayed as the remedy to all the problems which have beset rural and regional telephone users. As we commented in our minority report on the Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Amendment Bill No.1 2000, the Australian Democrats are concerned that contestability is the government's one and only real regulatory policy to equalise the disparity in services and technologies available to those in rural and remote Australia as compared to those in metropolitan Australia.

Supplying Services which don't meet the Standard Telephone Service

Both Telstra and the CEPU commented, in their submissions, on the ability of a carrier to market a lower-featured service (than the standard telephone service) to consumers at a discounted price.

The ability of customers to make an informed choice about accepting a lower-featured service at a discounted price relies heavily on the customer being fully informed about the services or technical capabilities that they won't receive if they choose that service.

The Explanatory Memorandum states (at page 59-60):

In choosing whether to take an ATS in fulfilment of the USO as opposed to standard USO services, consumers will need to be mindful that ATS may not be subject to the same requirements as standard USO services. An ATS supplier will be expected to identify any divergence from standard requirements in its marketing plan and to inform consumers of them.

The problem is that the Bill does not require the specific identification of that divergence.

Proposed section 13Q obliges a competing universal service provider (CUSP) to include in its ATS marketing plan appropriate terms and conditions on which the equipment, goods or services are to be supplied. However, there is no requirement that if the equipment, goods or services to be offered don't meet the specifications of the standard telephone service that that fact should be highlighted to the consumer.

The result is that the onus is on a consumer to make a comparison of what they currently receive as the standard telephone service and what is being offered as the lower-featured service.

The Democrats recommend that the Bill be amended to require that an ATS supplier identify any element of the standard telephone service that is not met by the service it is offering in its marketing plan and to consumers.

Assessment of contestability pilots

This Bill establishes a regime which will permit contestability in any universal service area. There is no reference in the Bill to the contestability pilots or to the basis on which contestability will be implemented throughout Australia.

The government does not seem to have or at least has not announced a clear plan of what will occur in relation to contestability for the remaining universal service areas in Australia. The approach appears to be very much one of 'playing it by ear'.

At the very least the Australian Democrats believe that there must be a full assessment of the contestability pilots at the end of a specified period, say 2 years. If after a period of 9 months, it appears that the residents of the pilot areas are benefiting significantly from contestability, it could be open to the Minister to commence the assessment early, with a view to expediting the expansion of the program. However, regardless of the time period involved, the government must not be permitted to expand the program without a full and public assessment of the costs and benefits of the program. The assessment and the publication of the results need to be viewed as a precursor to any expansion of contestability.

Subject to being able to draft an appropriate amendment, the would like to see the Bill contain a provision requiring the tabling of a public assessment of the pilots before contestability is pursued outside the pilot areas.

The Democrats recommend that a comprehensive public assessment of the contestability pilots be undertaken at the end of 2 years and that no expansion of the contestability arrangements should occur until the publication of that assessment.

The level of the USO subsidy

The level of the subsidy will be a key determinant to the success of the pilots. Clearly if the subsidy level is too low, carriers will simply opt not to compete for it. Telstra will fairly quickly recognise whether it is likely to be subject to competition and will adjust its behaviour and its offering to consumers accordingly.

On the other hand, if the subsidy is set too high the USO cost will blow out and all telecommunications consumers will bear a higher impost.

A number of submissions expressed concern that the proposed regime may result in an increase in the USO cost. The Australian Democrats don't believe that an increase in the total USO cost is necessarily something to abhor provided firstly, that it doesn't occur because of substantial infrastructure duplication and secondly that it is accompanied by an improvement in the range of reasonably priced services available in the universal service areas.

Conclusion

In our Minority report on the Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Amendment Bill No.1 2000 we remarked that:

As a general comment the Democrats do not necessarily agree that competition is the best method of achieving better services at lower costs for people in rural and remote Australia...

We believe that reviewing and increasing the level of the standard telephone service through the USO mechanism may be the best method, at this stage, of ensuring that residents of rural and remote Australia are not left behind with the continual advent of new technologies. We are disappointed that the government has not so far agreed to legislate a periodic review of the USO standard telephone service.

Our positions in relation to upgrading the level of the standard telephone service and periodically reviewing the standard telephone service remain unchanged.

The Australian Democrats reserve our position in relation to this Bill.

Senator Lyn Allison

(AD, VIC)

