

NATIONAL BROADBAND NETWORK — EXPANSION

Statement

HON MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM (Agricultural) [5.31 pm]: I want to make a few remarks tonight—I will not take too much time—because I was not able to participate in this morning’s non-government business debate. I must confess that I found the debate valuable and relevant—if not voluble and passionate!

I particularly want to concentrate on the idea that has been put forward that the national building project that has been promoted by the federal government is not perhaps what this country needs. I put it to members that this sort of infrastructure provision and sustainability—albeit on a grand scale—as members have already noted today, has happened before. As Hon Jon Ford said, it was not something that private enterprise paid for; it was something that ordinary, everyday Australians contributed to through their taxation, and, in some instances, contributed to with their lives to make sure that projects such as the Goldfields water supply scheme and, many years later, the Snowy Mountains scheme could work.

It is important to note that the criticisms of this national broadband network proposal today are basically the same as the criticisms that prevailed all those years ago. The Snowy Mountains scheme, as members possibly know, commenced post-World War II—I think it was started in 1949—and it took something like 25 years to complete. I think it was finally signed, sealed and delivered in 1974 at a prohibitive cost, then, of \$900 million or thereabouts. I am positive that in the years to come, whether the national broadband network costs \$42 billion or \$43 billion or whatever it might be, it will be considered to have been an outstanding investment in infrastructure provision and development in this country.

Hon Ed Dermer: It is interesting that \$900 million was spent at a time when Australia probably had fewer than nine million people.

Hon MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM: Hon Ed Dermer makes a good point. I tried to use some consumer price index figures, but I ran out of zeros when trying to equate that with today’s real money terms. It would be an interesting exercise to try to figure that out.

Hon Ken Travers: Hon Ed Dermer will tell us on Tuesday!

Hon MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM: Maybe in a few weeks; it is a bit of a homework exercise.

Hon Ed Dermer: I have heard a convention that you halve the value of money for every 10 years—I don’t know how that will work out.

Hon MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM: It might give Hon Ed Dermer a job!

The Goldfields water supply project was developed at the end of the 1890s depression in Australia. Obviously, there was not a lot of money around then, but this state had the vision and the commitment to make sure that this particular project was delivered, given that we were just at the end of the gold rush in the Western Australian Goldfields, which basically started slowing down when this project was completed in 1903. Things were certainly not good on the financial front in that respect; if not in the eastern states, certainly in Western Australia, things were a bit better because of that project.

The national broadband project is a similar nation-building project to the ones that I have mentioned. The long-term impact on the Australian economy will be profound. I know that it has basically started, but it will be just like those two historical projects that I have mentioned. I put it to members that they perhaps need to consider some of the benefits that stem from those early projects—new towns came into existence; land was opened up; investment in many forms occurred; there was migration; there were improved skills in industry; more and better technology was developed, especially in wealth-producing regions; and there were even better health and education outcomes for our young people.

I want to make mention of one comment that Hon Liz Behjat made earlier when she questioned the affordability of the expanded national broadband network. She spoke about the \$6 billion investment, as opposed to \$42 billion or \$43 billion. Surely the question should be: how can we not afford to totally embrace the expansion of this national broadband network? I put it to her that one of the things that all members might like to do is to read the article—I know there were a couple of articles—in today’s *The West Australian* by Mal Bryce. I will mention Mr Bryce in a moment. I believe the federal opposition’s promise of a \$6 billion investment will leave us in the technological dark ages. If members want to talk about money, I suggest that the federal opposition is being penny-wise and pound-foolish.

I noted with interest the comments of the former state Deputy Premier Mr Mal Bryce in today’s *The West Australian*. Mr Bryce’s credentials are first-class. He is chairman of iVEC, the Interactive Virtual Environments Centre, which is the Western Australian supercomputing hub involving universities and the CSIRO, as well as being an adjunct professor of public policy at Curtin University. Given that he has not been involved in party

politics for many years, that certainly adds to his credentials. He makes some compelling points that I would like to quote. The article in today's *The West Australian* is entitled "We must catch up with the rest of the world". Firstly, Mr Bryce says —

... if we harness the new network's potential, Australia will gain significantly through global competitiveness, increased productivity, a major stimulus to innovation, the online content revolution, the transformation of health and education service delivery, the prospects of a low-carbon future and enriched opportunities for community development.

The Federal Government's initiative to hardwire the nation is the most significant infrastructure undertaking since World War II.

He also suggests —

High-capacity broadband is an imperative, not an option, for Australia. We have a window of opportunity in the next five to seven years to join the world's leaders in providing the telecommunications infrastructure that will underpin our economic future. If we fumble the decision now, we finish up an also-ran. High-speed networks have become the key to competitiveness. Connectivity is now productivity.

He finishes off by saying —

Countries with the best networks will find it easiest to amass, deploy and share knowledge to design, invent, manufacture, sell, provide services, communicate, educate and entertain.

Those sorts of dividends are quite compelling. The question has to be asked: why not support this national broadband network expansion?

Hon Liz Behjat: We don't have the population.

Hon MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM: The honourable member should understand that in the 1890s, 1950s, 60s and into the 70s, the same arguments were made. I put it to her that government is about having vision and thinking about the future and where we want to take people. That is my only response to that.

Hon Liz Behjat interjected.

Hon MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM: I have only one minute 37 seconds left.

Hon Liz Behjat interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM: I quote from an article in *The West Australian* of Saturday, 22 May, which mentions the current Minister for Commerce, Mr Bill Marmion. It reads —

... the new WA Minister for Science and Innovation, Bill Marmion, called for the Rudd Government to roll the fibre further north, into the Gascoyne, Pilbara and the Kimberley to "close WA's digital gap".

I give the government credit; there is someone there who has some sort of vision. Do not try to deny it, because I am sure everyone, hopefully in this Parliament, has the same vision as I do. What the government should be saying is that the expanded national broadband network represents essential infrastructure provision for the long-term growth and development of Western Australia. I am reminded, as I said, of a recent comment Hon Ken Baston made in China. He probably knows exactly what I am about to say. After witnessing tourists—some of whom were members of Parliament and Clerks of the Legislative Council—from all corners of the globe walking and clamouring all over the Great Wall of China, buying mementos and sampling cups of coffee, he suggested that we could not do any better than to consider long-term investments such as the Great Wall of China. I put it to members opposite that if we want to invest in the future, investing in something that might last another 1 500 years might not be a bad place to start.