

TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE IN REGIONAL AREAS

1112. Mr M.P. MURRAY to the Minister for State Development:

I refer the minister to an article in yesterday's edition of *The Australian*, which reported the Deputy Prime Minister as saying that he doubted whether Telstra services in the bush were likely to be good enough by the next federal election to warrant the company's full privatisation.

- (1) Is the minister aware of the article?
- (2) Does the minister view the Deputy Prime Minister's comments as part of a growing realisation of the inadequacy of telecommunications infrastructure in regional areas?

Mr C.M. BROWN replied:

I thank the member for Collie for some notice of this question and, unlike some members of this House, for his deep and abiding interest in regional telecommunications.

- (1)-(2) It is interesting to watch the change in views at a national level. The Prime Minister has advocated the full sale of Telstra to fund some grandiose promises going into the next federal election. However, the Deputy Prime Minister, who has been deciding whether or not to stay in politics and has now decided to stay, needed to say something that was truly reflective of his constituents' views. He has been a bit silent for a while. He has had a mask over his mouth and has been very quiet. However, now that he might again run for election, he has decided that he must say something ever so infrequently with which his constituents might agree. In an interview that was reported in *The Australian* on 22 September, the Deputy Prime Minister said -

"I want to be able to look people in the eye and say we've closed the gap before we actually sell it," he said

"I don't think we will have reached that point by the time of the next election."

The Deputy Prime Minister has made an admission, which was shown up by our own telecommunications needs assessment in Western Australia, that telecommunications in regional and rural Western Australia, as in other parts of regional and rural Australia, are not up to the mark. Contrary to the views of the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister has now admitted that on that basis, Telstra should not be sold. I raise this matter firstly because the Deputy Prime Minister has finally said something accurate about this issue and, secondly, it will be interesting to see what happens to the national coalition Government. Nationally, the Liberal Party has been making the policies and every now and then it whistles to the National Party, which must come to heel and vote the way it has been told to vote. We will see whether the Prime Minister and the Treasurer give the National Party a bit of a whistle and whether it will come to heel, get a pat on the head and go ahead with the sale of Telstra or whether the National Party will listen to the Deputy Prime Minister and agree that regional telecommunications services are not up to scratch. We will also see whether the coalition Government will put some of the \$1 billion in revenue that Telstra provides every year back into regional infrastructure to ensure that people in rural and regional Western Australia get the standard of service they deserve.