**The Sun has Set on the Age of Copper – Mal Bryce**

Tony Abbot duded himself in 2010 because of his palpable lack of understanding of even the basics of telecommunications policy. Basically it cost him the Prime ministership. His now infamous quip “*I’m no tech head*” may well become his epitaph. With the release of his Telecommunications Policy for the 2013 election it seems he is determined if elected to dud the Australian people.

No one was surprised when he issued instructions to his frontbench nemesis in three words “Destroy the NBN”. Strangely, Malcolm Turnbull all but disappeared from the political landscape during 2011 -12 and left the job of attacking the NBN to the Murdoch Media. It is hard to recall another event in Australian political history when such a sustained strategy of misrepresentation and vilification was mounted by any arm of the Australian media against a nation building initiative.

In the second decade of this century Australia has a unique window of opportunity to catch up to the leaders and steal a march on the stragglers of the world in economic terms. The refresh and retrofit of our 120 year old copper based Telecommunications Infrastructure is the challenge. More than one third of the copper system is on life support at a cost of more than a billion dollars a year to maintain. This figure increases every year. The old copper network can never be expected to deliver the speed and volume of data traffic that contemporary Australia must have to survive in a fiercely competitive global economy. Amongst young Australians at the cutting edge of the new economy there is a saying *“Speed is not* ***everything*** *it is the only thing!”* An intelligent mix of Fibre to the premise, ubiquitous wireless and satellite technologies is exactly what Australia needs. In this age of instant gratification it is not surprising that some commentators are critical of the roll out speed. It seems readily forgotten that as a nation we wasted a decade arguing the toss about who should own the basic infrastructure.

Twenty years ago Fibre to the Node was a credible experiment when engineers were preoccupied with the imperative to extend the life of copper. That moment has passed for nations such as Australia. Fibre to the node if and when it is built by 2019 would be woefully inadequate, in colloquial terms “a lemon”.

The demand for very high speeds and greater capacity has been growing exponentially for the last twenty five years, ever since the volume of data being carried on Australia’s telecommunications networks surpassed the volume of voice traffic in 1997/8. In 2012 the volume of data downloaded by Australians was twelve times the figure for 2008. For Australia, the digital revolution is well underway. What we are now contending with is a game changing environment involving a wholesale shift for society and the economy. We are not alone. Globally, in 2010 it was estimated that 2 billion people were on line. That number is expected to double and treble very quickly.

In addressing her Special Shareholders Meeting in October 2011 Telstra Chairman Catherine Livingstone drew a vivid picture when she said; *“Data traffic on our networks doubled in 2011 and is projected to increase thirty fold in the next five years and a thousand fold in the next 10years.”*

The Internet Sector is bursting at the seams and Australia’s Digital Future means *faster speeds, more people, more content, more locations Online.*

Serious broadband delivers rich media which means: simultaneous high speed two way high quality, voice, data and video transmission (HD and 3D). The evidence of transformation through rich media is all around us; eCommerce, intelligent utilities, eHealth and tele-medicine, eGovernment service delivery, the next era of telework, intelligent buildings, education service delivery, personal security and public safety and a home entertainment revolution. Copper infrastructure can never deliver such a rich tapestry of services and content.

The Governments estimated cost of the NBN is $43Bn over ten years. When we consider Australia’s capacity to pay, that figure is less than 2% of Federal Government revenue during the ten year period. Figures used by either side of the political spectrum in the atmosphere of an election campaign will be questionable. Neither Government nor Opposition has explained to the Australian people that there is no end point to this type of project. It took a hundred years to roll out copper. Unlike the Snowy Mountains Scheme in 1959 there was no specific moment in time when the minister of the day declared the Australian Telecommunications system open for business. For the next hundred years it will again be a constant round of upgrades, expansions and modifications. According to most technical experts optic fibre and wireless are the two future proof technologies upon which our telecommunications infrastructure will depend for at least the next fifty years.

Why, except perhaps for churlish political reasons would anyone propose a response in 2013 that will sell our nation short?

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