



**Telecommunications Legislation Amendment (National Broadband  
Network Measures – Access) Bill 2010**

**Chamber of the House of Representatives**

**28 February 2011**

**Sharon Grierson MP**

Ms GRIERSON (Newcastle) (4.41 pm)—I rise to speak today in strong support of these two vital bills, the National Broadband Network Companies Bill 2010 and the Telecommunications Legislation Amendment (National Broadband Network Measures—Access Arrangements) Bill 2010.

These two bills are a key part of the legislative package required to deliver the Federal Labor Government's commitment to establish a National Broadband Network in this great nation, an initiative that defines this government and its vision and that will define this country's future. Aside from delivering on this nation-building commitment, the NBN Access bill will, in particular, provide certainty to business and the wider community about the competitiveness of the National Broadband Network. The NBN Access bill will establish clear open-access equivalence and transparency requirements for the NBN Co. It will also extend supply and open-access obligations to owners of other superfast networks that are rolled out or upgraded after the passage of this bill through Parliament.

The National Broadband Network Companies Bill will obligate NBN Co. to limit and focus its operations on wholesale-only telecommunications. It will also establish arrangements in reference to parliament for the eventual sale of the NBN Co. once the network rollout is complete. These two bills will deliver on Federal Labor's commitment to establish a wholesale-only National Broadband Network offering access on open and equivalent terms. They are clear evidence of Labor's commitment to deliver an effective, transparent and competitive network, something it is worth noting that the market has failed to do thus far. I, for one, seriously doubt that they would ever have done so to the extent that included the technical and financial challenge posed by last-mile connection.

During this debate, some on the other side of the chamber, and some commentators too, have suggested that, like President Obama in the US, we should not be putting all our technology eggs in the fibre broadband basket and instead should be concentrating on 4G wireless and satellite delivery. I cannot agree and it seems that neither does the Chairman of Google or the CEO of the NBN Co., Mike Quigley, who said in evidence:

“Far from proof that fibre will be redundant, the 4G announcement is very good news for the NBN rollout. While people like the convenience of their wireless devices, fixed networks are and will continue to be the workhorse of data download.”

And young people know so much about data download. Today in a briefing I saw an application that is being used by Government. Apps are becoming so frequent, so helpful and so instant. It is important to say that the growing popularity of iPads and other mobile devices leads to greater data demands and to meet those demands requires the serious grunt of fibre. That is indisputable. The Chairman of Google, Eric Schmidt, said a week ago that Australia was ‘leading the world in understanding the importance of fibre’.

I think that was very clearly illustrated on Saturday in an article in Australian Financial Review by Julian Bajkowski. He said:

“Lurking in the background is the big sleeper issue that wireless speeds and capacity are, as a function of nature, a strictly limited resource. The more people who pile onto a frequency to make calls, send emails or update their Facebook status, the less signal there is for the next punter connecting to the network. Imagine a battery hooked up to 100 40-watt light bulbs burning brightly. Multiply that to 1000 bulbs and increase their strength to 100 watts connected to the same battery and the picture dims very quickly without a boost from the mains. Apply that to mobile phones and you get one or two bars of signal strength in congested metro areas when you should have five.”

I think that is a very apt way of describing it so that all people can understand that the more people who use wireless, of whatever status, the more demand on it and therefore the slower it becomes.

I am a Member for a regional seat, and we know that in regional Australia there will never be enough towers to meet that demand. It will be fibre that gives certainty, and it will be wire-line services like in the NBN which will take the load off mobile networks and certainly all of the other applications that are going to happen.

I note there is one key issue that the opposition keep raising—the issue that they have danced around—and that is mobile base stations, the same ones that give coverage, are usually connected to the same kind of optical fibre that will power the NBN. Without the NBN we certainly would not be able to deliver on the needs for 4G, 3G et cetera. Fibre is the nationwide spine that we need for the future. While this does have serious limitations, it is contested that the more people on it, the slower it goes. It is prone to interference from noise in a real-world environment and wireless will initially roll out to capitals and prime regional areas, leaving the rest behind. So I find the comments of the Opposition quite deceiving and certainly not linked to reality.

The reality is that the homes of every Australian will increasingly become communication central. In the not-too-distant future our homes will be an e-health

extension to our doctors' surgeries and to our clinics and hospitals. Our homes will be an e-learning extension to our children's schools, to our TAFEs and universities. Our homes will be our e-entertainment centres from where we will access every cultural and recreation experience possible. So many personal and care services will have elements that can be delivered via our home internet service. A stable and reliable real time link—link to fibre—will have countless possibilities.

Although we would all agree that virtual encounters will never be equivalent to a direct personal service, high-speed broadband based on the NBN fibre rollout will be the closest thing to virtual robots in our homes—freeing up more and more people for critical service delivery and helping to overcome workforce shortages and to increase participation. I remain so excited about the profound and far-reaching changes ahead and the impact they will have on workforce shortages and participation in critical areas.

I am very proud that the NBN is a Labor legacy issue and that in decades to come it will be ranked alongside the social democratic reforms of the Whitlam government and the transformation of the Australian economy by the Hawke-Keating governments. The NBN stands as further proof that Labor are the true reformers of this nation and that they are the people who believe in social engagement and participation in every service that we can offer them. Conversely, the opposition to the NBN from the Coalition stands as further proof that they are the luddites, the dinosaurs struggling to imagine or create the future.

It is no exaggeration to say that the National Broadband Network represents one of the biggest nation-building projects in Australia's history. It will deliver affordable, high-speed broadband services to all Australians, irrespective of where they work or where they live. It will extend optical fibre to 93 per cent of premises, with speeds of 100 megabits per second—100 times faster than many Australians have access to today.

Other communities will be serviced by next generation wireless and satellite technologies, with average data rates more than 20 times higher than what is currently available to most users. That is the undertaking we have given to the Australian people and that is what we are determined to deliver.

The establishment of the NBN will represent a major step forward for telecommunications infrastructure across Australia. It will be a game-changer for this nation's future economic competitiveness. As the OECD noted in May 2009: Broadband is needed as a complementary investment to other infrastructure such as buildings, roads, transportation systems, health and electricity grids, allowing them to be "smart" and save energy, assist the aging, improve safety and adapt to new ideas.

It will affect how we conduct every aspect of our lives, how we communicate, how we express our creativity and our talents and intellect, how we store, share, document, exchange and access all forms of human activity and human knowledge. It will lead to better outcomes, more competition, more choice and more innovation

for consumers and business. It will lay the foundations for social, cultural and economic benefit for future generations. Needless to say, its effects on regional and rural Australia in particular will be far reaching.

By eroding the tyranny of distance, the network will significantly reduce the costs of doing business outside metropolitan areas. The NBN has the potential to deliver very real dividends for the health of regional Australians.

By significantly expanding the opportunities for e-health services, it will improve tremendously the ability of regional hospitals—such as Newcastle’s John Hunter Hospital—to contribute to the wellbeing of regional communities. For example, the Hunter New England Area Health Service, supported by the Federal Labor Government’s Digital Regions Initiative, is currently undertaking a three-year program to deliver telehealth services to more than 200 patients in rural and regional communities and the NBN is supporting that initiative. Prior to this initiative by the NBN, we have seen hospitals linked to each other and professionals and experts linked to each other, but we have not seen them able to link to users, to patients. The program targets chronic disease sufferers and links them in their own homes to monitoring, education and support services.

It is a wonderful, tangible and real-life example of how telecommunications technology can improve the health of communities otherwise disadvantaged by limited access to health services.

Federal Labor investments in telecommunications are already directly benefiting the health of the people of Newcastle and the Hunter Region. On 17 August 2010 the Minister for Health and Ageing, Nicola Roxon, announced that Newcastle would be one of the first places in Australia to benefit from the use of electronic medical records. Through Hunter GP Access, patients in my electorate will be able to manage their own records and control access to their own records and control access to the information. GP Access and the Federal Labor Government are taking Newcastle’s local healthcare system into the 21st century by building an electronic health records system that improves patient care and the safety and efficiency of the health system.

We would love to see that rolled out all around the country via the NBN. In addition to e-health records, GP Access will use healthcare identifiers for patients, providers and hospitals and will be the first to electronically send discharge summaries and referrals using national specifications.

They will help lead the way in developing and informing future planning of the system, improving technology and identifying what works well and what could work better. When used via the NBN across this country, there will be improved interactions and patient information transfers will be fast and reliable. Health is one of the many areas in which the NBN will improve equality of access and opportunity for Australians outside the major capital cities.

I know from first-hand experience the serious limitations to broadband access many in regional Australia suffer. For too long now, residents of the Hunter have suffered from inadequate internet connections, due in large part to the distance limitations of ADSL technology.

That is to say that ADSL can only be offered effectively if the residence is within a certain distance of a telephone exchange. As a result of this, places like Thornton and Shortland in my electorate continue to have serious difficulties accessing ADSL coverage due to distance and topographical factors. By offering fibre-optical access to the door of every premise, the NBN offers to fill this serious gap in the economic potential of regional Australia.

Major regional centres such as Newcastle stand ready to benefit from high-speed broadband. Like all my colleagues here in the House, I would of course love to see Newcastle and the wider Hunter Region be among the earliest areas to benefit from the NBN rollout.

That is something my local Labor colleagues—the Members for Shortland, Charlton, Hunter, Dobell and Robertson—are all particularly supportive of. I pay credit to Regional Development Australia and the Hunter and Central Coast, who are working with local industry to advance our position and ensure the right conditions are in place to maximise the opportunity for Newcastle, the Central Coast and the Hunter region to be among the early beneficiaries of the NBN.

Newcastle's success in the Smart Grid, Smart City initiative puts our region in the box seat to fully experience the full magnitude of the benefits of high-speed broadband. I would welcome collaboration between the Smart Grid, Smart City consortium, led by Energy Australia, and the NBN Co. Smart technology and innovation are central to the future of Newcastle.

The people of Newcastle already know from hard experience how to innovate in order to pursue knowledge and excellence and sustain a diverse economy, and that is what we have been doing across all sectors. We have built a knowledge based economy, and the NBN offers the potential to consolidate that success and make us truly an intelligent community. The opportunities that the National Broadband network offers to regional Australia in particular may well be endless but they are certainly essential.

To paraphrase the Member for New England, another member of this House who understands the importance of broadband for regional Australia, the future is fibre, will be fibre, should be fibre and regional Australians should, in the main, be allowed to share in that technology.

This important piece of nation-building infrastructure is deserving of bipartisan support, but the Leader of the Opposition's proposal to scrap the NBN represents a slap in the face for the people of regional Australia.

Sadly, the Leader of the Opposition chooses to put his wrecking-ball politics before the interests of the people of Newcastle and other regional electorates and indeed the interests of this nation. Clearly, the member for Warringah is well out of step with community sentiment on this issue. As the mother of two young adult daughters I sometimes look at him and think: I can't believe it! My daughters would be so ashamed if I did not understand the importance of this technology to their generation and to their future.

The people of my electorate understand why the NBN will play a crucial role in their economic future. They understand the importance of the federal government stepping in to allow for high-speed broadband access to their homes and workplaces every minute of every day. And they understand that Mr Abbott's proposal to tear down the National Broadband Network would represent a serious step backwards for their future economic prosperity and the people of regional Australia.

The Federal Labor Government's broadband policy will move Australia to the international forefront of connectivity, helping us to compete with countries like Korea, Japan, Singapore and much of Europe, which already benefit from high-speed broadband. The choice for the future of our digital economy is clear. I am pleased to support these Bills.