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ADDRESS TO THE BROADBAND IN THE BUSH FORUM: DIGITAL JOURNEYS

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Inequality in Australia Is Growing

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land. I pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I am pleased to deliver the opening address this morning and I want to start by talking about the important relationship between economic inequality and digital access.

Australia prides itself on being the country of the fair go, where the gap between richest and poor does not reach the obscene levels seen in other countries. Where through the operation of decent public health, education infrastructure and a responsible safety net - we live in comfort and harmony.

Australia is still a great country, but inequality is rising. The top 20 per cent of wealth holders now have 70 times the wealth of those in the bottom 20 per cent.

Levels of income inequality are above the OECD average.

There is a very real rural and urban rich-poor divide; those in cities are better off compared with households in the bush.

Sadly, rural Australia has some of the highest levels of poverty: 18 of the 20 poorest electoral districts in Australia are rural. Pockets of prosperity do exist in the bush but it is the case that in rural and regional Australia we have lower incomes, declining employment opportunities and reduced access to services.

It has a direct bearing on life expectancy and health.

People living outside our cities suffer from higher rates of chronic disease and don’t live as long. They have inferior access to services including doctors, specialists, mental health support and drug and alcohol treatment.

The levers a reforming government would pull to address these concerns include investments in health, education and public infrastructure. Labor’s plan is to do just that.

But in the 21st century access to broadband sits alongside education and health care as a key driver of opportunity.

It is why Labor invested so much planning and energy in the National Broadband Network.

Today we are focused on digital inclusion. But what is digital inclusion? It isn’t just about making sure that every household has a computer hooked up to the internet.

We need to go much further than that. It is about ending the “digital divide” in Australia.

The gap that separates households and businesses with access to digital and information technologies and those struggling with more limited access.

It’s about access, it’s about affordability. It’s about having reliable broadband services as much as it’s about digital literacy.

Bridging the Digital Divide

Australia cannot allow a digital divide to exist between urban settings and the bush. That isn’t a precondition we should agree to when formulating communications policies in Canberra.

Because achieving digital inclusion is not some far-off destination we may reach. It should be one of our highest priorities.

People living in the bush know that there are many services which are less accessible. In addition to the health services I mentioned earlier think employment services, Centrelink, disability services, family assistance, even banks and other financial institutions.

All of this leads to inequality, and communications access must be seen in exactly the same way. We often talk about a shortage of GPs or dentists or transport infrastructure as holding back people in the bush.

While 88 per cent of households in major cities are online, the figure falls to 82 per cent in inner regional and even lower to 79 per cent for those in outer regional and remote parts of Australia.

This clearly isn’t good enough, we must do more to bridge the digital divide and ensure that people living outside of metropolitan areas have the internet services they need.

Labor’s original plan was to deliver optic fibre to 93 per cent of homes and businesses in Australia. By the way, this included delivering optic fibre to 70 percent of regional cities and towns.

The previous Labor Government also introduced a policy called universal wholesale pricing. This meant that people in the bush paid the same wholesale price for equivalent broadband services as people living in our cities.

Not just equality of infrastructure - but equality of price. Labor is proud of these reforms.

Unfortunately, all this has been jettisoned by the city-based Liberal party – with the active consent of their partners the National Party.

The optic fibre rollout has been axed. Under the Liberals, Australians in regional towns will now overwhelmingly receive second rate copper-based broadband.

Universal wholesale pricing has also been axed. Under the Liberals, Australians in regional and rural areas will go back to the bad old days of paying more for essential broadband services than Australians living in our cities.

We are already seeing the effects of Liberal policy making on the NBN satellites. We planned to use the satellites to serve about 200,000 of the most remote homes and businesses in Australia.

Presumably to cut costs, the Liberals have doubled this footprint – now more than 400,000 homes and businesses will be served with the satellite.

The satellites are a limited resource. More users means congestion and a lower quality of service.

Consider this. The average household on the NBN uses about 128 gigabytes a month in downloads and uploads. In the cities, and on Labor’s Fixed Wireless NBN, you can get plans that deliver this for about $60 a month.

But if you live in the NBN satellite footprint, under the Liberals you will pay more. A lot more. I can’t find an NBN satellite plan that delivers the average household download amount for less than $115 a month, and 80 gigabytes of that is “off-peak” – which means you need to log on between 1 o’clock and 7 o’clock in the morning.

It is not fair, and it is a direct result of the retrograde changes this Liberal Government has made to the NBN.

Changes which will hurt the bush.

Broadband shouldn’t be regarded as an additional privilege or benefit associated with city-living; it is an essential service that people right across Australia already rely on.

We wouldn’t deny electricity or new roads on the basis of geographic location and communications infrastructure is the same. It is absolutely essential to living, working and participating in the 21st century.

Last year my colleague Jason Clare drew on the example of Gough Whitlam’s legacy to explain why the NBN is so important.

When Whitlam introduced sewerage systems in poorer neighbourhoods in the western suburbs of Sydney he was accused of having a “dizzy vision of a paternal, centralist Government in Canberra”.

But Whitlam knew that it was essential infrastructure that every household deserved regardless of where they lived.

Labor understands this. It is why we designed the NBN the way we did.

Liberals are Out of Touch

The late Mick Young used to say that politicians should never write a letter and never throw one out.

Today the modern maxim “Never Tweet” applies. Malcolm Turnbull probably wishes he followed that advice because Twitter has got him in trouble more than once.

But there is one infamous tweet in particular that speaks volumes about the conservative attitude to digital inclusion.

In March 2014 when Turnbull was Communications Minister one Twitter-user Julia Keady-Blanch tweeted:

“Bought a house in Ocean Grove. No NBN. No Cable. No ADSL 2 or 1. Back to the dongle. Prehistoric. @TurnbullMalcolm. Not good enough #nbn”.

Now many ministers would let this go and not respond. Others would respond empathetically. Some would even promise to improve digital access to this particular community on Victoria’s Bellarine Peninsula near Geelong.

But not Turnbull, he responded that same day to Julia:

“@SaysJuliaKeady just curious: if connectivity was so vital to you why did you buy a house where there was no broadband available?”

This reveals a mindset that is urban-centric and dismissive of the connectivity needs of regional areas.

We don’t know why Julia bought a house in Ocean Grove. She may have always lived there. She may own a business in Ocean Grove or work from home part of the time and commute elsewhere to a regional centre like Geelong. She may use the internet for study, to stay in touch with loved ones interstate or overseas. We just don’t know.

But in any case Julia shouldn’t have to justify to the nation’s then Communications Minister, now Prime Minister, why she deserves basic internet services.

Ocean Grove is hardly a remote or inaccessible place either; it is a well-known town just thirty minutes from Geelong and another hour on top of that to Melbourne.

But like many people in the rural and regional Australia Julia was – and possibly still is – despairing about the lack of communications access in her town.

Not everyone can afford to live or necessarily wants to live in Point Piper. But they still deserve digital inclusivity instead of retrograde, indifferent advice that if you want to be connected to the internet you need to live somewhere that deserves access.

Like universal health care or the roll-out of transport infrastructure it is a matter of fairness.

We can all benefit.

If we can get more people in the bush online we can improve economic participation, health services and education outcomes. There should not be a digital divide between the city and the bush. We must do better.

A Big Issue for Small Business

One of the reasons Labor’s NBN model was so important for rural Australia is that we understood that it would help to level the playing field for regional businesses.

If we create classes of digital haves and have-nots we will be deliberately disadvantaging people and denying them access to a vital service.

Last week I was in Newcastle and the Hunter region speaking to people about problems with the roll-out of the Fibre-To-The-Node NBN.

I joined my colleague Sharon Claydon in visiting an Opposite Lock Newcastle franchise, a business owned by Gordon and Mel Allerton that specialises in installing 4WD accessories.

Their story will alarm small businesses owners across regional Australia because it shows the inherent flaws in relying on copper wire.

They’ve suffered through 50 days of outages in 16 months. Even though they aren’t even connected to the NBN they are still hurting from the roll-out.

It all comes down to disconnections caused by the local NBN roll-out. A roll-out that relies on last century’s copper wire under the Liberals’ model.

They have had to send staff home when outages occur because the workshop simply doesn’t have enough work on. Over one outage period Gordon and Mel reckon that they lost between $50,000 and $100,000.

There will be plenty more of this to come because rotten copper exists in communities right across the country.

In the Hunter, one Belmont resident recently revealed that the ADSL connection she had is actually superior to Fibre-To-The-Node NBN. She like others has been switching off her wi fi and relying on personal 4G mobile internet.

Meanwhile those lucky enough to be connected to Fibre-To-The-Home report superior service. It just depends which side of the divide you are on.

Under the Liberals, it is a lottery pure and simple and one that will unfairly disadvantage many businesses operating in tight margins in communities across Australia.

Improving Services

Australia has an ageing population and in coming years we are going to have a lot of older people coming through the aged care system.

We can improve the entire system by keeping people in their homes – if that is what they choose – rather than an aged care facility or even a hospital bed.

The NBN is essential for telemedicine and other advances that are especially important for older people living in remote and isolated areas.

It allows older Australians to be monitored and receive advice via video link in their own home rather than an aged care facility or a hospital bed. It means that people can – with their GP – consult specialist services that are located hundreds of kilometres away.

New technologies can save the entire healthcare system billions of dollars. One aged-care provider Feros Care has said that if just half of their nurses’ visits were doing using telehealth each nurse would save 7,700 kilometres in travel. They could double the number of clients they treat each year.

But this can’t be achieved with sub-standard broadband services.

Improving Education Outcomes

It is the same when it comes to education.

For those living in remote and isolated areas NBN technology can allow access to education programs previously considered impossible. It will enable high-quality learning and collaboration between teachers and students across state and territory and even international borders.

A superior “distance education” requires a strong Internet connection. Those currently relying on “School of the Air” technology have found that it is prone to failure and just doesn’t deliver when it is needed.

As Katrina Morris from the Thurlga Station in South Australia has said:

“It’s just so disappointing because my children are just after an education the same as a kid in town or a city would want.”

Once again we can’t fully harness the potential of superior education outcomes without ensuring that the infrastructure is up to scratch. We have a long way to go and we must make sure that we take every educational advantage available from the NBN.

Labor’s Plan

Labor will have plenty more to say about the NBN in coming weeks.

I would like to announce it today but I’m going to leave that to our Shadow Communications Minister Jason Clare.

What I can tell you is that at this election we face a stark choice.

If we want to further entrench growing inequality – which will hit people living outside of our major cities particularly hard – we should go full steam ahead with Malcolm Turnbull’s second rate and unfair NBN model.

But there is another option - ensuring that households and businesses in the bush are provided with the communications infrastructure they need to help them get ahead, at fair and affordable prices.

Our plans will be announced soon. But I will say this.

Malcolm Turnbull has made a diabolical mess of the NBN. Over the last three years he’s nearly doubled the cost of his second-rate network, he’s more than doubled the timeframe for getting it to all Australians, and in the meantime Australia has dropped from 30th in the world for internet speeds to 60th.

Fixing this mess will take some doing. We need to be upfront about that.

There are contracts that are currently in place and they have been signed in good faith. It will not be our policy to breach those contracts; we are committed to governing responsibly.

A key part of the challenge will be dealing with those communities like the ones I mentioned in the Hunter where Fibre-To-The-Node NBN has been rolled out using old, tired copper wire.

You won’t be surprised to learn it is in these locations where the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman has received the most complaints.

But we are committed to getting the NBN back on track, and to restoring our original vision for this critical infrastructure project.

A vision that will ensure that we build for the future and provide the platform for our future prosperity.

A vision that will ensure equality of access between the city and the bush.

Communities in the bush will always be better served by Labor when it comes to communications policy.

This election will be fought out on the issues of Australian jobs, of health care and education. It will be about who has the best policies for the future of the country. In our view the measure of any policy is how we improve Australia for all and how we reduce inequality; anything less than that is an abrogation of responsibility.

Communications infrastructure is no different.

If we fight to preserve Labor’s hard fought policy achievements and fight to advance our new ideas for improving people’s lives, we can make a real difference.

Thank you.