



Speech by

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TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY, FAR-NORTH QUEENSLAND

Ms BOYLE (Cairns—ALP) (11.39 a.m.): I rise to speak about a matter of considerable importance to far-north Queensland and, for that matter, the entire northern half of our country, and that is the issue of access to telecommunications and information technology. Cairns is the city that services far-north Queensland and, to that extent, its prosperity is dependent on the vitality of the region. Far-north Queensland is a diverse region encompassing many cape communities, mainly Aboriginal communities. I speak of amazing places in far-north Queensland such as Aurukun, Lockhart River, Kowanyama and the islands of the Torres Strait. Those islands spread out from the northern tip of the cape all the way to Papua New Guinea. I speak also of the coastal communities extending down from the north to Cairns and further south from Cairns to Cardwell. I speak of the tablelands communities and small towns with high unemployment rates, such as Herberton and Ravenshoe. I speak also of the Gulf communities, such as Georgetown and Karumba.

All of those communities outside of the Cairns urban area do not have the same level of access to telecommunications as do other Australians. Therefore, they do not have the ability to take advantage of the wizardry of information technology, much of which has been claimed in its excellence by Australians. This is not an equitable situation and, as Queenslanders, we should not allow it to continue. All of those rural and remote communities in the far north, and for that matter other communities in the west of our State, need access to information technology more so than any other communities in Australia.

I suggest to the House that the problems of which we are aware in so many of the Aboriginal communities in the north would be brought a long way towards being resolved were they to have access to the telecommunications that are a part of this century, let alone those of the next century. That would afford them a level of education and health and also business opportunities that would enable them to make considerably more progress than could be made under any other initiative we could take.

Honourable members would know that our country is an unusual one. The northern half of Australia, defined generally as that north of the 26th parallel, comprises 55% of the landmass but only 5% of our country's population. The lifestyles of many people across northern Australia and certainly on the Cape York Peninsula are limited by their isolation, with many small communities spread in a diverse fashion across the north. In contrast to the populous southern half of the country, they do not have the populations to make the roll-out of information technology and telecommunications economically viable. That is the challenge.

The challenge was put to Telstra several years ago at the Northern Australia Development Council conference by groups representing interests in far-north Queensland. Nowhere else is the access to telecommunications and IT more needed than in northern Australia. However, that is not happening. The voices have not been heard. Of course, this is a matter for the Federal Government, and only it can resolve this issue. Why is it not doing so when it is obvious that this is where the need is and where the benefits that would flow are obvious, including benefits in terms of reconciliation with Aboriginal and other indigenous people?

In attempting to make a difference, the choices are several. The first concerns the Federal Government's setting of the universal service obligation that our telecommunications carriers must meet. To date, that has applied only to Telstra. Under the universal service obligation, 96% of

Australians now have access to telephones. The universal service obligation, despite its present review, is not being changed. As we head towards the year 2000, the best that our Federal Government is expecting our telecommunications providers to offer to the people of far-north Queensland is access to a telephone. That is not good enough. Were the Federal Government to take this matter seriously and change the universal service obligation to require of Telstra and other communications companies a higher standard for people in the far north, that would mean spending money. That is money that the Federal Government has not been prepared to spend on those whose lives and wellbeing depend on it.

The importance of this issue is underlined by the obscene profit announced by Telstra only weeks ago—a \$1.8 billion profit for the first half of this financial year. How proudly Telstra representatives speak of that profit and its benefit to Telstra shareholders. That benefit to Telstra shareholders is all very well, but if it is at the expense of the development of our country, if it denies the top half of our country—the people scattered throughout far-north Queensland and western Queensland—opportunities to share in the access to services that others take as an every day privilege, that profit is obscene.

Amazingly, Telstra Chairman David Hoare was quoted in an article in the Australian of 12 March this year as reaffirming the board's support for privatisation. He stated that a fully privatised Telstra would be better able to compete in the global telecommunications market. That may well be so, but that is not the point. He stated that privatisation "will allow us to perform more effectively in the interests of all stakeholders, whether they are shareholders, customers or staff." All stakeholders? He did not count that small but important number of customers in far-north Queensland when he announced—gloried in—that \$1.8 billion net profit.

It is not good enough that our Federal Government is further considering the sale of Telstra. It is not good enough that it ignores the needs of the north. It is not good enough that it does not put more of its own—our own—dollars towards the telecommunications roll-out in remote areas. It is not good enough that it does not require more of our national telecommunications provider in order to make this happen. What is it doing? Not nearly enough! The Howard Federal Government has supplied \$250m over five years under its Networking the Nation program. Its name is a false one, because \$50m a year is nowhere near enough if we are serious about looking after the north and about giving farmers and remote communities, including Aboriginal communities, a fair go.

I particularly wish to mention Balkanu, the Cape York Development Corporation, which is working hard to establish a digital network throughout Cape York. I am impressed by the expertise of its many young indigenous people, who are clearly leading the way and providing positive models for other people throughout the cape. But its progress so far has been modest and its reception by Canberra is only modest. It should not be modest. It should be welcomed with open arms. The chequebooks in Canberra should be opened and considerable funds expended on the people of Cape York and other remote areas.

I exhort all members of this House to take up this issue. It is not sufficient simply for those of us who represent the far north to speak on this important issue. We could get that message through to Canberra if we would all consider the needs of all of Queensland and not just our own electorates. I exhort honourable members of this House from all political parties and the Independents, too, to take up this issue and to do three things: firstly, to urge the Federal Government not to privatise Telstra; secondly, to urge the Federal Government to improve the universal service obligation to include telecommunications and information technology; and, thirdly, to double the funding under the Networking the Nation program. Only then can we truly look forward to achieving equity in our State and only then can we really say that we are doing something practical towards reconciliation with our indigenous people.
