



Speech by

Mr. R. CONNOR

MEMBER FOR NERANG

Hansard 14 September 1999

COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION STRATEGIC PLAN

Mr CONNOR (Nerang—LP) (11.49 a.m.): Recently, the Minister responsible for IT, Terry Mackenroth, released his much-awaited communication and information five-year strategic plan. If I said that it lacks vision and understanding, it would be a gross understatement. Before I explain why I say that, I commend the Minister for at least releasing something after 15 months in office and over two years in the shadow portfolio. I recognise, too, that he has at least enunciated why we need a plan. He states—

"Our economy will suffer and our communities will not reap the social benefits if we fail to harness communication and information technologies."

The Minister states further—

"The prosperity and social benefits we enjoy will depend on how proficient Queenslanders become at harnessing the power of emerging communication and information technologies."

Clearly, the Minister recognises the reasons why we need a plan and the urgency of making it happen. As I flicked through the so-called plan, I saw that the Minister draws an analogy to describe this upcoming information superhighway. His "Message from the Minister" uses the terms "journey" and "blueprint" to describe his plan. Clearly, the Minister sees this plan as both the blueprint and road map to build and journey along the information superhighway.

So let us measure his document against his own analogy. If one is to build and journey along a superhighway, one needs to understand where it begins; where it is going; what material, equipment and skills are needed to build and travel along it; what material, equipment and skills we have; what obstacles are in the way; how long it will take to build the superhighway and travel along it; and the general specifications that are required. However, in these areas the Minister fails miserably. His document is divided into four sections—or goals, as he calls them. Those four goals are then broken down into a series of strategies and actions, with their implementation limited to only defining the department responsible. Clearly, the document is flawed. I am reluctant to call it a plan, because the document is almost devoid of anything other than generalities and gratuitous platitudes.

I refer to what the Minister calls "actions"—the most detailed aspect of his document. Firstly, the Minister states—

"Examine regional opportunities to assist people to become familiar with and competent in the use of new technologies."

I ask the Minister: which ones, or at least how are they decided? The Minister states further—

"Identify national and international prospects that could locate or relocate facilities in Queensland."

I again ask the Minister: which ones, or at least how are they decided? The Minister states further—

"Identify where new export support programs are required."

Again I ask the Minister: which ones, or at least how are they decided? The Minister states further—

"Establish incubator facilities for start-up companies."

Again I ask the Minister: which ones, or at least how are they decided? The Minister states further—
"Review Queensland's taxation regime as it impacts on electronic commerce."

Again I ask the Minister: which ones, or at least how are they decided? The Minister states further—
"Develop performance indicators for communication and information activities in Government."

Again I ask the Minister: which ones, or at least how are they decided? None of those issues are addressed in the Minister's report. The Minister states further—

"Facilitate growth in the communication and information sector through incentives, partnering arrangements and State taxation relief."

Again I ask the Minister: which ones, or at least how are they decided? The Minister states further—
"Pilot the intensive use of communication and information technology in partnership with selected communities and businesses."

Again I ask the Minister: which ones, or at least how are they decided?

Those are just some of the generalities that are used in the document over and over again. The document is devoid of vision and understanding. We continually see in it words such as "evaluate", "review", "monitor" and "explore". How is the industry and the community generally supposed to understand where the Minister is heading with this document when it contains such generalities? This document is not a plan; it is a quiz—guess what the Minister means?

I give some acknowledgment to the section in the document that relates to education and training. In that regard, the document at least goes into some detail. However, it is a pity that, because of the lack of clear direction from this Government, our young people who will benefit from that education and training will be forced to go interstate or overseas to get a job in this industry. If we do not have a clear and detailed plan, industry and the community will go off in different directions and build a series of goat tracks that will meander through the wilderness instead of working together to build our own version of an information superhighway.

The document does not detail time lines or measures of effectiveness. Instead, it is full of generalisations and fuzzy statements. Many of the initiatives that are contained in the document are neither explained nor detailed. For example, the document flags but does not deal with social equity issues. It does not even mention existing information networks, such as public libraries, which can play—and are playing—an enormous role. The document does not specify the provision of industry, economic or social statistics, nor their proposed availability, cost and dissemination. There are no indicative costs or likely time frames for any of the actions. Therefore, the initiatives are not accountable. The document also does not contain any milestones to gauge the effectiveness of the implementation. The so-called information poor and the resultant target groups—the elderly, non-English speaking people, women and disabled people—are not dealt with properly and no detailed explanation is given as to how the Minister will limit the digital divide.

The document focuses mostly on industry and the economy. It makes virtually no adequate reference to regional, social, cultural or historical aspects of information policy. In that document, the Minister does not deal with information democracy or the political aspects of a well-informed, information-rich society. The document also does not deal with the negative social consequences of the likely changes to society, how the Minister will address them, or even how the Minister will determine their existence.

The document does deal with the potential shortcomings of desired levels of service for telecommunications, but it leaves the question of how and when those shortcomings will be rectified and funded in question. The document deals with the issue of how online technologies will move Government services into homes, workplaces, libraries and community centres, but it does not deal adequately with the issue of the skills that are required by the general public in order to use those technologies.

The document details Government initiatives and its involvement in assisting service delivery, but it does not deal with the potential competition of Government and its agencies with the private sector. The document also does not deal with the overall Government revenue implications of the online economy nor, as one would expect in light of the net bet scandal, does it deal with online gaming and its likely social implications.

Although the document acknowledges the lack of development of Queensland brand names, it does not deal with it. The document also does not deal with the role Queensland could play as a regional leader and the ability for Queensland to become a hub for the delivery of professional services to the region. In the document, the Minister acknowledges how far we are behind but does not deal with the urgency of the need to move forward. No time frames, no funding commitments and no specific targets are given. The document also does not deal with the potential for Queensland in

relation to intellectual property rights. There is a complete lack of understanding and no mention of issues important to the younger generation and Queensland's creative sector, especially our artists, musicians, dancers, actors and authors. And what about sports? The document contains no initiatives to ensure a Queensland content from a cultural perspective. These areas not only have the potential to promote Queensland to world but also to underpin our unique culture and lifestyle.

The document contains no recognition of the important part that the Queensland Government can play as a leader in the use of technology. The Government should be an example to the rest of Queensland. This is exemplified by the fact that the ability to update or give effective feedback to the Government's own so-called planning document is very limited. The Government should have considered news groups, online forums or other forms of electronic feedback to enhance, improve or criticise the document. The document makes no commitment to the Government's role as an employer of the specialised skills in the online industries, a provider of online traineeships and apprenticeships, or as an employer of graduates. The document also makes no provision for reciprocal arrangements with major international centres of innovation for the free flow of talent into and out of Queensland.

Although there is a general commitment to implement taxation reform, there is no specific commitment to assist in the reduction of transaction costs by limiting taxes impacting on online trading. Without such a commitment, many online traders will be forced to source their financial transactions interstate or offshore. Nowhere in the document has the issue of slow access speeds to Queensland-based commercial web sites been addressed adequately. That is one of the most fundamental issues for ensuring a competitive electronic commerce environment for Queensland. Without effective access speeds, the web hosting and the resultant electronic commerce will be carried out offshore, mainly in north America. The document gives no proper consideration to the importance of information industries to underpin the competitiveness of all business activities. Online technologies have a massive enabling factor for other industries.

If members want to see how a plan should be written, they should look at Victoria's recently released report titled "Global Victoria". Members could also look at Canada's 1996 report titled "Building the information society: moving Canada into the 21st century". If members want to see the guidelines as to how a plan should be written, they could look at the report titled "Australia as an information society: grasping new paradigms", which was written back in 1991 by Barry Jones. Members may remember him as the Federal president of the ALP.

Time expired.
