



Speech by

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM

MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE

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NATIONAL COMPETITION POLICY

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM (Gladstone—Ind) (5.40 p.m.): I second the motion. NCP and privatisation seem to be on the lips of many in government—elected members as well as those working in bureaucracy. I have been—and will always remain—of the view that strategic infrastructure should remain in public ownership. That includes the railways, Australia Post, Telstra, power, water, the ports—those essential services necessary for the comfort and the needs of the population of a country.

The area that I want to touch on today is Telstra. Some federal representatives say that Telstra will not be privatised until country services are brought up to standard. What is 'up to standard'? Even if it does reach the standard at one point in time, technology constantly changes and it will not be long before those areas that are more expensive to service will be left lagging behind in terms of availability of technology—and up-to-date technology at that. Those people in rural and regional Queensland will be left to pay in a user pays system.

It is no use the federal government saying that a caveat can be put on private owners to ensure that services are provided at a reasonable cost to all consumers in Australia. I have been through an experience in which I was told there would be no impact on the community because of the sale of a certain entity. But the reality was that later on when there was an impact and I complained, I was told quite bluntly, 'It is a private company now. There is nothing we can do.' So I have a huge level of scepticism in terms of the ability of the federal government, irrespective of who they are, to protect the consumers of Australia, particularly in the area of these essential services.

Forty-nine per cent of Telstra has already been sold off. It is my belief and the belief of many people that this should never have occurred. However, the government for political reasons as much as anything retained 51 per cent, which at least is a majority share. If Telstra is privatised totally, rural and regional Queensland will pay in the long run.

When a rural consumer applies to have power connected they are looking at having to spend something like \$10,000 to \$15,000. That is a commodity that most of us take for granted—not in the amount we can consume but in its availability and affordability in terms of primary connection. Now we have progressed down this path where rural consumers—even marginally rural—

Mr Lucas interjected.

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM: The minister is right. I applaud the Beattie government for that. That is the uniform tariff. However, I am talking about the connection fees. The member for Nanango said that it can cost \$27,000 for connection in her area. It just depends where people live geographically.

The basic communications offered by Telstra are an essential service for the people of Queensland, particularly since we live in a decentralised and diverse state. They are talking about making a lot of medical services accessible by the telephone. The availability of modern technology at an affordable price and in an acceptable time frame will become essential for the people of Queensland.

I am calling on this parliament to let the federal government know that we as Queenslanders are not happy with proposals to sell Telstra—to completely privatise it—that it will not provide appropriate protection for the community here in Queensland in terms of accessibility to services and that there is no proven way to legislatively provide in the long term and on an individual basis the

necessary protections to ensure that this essential service is made available to the community of Queensland into the future at an affordable rate.

Just to indicate the way that the federal parliament is going, a lot of the Australia Post vehicles have the word 'Australia' removed from their signage, leaving 'Post'. If that is an indication of intended privatisation down the track, it is reprehensible and should be rethought. We need to keep these critical infrastructure in public ownership to protect the public safety, public wellbeing, public affordability and public accessibility. I support this motion unequivocally.