

Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia

Broadband for the Bush Alliance March 2014

[The Broadband for the Bush Alliance](#) is a group of organisations committed to the digital inclusion of remote and rural Australians. The Alliance brings together a range of stakeholders with expertise in communications, remote service delivery, and community engagement.

In 2013 an Alliance delegation recently met with members of the Parliament in relation to our telecommunications policy, which is aimed at achieving the best possible economic and social benefits for remote and rural Australians. It was pleasing that in our meetings with Coalition MPs there was a good understanding that development and progress in remote and rural Australia cannot proceed without adequate telecommunication infrastructure.

In these meetings, we pressed strongly for the development of a specific remote and rural telecommunications policy due to the particular circumstances of the bush being so different to majority, populated, Australia. For example, lack of critical mass means that market-based policy and procurement mechanisms do not work. These points are entirely applicable to consideration of Northern Australia, and we submit the following comments.

1. There needs to be a specific telecommunications policy for remote and rural Australia.

This policy needs to:

- a. fully appreciate the differences of the vast region, including constraints in relation to market-based mechanisms;
- b. recognise the long-standing understanding of city-based Australians that remote and rural Australian telecommunications infrastructure needs to be subsidised;
- c. tap into the willingness of remote and rural communities and businesses to partner with government to develop mutually beneficial local solutions;
- d. take into account the strategic need for both fixed and mobile communications, and the extent to which existing infrastructure plans (the NBN) address these needs;
- e. and acknowledge the importance of skills building and training in ICT.

2. A greater emphasis on the importance of ICT to realising the vision outlined in the Green Paper is needed.

Most of the development approaches suggested in the June 2013 Coalition Green Paper cannot effectively precede without robust telecommunications infrastructure. Developing the North as a

Broadband for the Bush Alliance is:

Australian Communications Consumers Action Network, Broadband Today, Central Desert Shire Council, Central Land Council, Centre for Appropriate Technology, Centre for Remote Health, Desert Knowledge Australia, Frontier Services, Indigenous Remote Communications Association, Katherine Town Council, Ninti One, Regional Development Australia Northern Territory, Remote Area Planning and Development Board, Swinburne University of Technology

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food bowl, expanding the tourist economy, high-tech energy generation, building defence capability, developing world class healthcare research facilities and creating education hubs all require underpinning ICT infrastructure.

The Green Paper omitted to mention one crucial factor that is holding back economic development throughout much of the North; the lack of reliable and affordable telecommunications. Whilst upgrading the Bruce Highway is prioritised in the paper, upgrading the information superhighway which underpins economic development is scarcely mentioned.

Attached to this document is further explanation on a thematic basis as to why telecommunications should be more explicitly referenced and considered.

3. The digital economy should be included as a development opportunity for Northern Australia.

The digital economy can be described as, “*Wealth creation through the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services enabled by digital technologies*”¹. It will challenge business models and is a catalyst for innovation. Without the skills and knowledge of how to work in an online environment or the right infrastructure; rural and remote Australia will be disadvantaged in all aspects of economic and social development.

4. Indigenous specific development opportunities and digital inclusion should be included.

The paper spends little time on Indigenous-specific opportunities, but without Indigenous involvement and inclusion in the development of the North, that development will be constrained or undermined. Indigenous Australians make up a significant proportion of the population, and hold a significant proportion of the land in Northern Australia. Given this, they need to be more thoroughly considered in any plans for the North. Furthermore, Indigenous Australians have much to gain and contribute by being joined to the digital economy as digital capacity building of Indigenous Australia will: support workforce needs, cultural tourism, micro-enterprise, and service delivery, as well as reducing the current social, economic and digital divides.

5. Locally brokered development and partnerships that are responsive to local needs and aspirations need to be highlighted.

When these principals are applied to communications and broadband, the opportunities for realising significant development and economic opportunities become obvious. The Alliance strongly advocates for flexibility in policy to enable devolved regional and locally developed solution-finding to meet telecommunication and broadband needs. There is significant existing infrastructure that can be leveraged, there are opportunities for public/private/community partnerships that can be used to overcome the structural and market weaknesses in remote Australia.

We attach three papers developed by the Alliance that are relevant to the Coalition’s 2030 Vision for Developing Northern Australia. These include:

- [The Broadband for the Bush Alliance Policy](#)
- [Extending remote and rural cellular coverage](#)
- [Rethinking the Indigenous Communications Program](#)

Effective telecommunications, which includes the both the telecommunication infrastructure itself and the support to ensure its best use, is essential in the development of remote and rural Australia.

¹ National ICT Australia 2013 @ <http://www.nicta.com.au/>

We strongly encourage the Coalition to embed this importance in any policy relating to the region, including policy relating to Northern Australia.

Attachment 1: The importance of ICT to Northern Australia

1. Increased business presence

In order for businesses (both small and large) to have a presence in the North, they will need quality, reliable communications. This is important for reaching out to potential customers through websites, social networking, and so forth. More importantly, perhaps, many business functions depend on quality communications. A small business seeking to use a cloud service for its email or ITC infrastructure cannot afford to rely on a congested or unstable communications link to the provider. A large business needed to send documents back and forth between its other offices cannot afford to wait until the network clears before sending those documents. Businesses and their employees will benefit from the ability to work remotely, particularly in a relatively sparse area such as Northern Australia.

The possibilities for businesses to engage with the region are also increased by quality communications infrastructure. It is much cheaper, and much more convenient, for a meeting to be conducted over voice or video link than to have the parties present in the same country.

2. Population growth

The Coalition Green Paper in July 2013 noted the importance of increasing the population of Northern Australia. In order for this population to increase as much as possible, it is important for quality communications infrastructure to be in place. This is for two main reasons.

First, an increased population will entail increased use of private sector and government services, and many of these services will be accessed over the phone or online. Consumers expect the convenience of phone or online to these services, and moreover, it is far cheaper and easier to provide these services over phone or internet than to build banks, post offices, government office branches, and so on in each remote location where these services will be needed.

Second, many individuals will expect access to communication services for social and recreational purposes, and it will be difficult to convince people to move to the North if such a move would mean isolation from their families, friends, and entertainment. As well as voice and video contact, quality communications will provide access to online sources of music, videos, and other entertainment, and having this access is likely to be increasingly important to consumers in the future.

3. Health

With an increasing population (including an increasing elderly population) access to health services will be vital, and the green paper noted the value in developing quality health services in the North. The facts of geography will remain, however, and it will be impractical to build a fully-serviced hospital in every regional centre in the North. For this reason, access to telehealth services is likely to be an important ingredient in growing the North, allowing individuals in remote locations to have access to health services provided in major centres.

4. Tourism

One particular industry that could benefit from development in the North is the tourism industry. Tourism operators will benefit from quality communications in many of the same ways as other

businesses. Allowing prospective tourists to investigate local attractions, accommodation, transport options, etc. through simple online systems will provide increased opportunity for tourism operators. In addition, the tourism industry will benefit from visitors having access to reliable quality communications. While some tourists may enjoy the experience of being “cut off”, many will seek to have a level of contact with their homes and with the rest of the world—this could be as simple as wanting to keep up to date with the news, or wanting to maintain a travel blog. For these tourists, the prospect of being effectively “cut off” may be a disincentive to travel to a particular destination.

5. Education

The Green Paper noted the benefits in developing education institutions and increasing the skill set of residents of Northern Australia. The difficulties of doing this in a sparsely populated region will be similar to those in developing quality health centres—in order to service a growing population in the North without also improving the communications services of the North, a great many facilities would need to be built.

With quality communications, on the other hand, the possibility of using much more cost-efficient online teaching methods is introduced. Remote students would gain access to quality institutions without the need to relocate, and a single institution could reach a larger number of students using online education tools rather than relying on large lecture halls and large numbers of staff.

6. Research

The North provides an opportunity for great research, particularly in life sciences such as ecology and geology. For this research to occur, it is important that researchers have access to quality communications. Much research is collaborative, and allowing a researcher in the North to have an easy way to contact researchers in other locations, plus access to the increasingly large body of research information provided over the internet, would boost the possibility of research in the North. Additionally, the likely areas of research that would be carried out in the North are likely to be data-intensive, and require an ability to send large research datasets to other researchers or to home institutions in other cities. In order to send these large datasets in practical timeframes, it will be necessary to have quality communications systems in place.

Attracting tourists, world class healthcare, research and training and attracting and retaining workers and families in the North will only be achieved if people have access to comparable ICT (including mobile phone coverage).