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Media Release

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The following is Tony Windsor's speech during the "MATTER OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE" debate on Tuesday 19 June 2007 on

Broadband

Mr WINDSOR (New England) (4.03 p.m.)—Isn't it great to see some competition for the regional vote? I think the broadband debate and some of the debates on water and climate change are starting to embrace the issues that are very important to country people. I was interested to hear the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry—I see that he is leaving the chamber—cite the National Farmers Federation as a source of knowledge on this issue. I think their behaviour during the telecommunications debate has been disgraceful. The duplicity of the former president, Peter Corish, on this issue is something that will go down in the history of the farming community and country Australians.

Infrastructure is obviously critical to country Australians, particularly telecommunications infrastructure. As I have said a number of times in this chamber, telecommunications is the one piece of infrastructure that negates distance and location as being a disadvantage to living in the country. We talk about railway lines and roads—and they are important—but telecommunications, broadband particularly, is the infrastructure of this century. We need to look past the politics involved in this issue and get it right. There are a number of things happening here. It is not just a city-country issue. It is also about where this nation places itself globally in terms of telecommunications. The game that is being played at the moment in trying to capture the minds of the Australian public on this issue is a little pitiful. We should get this right. If it does cost money and it does use up some of the Communications Fund and some of the Future Fund to put it in place and get it right, that is what the Australian public would expect and demand of any government, or potential government, into the future.

The government says it is going to guarantee high-speed broadband services to 99 per cent of the population and I am told that there are a series of maps available on the spread of that communication. Given some of the concerns, particularly about wireless but also satellite, regarding location, geography et cetera and atmospheric conditions, one of the things the government could do is outline—and I hope the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources will do so today; I am told he is very informed on this issue—who the one per cent are—

Mr Baldwin interjecting—

Mr WINDSOR—Yes, it is you—a man of great knowledge on this issue, revered in the Hunter as a technological giant. One thing that the parliamentary secretary, the Prime Minister or the minister may like to do is to tell the people of Australia who the one per cent are. Who are the one per cent who are going to miss out? Who are they and where do they live? What that would effectively do—and I think there is a challenge to the government here—is put in place a guarantee to the other 99 per cent that they will receive high-speed broadband.

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Anybody with any sanity in this place knows that there are going to be terrain problems and atmospheric problems. Not only people in very remote areas, where you would expect that satellite is the only form of communication, but people in all of our electorates in the country are going to have difficulty receiving this service. So is the government guaranteeing service to 99 per cent of the population? Rather than go through who they are, it would be a lot easier just to nominate the one per cent who are going to miss out and then guarantee the service to the others. I bet the government is not prepared to do that.

We have got an issue in this parliament that relates particularly to the National Party. Deputy Speaker Causley, you may have been at the conference in Singleton over the weekend. The theme of that conference was to break the city-country divide. I listened to the state leader with some interest because I agreed with most of what he was saying. The very next day, there was an announcement at the federal level that entrenched that divide. No matter what anybody says on this particular issue, there is a divide here.

The government is suggesting an optical fibre arrangement for our cities. It is suggesting that some country people will get ADSL2+. Tamworth and Armidale in my electorate will receive that infrastructure; others—the majority—will receive wireless. Everybody knows—including the Prime Minister, who has stated it here—that that will be at a lower internet speed. When Telstra was sold, a guarantee was given to Senator Barnaby Joyce and to the former President of the National Farmers Federation, Peter Corish—that duplicitous person I spoke of a moment ago. On the sale of Telstra, they said that there would be a basic guarantee—they said that it would be in writing but nobody has ever seen it—that the government would deliver equity of service and parity of pricing to country people on broadband services and telephone services. This great announcement of yesterday is supposedly the follow-through from that commitment.

What is wrong with that commitment? Obviously it is not an equitable arrangement. City people are going to get a service that has higher internet speeds than that of country people. They are—and I am not kidding—going to receive less of a service in country Australia than in city Australia. The government has broken its commitment to the Australian people when it talked Senator Joyce into supporting the legislation.

It is contrary to what the National Party did over the weekend in their great expose of how they are going to spend the next four years eradicating the divide between city and country. It did not take four years—it took one day. In one day they have entrenched that—and they are proud of it. They are proud that country people will receive a lesser service than their city cousins. I think that is a disgraceful act.

There are a number of issues that I would like to cover quickly. One is a probity and a process issue. The government asked a number of bidders to bid on the provision of internet services to country Australia. The announcement yesterday was of the winning bidder, Opel. As I understand it, what the government did not do is announce to the other bidders that it would add another \$358 million to the original bid offer. I think that is something that needs to be closely looked at. How can the government issue a contract when it has asked a number of bidders to bid and when it has then changed the numbers? Somebody might be able to explain that to me, but I am told that the other bidders were not aware of the \$358 million. So how could they, in a competitive bid process, guarantee what the winning bidder could when 50 per cent of the money was not there? That is an issue that needs addressing.

Yesterday the member for Calare asked a question of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister said that country people 'will have the same access to broadband speeds as is now available in metropolitan areas'. If the Prime Minister is satisfied that the speeds in metropolitan areas are sufficient now and that that is good enough for country people, why are we increasing the speeds in the city? If that is sufficient for people in the country, why is it not sufficient for people in the city? The guarantee of equity of access that was given in terms of broadband and telephone services has been ignored by this government. *(Time expired)*