



PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Wellingrove would be good start for a “powered tower program”

The telecommunication needs of the people of Wellingrove in the New England electorate were raised in the Parliament this week by their MP, Tony Windsor.

Mr Windsor recently attended a rally in Wellingrove to hear the needs of the people of this small regional community and as well as raising their situation on the floor of the Parliament this week, he has requested a meeting with the Minister for Broadband, Communication and the Digital Economy, Senator the Hon Stephen Conroy to discuss solutions to the problem of delivering telecommunication services to the people of Wellingrove and other small regional communities.

The following is what Mr Windsor told the Parliament.

Speech August 29 2008

[Mr WINDSOR](#) (New England) (11.44 a.m.)—I would like to bring to the attention of the House a situation that is common across many country areas of Australia, but I would like to use the example of the community of Wellingrove in my electorate.

Wellingrove, for those who do not know—and I am sure most of you do—is situated between Glen Innes and Inverell. It is a lovely spot, but one of the difficulties that this lovely spot has is that it does not have mobile telephone communication. I think most of us would understand how that has come about. The full privatisation of Telstra took place a couple of years ago under the former government.

Certain commitments were given, particularly to Senator Barnaby Joyce in the Senate, that there would be enshrined in legislation a guarantee of equity of access to telephone services and broadband services for all Australians. That was re-endorsed at the time by Peter Corish, who was the President of the National Farmers Federation. Subsequently, that guarantee was never sighted in the sale legislation.

The legislation went through the parliament. Certain commitments and guarantees that were given under the former government were not put in place or enshrined in legislation, as it was said at the time they would be.

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Wellingrove is a rural area, a very rich agricultural area, a highly productive area, and it covers about 1,600 people. Those people are now suffering the legacy of that sale, in my view. The current government did not support that sale when in opposition, but we cannot undo the past.

I am now representing that community. A rally was held there a couple of weeks ago, asking what can be done for their particular circumstance. The circumstance would be common across many of these areas.

We have a fully privatised major telco in Telstra whose main agenda now is to make money for its shareholders. It is not that interested in service delivery to communities that are not profitable, and the Wellingrove community falls into that category. Telstra say that they cannot make any money out of that number of people; therefore, they are not interested in putting up a mobile tower so that those people would receive reception.

As I said, the current government, although not responsible for what happened then, can always blame the previous government for the circumstances that these people and many others find themselves in. But I would like the new minister to look a bit further than that. I think there are certain obligations to provide what is an essential service now, not a luxury, to those communities that are not seen as viable options for the telcos.

The former government also said that competition would prevail in those particular areas. That has been farcical. Obviously competition is not going to deliver for what is considered below viability in terms of shareholder return.

The concept that I have floated and others have floated on a number of occasions is one that I believe could rectify this particular circumstance and would involve the government playing a role. Rather than their just blaming the previous government for making a stupid decision—which it did—I would like to see the new government actually try to address the circumstances of these people that have been left with this legacy of the former government.

One way of doing that is under what I refer to as a ‘powered tower arrangement’, where the government provides the basic infrastructure for the tower—that of a road, obviously a site and electricity to the site—and then that tower becomes available to all competitors in the telco business.

That can do a number of things. Obviously it can deliver a service to these people but it can also provide the basis for some degree of competition. I was delighted to receive a call from Optus, who had become aware of the situation at Wellingrove and were interested in having a look at that particular circumstance. (Time expired)