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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Opinion Piece

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Nationals tap dance on the floor not cross it

The recent debacle in the Senate regarding the stance taken by the Nationals and a couple of Liberals over the rolling of the former Howard Government's \$100m per annum Regional Telecommunications Fund into the Rudd Government's \$4.7B National Broadband Network cries out for comment and some perspective.

Much has been made of this by the Nationals muscling up to their senior Coalition partner but only after the Liberals had left the room (or didn't bother to come in). Liberals Leader in the Senate, Senator Nick Minchin went so far as calling it a "Mickey Mouse vote".

Senator Joyce defends his position by saying he was standing up for the rights of country people - "that country people are sick and tired of politicians rolling over".

Well Senator Joyce voted to sell Telstra when numerous surveys suggested that 90% of country people did not want Telstra sold – AT ALL. That was the time for the Nationals to muscle up.

Senator Joyce argued at the time that the \$2B "locked away" trust fund – the Regional Telecommunications Fund which equated to \$100m per annum, would fund country people's needs into the future. It would "future proof" telecommunications in the country he said.

Then Prime Minister John Howard said at the time that no Government can bind a future Government in terms of policy.

Senator Joyce knew that and he still sold out for a pittance – remember \$100m per annum not \$2B in one lump sum as Senator Joyce is making out. Now the Coalition in Opposition has said that they will provide the \$100m per year if they are re-elected.

Senator Joyce said at the time that the Telstra sale legislation would enshrine in it equity of access to telephone and broadband services and that he would only support the sale on that basis.

That promise was never committed to the legislation and only recently we saw the fully privatised Telstra putting in a tender for the National Broadband Network (NBN) that left two million Australians out of the coverage. No need to ask where they live.

It's one thing to die in the trench over an issue but the Nationals should have stood up to the Liberals and died in the trench to stop the full sale of Telstra when they were in Coalition in Government not now that they are in disarray in Opposition!!

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Senator Joyce was also the Senator who lauded the amendment to the Water Amendment Bill 2008 moved by Greens' Senator Bob Brown in relation to exploration licences for coal mining on the Liverpool Plains saying "I hope the message is conveyed to the people of the Carroona area that we (the Nationals) will support them on this matter," only to renege the next day after pressure from the Minerals Council of Australia.

Senator John Williams also stated on this issue, "There is no point in compromising the prosperity of the future and the capacity to feed ourselves for the sake of a 30 year window in mining."

Even that great Nationals poodle, Senator Ron Boswell said "Today we have delivered for the people of the Liverpool Plains."

Senator Joyce admitted on the ABC Country Hour on November 28 that the Nationals had been leant on by the Minerals Council saying "There was a Coalition position that was put forward on the Wednesday, which after, to be honest, after lobbying from Mitch Hooke, was changed, and then the Coalition's position changed and the second amendment reflected the position of the Liberal and National Coalition."

He (Senator Joyce) says it's part of being in a Coalition, and it's about giving and taking on issues.

He (Senator Joyce) says it's a good example of the National party taking into concerns the Liberal party has on this issue.

Funny too, but Senator Joyce also told a Carroona farmer that he had no idea about the about face.

So when the Nationals had the chance to really stand up for country people at Carroona and other groundwater sensitive locations they failed just as they did on Telstra.

But when it is politically opportune for them to stand up behind a façade of hairy-chestedness, they do.

The Nationals do a very good tap dance, gliding across the floor on matters that can make a real difference for country people, but Nick Minchin's "Mickey Mouse" description of the vote says it all about the substance of the issues on which they actually do cross it.