

REGIONAL MOBILE TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Motion

HON PAUL BROWN (Agricultural) [11.02 am] — without notice: I move —

That this house note —

- (a) the unique challenges that regional Western Australia faces with the provision of mobile telecommunications;
- (b) the investment of an additional \$45 million in the state budget towards the regional mobile communications project and the benefit that this will bring; and
- (c) the prioritisation of where this investment should be targeted.

During the last four years we have seen an unprecedented investment in telecommunications across regional Western Australia thanks to the royalties for regions program. This has been achieved through the provision of \$40 million from royalties for regions to the regional mobile communications project. This project is augmented by Telstra to fully realise a total investment of \$106 million. This has allowed the rolling out of 113 new mobile towers across regional Western Australia.

My Nationals colleagues and I support this wonderful initiative and I am sure that all other regional members in this house do as well. This initiative has enabled mobile telecommunications coverage in areas of regional Western Australia that were previously isolated communities or businesses. However, there is still a severe lack of mobile phone coverage in many areas of regional Western Australia that impacts not only mobile phone coverage, but also radio telecommunications, which is essential for police and emergency services, business and recreational purposes. The RMCP project is providing WA's regional rural and remote communities with access to a self-sustainable and affordable mobile voice and wireless service through the delivery of 113 sites along major roads and highways across WA. Following the completion of stage 1 of the RMCP, it is estimated that some 8 000 kilometres of WA's highways and major roads will have near continuous mobile coverage. Fifteen remote and regional communities have also benefitted from this project.

As we know, phone companies have traditionally been reluctant to install mobile phone towers in regional Western Australia as it is not seen as very profitable. The result was that people living and working outside of Perth missed out on mobile phone coverage or at best had very patchy phone coverage. The tyranny of distance is a major factor in the wellbeing of our regional communities, our families and our friends, and the provision of emergency services in regional WA is stretched to capacity in many areas. Thanks to the delivery of 113 new mobile phone towers across the state—particularly along our major roads and highways—we can now deliver greater access to emergency services.

As members would be well aware, emergency services personnel and volunteers throughout the state play a vital role in our regional communities. We are lucky these communities are catered for by emergency service personnel and volunteers but it does not count for much if people who need emergency assistance cannot get access to that service because there is no coverage in the area. I do not really care which flavour of politics members like or which side of this chamber they are sitting on, this is a policy that everybody should support. We have all been in areas where we have been unable to get mobile phone coverage. Even in the metropolitan area there are mobile black spots that I am sure people are unhappy with. Imagine then, that a person is with family or friends in an isolated area—isolated does not mean the back of Woop Woop; it could be a major highway—far from any type of assistance, residence or business that could help if the person gets into trouble and there is no access to that vital emergency service when it is required. This is what the citizens of many areas of regional WA have had to endure for far too long. The RMCP is now helping to alleviate that deficiency.

I had personal experience with the potential need for emergency assistance in an area with poor mobile reception. Many years ago I had a number of workers who were involved in a car rollover while travelling between job sites. Fortunately, they were not seriously injured, with the exception of a few scratches and bruises and perhaps a bruised ego or two, but that was down to pure luck. When I got a scratchy phone call after the accident happened, it was along the lines of, “Car accident, scratch, scratch, drop in, drop out, north of Goomalling, scratch, scratch, drop in, drop out.” I had a minor heart attack because I thought my employees, who could not get mobile access to the emergency services, were injured on the side of the road. It was a gut-wrenching experience and my heart sank. I felt completely powerless and unable to help them. This was approximately 150 kilometres from the outskirts of Perth; an area that would be very familiar to many members in this house.

In the state budget last week we saw that stage 2 of the RMCP is funded. This is another \$45 million to build on the \$40 million already provided by royalties for regions. Stage 2 of the RMCP will continue to provide delivery

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of an even greater coverage area in regional WA as well as move towards broadband accessibility in remote communities. In fact, the Minister for Regional Development recently stated —

While there had been emphasis on improving mobile communications capability over the past four years, the focus was now widening to include higher-bandwidth fixed broadband services in regional areas, particularly to support health and education needs.

This will achieve equality in economic opportunity and social amenity between urban and regional populations.

Having been an operator of an agricultural business that provided a service across wide areas of our state, I know full well the difficulties experienced with dodgy mobile phone coverage. I have said in this place before that the effective catchment area for my business before I entered Parliament was the Agricultural Region. I could not count the times and areas when and where I was unable to get mobile phone coverage. That continued to a lesser extent, but nonetheless still continued, even when I became a member of Parliament. This is why I have a very good understanding of the frustrations of many of my constituents. Business suffers because people are unable to communicate effectively with customers and that means lost opportunities. It also makes it very hard to communicate with any workers a person may have.

We did not have a landline at our place for many years but we were lucky enough to have exceptional mobile phone coverage on our property. I did not have to travel very far for that to change considerably. One of the very real benefits for country businesses with the introduction of the RMCP is that in spite of the distances that we have to endure in regional Western Australia, we can now operate on a very real and competitive footing in many other aspects of business.

Once again, royalties for regions has had to do the heavy lifting to provide the services that should have already been provided by the federal government. But I notice that in this week's federal budget, the coalition has pledged a \$100 million investment into telecommunications infrastructure to fix mobile coverage and black spots in regional areas. I welcome this investment. I hope that the federal government will partner with the state government so that further investment from the telecommunications industry can be leveraged. If an initial investment by royalties for regions of \$40 million into RMCP stage 1 is able to leverage another approximately \$66 million from private investment towards building 113 mobile communications towers, imagine what the further funding of \$45 million through RMCP stage 2 and additional funding from the federal government from within the \$100 million announced this week could bring to regional WA when private investment is also factored in. Given that a smaller percentage of Western Australia's total land mass area is covered by mobile telecommunications than any other state, I encourage the federal government to prioritise this state when determining where future money will be spent.

I will complete my comments on this motion and allow others to express their opinions. I look forward to hearing what other members in this chamber have to say about this vitally important project and funding for regional Western Australia.

HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural) [11.12 am]: I would also like to make a contribution to the motion moved by Hon Paul Brown. As a regional resident, I would welcome any upgrades to mobile phone services. The example that Hon Paul Brown gave related to an area not very far from where I live. I can give first-hand examples of people who have had accidents on roads and have driven to our home in need of help because there are no services along many of the roads, even though we live relatively close to the metropolitan area. The part of the motion relating to the mobile phone service in regional Western Australia is not something that any of us would dispute. I do not think I am going too far out on a limb in stating that for a country as wealthy as Australia, with such a strong, growing and wealthy economy and a AAA credit rating, the mobile phone service in regional Western Australia goes nowhere near what people might expect.

Mobile phone coverage is getting worse. I can cite the example of my own home. At any one time, a couple of cars are parked at the top of my driveway. I live on a hill. People can get reception there, so they stop and make phone calls and move on. That is no longer the case. My home had a wireless broadband internet service. It is worth bearing in mind that this issue is not only about mobile phones but also about the internet service. As Hon Paul Brown would know, when running a business, not much of it is done by phone anymore; it is done by email. We have apps on our phones, so when we are about to spray, we can look on the radar to see when the rain is coming and all those sorts of things that are important as well. It is also about the internet service. In my home we moved from satellite to wireless broadband internet because it was so much quicker and gave us a much better service at a much cheaper rate. As the service diminished, we had to move back to satellite because it got to a point at which we could not download anything through the wireless internet service. The reason was that as the towers in the town got more customers and more people using those towers for whatever reason, those of us who live 20 kilometres or so out of town dropped off the network, so to speak. This was a commercial

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decision by Telstra. I had a long discussion with Telstra about my circumstances. Basically, it allowed me to get out of the contract so I could return to satellite. Telstra required a significant investment in its tower in my area to bring it up to a specification that would service not only the immediate town, but also the area as well. Commercially, it does not make any sense for Telstra to do that. We have a problem based purely on commercial reality. There is less money for telecommunications carriers to deal with farms and the cluster of people in our towns. I do not know that it will ever be resolved. Perhaps we need to look further afield to different ways of communicating rather than relying on this technology.

I was fortunate enough to be an agricultural exchange student in the United States in 1988. When I was there, I went to a trade fair and I saw this new invention, which was a phone in a case like the one I have here. I was able to pick up a telephone from that case and call my parents in Australia. There were no wires or cables. We were fascinated by this and thought it was a great idea. That case has now morphed into the little standard mobile phone that we have today. That was almost 30 years ago—in 1988, so 26 years ago we used our first mobile phone. Still, the government of today, in 2014, is looking at how we might pursue that old technology. There is a flaw in this motion. The government is putting in \$45 million, which sounds great; I am sure the people who live in the area in which a tower is built will be pleased. Knowing how royalties for regions money has been spent over the years, I am sure that those towers will be built in areas in which there is benefit for those building them. We can argue about that but it does not solve the issue that we have.

There is no doubt that the gap between towns and towers is becoming blacker and blacker, to the point at which when I drive from Northam to Goomalling, which once had mobile service coverage in all but a few of the hollows, there is no mobile service coverage from about five kilometres out of Goomalling until seven or eight kilometres out of Northam. That big area in which we were once able to get mobile phone service is no longer served by mobile phone communication. We will never be able to build enough towers to fill in all those black spots. I do not know that the taxpayer should be building those towers to fill in the black spots; I think that is a commercial decision for Telstra. I might sound like a conservative politician but that is the way it is. The mobile phone towers were built as a service provision but now they are corporately owned and shareholders expect a fair return on their shares. There is no commercial imperative for Telstra to build more towers or to upgrade its existing towers so that we can all get this mobile phone service that we would like, so it will not happen. It is a great initiative. Let us put that \$45 million into some more towers. It will probably fix up 45 of those several thousand black spots.

I also had the pleasure to be involved in the regional mobile communications program stage 1 as the Regional Development Council's representative. It was a very interesting experience. It further reinforced the comments that I just made. Yes, 120 new towers were built but ultimately, as a result of that, the quality of the whole network, the complete system, is worse than it was before they were built. I am not sure that throwing another \$45 million at the towers will fix the network. It will help the people who live under those 45 towers but it will not fix the network and create the mobile communications system and network that we need. If there is a tower built between Northam and Goomalling—I hope one is built next to my place—that will fill in that black hole but there will be no tower north of Goomalling, so we will always be driving in and out of mobile phone coverage whether those towers are built or not.

I think the challenge for government should be to recognise that that was 30-year-old technology and it served us well but why do we not embrace new technology? A classic scenario was to have the national broadband network run through our regional areas. That would have opened up a whole new world of communicating by voice over internet protocol, Skype, Viber and other ways of transmitting voice data calls. We could have had smaller stations where the NBN cable was laid that would be less expensive. We could have had an upgraded satellite service. All of us could have had satellite phones but they are now cost prohibitive to buy and operate unless one is in an extremely remote area. Perhaps there could have been an opportunity to have a cheaper satellite system embracing the latest technology rather than sitting back on our hands and saying, "This will win us a few votes so let's go with this one." Really, government has a greater role to play than that. It is good to win elections, but ultimately we are here to govern and I think we should be looking forward to the new technologies available today, just as the rest of the world is. No matter how much money we spend on 30-year-old technology, ultimately it will not service us in the way we would wish it to, because it is old.

The prioritisation of where this investment should be targeted is the third part of the motion; I will be making a contribution to the house later today on the priorities of this government. I think that priority should be, once again, placed on a new technology—a new system of communication. We have all kinds of reasons for that, and I am sure other members will make a contribution on that. Hon Paul Brown is exactly right: in the case of an emergency on the side of the road, I do not think it should be a privilege to have a way of communicating with the outside world. I think that in a country as rich as Australia it perhaps should be a right. The same goes for business: I think businesses that pay their taxes have a right to a complete mobile communications network—a

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complete system—that suits the requirements of a contemporary businesses, whether it be farming, contractors, stock agents or whatever that business may be.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Simon O'Brien): I have noted that Hon Martin Aldridge, Hon Jacqui Boydell and Hon Dave Grills have sought the call; however, I will give the call, in the first instance, to the minister seeking it. I call on the Minister for Commerce.

HON MICHAEL MISCHIN (North Metropolitan — Minister for Commerce) [11.22 am]: I will not interrupt the debate for too long because this is an important issue and I am interested in hearing what other members have to contribute. But I do want to outline the present situation with the regional mobile telecommunications network, and I thank Hon Paul Brown for raising this issue as it is something worthy of informing the house on the progress and current situation of.

Of course, he was quite right to indicate that the increased provision of mobile telecommunications infrastructure is critical not only to the development of Western Australia, but also important for the wellbeing and the amenity enjoyed by our citizens in regional areas who otherwise may suffer from a lack of ready communication with the rest of the state and the country. It is also important for communities out in the regions that are isolated and, because of the accident of geography in Western Australia, do not find ready access to such services. Reliable mobile coverage provides very far-reaching benefits for regional communities and businesses, for emergency services operations and for the delivery of government and other services. Of course, our state faces a number of unique challenges in improving our mobile coverage, with relatively high infrastructure costs, small communities dispersed over long distances, limited backhaul capacity and land access issues.

In January 2012, Telstra was awarded \$39.2 million to implement the regional mobile telecommunications project, which is delivering more than \$100 million worth of value to the state. Of particular concern to the government at the time was the lack of highway and town-to-town coverage in regional areas, and that was regarded as a priority. The regional mobile telecommunications project is improving mobile communications in almost every Western Australian region, and providing reliable, near-continuous mobile and broadband coverage along major highways and in selected regional, rural and remote communities. Eighty-nine of the 113 regional mobile communications project towers that were planned have now been completed. Last week's state budget demonstrates the government's continuing commitment to expanding telecommunications accessibility in regional and remote communities. As has been noted, a further \$45 million will be invested over four years in the regional telecommunications project, and it is expected to provide a further 80 mobile telephone towers to provide new or improved 3G and 4G mobile and wireless broadband services within small communities and at strategic locations.

Faster broadband capacity will also be provided in approximately 64 communities where ADSL-enabled exchanges provide a potential upgrade pathway to fixed wireless or fixed broadband through fibre-to-the-node. This component of the project will be finalised when NBN Co Ltd releases its revised rollout plans in the second half of 2014. An education and skills development program is being established to ensure that regional businesses and communities are equipped with the knowledge and expertise to participate in the digital economy, and the regional telecommunications project will deliver a significant reduction in mobile telephone and data coverage gaps in small communities and at strategic locations throughout the region. The enhanced delivery of government and emergency services has also been a key success for the first stage of the project.

In order to determine priority locations for improved coverage for the second stage of the project, the Department of Commerce undertook a state telecommunications needs assessment to identify the existence of access and affordability gaps to digital capability at almost 600 locations across the state. Communities were ranked according to social and economic factors based on the number of students, the number of dwellings and the total resident population, and consultation was undertaken. I have also had a very productive discussion with the federal parliamentary secretary to the federal Minister for Communications about improving coordination between this project and the commonwealth's mobile coverage program. As has been noted, the commonwealth is investing a further \$100 million across the country in respect of this. I have had very fruitful discussions regarding Western Australia's particular needs, to try to convey that what might be an appealing, rational and sensible approach to prioritising mobile networks in other states may not be necessarily applicable to Western Australia, and to emphasise how we in Western Australia have actually had an enormous amount of success in this regard to date and ought to be entrusted with pursuing the current program to its logical next stage.

The adoption of broadband-enabled services is fundamental to improving, and indeed maintaining the productivity, competitive standing and wellbeing of Western Australia. I thank the honourable member for raising his concerns. I note with interest the other comments that have been made, and I can reaffirm the state government's commitment to improving mobile telephone coverage at an early opportunity and as widely as

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possible. I acknowledge that Hon Darren West may be having problems with coverage in particular areas; I am surprised to hear that the coverage has actually decreased, despite the installation of some 89 additional towers. I do not know the reasons for that, but it may very well be the nature of the service provider that is being used from time to time, that certain towers are not being maintained to the standard necessary or that some of the equipment is not compatible with the advances in mobile communication that we are enjoying nowadays. Every new generation of equipment tends to render the previous equipment obsolete. I do not know the answer to that, but I would be interested to hear his experiences, and perhaps if he writes to me I can see that it is sent to the appropriate agency in order to be considered and to analyse and perhaps deal with the problem.

These sorts of things will only be satisfactorily achieved by a satisfactory partnership between the commonwealth and the state, by coordination of these programs, and also with the cooperation of the providers of the services like Telstra. To date Telstra, because of its broad coverage in Western Australia—greater than the other competing service providers—has achieved priority in the setting up of these things. There are tensions between the desirability of having a comprehensive service provider that is equipped to put up these towers, and of course allowing for suitable competition from other service providers in due course. Those are some of the difficulties that need to be resolved by the commonwealth government in order to maintain an open marketplace in which competition can achieve the best results at the lowest cost to consumers.

In any event, I thank Hon Paul Brown for raising the subject and I thank other members for their contributions. I will examine with interest what they had to say about the matter. Even though I may have to depart the chamber on urgent parliamentary business, I will have that referred to my department for consideration.

HON MARTIN ALDRIDGE (Agricultural) [11.30 am]: I would like to start by thanking Hon Paul Brown for bringing this important motion to the house and all of those members who have made a contribution thus far. I do not want to spend long talking about the existing program because the motion refers to the prioritisation of future investment. The regional mobile communications project is vitally important to the constituents in our electorates. It would have to rank in the top five issues that my constituents talk to me about regularly. Contrary to claims made today, the RMCP is making a difference in regional WA. It is improving mobile phone coverage. Some of today's debate wandered off onto the national broadband network. Hon Paul Brown and I share an electorate. The NBN runs to Geraldton within our electorate. I can tell members that the delivery of the NBN to Geraldton has not added one iota to mobile phone coverage in Geraldton or the midwest. The NBN is not the solution to mobile internet technology. The notion that the technology will be phased out is also misinformed.

The original expectation of the RMCP was to construct 60 towers. It is a credit to this government that we were able, in partnership with Telstra, to increase that number by 53 sites to the 113 sites that we are all aware of today. If members look at the Department of Commerce's website, they will see the coverage map that RMCP stage 1 will improve. It is quite staggering. It projects an increase, not a decrease, of 22 per cent in mobile phone coverage in regional WA. That is quite an astounding achievement, and one that the government should be very proud of. As the Minister for Commerce mentioned, the focus of RMCP 1 was around, firstly, highway coverage and, secondly, some black spot infill. It can be seen from those maps that we have now almost seamless coverage on Highway 1 from the South Australian border right around Western Australia to the Northern Territory border. That is a very good achievement.

I am sure members will share their experiences about the benefits to their communities. There are a couple of experiences I want to talk about. I was with my partner at their family farm in Jitarning last weekend for Mother's Day. When we go home, we rely on Telstra's Next G network to provide our internet connection; I thought I would run a broadband speed test to see what sort of coverage they get. I was staggered to find that the new East Wickepin RMCP tower delivering mobile broadband internet access into the Jitarning farmhouse of my partner's family gave them better mobile broadband internet access than I receive from my ADSL connection in Perth. That is really interesting because usually it is the other way around.

Hon Col Holt: You're moving to Jitarning!

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Come out to Jitarning. The farm is for sale, so members can come on down. It comes with a good internet connection!

I also want to talk about the support it provides our emergency services. I know that emergency services do not rely on the mobile phone network for primary communication, but more often than not these days the mobile phone network is being used to mobilise our volunteer emergency services. We are less and less reliant on radio pagers and things like the Hutchison paging network to mobilise our volunteers across the state. We are becoming more and more reliant on new technology using our mobile phone networks. That is one of the advantages in having a staggering increase in our mobile phone network coverage.

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As Hon Paul Brown mentioned, there is a new commitment in the state budget over the next three years to the regional mobile communications project stage 2. I expect that that will enable the construction of at least another 100 mobile phone towers, similar to what the first stage of the program achieved. The emphasis should focus on regional community coverage and black spot infill. There are still communities in my electorate that have poor to no mobile reception. We should target those as a priority under RMCP stage 2. The new funding round also gives us an opportunity to address one of the issues that I think is having a real impact on the efficiency of the network, and it may be part of the problem that Hon Darren West raised, which is the increase in mobile phone boosters. The prevalence of people using illegal mobile phone boosters is increasing. Telstra network engineers say that people buying illegal mobile phone boosters is having a real impact on its network. People are able to buy these devices on eBay or the internet, say, from China. Once installed, they have a real impact on the network. There is more to be done in that space. A Telstra-approved mobile phone booster can obviously be bought, but I think it costs somewhere in the order of \$700 to \$720. Perhaps there is scope within RMCP stage 2 to continue with the theme of improving mobile phone coverage because a mobile phone booster helps people on the fringe of a mobile phone coverage area to receive better reception. It also will help combat the rise in use of illegal mobile phone boosters, which is having a real impact on the network.

As we know, governments provide subsidies for different things from time to time. A couple in the telecommunications space that come to mind are the subsidies for satellite phones for people who live in regional and remote areas, and the subsidy for access to satellite television if terrestrial television services are unavailable. Perhaps the minister who is responsible for this program could consider how we could partner with Telstra to try to combat the rise in use of these illegal mobile phone boosters.

I will now talk about an article that appeared in *Farm Weekly* last week. An opinion piece entitled “Mobile network co-operation”, written by Mr Peter Lee, appeared on page 12 of the *Farm Weekly* of Thursday, 8 May. It was quite interesting. I think the author was trying to have a bet both ways on this issue. His article pointed out some of the history of telecommunications in the bush. I quote from Mr Lee’s article —

From a consumer’s perspective, every dollar spent on putting up competing mobile networks in rural and remote Australia is a dollar wasted.

I agree with him. He then argues for co-investment by government with Vodafone and Optus. In the second paragraph down, he goes on to say —

Co-investment sounds too sensible to actually happen, but logically Telstra should stop building new sites in the bush, while Optus, Vodafone and governments should spend their spare dollars filling in the gaps.

And as Royalties for Regions is so keen on funding extensions to Telstra’s network, maybe it can find a few more dollars to increase the size of the network, instead of boosting Telstra’s profits.

In the same article he tells us that having competing networks in regional WA is a waste of taxpayers’ money but then criticises us for investing in the Telstra network when we should be helping Optus and Vodafone!

Hon Michael Mischin: That assumes that they actually have the expertise to do it as economically as Telstra, which has had the experience of putting up 89 so far.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: That is right.

The article has left me very confused about what the author of the opinion piece was trying to suggest we should do. I do not support government investment in the Optus or Vodafone networks for a very simple reason. My regional constituents’ aspirations are simple: they want reliable mobile communications, including mobile internet access, before network competition. Do not get me wrong: competition in the telecommunications space is something that we should aspire to and would, I am sure, help us all, including our constituents, in terms of the cost of telecommunications but not in preference to coverage. That is the real issue we are dealing with in Western Australia.

Some comments were made today about the federal program. The state has delivered a \$106 million joint venture with Telstra. The commonwealth is talking about a \$100 million initiative across the nation. I think we need strong advocacy from the state government to the federal government to ensure that we get a reasonable share of those funds, given we are responsible for one-third of the land mass of our nation. That brings its challenges when it comes to mobile communication reception. It is going to be a real challenge to make sure that we secure some commitment. Ours is the only state in Australia—in fact, it is probably the only government in Australia—that is investing in the mobile phone network in this way. I hope the commonwealth is looking at what we are doing and the huge gains in mobile phone coverage and mobile internet broadband access that our communities are now enjoying. I thank Hon Paul Brown for bringing the matter to the house.

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HON JACQUI BOYDELL (Mining and Pastoral) [11.41 am]: I also thank Hon Paul Brown for bringing this motion to the house today. The regional mobile communications project is another significant royalties for regions initiative designed to improve the lives of people in the towns and communities that we represent as regional members of Parliament. I just want to make a couple of comments about Hon Darren West's contribution. Given that Hon Darren West was in America 30 years ago and has been a member of the Labor Party, I am absolutely astounded that he has not brought regional mobile communications to his party as something that is important to regional Western Australia. Neither the previous state nor federal Labor governments invested in such a program but this Liberal–National government has done it. The map I am holding up covers the agricultural region.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Alanna Clohesy): Order, members! Hon Jacqui Boydell has the call.

Hon JACQUI BOYDELL: Labor does not prioritise investment in regional mobile communications. That is clear from what the Labor Party has brought to the table so far—zero.

I congratulate the government for its investment in stage 1 of the regional mobile communications project. I am looking forward to the contributions from other members today about how we should prioritise that investment through stage 2. We all know how important reliable and efficient telecommunications and infrastructure are in our communities; they are absolutely essential. They are the cornerstone of us developing the social and economic fabric of the communities we live in. That is taken for granted in the metropolitan area. Although they are vastly improved in the communities that we represent, there are areas in which we need to stimulate some more investment. This Liberal–National government has done that through the announcement in the budget last week. As has been stated this morning, stage 2 of the regional telecommunications project will receive funding of \$45 million, which will build on the \$40 million stage 1 regional mobile communications project to deliver 113 new or upgraded telecommunications towers into our regional areas.

Hon Jim Chown: That's \$45 million more than the Labor Party ever delivered.

Hon JACQUI BOYDELL: Absolutely; it is way more than the Labor Party has ever delivered. Unfortunately, however, some regional areas still have limited or patchy network access for mobile and internet reception, exposing an evident and, indeed, unacceptable digital gap within metropolitan and regional areas that we are looking to close. The regional mobile communications project is certainly a step in the right direction. I completely commend the initiative.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Order, members! There are exchanges across the chamber, none of which relate to the topic the member is speaking on. I remind members that we are here to hear the member speak.

Hon JACQUI BOYDELL: Thank you, Madam Acting President. I think we know the reasons why this policy is important. I will highlight a couple. It will allow our communities to remain socially connected; it is extremely important in terms of mental health and the delivery of health services in regional Western Australia; it is vital in case of emergencies in remote areas; and it is critical to trade and investment opportunities in our regions. However, that is not the focus of the discussion today. Instead, we are here to discuss the future planning and priorities for stage 2 of this really valuable project, and in particular which localities should be prioritised for communications development and why. Of course, we would all aspire to have a communications system in place across the whole state so that every community, household and business has strong and well-functioning broadband and mobile coverage. As the Minister for Commerce pointed out, due to the geography of our state that may not be possible in the extreme inland areas; however, we are working on a way to get there.

I have to touch on the fact that the federal government has acknowledged the problem with telecommunications systems in regional areas and developed the mobile black spot program. Over the next four years, \$100 million will be invested in improving our telecommunications coverage. I commend the federal government for that initiative. I suggest that this debate gives us the opportunity to call on our colleagues in the federal Parliament to justify why certain locations in regional WA need that funding, as opposed to others, to improve their telecommunications infrastructure. Today I will talk about the opportunities for the Kimberley and Pilbara and why they should be priority areas in the next round of infrastructure development. Why would we look at those areas? Mobile phone reception and internet services can be limited and patchy in those areas, even in the larger towns such as Port Hedland and Karratha. At the same time, some critical social and economic policies are at play in these regions. Their success is closely integrated with well-functioning telecommunications infrastructure. The first policy priority relates to Aboriginal development and closing the gap. As members may be aware, nearly 50 per cent of the population of the Kimberley is Aboriginal, with many communities isolated and disadvantaged. Telecommunications infrastructure is critical to achieving lasting progress in closing the gap in those communities. The digital gap contributes to that disadvantage by limiting access to health services,

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online education, learning and development services, and meaningful participation in the modern digital economy, which are opportunities that those in the metropolitan centres enjoy. Telecommunication for these communities also represents an opportunity to engage with the business world to further develop artistic ventures and promote Aboriginal heritage and culture, which in turn promotes tourism across the region. I would like to see some improvement in those telecommunications to really help and give those communities critical tools to commence change from within.

The second aspect relates to our long-held desire as a state for the Pilbara and the Kimberley to be those frontier development regions. Just last week I spoke at the Pilbara–Kimberley forum about opportunities for trade and investment in the Pilbara and the Kimberley and, in particular, the way forward in developing modern trade and investment architecture and what is our next level of diversity and economy in those areas. If we can diversify, we need a telecommunications system that attracts trade and private investment into those areas. At that forum I noted an immense opportunity to meet the growing needs of the middle class of our Asian neighbours, in what is deemed the Asian century, via agriculture and resource expansion as well as defence, education, tourism and other technology-based services. We routinely acknowledge that our vision is restricted by the need to raise enough capital funds for those investments. I would equally point out that the limited telecommunications infrastructure in those areas is also a real and significant barrier to realising those development opportunities.

I would really like the minister to take on board those comments about developing a diversified economy in the north of the state. Establishing and maintaining contact with overseas investors and building efficient online services and systems for those businesses will need reliable mobile and broadband services. Unfortunately, that is not always the case in the Pilbara and the Kimberley. A state telecommunications needs assessment was undertaken in 2008 and 2010, which confirmed that although the Pilbara was the driving force of the economy, which has been stated many times in this house, the mobile and telecommunications infrastructure of the area was extremely poor. Although we have gone a long way in investing in that, we certainly need to take the next step to allow that private investment to join with government investment to continue to build those economies in the north. I am quickly going to run out of time.

I think I have brought forward a couple of ideas today. To me, the trade and investment opportunities in the north of the state are paramount. I reiterate the fact that in helping to close the gap for Aboriginal communities, we need to develop ways that they can access online and mobile communications, which are vitally important to the development of health and educational services in regional Western Australia.

I thank members for their contributions today. I think we all realise that underpinning regional development in Western Australia, a forward-thinking mobile telecommunications plan is what we need. This government has started to develop that. We need to continue it. Every other state in Australia would like to have this plan.

HON DAVE GRILLS (Mining and Pastoral) [11.51 am]: I would like to thank Hon Paul Brown for bringing this motion to this place, and Hon Darren West, Hon Michael Mischin, Hon Martin Aldridge and Hon Jacqui Boydell for their contributions to the debate. One thing that gets me about this issue is the discussion we have on it and the good things and the pros and the cons in the way it works. It is pretty obvious that out in the bush communications are a good thing. I can relate it to my previous occupations and my time in the Defence Force. When we had exercises, everyone would ask what the worst thing about the exercise or the operation that we did was, and we would say it was communications. Back in the days when pigeons were the go, communications were not very good, but now that our communications work better, lives can be saved. It might not sound like much, but I know that a person may be on the end of a telephone, calling St John Ambulance, for example. That person may not have any experience in first aid. The person on the telephone at St John Ambulance may say, “Can the patient breathe? Put your hand under the chin and push their head backwards.” That can save a person’s life, because nine times out of 10, people die in traffic crashes because they cannot breathe. That is one simple thing.

Apart from that, something that is more of a grassroots thing and that I think is a really good thing is when people say to me, “I can actually do some stuff that I couldn’t do before because I can communicate.” Because of that, with the Army cadets that I run, we are now able to go out to do exercises in areas where we probably could not go before because we had no communications. The reason we can do it is that we have communications and —

Hon Jim Chown: Did you keep losing them?

Hon DAVE GRILLS: What—cadets?

Hon Jim Chown: Yes.

Hon DAVE GRILLS: Yes—you get paid for them!

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We would go out and do that. With our orders, instead of going through the long and arduous task of putting them together, we can say that we have mobile communications with this hospital or this police station—whatever communications we need. That is a good thing because it is safer for us and it is safer for the cadets and everyone else who does it.

I would again like to thank Hon Paul Brown for bringing forward this motion. We look forward to doing the next stage of the project so that, as Hon Jacqui Boydell said, the Kimberley and the Pilbara will have that same communications benefit.

HON COL HOLT (South West — Parliamentary Secretary) [11.54 am]: I would also like to make a quick contribution to the debate on the motion and, obviously, support the motion. I think the point of this motion, especially paragraph (c), is that it provides an opportunity for everyone in this house to raise the issues that they think are important to their area in the rollout of the second phase of this regional mobile communications project. We are going to do it. We have done the first phase, which involved funding of \$40 million for 113 towers. That has undoubtedly improved coverage and communications for those communities and individuals who now have access to mobile telecommunications that they never had before. We saw that as a good thing, so the investment of a further \$45 million is going to happen. We prioritised this project and we are going to do it. This is an opportunity for members of this house to put on the record that they want some of those towers and some of that improved communication in their areas in regional Western Australia. Every member has had the opportunity to raise the areas that they think are important and why they think they are important. I do not think every member made the most of that opportunity. I think some members decided that it was never going to happen and was not a good thing; therefore, they would not try to influence which areas the services went into. What a missed opportunity it is for their electorates and the people they represent.

I want to talk about some of the things that I believe are important for the south west region. I have done a lot of work in that region, so I want to put on the record and highlight that even though the south west is very well populated compared with some of the other regions, it has some commercial options when it comes to mobile communications. Some carriers want to provide a commercial service in places such as Mandurah, Bunbury and Albany. However, similar to other regions of Western Australia, there are black spots that have not been addressed in any commercial deals or in the first phase of the regional mobile communications project. So I am going to put on the record some of the places that I think are important locations in the south west to be addressed in the next phase of the plan. I will start with Elleker, which is a small town about 20 kilometres to the west of Albany. Even 20 kilometres is a big distance when a person wants to use a mobile phone. I know that people in Elleker have been waiting for many, many years for the mobile phone coverage in their area to be fixed. They have been waiting and waiting, and more people have moved into the area, but guess what? No commercial operator has decided that it can build a tower that will give a commercial return. That is the whole point of this project. This project is about making those marginal commercial decisions commercial. If we can partner with a service provider to get it over the edge to build a tower that will be a commercial proposition, that should be our aim. We are trying to drive the biggest bang for our buck. In the first regional mobile communications project, I think we provided \$40 million. I think that perhaps another \$66 million was leveraged out of the commercial sector to build those towers. That is exactly what we should be doing.

I note the contribution of Hon Michael Mischin and his discussions with the federal government and its \$100 million commitment to regional black spots. I have some concerns about where that \$100 million investment is going to land, because there are special criteria around some commercial outcomes. I think we know that that does not work in regional Western Australia. The nature of our state, big as it is, and the spread of the population, is not conducive to companies making commercial decisions to provide a commercial service. It was good to hear that Hon Michael Mischin is in full discussions with the federal government to bring it into line with our thinking about what some of the priorities are.

I talked about Elleker, which is really about a community or a business approach. In the south west one of the biggest issues is around emergency services. I think of places such as Jalbarragup, which is near Nannup; Ferguson Valley; and Torndirrup National Park near Albany, which do not have any adequate mobile phone coverage. These are heavily forested, hilly areas. Torndirrup is along the beach where the Salmon Holes fishermen go, often with disastrous results. We are saying that mobile phone coverage should be about emergency service access as well, as Hon Martin Aldridge pointed out.

In the rollout of the next phase, let us hope that the \$45 million brings more than the 113 towers that were built in the first phase and that it gets up to 120 or 125 towers, because this big, broad, wonderful state of ours has remaining black spots. We know that people want to use mobile phones. We know that mobile phone technology is increasing and improving every day. It is a technology that will be used way into the future. Let us use this as an opportunity to target those areas on good rationale—namely, around emergency services, business opportunities and trade opportunities—to ensure that the people in regional Western Australia have the same

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opportunities and access to communications that everyone else has. That is all we are asking, really; we are asking to use funds provided through the royalties for regions program for this specific project to leverage a better outcome for regional Western Australian communities and the people who live in them. It is a big challenge. How are we going to do it? Where is the money going to be spent? I am sure that there will still be some gaps when it is finished, and maybe future governments will look into how these two projects have run and decide to continue the rollout and continue filling in the black spots. We know that there will be more; that is why we have the second phase of this project, because even though there are 113 towers as a result of the first phase, they have not covered all the areas, although they have done a pretty good job. Further investment of \$45 million will do an even better job, and I look forward to seeing the people in Ferguson Valley who have been campaigning for a long time to have their issues resolved, because they want to pursue their business opportunities as well as ensure that emergency service responses —

Hon Darren West interjected.

Hon COL HOLT: That has no relevance. They also want to ensure that emergency service responses for people living in that area are well covered.

HON STEPHEN DAWSON (Mining and Pastoral) [12.01 pm]: Given the time remaining, it hardly seems worth my while, but I wanted to give my apologies to Hon Paul Brown for not being in the chamber; I have been away on urgent parliamentary business. I congratulate him on his motion; it is an important one. I am not sure what my colleague Hon Darren West said, but this is an important issue for my region. I welcome these extra dollars but, as Hon Col Holt said, there are still a lot of communities in my electorate that do not have these services, and we need them. I was going to run through a list, but I am out of time.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Alanna Clohesy): Members, that concludes private members' business. Before we move on, I would like to acknowledge the presence in the visitors' gallery of students from Subiaco Primary School, and I welcome them to the Legislative Council.