

DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY — REGIONAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Motion

HON LAURIE GRAHAM (Agricultural) [12.18 pm] — without notice: I move —

That this house notes the failure of the federal government to provide adequate digital connectivity in regional Western Australia and congratulates the McGowan government on stepping in to fill the gap.

I will start talking about this issue by outlining the problems that a farmer about 120 kilometres from Geraldton has with digital connectivity. I will explain where they have come from and where they are today, to give members some feeling and understanding of the impact.

They started off with a landline service, which everyone had in the old copper cable days. When the internet became available, they connected to it using that service. Next, Telstra came along and they retained their landline service and their poor-capacity internet service, I must say. At the same time, they purchased a number of mobile phones with large Telstra data packages so that they could get some connectivity for their farm business. That was a very poor solution. To get a Telstra connection, they would often have to drive to the top of the hill and download data by using their Telstra mobile phone tethered to their computer. They would go back to the farm and then have to do the same thing when they needed to return that data to the person with whom they were trying to communicate. Then along came NBN Sky Muster satellite. It was going to be the saviour of them all. They were eligible for that service because the services that they had were not adequate. Sky Muster offered a 25/5 megabits per second service, but it turned out that they were unable to use it most of the time, so they reverted to their landline internet service and Telstra mobiles. In the middle of the night when there was low activity, they were sometimes able to use Sky Muster.

The next provider to turn up was Optus. A tower was put up some 15 kilometres away and they thought, “You beauty! People don’t realise that a phone tower has popped up in Mullewa, so we’ll connect to Optus.” That service worked fantastically for them. They now had a number of services and Optus was working well. Of course, once the people of Mullewa became aware that Optus was available, they took up all the bandwidth so the farmers who had connected still retained their Optus service but could not find a solution. As a result, the farm now has active NBN, Telstra and Optus internet connections. Obviously, that does not include the mobiles that the farmer still needs to use to download data when the other internet connections are not available.

The next solution to turn up was the Digital Farm Grants program. The shires to the north of the City of Greater Geraldton—that is, Mullewa and Chapman Valley—and to the southern border, Mingenew and Morawa, and a number of other councils formed a joint venture to find a solution. They used a local Geraldton IT company, called LogicIT, which came up with the project. Things were looking great until the City of Greater Geraldton was approached by the proponents who were trying to stitch it together and they were advised that there was good connectivity in the rural area and that they did not need to be included in the rollout of that project. Now people in those areas are not going to receive that enterprise-grade internet connection that would have allowed them to drop all the other services they currently have. The ludicrous situation is that people on the outer boundary of the city of Geraldton will be still eligible for Sky Muster, even though enterprise-grade connection facilities will be available right next door. No doubt some of them will pay the cost to connect to that, as many had done before the project came into being. It is a shame that the City of Greater Geraldton decided to not participate in the joint venture. It was a very backward step. I could probably best summarise it by saying that it could not see beyond the Moresby Range.

I move onto the NBN in the Geraldton area, which I am very familiar with. When the announcement was first made that NBN services would be rolled out in Geraldton, it looked like a great solution. The initial proposal was for fibre to the node in high-density areas and towers for the rest of Geraldton. That changed subsequently to fibre to the node to most of Geraldton in both the high and medium-density areas, and in the lower density areas, where I lived, people were staying on wireless. To be truthful, that decision was sensible. The cost of putting in fibre to service one customer every 500 metres could not be justified. Putting in fibre to the node was never an option for us. Most people thought that was great. However, when we came to connect to the service, we found that because we were not in Google maps, the NBN thought we did not exist and would not connect us. Another six months or so passed by, and not only myself but a whole group of people in our street were able to be connected. Properties with odd numbers were eligible for a NBN service but the even numbers were not included in Google maps and not recognised by Telstra. Somehow the maps were wrong. I understand that was an Australia-wide problem.

When it was decided that fibre to the node would go to a lot more of the Geraldton area, it was decided to leave the towers exactly where they were instead of putting them on a high point so that they could service the greater Geraldton area. My property happens to be a kilometre from an NBN tower, and I am lucky that there is a straight line connection to that service with no obstacles. Unfortunately, although my property is only a kilometre away

Hon Laurie Graham; Hon Tjorn Sibma; Hon Darren West; Acting President; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon Michael Mischin; Hon Diane Evers

from the tower, it is at exactly the same height as the top of the tower, so the service only just reaches my property. People who live a couple of kilometres behind me, over ridges et cetera, have no connection to that tower. The towers were not put up on Moresby Range. When we examine why those decisions were made, we see that the towers were put up in the same location as the existing Telstra cable. That same process was being followed until recently. Towers are being put in only where the fibre cabling exists. So there is fibre cable, for instance, at Drummond Cove and in the last 12 months a tower has been erected to service that area. That service is a great improvement for people who live in a blind spot, but people who live behind the Moresby Range could have benefited from having that tower placed in a different location. For what would have been extra capital expenditure, those people would have been advantaged by having a service. A whole host of people in rural areas fail to have access to a good digital signal because the decision was made to put the towers at locations with existing fibre cabling.

As I said, at home I am connected to fixed wireless with a five up, one down connection when it became available. That is all they were rolling out in rural areas. Although that was adequate for a short time, it soon became obvious that there were problems with it, because I changed to using voice over internet protocol on the home telephone line at the same time and when anyone was downloading from the internet, the phone was unusable. I had to reconnect the telephone and there went an extra \$60 a month on a plan to again take up something that I thought was going to last for some time. About 12 or 18 months ago, we were offered a 25/5 megabits per second service. I immediately connected to it and was able to drop the fixed telephone line and go back to a VoIP service.

There are ongoing problems because of the decisions that have been made. Towers have been put along the highway all across the Mullewa area to service people along the highway, but no consideration has been given to people on rural properties who would have gained a service from having towers placed on high points. Putting towers on the ridges would certainly have increased the cost of the rollout, as there was no digital cable in place, but the cost would have been fairly small compared with the return from providing connectivity to additional customers, particularly those people who have no data option.

I will give a few examples of the copper cable issues I have heard about. This incident happened in the last few weeks. A 79-year-old constituent has access only to a copper cable and it is connected via a RAM 8 pair gain system. I do not know what the technical issue is with that connection, but obviously multiple people use multiple lines and they are duplexing et cetera. At each point of weakness, when there has been rain around, which has occurred recently, the lines become unserviceable. Recently, she had an episode and could not get to the phone. She required an ambulance. She was fortunate that when she went onto her back verandah—she was not capable of moving around easily—a neighbour saw her waving frantically, came down, sorted her out, went home and rang an ambulance for her, and that issue was resolved. The unfortunate situation is that Telstra will not accept that that has occurred and now it requires it to occur again so it can monitor the situation before it will do anything to fix those services. That obviously becomes a major problem.

I have a list of the days that the telephone service was out in Westonia—seven days, two days, three days, one day. This is one connection. Every month, there are one or two days of missing service. Again, the exchange is very old and when there is a problem, there are no service people available to service it. I have concentrated mainly on the Telstra issue, and I am sure that others will move on to the digital issue and the improvements. Telstra has cut in the order of 12 000 employees as it has become more efficient over the years. A large percentage of those people have been in rural areas, and people now have to travel hundreds of kilometres to fix problems. Obviously, from the privatisation of Telstra, Telstra shareholders are gaining, but people in regional areas are missing out.

I will move on to the recent rollout of the \$5 million digital farm program, an initiative of the Labor government. An amount of \$2.3 million has recently been allocated to four groups and one of those groups, which I referred to earlier, is in the Geraldton area. That covers a 37 000-square-kilometre area and 1 000 farmers. It is a shame that it did not include that missing block of the City of Greater Geraldton. It was the first round of the grants and I think the minister has made a subsequent announcement about a group in the south west. Those initiatives are giving people high-speed broadband for the first time, but they have to pay very significant connection costs. I understand that for an enterprise, the cost of an unlimited plan is in the order of \$750 a month. Those initiatives would not have been possible without the state government splitting the \$22 million fund and allocating \$5 million to the last mile providers, although in this case the last mile providers are providing services over distances of up to 50 and 60 kilometres, so I think we might need to change the term.

HON TJORN SIBMA (North Metropolitan) [12.34 pm]: I thank Hon Laurie Graham for bringing to the attention of the house the issue of infrastructure and digital connectivity in regional Western Australia. We should not miss the opportunity to speak about infrastructure generally, and communications infrastructure specifically, because these matters are integral to the welfare of the entire state. When I looked at the terms of the motion, I could not find comfort in a proven failure of the federal government; nor am I moved particularly by the

Hon Laurie Graham; Hon Tjorn Sibma; Hon Darren West; Acting President; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon Michael Mischin; Hon Diane Evers

McGowan government's efforts in this respect. Furthermore, I cannot find proper cause to offer it my congratulations, and that should not come as any surprise.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: I just presumed that you haven't been looking.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: Indeed. That is a very useful interjection that I may use somewhat as a segue. This morning I took the opportunity to look backwards a little, because if there is a theme in debate, particularly in that put by members opposite, it is the preponderance to look at what happened in the last eight and a half years, so if it is good for the goose, it is good for the gander.

I got out of the government staffing game in about 2011, but it was about that time that the then Barnett government, in alliance with our colleagues in the National Party, began to look very seriously at these issues. There was recognition of coverage gaps—capability gaps—that impeded quality of life and quality of commerce throughout regional Western Australia. That is something that every government should continue to look at. There were probably three broad projects run at that time solely by the state government or in partnership with the commonwealth. The first and probably most significant was the regional mobile communications project, or the RMCP. It was a \$40 million project delivered through royalties for regions. It delivered 113 towers across nine regions of Western Australia and improved coverage across the state by about 22 per cent. It improved town-to-town coverage and continuous highway coverage across an area of broadly 95 000 square kilometres. We need to be a little sensible here and be prepared to give the other side due accolades. The two main features that will dominate or supervene on any policy or political decision made by any government is the fact that Western Australia is an enormous geographical area—we all understand that—with a sparse population but concentrated in the metropolitan area. That makes equalised policy and program delivery very difficult to take in. There are trade-offs. There are some things that can be done and there are some things that cannot be done. I think the Barnett government deserves all credit for taking up the cudgels from at least 2011 onwards and starting to address gaps in communications coverage throughout Western Australia.

In addition to the regional mobile communications project, there was a specified mobile phone black spot program. That was undertaken in partnership with the commonwealth government and involved a further \$45 million invested in the regional telecommunications project. It led to the installation of another 80 telecommunications towers in identified mobile black spot areas. I do not think there would be a single member in this house who has not endured the frustration of coverage dropouts throughout Western Australia at some time in their life. The previous government did address this, and it did so in cooperation with the commonwealth.

I also want to address something that gets to the impulse towards self-congratulation, which, I put to members politely, is an unfortunate feature of the government generally. It seems to be a boilerplate add-on or proforma that every private member of the government is wont to use.

I think we can talk about serious matters of the economics of infrastructure, without also having to give ourselves a pat on the back. To his great credit, Hon Laurie Graham spoke about specific problems that his constituents have had and need remediation of. That is clear. But I put to the honourable member that he can raise these issues and seek remediation without necessarily having to give a pat on the back to his ministerial colleagues or Premier. I do not think —

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: You think we should hide our light under a bushel —

Hon TJORN SIBMA: You will get your opportunity, no doubt, minister. I can see you salivating over there, waiting for your opportunity. You will be given your opportunity.

But Labor members should not think they have to dress up every issue of public policy in the regal garments of their Premier. They do not need to do that; it is not to their credit that they do that.

But I want to say one thing, because I need to understand the context in which members opposite may be tempted to give themselves a pat on the back. On 28 January last year, just before we entered caretaker mode, the then Barnett government announced a \$22 million program for the state agriculture telecommunications infrastructure improvement fund. It was designed to provide productivity, commercial and social benefits to regional agricultural communities—excellent. Again, that was announced on 28 January 2017. There was an issue to be addressed, and a fund to deal with those issues.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: Sorry; what was that, member?

Hon TJORN SIBMA: I will table this later.

If we fast-forward through the recent unpleasantness—at least for people on my side of the fence—through the fog of the state election, we get to Thursday, 20 July 2017, when there was an announcement from the Minister for Regional Development on a workshop to set agricultural rural telecommunications strategy. We found that the earlier Barnett government announcement—announced by Hon Terry Redman, Hon Mark Lewis, and my friend

Hon Laurie Graham; Hon Tjorn Sibma; Hon Darren West; Acting President; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon Michael Mischin; Hon Diane Evers

who is away on urgent parliamentary business, Hon Michael Mischin—had been rebadged after five months, and was claimed as a McGowan government initiative.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: So when did they announce that?

Hon TJORN SIBMA: On 28 January 2017.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: That was very timely —

Hon TJORN SIBMA: It was very timely.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: — when we were going into caretaker —

Hon TJORN SIBMA: Well, the great initiative—the stepping into the breach, the stepping into the gap—seems to have constituted only a rebranding of that fund. I am well aware that there have been subsequent announcements.

But before Labor members attempt to pat themselves on the back, as they are wont to do, they should give at least some credit to the work of the previous government, and appreciate that this issue has been one of long-term focus, commitment and investment. It is not an opportunity to indulge again in this ongoing orgy of self-congratulation, whether for Metronet or Local Projects, Local Jobs. What is it in the DNA of the Labor Party that compels it to use every single opportunity to give itself a pat on the back? What is it? Is there a proforma that backbenchers use?

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: Have you gone through your motions? I mean, you were in this place. I would strongly suggest you go and have a look at what has actually happened over the last eight and a half years.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Members! Thank you. When I call members to order, I require members to refrain from speaking and to resume their seats. Thank you.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: I failed to hear your voice over all the excitement.

The Barnett government had a proud record of building telecommunications infrastructure throughout regional Western Australia, filling a gap left to it by the previous government. I congratulate the government only on continuing our good work.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: I give the call to Hon Martin Aldridge.

Point of Order

Hon DARREN WEST: It is the normal practice of the house, Mr Acting President, for the responsible minister when seeking the call to be given the call.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Robin Chapple): There is no point of order. We have a policy up here of keeping a list of who has jumped in the past, and Hon Martin Aldridge has the next call. That is my decision.

Debate Resumed

HON MARTIN ALDRIDGE (Agricultural) [12.44 pm]: I thank Hon Laurie Graham for bringing the motion to the house so we can have this debate today, but that is probably where my thanks to the member will end. I think first and foremost that we should acknowledge the great challenge in delivering services in regional Western Australia. Obviously, Western Australia is the second most sparsely populated state—second only to the Northern Territory—so delivering services of any kind, whether it be digital connectivity, as this motion discusses, or water and power presents unique challenges that many underestimate.

I have been a watcher of telecommunications policy over the best part of the last two decades, and I want to specifically talk about the member's reference to the failure of the federal government. There were obviously many references to the NBN during the member's speech. I know the Labor Party does not like to see the Liberal–National Party roll out the NBN—the biggest infrastructure project since the Snowy Mountains hydro scheme—but, contrary to the motion before this house, the one thing the Liberal–National Party has done with the rollout of the NBN is to focus on people who live outside our major cities who have never had, or have had insufficient, digital connectivity before, unlike members opposite and their colleagues in Canberra who focus on the millions of people who live in our capital cities.

I will highlight some of the things the federal government is doing. In the last two terms of the federal government, it has actually done some really important things in telecommunications and related policy through the levers it has. One is a bill before Parliament at the moment that will create statutory infrastructure provider obligations, or providers of last resort, as the NBN will become. That very important piece of legislation will for the first time set a benchmark—a minimum standard—for high-speed broadband in Australia. For a long time the only standard we have had in Australia—the only entitlement that Australians have had—is that of a copper phone line service. If we look at the data over particularly the last two decades, we see that one thing stands out: the significant increase

Hon Laurie Graham; Hon Tjorn Sibma; Hon Darren West; Acting President; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon Michael Mischin; Hon Diane Evers

in data and significant decrease in voice across our telecommunications networks. There has been almost a complete flip.

I have said that we do not have a universal service obligation for broadband. The federal government has proposed one and has legislation before the Parliament through the statutory infrastructure provider obligations to create an initial minimum standard of 25/5 megabits per second, which the moving member spoke about as a minimum connection for Australians. It will be the first time in Australian history that we will see this service guarantee, and in recent times the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has weighed in on this issue with respect to holding retail service providers to account on their product offering.

One of the other things is the transition from the universal service obligation to a universal service guarantee. The Productivity Commission conducted an inquiry on that at the direction of the federal government. I made a submission in writing, and gave evidence to the inquiry when it came to Perth. It was a very important inquiry, because for too long the USO has been focused on technology that I think will be redundant within the next decade. It should be much more forward-focused on the technology of the future, and the requirements of future Australians from that technology. The federal government has welcomed that inquiry and has commenced negotiations and work on implementing the replacement to the universal service obligation as it transitions to the universal service guarantee, which I think will reflect the change in technology, the shift from voice to data, the change from fixed to mobile, the increase in competition that is taking place in the telecommunications industry and, overall, the decrease in costs that Australians are paying for their connectivity in many cases.

Hon Tjorn Sibma outlined quite well some of the things that the Liberal and National Parties achieved in government in Western Australia. Western Australia was the first state in Australia in recent history to co-invest with industry on the expansion of mobile phone networks. Our government invested \$105 million in 344 new and upgraded mobile phone sites. We can compare that with Labor's record at a state level; it has not announced or funded one new site since it won government in March last year. We can also compare it with federal Labor's record; equally, it has not funded one single mobile base station. Our government's investment brought mobile phone reception to towns in my electorate for the first time. It is hard to imagine that in the 2000s, people have only now been able to use mobile phones in the main street of some of our towns.

Hon Tjorn Sibma mentioned the \$22 million agricultural telecommunications fund, which was an election commitment in 2013 as part of the National Party's Seizing the Opportunity Agriculture package. Included in that package was \$75 million for agricultural infrastructure, of which \$22 million was quarantined for ag telecommunications. As Hon Tjorn Sibma mentioned, it was announced before the election. One of the few things kept in Labor's first budget was that \$22 million. I note that in the 2018–19 budget papers, only \$17 million is allocated to that fund; I am not quite sure where the other \$5 million has disappeared to. Nevertheless, I welcome the Digital Farm Grants program that Labor announced earlier this year. It is good to see that it is continuing to deliver this important National Party election commitment.

I will now move on to the Mobile Black Spot Program of the federal government. In this space, the federal government has really followed the state of Western Australia and has come on board. It has really made a difference. The federal government invested \$220 million in 867 mobile base stations across Australia. That has generated \$680 million of new investment in expanding mobile networks across Australia. In the first stage of that program, 114 Telstra base stations were built. Some of those were built in partnership with the former Liberal–National government in Western Australia. Those 114 base stations alone have connected 14 100 calls to 000, which prior to that time would have gone unanswered. That is a significant achievement if we look at emergency connectivity alone. I was with the federal Minister for Regional Communications earlier this year when she announced a review of regional telecommunications, which I think is a five-yearly statutory review. That has only just launched. I encourage members to pay some attention to that and to maybe even make a submission to it. Like other members, I was disappointed when round 3 of the Mobile Black Spot Program was announced in that it did not adequately address the need to expand the mobile phone network outside Perth. I made that very clear both in this place and in public commentary.

I will not be able to support the motion before the house today, but I do direct Hon Laurie Graham to one issue in particular. When the federal government sold Telstra some years ago—people have different views about that—the National Party in government federally negotiated a \$2 billion regional telecommunications future fund to help deal with the exact issue that Hon Laurie Graham brought to the house today. It was a \$2 billion infrastructure future fund. Of course, not a single dollar has been spent from that future fund, because a man named Kevin Rudd got elected as Prime Minister of this country and he raided that \$2 billion to fund a whole range of things, including pink batts, school halls and all sorts of things.

Of course, the other great policy failure has been of this government. The Minister for Regional Development has cost-shifted \$400 million of water service provision in regional Western Australia into royalties for regions. Can

Hon Laurie Graham; Hon Tjorn Sibma; Hon Darren West; Acting President; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon Michael Mischin; Hon Diane Evers

Hon Laurie Graham imagine if we had \$400 million a year sitting in the royalties for regions account to spend on addressing the shortfalls in digital connectivity in Western Australia? Hon Laurie Graham has backed a minister who has cost-shifted that amount of money to the detriment of all regional Western Australians.

HON ALANNAH MacTIERNAN (North Metropolitan — Minister for Regional Development) [12.54 pm]: First of all, I thought that Hon Tjorn Sibma possibly had not read the motion that Hon Laurie Graham put forward, because the motion focuses on the deficiencies not of the Barnett government but of the federal government, which is the entity that has the constitutional obligation to provide telecommunications across the entire country, and certainly not just within the Brisbane line. I thought Hon Tjorn Sibma might not have read the motion, which is very much focused on the federal government. Having now heard the stellar performance of Hon Martin Aldridge, it brought home to me what I have thought to be the case—that part of this problem is the fact that the Barnett government did not pursue the federal government hard enough and that it was, in many respects, a patsy of the federal government.

I do not think anyone in this house would not acknowledge that the Barnett government put a lot of money into mobile black spots in the last couple of years of its tenure. In fact, it put far more money into mobile black spots than any other state. In fact, it was the only state that put in more than 50 per cent of the total cost of extending the mobile network. But it never critiqued; it just kept chucking in money when the federal government should have been the one investing that money. We find this ludicrous. It is the same with the Bureau of Meteorology radars that were built. They were important projects—of course we should have them—but why, on this side of the country, do these have to be funded by the state government? It is like a game of snakes and ladders with BOM radar up and down the east coast, but if we want to get those in Western Australia, we have to pay for them ourselves. One critique that we can legitimately make of the Barnett government in this area is that it did not advocate hard enough; it was not prepared to critique the federal Liberal–National government, which was not providing adequate finance for telecommunications industry infrastructure on this side of the country. What the Barnett government did was to go in and fund it all itself. It is important. We do not demur from the importance of filling that gap and doing it. Indeed, in our way, we are doing that as well. But we are also fighting hard for a better share. We are actually prepared to stand up to Canberra on all these issues.

We were doing that even when I was a federal member. Really, there was nothing coming from the state government of the day to critique the things that were being done. Members may remember that there had been a commitment under Labor—indeed, the rollout had commenced under Labor—for fibre to the premises in Geraldton. One of the first things the Abbott-type government did was seek to change that for half of Geraldton, and to put in fibre to the node. Along with Hon Darren West, I was part of a campaign that really agitated to stop that digital divide happening in Geraldton. When I was in federal Parliament agitating on behalf of regional communities in Western Australia, we started to see this perversion of the national broadband network. Even the “fraudband” proposal adopted by Malcolm Turnbull and the Turnbull–Abbott government was supposed to be a fixed wireless network, but what we in fact saw happening was that many regional towns were being put onto Sky Muster. In fact, as part of our telecommunications audit, which was never done by the Barnett government, we were able to identify exactly how many towns had in fact gone on to Sky Muster rather than fixed wireless, which was supposed to be part of the plan. This has had an enormous impact for all other users of Sky Muster as well. It has meant that one could not even get a reasonable domestic level of NBN service, let alone the enterprise-grade level of service we think is so important, particularly for our farming businesses. They do not just need email; their requirements are far more significant than that.

Sitting suspended from 1.00 to 2.00 pm

Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN: I will just continue my remarks that the failure of the Barnett government in the digital connectivity space was not pressing the suit strongly enough to the federal government. Yes, we acknowledge it put very considerable sums of money into the Mobile Black Spot Program and things like the Bureau of Meteorology radars, but the Barnett government should have been pressing the federal government harder.

The member who has been waxing on about the role of the Abbott–Turnbull government, Hon Martin Aldridge, with its “fraudband” and saying what a great boon it was for WA was talking complete nonsense. We have set out Sky Muster. Not only did the federal government take all these people who are supposed to be on fixed wireless under its “fraudband” scheme, but recently it has announced some pretty bad news as well for communities that have not been shunted on the Sky Muster, because it has announced that it is considering reconfiguring the fixed wireless network to support download speeds. The government wants to get download speeds up to 75 megabytes a second, but the consequence of this will be to reduce upload speeds. Upload speeds were reduced to a maximum of 10 megabytes a second. This is absolutely inappropriate for all of those agricultural technology applications that we are talking about—all of those times when vast amounts of data need to be uploaded by our farmers. All of these fantastic apps and opportunities that farmers can take advantage of to finesse their agricultural outcomes are to be destroyed. What we constantly see happening with “fraudband” is that people in the bush are being subjected

Hon Laurie Graham; Hon Tjorn Sibma; Hon Darren West; Acting President; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon Michael Mischin; Hon Diane Evers

to a whole raft of changes, which are driving down the ultimate quality of the broadband product they should be obtaining.

I also want to raise with Hon Martin Aldridge why he did not protest—again just being a patsy to the federal government. In 2016, when the federal government came out with its third round of the Mobile Black Spot Program, seven of the 106 sites were in WA, but ultimately we only got five.

Hon Martin Aldridge: I did.

Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN: Hon Martin Aldridge did come out.

Hon Martin Aldridge: I issued a media statement.

Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN: Hon Martin Aldridge issued a media statement. He has been telling us that we should be funding the third round of the Mobile Black Spot Program—we should be funding the electoral commitments of the Liberal and National Parties in the metropolitan area. Sorry, we are not going to do that. We do have the fourth round of the Mobile Black Spot Program. We have written to whoever is the current incumbent—it was Fiona Nash, but there is such turmoil—and said we want to make a contribution, but that we need to have a seat at the table at selecting those spots. We are not going to just support the marginal seat activity of the coalition. The federal government needs to bring us in and give us a seat at the table in determining the priorities, and we will be there.

HON MICHAEL MISCHIN (North Metropolitan — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [2.06 pm]: I will not take up very much time, but I listened with some interest to the contribution of Hon Alannah MacTiernan, and as usual she banged on about the failings of the Barnett government and tried to make out that this current McGowan government was achieving some great success because it was putting pressure on the commonwealth. Need I remind her that between 2007 and 2013, there was a Labor government in the commonwealth? We commenced our extension of the mobile phone coverage around the state because we could not get anything out of a Labor commonwealth government. We ended up spending some \$85 million to provide some coverage for this state. We managed to achieve that by providing coverage along Highway 1 from the Northern Territory border all the way down to the South Australian border and extensively into regional areas. People grizzling about how they do not have the national broadband network in certain areas and how there may be a blackspot in a country town ignore the fact that until we got into government and commenced our regional communications program, and later managed to get a contribution from the commonwealth government in the order of about \$50 million, if not more, there was nothing in country areas. Never mind NBN and broadband speeds, people could not use a mobile phone along Highway 1 in many places. To now hear that this government has contributed the massive sum of \$2 million to give a little faster NBN connection to certain farmers is just pathetic. Regarding the idea that this government is making itself out as being a great saviour by putting pressure on the commonwealth, what did Hon Alannah MacTiernan manage to achieve in her little stint in the commonwealth Parliament? Absolutely nothing.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Order, members!

Hon MICHAEL MISCHIN: She was waiting to jump from one political life raft to another. She went to local government, went off to the commonwealth, managed to get nowhere fast, came back here and now has become the great saviour of the Labor Party and a minister and complains about everyone else's failings.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Hon Michael Mischin, one of the problems with leading on members from the other side is that you might just get that lead-on responded to, and I suggest that is not where we need to go in the final seven minutes of this debate, so I urge you to stick to the motion before the house and not to seek or encourage any other member to intercede in any other way.

Hon MICHAEL MISCHIN: As for the government that was in place at the time—the one we had to pick up this burden from, the one that supposedly should have put more pressure on the commonwealth—before we commenced this project using state funds in order to get something done for the state and regional areas, it was a Gallop and Carpenter government, of which Hon Alannah MacTiernan was a part. Why did she not put pressure on the then commonwealth government to get funds? It was not possible, but at least we ended up doing something about it.

As for the motion before the house —

Hon Alannah MacTiernan interjected.

Hon MICHAEL MISCHIN: Mr Acting President, I know Hon Alannah MacTiernan ignores rulings as a matter of course—she cannot help herself—but I ask her to stifle herself for a moment.

Hon Laurie Graham; Hon Tjorn Sibma; Hon Darren West; Acting President; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon Michael Mischin; Hon Diane Evers

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Dr Steve Thomas): Honourable members, we will not lose control of this debate. I think we have had enough of interjections from all sides of the house. Hon Michael Mischin, referencing other members obviously opens the door for them to respond, and I advise you to make sure that your contribution to the debate from here on in concentrates on the matter before the house.

Hon MICHAEL MISCHIN: Thank you. I was referencing the comments she had made, rather than her.

I will not take up much more time on this, other than to say that it is all very well to complain about the failure of the federal government to provide adequate digital connectivity in regional Western Australia, but let us face it: had it not been for the rather modified, albeit watered down, national broadband network scheme that has been promoted by the current commonwealth coalition government, we would not have NBN coverage in Tasmania, let alone any part of Western Australia. There was no way that that was going to be done to the level that had originally been planned, within anything like what Australia could afford. Sure, it is far from adequate, but there ought to be a focus on trying to extend mobile coverage and improving things over regional areas rather than trying to complain about the previous government being somehow at fault.

As for the point that Hon Laurie Graham made about the siting of towers and the fact that there are black spots in towns and the like, yes, this came under a portfolio that I administered and there were very great difficulties in many areas in finding suitable spots that gave as adequate and as comprehensive coverage as possible. Yes, we are going to get black spots; there are black spots in the city as well. One of the problems is finding a suitable site. Many communities would complain if we tried to put a tower up on a hill, where it could be seen by anyone. It would be unsightly and would damage the amenity, the view and the landscape. Telstra was doing this—along with others, but it was mainly Telstra, and it did a wonderful job of it—and had to balance connectivity with appropriate landlines and the like, power sources, accessibility for maintenance, and the ability to site a tower in places where people were prepared to allow it. Local communities could sometimes be very difficult. A few years ago in, I think, Bindoon—Hon Martin Aldridge might recall—there were significant problems with getting a tower built, even though it was essential to have coverage there. People wanted it, but they did not want to see the tower. Then there was the question of native title, because a lot of these areas require the consent of traditional landowners, so that had to be negotiated. Many of these sites may be alleged to be of some spiritual significance and the like.

A lot of things have to be wrestled with by these communications companies, and I would suggest that the progress that was made over the last eight and a half years by the Barnett government was exemplary in this area, in opening up country areas to the sorts of facilities—or a version of them—that were available only to city areas in the past. I can only hope that this government continues that rather than trying to put tickets on itself and demanding that the commonwealth government pay for everything. We ended up paying for it; that is where some of the money went that the government is now complaining was frittered away. It was spent on things that actually mattered and helped people's amenity. I would be inclined to support this motion if it had something along the lines of "the failure of successive federal governments to provide", because the last Liberal coalition government, back when we were in office, contributed to the state a significant sum of money through its black spot program. What we did was a model for other jurisdictions. Unlike other jurisdictions, we were allowed to choose where our towers would go because we had shown the expertise and ability to do so responsibly and in a cost-effective fashion. The motion really should compliment the last government for that, and complain about federal governments, other than the current one, which did nothing for Western Australia in this regard.

Having heard the kind of rhetoric coming from the federal Labor Party, if we have the misfortune of a Shorten Bolshevik government in Canberra, I doubt there will be any money coming to Western Australia for this sort of project. I have not heard a single commitment to fixing the GST, let alone funding anything. It is quite astonishing that the McGowan government should support the idea of a federal Labor government that has emphatically said that it is not interested in fixing the GST, and will dribble out only little bits of money for its pet projects.

HON DIANE EVERS (South West) [2.15 pm]: I hate to say this; I originally was going to stand and say something like, "It seems we all agree", but sometimes that is very hard to believe. I think there is agreement that digital connectivity is important and that we should be doing something about it. I know that, over the terms of both state and federal governments, there have been some politicians who understood how important this is and some who tried to move forward the idea that we should support it.

Given the motion as it stands, I do not think we need on a day like today to talk about the failure of the federal government; I think I will just let that one go. As for congratulating the current state government, well, it is doing what it is supposed to be doing—great, good on it. That is why it was elected. Again, I would not put any congratulations in there. It is just that, over the past 20 years, I have seen digital connectivity move at a snail's pace. Every now and then we move forward, and I appreciate the black spot funding that gave us a little better mobile coverage. What has happened with the NBN is good, to this point, but it is very, very slow. Currently in

Hon Laurie Graham; Hon Tjorn Sibma; Hon Darren West; Acting President; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon Michael Mischin; Hon Diane Evers

the regions it is a real hit-and-miss situation; people may have it or they may not. I might have it, but my neighbour might not. It is not good enough.

Demand was completely underestimated, even back in 2008 when it was first suggested that we should have a national broadband network. There is the medical stuff, education areas and small and large businesses. I am pleased that we are also recognising how important it is to farmers and farming communities. As we have talked about, over and over again, the community resource centres have been using digital connectivity, when they are able to, to help people who do not have access to it, because it is so important for their communications and so many other things that go on in regional areas.

I really hope that we continue—kicking and screaming, if we have to—to support improvements to our systems. It would be lovely to have it as was originally suggested—fibre to the home. People in the US have been downloading and live streaming movies for probably the last six or eight years; here it can take up to 24 hours to download a movie, and then only if there are no disruptions to the signal. We are a long way behind the rest of the world, and I know Australia hates to be so far behind. This is an area that we really need to address. It would be a lot easier if we had agreement on some of these things, so that when issues are put up, we actually provide funding to support improvements to the regional areas across the state. I agree that the federal government should pay for the majority of this and should be funding a national system so that we all have access to it, but we also know that that does not always happen.

In closing, we talked a little about whether it is the individual or the collective. I would just like to point out one more time that here is a collective; here is a situation in which the collective is so important, because although individuals might be able to get satellite service to their own home, it does nothing for everyone else in the community, and it does nothing for the development of the medical, educational and business possibilities involved in those internet services.

Rather than yelling back and forth at each other—nonsense, for the most part—why not work collectively to try to improve the system and figure out what we can do to make it better, so that all people can have access to the services that we all want?

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.