



## South African telecommunications & broadcasting summit



Tim O'Keefe

JOHANNESBURG: ABA member, Tim O'Keefe, was the guest international speaker at the AIC Telecommunications & Broadcasting Summit held in Johannesburg from 22-24 April 1996.

Mr O'Keefe spoke on the following subjects:

- legislative reform and the funding of Australia's telecommunications and broadcasting industries;
- addressing social imbalances—Australian broadcasting policy initiatives; and
- introducing competition in telecommunications while maintaining social objectives.

Mr O'Keefe was also on a panel discussing the democratisation of the airwaves. While in South Africa, Mr O'Keefe also met with councillors and staff of the ABA's South African equivalent—the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA).

One IBA councillor said at the conference that the IBA was probably the most powerful broadcasting regulator in the world, due to the IBA's policy formulation and implementation roles. The speaker from the South African Department of Communications, which has responsibility for broadcasting, telecommunications and post, reported that Parliament was considering proposals to give the Minister for Communications and his department a greater role in broadcasting policy.

In Mr O'Keefe's meeting with the IBA, there was extensive discussion of the comparison between the two broadcasting regimes operating in Australia and South Africa.

The new government in South Africa has made extensive use of the Australian model for its new broadcasting legislation leading to discussion on the operation of the Broadcasting Services Act in Australia.

The IBA is in the process of licensing community broadcasting services in regional areas. It will also oversee the sale of three of the South African Broadcasting Corporation's (SABC) radio services and is preparing for the allocation of commercial television channels. The IBA uses a merit-based system for allocating licences, which prompted comparison with the ABA's price-based allocation system for commercial licences. The introduction of telecommunications and broadcasting services to regional and remote areas is a high priority so there was interest in the Australian government's Universal Service Levy for telecommunications carriers and in the ABA's planning and allocation process in regional Australia.

With the introduction of privately owned pay TV services and SABC proposing to introduce two analog satellite delivered pay TV services,

there was interest in the implementation of Australia's pay TV policies.

The SA government-owned telecommunications company is facing increased competition from mobile carriers, so there was interest in how competition has been introduced in telephone services in Australia while uneconomic, but equal access, services continue.

The IBA and the SABC have benefited from Australian assistance in the transition from a centralised government controlled broadcasting system to one which is more responsive to needs of all South Africans. It also seems likely the new commercial television service will benefit from investment and programming expertise of Australian commercial television interests.

## ATUG 96: the way to the future

MELBOURNE: Senator Richard Alston, Minister for Communications and the Arts, took the road to the future by becoming 'a virtual participant' at the annual conference of the Australian Telecommunications Users Group, which was held from 29 April to 2 May. He delivered his opening address from Canberra via a hookup to participants in Melbourne.

Senator Alston outlined the Government's strategy for achieving 'an efficient, innovative telecommunications industry', which will be based on the promotion of competition, the partial privatisation of Telstra and the preservation of universal service. He said the Government expects that by the end of this year, policy on the future industry structure, including regulatory arrangements, would be reflected in legislation.

Following the conference the minister set up a telecommunications working forum. The forum met on 16 May and considered issues raised in a discussion paper circulated before the meeting. Issues discussed ranged from: carrier licensing, access and interconnection, the control of anti-competitive behaviour, technical regulation, codes of practice, and universal service arrangements and other consumer safeguards.

The Minister also proposed setting up an expert working group to advise on policy principles for a further exposure draft to be tabled in the Spring session.

Post 1 July 1997, Government hopes that it would have struck a balance e.g. between the commercial needs of providers and consumers' right to quality service, between encouraging an open market and having in place appropriate mechanisms to deal with anti-competitive conduct, and between industry self-regulation and scope for Government intervention.