

Digital television moves closer

The Federal Budget (the Appropriation Bills) may have been the main focus of debate in the House of Representatives during May and June, but other significant pieces of legislation also were considered by the House. New legislation on digital television and proposed laws dealing with fuel sales grants were brought before the House for debate.

The implementation of digital television in Australia moved a step closer when the Broadcasting Services Amendment (Digital Television and Datacasting) Bill 2000 and the Datacasting Charge (Imposition) Amendment Bill 2000 were introduced into the House of Representatives on 10 May 2000. The first bill implements a new regulatory regime for datacasting services and changes arrangements for the introduction of digital television. The broadcasting bill requires free-to-air broadcasters to provide a standard definition digital simulcast of their transmission in analog mode at all times in addition to meeting High Definition television quota requirements.

'Broadcasting Bill implements a new regulatory regime for datacasting.'

Scheduled for introduction on 1 January 2001, digital television and datacasting services will provide consumers with improved picture quality and the ability to choose between different types of television viewing. Introducing the legislation, Peter McGauran (Minister Assisting the Minister for Communications, Information and the Arts) told the House that, through their television sets, consumers would be able to have access to new datacasting services, which are likely to include "a wide variety of information, education, advertising and shopping services".

'Fuel sales grants scheme passes the House.'

Also on 10 May, a package of three bills implementing the fuel sales grants scheme passed the House of Representatives and was forwarded to the Senate.

The new grant system is targeted to consumers in non-metropolitan and remote areas. As indicated by Treasurer Peter Costello in his second reading speech, it allows "a tiered system of grants to be paid for sales to consumers in non-metropolitan areas, with a higher rate of grant provided for sales in remote areas".



Digital television will provide consumers with improved picture quality.

"As a consequence of this grant scheme," said Mr Costello, "for consumers in regional and remote Australia fuel prices as a consequence of GST need not rise."

In response, Shadow Assistant Treasurer, Kelvin Thomson, was critical of a number of aspects of the legislation. He argued that the legislation "does not clarify any of the details which are necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of this scheme."

"We are most concerned that the government either has not yet actually settled the detail of the boundary changes . . . or, if they have settled the detail of the boundary changes, they are not prepared to come into the Parliament and come clean concerning which areas will be eligible for the grants," Mr Thomson said.

The Opposition also raised the question of the effectiveness of the mechanism to ensure that the grants are passed on to consumers.

The scheme is expected to cost around \$500 million throughout the next four years.

Where can you get the details?

The progress of bills can be checked from the Daily Bills List on the Internet at: www.aph.gov.au/parlinfo/billsnet/blist.pdf

The text of bills and the explanatory notes are available on the Internet at: www.aph.gov.au/parlinfo/billsnet/bills.htm

The debates on the legislation can be found on the Internet at: www.aph.gov.au/hansard