



New, Improved ALP Communications Platform

Looking back from a 1994 perspective, it's hard to believe that barely three years ago, review of telecommunications regulation was in its infancy, OTC and Telecom had not yet merged and the sale of AUSSAT to an as yet unknown competing carrier had yet to happen.

As the Minister for Communications Michael Lee said in an address to the ALP Conference last month, the changes in the telecommunications area in the past three years have been 'extraordinary'.

The ALP's amended policy platform, endorsed by the conference, reflects the party's response to the changes. It is a very different document from that put to the electorate in 1991. The Minister said that it had been significantly reworded to recognise the fact of convergence and to acknowledge the cultural issues inherent in the convergence of telecommunications, broadcasting and computing.

Media coverage of this policy area at the conference tended to focus on the longstanding stoush over the possible privatisation of Telecom, though the final policy puts paid to that possibility as well as the ever-present bogey of timed local calls, which as an electoral no-no has become part of ALP mythology.

Commitment on Consumer Issues

Less controversial aspects of the revised platform, but nevertheless of vital interest to ordinary Australian users of the telecommunications system, relate to matters such as consumer protection and privacy. In particular, the ALP is committed to:

- Introduce a condition in all relevant class licences requiring new operators to participate in the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman scheme.
- Consider establishing a consumer guarantee fund by placing a levy on all carriers and resellers. The aim is to ensure continuity of service, and to eliminate any disadvantage to consumers as a result of the inability of any reseller or carrier to continue with its service obligations.
- Support the individual's right to privacy in the use of telecommunications services and the application of the privacy principles to the industry.
- Develop a framework to ensure the effective delivery by Government of those CSOs that are not the responsibility of the telecommunications carriers (ie, social service

type CSOs); and conduct a parliamentary review of CSO delivery once in the life of each Parliament.

- Ensure that all operators of telecommunications services contribute to the provision and servicing of CSOs on an equitable basis.
- Provide rural and remote areas with services equivalent in cost and standard to urban services, and with enhanced communications services so that they can participate more effectively in our national life.
- Require carriers to demonstrate their responsiveness to customer needs, especially in billing arrangements and the right to privacy.
- Regularly monitor Telstra's charging policies to ensure non-metropolitan charging zones adequately reflect socio-economic communities of interest and not simply distance.

Libraries to Aid Universal Access

Finally, the ALP platform contains a commitment to encourage the development and use of information services utilising the national telecommunications system.

This commitment is particularly interesting for its emphasis on recognising and using the existing network of local government-funded public libraries, which the party sees as 'ideally placed to lead the way in maintaining universal access to emerging information technologies'.

Commendably, the ALP is also committed to ensuring compatibility between terminal equipment and the national system, and encouraging new operator-assisted access to information services where the need exists. □

