



Senate backs telecoms research funds

In the midst of its marathon sittings to consider the huge package of telecommunications legislation, the Senate passed a government amendment giving the Minister for Communications and the Arts the power to make grants for consumer representation and telecommunications research.

The scheme emerged from a proposal developed by the CLC and supported by major Australian communications research organisations. It was first presented in a submission to the Senate Committee which recently examined the telecoms legislation package (available at [insert CLC Web Site address] [we need to confirm approval from the Senate Committee to publish it].

The legislation passed by the Senate, which now needs to go back to the House of Representatives to be reconsidered, empowers the Minister to make grants:

- 'to consumer bodies for purposes in connection with the representation of the interests of consumers in relation to telecommunications issues'; and
- 'to a person or body for purposes in connection with research into the social, economic, environmental or technological implications of developments relating to telecommunications'.

The monies would come from Parliamentary appropriations and the Minister would have to report to the Parliament each year on the activities supported.

The agreed scheme differs in important ways from that proposed by research and consumer organisations.

First, the monies will come from

the Commonwealth budget, rather than from a levy imposed on the industry, like the universal service levy.

Second, the monies will be made available at the discretion of the Minister, rather than by a Board established specifically for the purpose, of the kind which has been established for the Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund (to be chaired by former Deputy PM, Doug Anthony).

Both these elements give the government a more direct role in determining the scale and priorities of work

telecommunications who might otherwise go unheard.

Australia has been fortunate in having a tertiary education system which has provided bases for many specialist communications research organisations in the country, and in having a national telecommunications carrier, Telstra, which funds consumer representation (Telstra's Consumer Consultative Council, network of regional councils and support for the national Consumers Telecommunications Network) and, which, until last

year funded public domain research through its Fund for Social and Policy Research in Telecommunications.

However, the end of Telstra's Fund is already having a significant impact on specialist communications research and public interest organisations, at precisely the moment when their work is becoming even

more critical. The proposed industry fund is an attempt to migrate the activities previously supported by Telstra alone to the more competitive environment after July 1997.

The challenge now is to ensure that the proposed statutory mechanism works effectively to achieve the goals of effective participation and high quality research.

First, sufficient funds need to be provided in the May budget - the Senate Committee submission proposed \$2 million per year in 1996/97 dollars.

Second, mechanisms need to be established quickly and communicated to potential applicants to explain the kinds of activities which will be supported. □

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Supporters of the proposed fund

- Centre for International Research on Communications and Information Technologies (CIRCIT)
- the Communications Economics Research Program at the Institute for Research into International Competitiveness (Curtin University of Technology)
- Centre for Telecommunications Information Networking (CTIN) in Adelaide
- Latrobe University Online Media Program
- Ian Reinecke, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic Services) University of Queensland
- Telecommunications Needs Research Group (RMIT)
- Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy in Brisbane
- Communications Law Centre in Sydney and Melbourne
- Consumers Telecommunications Network.

supported, although the precise mechanisms for allocating the funds have yet to be settled.

The specific provision in the new legislation for funding of research and consumer representation is highly significant. As was argued in the submission to the Senate Committee, there are increasing demands for policy input, greater reliance on industry self-regulation in the new legislation and a constant tendency for technological change to outflank policy development. These all make it essential that Australia devote substantial resources to increasing knowledge and understanding of the social and economic impact of telecommunications, and to ensuring the representation within industry structures and to Government of consumers and others affected by