

Australian Labor Party

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Digital technology is not simply capable of making human communications easier and faster — it is capable of creating enormous change in the underlying fabric of our society.

Economic change

Foremost among the changes that are transforming Australia's industrial landscape are the increasing use of information technology and information management as the primary tools of industry, and the further emergence of information industries as strong economic generators in their own right. Central to this has been the emergence of electronic commerce as a major economic force, with massive potential to shift jobs and economic activity around the world.

While online commercial transactions are creating many new commercial opportunities, these technological changes are also a significant wake-up call to many established industry sectors and businesses that will now face greater competition from highly technological entrants to their markets. The emerging faces of online trade will not just be in the purchase of goods 'online' — a rather conveniently limited view of e-commerce adopted by some in public policy — but also in the electronic exchange of services, including such information as legal advice, archival data, architectural design and accounting services.

Our economy and employment base have already been transformed by the strong shift to the service sector which now forms such a large part of the economy of developed nations. Yet this is the very sector that is most vulnerable to the impact of the growth in technologies through which many services can be delivered electronically from anywhere in the world.

Ubiquitous access

One of the most significant issues facing public policy today is the growing gap between those with access to the latest information and communications technology, and those without. Commonly called the 'digital divide', this schism is created by a range of factors, including age, education levels, relative wealth and, importantly in this country, by geographic isolation. As the transfer of both private and public sector services from traditional to networked and online modes continues, equity of access to digital communications presents a political challenge that must not be underestimated.

The Labor Party understands the strategic importance of information management and access, and the urgent need to close the growing digital divide. Our first task is to ensure that the communications infrastructure is appropriate on both sides of the delivery model — the administration or supply end and, with equal priority, the demands and needs of people, as citizens and consumers. The Commonwealth must stop relying only on competition to close the digital divide which has thus far proved ineffectual.

Being online is, after all, an educational experience that introduces and sustains information tools as meaningful learning media as well as developing a social system for communication, information management, entertainment, and commerce. We must do whatever we can to ensure as high a level of access to networked media as possible if we are to see the benefits of creating a networked nation.

Regulation of the internet

The poor reputation of the Howard Government in respect to their attempts to control or censor aspects of the internet

has attracted a great deal of international criticism and scorn, which in turn has affected investment decisions concerning the Australian IT sector. Such decisions betray an unbelievable ignorance not only of the technology that underpins the internet, but also the people who populate it.

Labor supports as the only effective realistic content regulation solution the education and empowerment of end users of network technology, particularly by way of end use filter devices, such as devices installed by the users of internet browsers. This, combined with the pursuit of broad international agreements to address the question of inappropriate internet content (such as that which contravenes existing laws in other media, such as the publication of libellous material) and the development of appropriate consumer protection standards for end-user filtering devices, represents a positive and socially mature way of dealing with both illegal and inappropriate material on the Internet.

Copyright

Last year, Labor supported the passage of the *Copyright Amendment (Digital Agenda) Act 2000*, the purpose of which was to ensure that the copyright law was brought up to date to recognise new advances in technology.

Copyright law requires a balance to be struck between the interests of creators, writers and artists, and those people who wish to make use of intellectual property. For users of intellectual property, such as students, researchers and members of the public, our laws must ensure that people can obtain fair access to copyright material. Libraries throughout Australia play a vital role in ensuring that Australians are able to access information.

Labor committed to reviewing the operation of the new laws within twelve months of returning to government to ensure that the new regime is operating fairly for all concerned and will continue to work to ensure that our intellectual property laws ensure that creative endeavour is promoted, while also providing access on terms which are fair and reasonable.

Classification

Australia's system of classification depends on a national approach agreed between the Commonwealth, the States and Territories and implemented nationally by the Office of Film and Literature Classification. This has served our country well and allows material to be classified according to objective criteria and with a minimum of political interference.

Labor believes that adults should be entitled to read, hear and see what they wish in private and in public, subject to adequate protection against persons being exposed to unsolicited material offensive to them and preventing conduct exploiting, or detrimental to the rights of others, particularly women and children.

Labor supports the continued work of the Office of Film and Literature Classification and the reform of our classification legislation to streamline the processing of non-contentious material of a documentary character.

This is an extract of Dr Lawrence's statement. The full statement, as well as the full statements from the other political parties are available at <http://www.alia.org.au/advocacy/>. ■