Bridging the Digital Divide

The Coalition is committed to ensuring that all Australians have equitable access to affordable telecommunications and internet services, irrespective of where they live or carry on business.

Since 1996, the Coalition has implemented numerous programs to promote internet take-up by Australians, through the provision of telecommunications infrastructure, internet and technology skills training, and community content. These include the $421 million *Networking the Nation*, Internet Assistance Program and the Special Digital Data Obligation. These Coalition policies have ensured that Australia has one of the highest internet take-up rates of any country in the world, and that internet access levels in rural and regional Australia have reached similar levels to metropolitan areas.

The Coalition agrees with ALIA's proposition that Australia's public library network is ideally placed to help bridge the digital divide, both in rural and urban areas. Through the *Networking the Nation* program, the Coalition Government has provided $18 million of funding to eighteen projects enabling public libraries to better service the information needs of their local communities. These NTN grants have been used to improve telecommunications infrastructure and internet capabilities of public libraries, provide internet training to local communities, and establish mobile library services in rural areas.

In recognising the special needs faced by rural Australians, the Coalition has committed over $1 billion to improve information and communications technology infrastructure and services, primarily in rural and regional Australia. This investment has been the catalyst for strong internet uptake — between May 1998 and May 2000, the number of adults with Internet access in regional and rural Australia increased by 225 per cent.

The Coalition is committed to maintaining an open and competitive telecommunications market, underpinned by strong consumer safeguards and supported by appropriately targeted funding in areas where market failures might deny consumers the full benefits of competition.

Online content regulation

The Coalition takes very seriously its responsibility to provide a regime to address community concerns about the publication of illegal and offensive material online, while ensuring that regulation does not place onerous or unjustifiable burdens on industry and inhibit the development of the online economy.

The regulatory framework, which includes amendments to the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (BSA), is based on the principle that what is illegal offline should

also be illegal online. The restrictions are no more onerous than those that apply to other media. Definitions of prohibited internet content in the BSA are based on specific and detailed criteria of the National Classification Code that are developed in consultation with the community. These criteria are not concerned in any way with limiting freedom of speech by restricting political or other discourse on matters of public interest.

The Coalition acknowledges that the unique characteristics and rapidly changing nature of the internet present specific difficulties for regulation of internet content. The Government also recognises that there are technical difficulties with preventing access to material hosted overseas that would be prohibited content in Australia. However, the Coalition considers that where it is technically and commercially feasible to prevent access to this material in Australia then this should be done.

A key plank of the framework is education and advice to the public about ways in which they can manage internet usage, including by their children. To this end, the Coalition has established NetAlert, an independent community advisory body, which is responsible for running national awareness campaigns to promote a safer internet experience and for researching new access management technologies. NetAlert has launched its community advisory services which include a national toll free helpline (1800 880 176) and an informative website (http://www. netalert.net.au).

The Coalition believes that this framework strikes the right balance between community concerns about illegal and offensive online content, and the interests of industry and all Internet users.

Copyright and new media

The Coalition is committed to maintaining a balanced and workable copyright regime for the digital age, one that encourages creativity and innovation while maintaining reasonable public access to copyright material, particularly through Australia's libraries.

This commitment is reflected in the Digital Agenda reforms which updated the *Copyright Act* for the digital environment in line with new international copyright standards. These reforms ensured that the copyright exceptions such as fair dealing and the library copying exceptions apply equally in the digital environment.

As recommended by the Intellectual Property and Competition Review Committee, the three year review of the Digital Agenda amendments will include a thor-

ough examination of the effects of the libraries and archives provisions on copyright owners' markets and the ability of libraries to discharge their important community function as disseminators of information in the online environment.

In addition, the Coalition recognises ALIA's concern that contracts for use of online material are increasingly being used to override the copyright exceptions. It was in consideration of this concern that the Attorney-General established the Copyright Law Review Committee's current reference on the use of agreements, particularly in the online environment, to modify the exceptions to the exclusive rights of copyright owners. The Coalition will consider the findings of this reference when the report is submitted in April 2002.

Information literacy

The Coalition believes the Federal government has a role in ensuring all children, wherever they live, have access to world-class curriculum material. The development of Australian online curriculum resources will play a crucial role in delivering education opportunities to young students.

- The Coalition will invest $34 million over the next five years for the large scale, collaborative development of a national pool of online curriculum resources. Together with the Coalition's *Teachers for the 21ˢᵗ Century* program, this measure will enable schools to develop the skills and teaching materials their students and teachers need in the information age.

- The Coalition will provide funding to support *education.au* to host a major Global Summit of Online Education and Training Networks early next year. The Global Summit will bring together leaders, specialists and policy makers from Australia and overseas to explore future directions in the development and management of online learning, education and training networks.

- The Coalition will expand the highly successful Computers for Schools project, which is providing used computers for schools.

At our universities, the Coalition Government is already taking steps to improve access to high bandwidth telecommunications links for regional universities.

The Coalition Government has already provided funding of $3 million in 2000 and 2001 for increased bandwidth for several

regional universities most in need. In July last funding of approximately $3 million was announced to significantly upgrade bandwidth availability for these campuses in 2000 and 2001.

The Coalition Government has committed over $18 million between 2001-2003 on IT infrastructure at regional universities.

As part of *Backing Australia's Ability*, the Government has also set aside $246 million over five years to address issues of systemic infrastructure, including the provision of adequate bandwidth for the higher education sector.

The Department is in the process of commissioning a study to examine the future needs for telecommunications infrastructure across the higher education sector. In consultation with AARNet and the Committee for Australian University Directors of Information Technology (CAUDIT), the project will gather data on costs and conduct consultations on the overall availability and use of bandwidth across the sec-

tor as well as the nature, level and potential for future collaboration within the wider research, education and training community. This study should be completed by August 2001. The outcomes of the study will be used as a basis for a strategic long-term approach by the Government to secure adequate and affordable bandwidth to support teaching and learning and research across the higher education sector.

Backing Australia's Ability also provided 2000 new targeted university places in the areas of mathematics, science and information technology. More than half the 2000 innovation places will be used to provide programs in the priority area of ICT. Almost eighty per cent of all those institutions that won a share of the places will offer courses in these areas. Universities will offer students programs in the areas of information technology, computer science, software engineering and telecommunications. It is estimated that some 1600 places will be made available to students to study in these areas over the next year. These places

will provide a much needed boost for the ICT industry in Australia.

The Howard Government recently announced more than $40 million in funding for universities throughout Australia for special capital and infrastructure projects. Capital grants from the higher education Capital Development Pool (CDP) for 2004 supports innovative electronic infrastructure projects that lead to flexible, high quality services and new campus developments in suburban growth areas and regional centres. While the CDP still funds traditional new campus developments, the Coalition Government has placed particular emphasis on the increased use of flexible delivery of educational services to increase student access and choice. Projects funded in 2004 include campus upgrades and expansions, broadband developments, ICT resources, e-learning campuses and multimedia centres. The Government has already committed over $120 million for capital development works in the higher education sector over the 2001–2003 Triennium. ■

Stop press
Labor announces plan for fairer GST

On 19 October, Kim Beazley announced the Australian Labor Party's plans for a fairer GST.

According to the joint media statement released by Kim Beazley and Simon Crean, Labor's plan will:

• Slash GST red tape.

• Cut the cost of GST compliance.

• Improve cash flow.

• Fix GST problems faced by small wineries, pharmacies and meat processors.

• Penalise big businesses for failing to pay bills on time to small business.

• Make the Commonwealth Government pay all accounts owed to small business within 30 days.

Included in the policy announcement was confirmation that the ALP is opposed to tax on text books, and will increase the Educational Textbook Subsidy Scheme [http://www.textbooksubsidy.gov.au/textbooksubsidy/default.htm] to fully offset the GST.

Full details of the ALP policy can be found on their website at http://www.alp.org.au.

GST-free text books
Labor will take the GST off educational textbooks by increasing the Educational Textbook Subsidy Scheme to fully offset the ten per cent GST.

This measure will commence on 1 January 2002 — in time for the new school year. Administrative arrangements will remain unchanged other than an increased subsidy will be available for sales made after 1 January 2002.

Over the next four years this will put an additional $15 million back into the pockets of Australian students and parents.

Access to textbooks at a reasonable price is vital if Australia is to become a Knowledge Nation. The cost was already high enough before John Howard imposed his ten per cent GST. The taxing of books can only retard the level of literacy in the community as the higher prices make it harder for low-income students and parents to access the books they need for study.

On 1 January 2002 Labor will increase the subsidy scheme to offset the full 10% GST. Over the longer term Labor will examine the feasibility, in consultation with the industry, of making educational textbooks GST-free. This should simplify administration for booksellers as they will not have to deal with two Commonwealth agencies as now, would only have to deal with the ATO.

Textbooks will continue to be defined as they are now under the Educational Textbook Subsidy Scheme. ■