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PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP

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**LAUNCH OF "NETWORKING AUSTRALIA'S FUTURE", THE FINAL REPORT
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It is a great pleasure to be here - if not quite among visionaries, then at least among those who speak the language of the future, and who see - as the authors of this report see - the shapes and patterns of the future in an information age.

That age, of course, is already upon us.

If I might offer an image from the past - the future at our doorstep is a bit like the encyclopaedia salesman, standing there proffering solutions to our educational shortcomings; entreating us to invest in knowledge of the things we never learned or had in life, but can now render to our children; tempting us with worldliness.

The children, mind you, know more about it than we do. The chances are they've been clicking away at interactive media for years. Chances are they're playing a virtual reality game while we are standing at the door.

But the game has really just begun, and we can't leave them stranded with a few scraps of technology which by Christmas will look like something from the Dark Ages.

So, despite our reasonable doubts about the capacity of technology to change the things which really matter - like love, laughter, life and death - we say "Yes".

We're not sure that technology gives us much more than a stress-related illness and a sense of inadequacy - but we say "Yes".

Al Gore says the new information age is the equivalent of the Gutenberg Bible, but we know his emphasis is not on the Bible, but the technology which printed it. We know it is no substitute for belief.

We know in our bones that it will not, of itself, give us knowledge or happiness.

It will no more change our essential human needs than it will alter our bodily functions - though I've met a few zealots who would have us believe that it will do these things.

But for all our reservations, we look at the kids, and we think - we cannot in conscience deny them these things. This is their future. It's what the salesman says it is - it's the best investment we can make.

Now I don't know if there exist any reliable statistics to show that those who buy encyclopaedias end up with happier and more successful children than those who don't.

But it is pretty obvious that merely buying them is not enough.

It depends on buying, if not the best, then the best we can afford, and the one which is most appropriate to our needs.

It also depends on whether we use it and, if we do, what we use it for - as an icon of our learning for visitors to admire, or for the practical education of ourselves and our children.

So long as we buy it for the content and not just the leather binding: so long as we bought it for what it says to us, rather than about us: so long as we were interested in the content rather than the appearance - I think the chances are that with the encyclopaedia we did make an investment in the future.

And I think the same is true about the new communications technologies.

We really do have to embrace them now, so that we, our children and future generations of Australians will not be left behind.

So that Australia will enter the 21st century where it should be, in the front rank of nations.

And, when we do it, we should not be under any illusion that the act of embrace will, by itself, create the future we want.

The technology itself is marvellous, of course; but it is only the means to an end.

Like the encyclopaedia, it is a beautiful thing.

Like the encyclopaedia, it contains the means to worldly knowledge; to useful practical knowledge.

Like the encyclopaedia, it can be the means of self-improvement, it can bring people from the margins into the mainstream.

But, of itself, it is not a better education; or a better health service; or a better life.

This technology will not teach us how to think. It will not teach us logic or argument or how to put a case, or how to work effectively in the world.

It will not teach us how to write - but all these things will be as important in information age as they have ever been.

In fact, of itself, technology contains a few serious risks. It presents us with a great challenge.

The initial excitement might be in the technology, but what matters is what we do with it.

The real excitement is not in the highway itself, but in where it can take us.

It can, for instance, take us to a more democratic and equitable society, or one in which injustice is intensified by unequal access to knowledge.

The same can be said of the global context: it can help to bridge the gulf between the developed and the developing world, or it can make the gulf wider.

It can strengthen our national culture and those of other countries, or, by the flood of homogenised "global" product, it can fatally weaken them.

There is a lot at stake - nothing less, in fact, than the shape of the society and the world we inhabit in the 21st century.

The great challenge is to make sure that the new communications technologies enrich and strengthen us.

For instance, they can be a powerful educational tool.

We now have the opportunity to fully realise the educational potential that television never delivered.

We can link schools to share information.

We can make it possible for schools in regional Australia to share the vast resources of our great institutions.

We can expand the realms of these institutions.

There are possibilities we have not yet thought of.

The technology has the ability to help us meet our education and training needs in a world in which the turnover of knowledge in industry will soon complete a cycle every five years - and sooner in the so-called knowledge-based industries.

If Australia is to get the vocational training system we need, the effective deployment of the new technologies is essential.

We can teach history, brick-laying, civics, hairdressing, physics and football - around the clock, around the continent.

We can deliver better health services to all Australians all the time: better diagnosis, better staff training, better care.

We can deliver rehabilitation programs - national rehabilitation programs - into homes and community halls right across the country.

We should be able to - surely - make the delivery of government services more efficient.

Both the operation and our understanding of government should be improved by the application of these technologies.

Again we can see the challenge: if we let it, the technology can be alienating, but if we are clever we can strengthen the bonds between us and raise our level of mutual understanding.

We have to decide, as from now, that access to the national information infrastructure will be no less a general right than access to water, or public transport or electricity.

It must not and need not be in any way the preserve of business, or the better off, or those who live in the major population centres, or who attend better schools.

It has to be a fundamental right of all Australians.

We should recognise it as being to the 1990s what the railway and the telegraph - and the mechanics institute - were to the 1890s.

The only difference need be that, unlike the railway, the information highway will not run through the seats of influence and privilege - and you won't have to change trains at Albury.

It goes without saying, of course, that the more rapidly and effectively we take on these technologies, the more competitive Australia will be.

In fact, our competitiveness crucially depends on it.

These days we talk about knowledge being the principal source of a nation's wealth.

With the new information technologies, we must recognise that we are talking about more than the distribution of that wealth - we are also talking about its creation.

We can use this technology to greatly increase the productivity of our existing industries, and we can develop industries which produce or adapt the technology.

We can export the technology.

We are doing this now.

But the greatest potential lies in content.

An educated, English-speaking, multicultural, outward-looking country in the fastest growing region in the world has enormous advantages in the information market place.

All those new channels and services and networks and systems will need programs and ideas and software.

Australia can be a significant provider.

Creating content for our own channels will be an essential part of protecting and enriching our national life.

It will also be an export industry.

We can trade in ideas and culture as well as minerals and manufactures.

That is why this is a very appropriate place to launch the Report.

Film Australia is creating product for the highway and exporting it - the potential to do more is virtually unlimited.

It is a reminder that we are already engaged in the new technology.

Australia is not simply receiving the new technology and the product it carries, but actively creating and shaping them.

Last week in Brussels the G7 held an information society summit.

Among other things, they concluded that realising the potential of the global information society depended on governments promoting:

- . the universal provision of and access to services
- . equality of opportunity
- . diversity of content, including cultural and linguistic diversity, and
- . open access to networks.

They also stressed the importance of "defining an adaptable regulatory framework".

"To succeed", they decided, "governments must facilitate private initiatives and investments and ensure an appropriate framework aiming at stimulating private investment and usage for the benefit of all citizens".

Most of what they said, we have been saying in Australia for some time.

Much of it we have been doing.

And, of course, there is no better example of this than this Report by the Broadband Services Expert Group.

BSEG's work rivals, and in most cases surpasses, the work being done by any other government in the world.

The work of BSEG in the past year has helped to put Australia in the best possible position to take advantage of technological development - particularly in their social applications.

The Report recommends the implementation of a national strategy: a strategy based broadly on the joint development of technical and creative infrastructure.

The technical infrastructure is already on the way. Our telecommunications networks provide the platform for new interactive services to operate, and offer access to networks like Internet.

Telstra and Optus are investing billions of dollars which will guarantee a first-rate telecommunications network in Australia next century.

Later this year, a new dimension will open as optical fibre cable networks begin to reach substantial numbers of Australians.

It is no less a significant advantage that the Australian population is computer-literate. More than 40 per cent of Australian households own a personal computer, which, with the exception of the United States, is the highest rate in the world.

Last year we went a long way to developing the creative infrastructure when we produced the cultural statement, *Creative Nation*.

A substantial part of that statement - and a substantial part of the money it provided - was directed at information technology and the new media.

A significant precursor of *Creative Nation* was the decision to combine the portfolios of Communications and the Arts - in other words, to link the technologies of the future with the creativity of our people.

In giving a substantial boost to Australian cultural development, the statement recognised the need to encourage the growth of industries producing content for the new media.

The creation of AME - the Australian Media Enterprise - whose board will be announced by the Minister within the next few weeks, carries the process significantly further.

The BSEG Report recommends a "whole of government" approach. I am pleased to say that that is the direction we have taken.

Last year I wrote to Ministers seeking Cabinet Submissions on the effect of new technologies on key portfolios.

I'm expecting those submissions to be discussed in late March at a special Cabinet meeting which will be dedicated to government use of information technology.

Information technology concerns education and training; it concerns industry; it obviously concerns telecommunications and the arts.

It is, therefore, a major interest of Simon Crean's, Peter Cook's and Michael Lee's. It is a major interest for Ministers and Departments of Health, Human Services, Social Security, Administrative Services, Finance, Trade and others.

It is certainly an interest of mine.

That is why I want to implement the BSEG recommendations as quickly as possible.

The fundamental recommendation is a national strategy for new communications networks.

We have in part commenced that work.

However, to take it further, I have decided to establish a National Information Services Council as the Report recommends.

The Council will comprise Ministers and leaders from relevant fields, and will be established under the auspices of the Prime Minister's Science and Engineering Council.

The members of the Council will be announced within the next few weeks.

It will meet in April and October this year and, following the meetings, Cabinet will be convened to formally coordinate the Government's policy responses.

By the end of the year we will have a blueprint for the next century.

There is a great deal more I would like to say: but I don't want to sound like a zealot.

Like all new technology - and new encyclopaedias for that matter - this new information technology does inspire a sort of messianic passion in the early stages of conversion.

Yet, as the Report makes so patently clear, we need most of all a very considered and rational approach.

So I will limit myself to saying this - the opportunity for Australia is probably unprecedented.

We have the chance to dramatically improve the performance of our existing industries while creating a plethora of new ones.

New industries which will integrate us with the region and the world and, at the same time, strengthen our national life, culture and identity.

We have the chance to deliver services more equitably and efficiently than ever before.

In other words, we have the chance to make Australia significantly wealthier and more democratic: culturally richer and socially more cohesive.

It is an extraordinary opportunity and it can be truly said that we are superbly placed to take advantage of it.

Coming as it does, between the G7 meeting in Brussels and the CeBit Fair at which Australia is the partner country in Hanover next week, this launch of BSEG's Report is also well-placed.

Let me close by congratulating Brian Johns and everyone who served on the Group and contributed to the Report.

Above all, I want to thank them.

They have made a very substantial contribution to their country.

We know what the challenges are. We know that we can meet them, and that when we do, we meet our responsibilities to our children and the Australians of the 21st century.

ANNEXURE 1

G-7 CONFERENCE ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Government ministers of the Group of Seven (G7) industrialised nations and representatives of leading technology companies met in Brussels over last weekend at a conference on developments on the information society.

Summary of principles agreed by ministers of G7 nations:

The smooth and effective transition towards the information society is one of the most important tasks that should be undertaken in the last decade of the 20th century;

Our action must contribute to the integration of all countries into a global effort...;

To succeed, governments must facilitate private initiatives and investments and ensure an appropriate framework aiming at stimulating private investment and usage for the benefit of all citizens;

In order to realise the potential of the global information society in the future, the G7 partners agreed to collaborate in the areas of:

- promoting dynamic competition
- encouraging private investment
- defining an adaptable regulatory framework
- providing open access to networks

while:

- ensuring universal provision of and access to services;
- promoting equality of opportunity to the citizen;
- promoting diversity of content, including cultural and linguistic diversity; and
- recognising the necessity of worldwide cooperation with particular attention to less developed countries.

In addition, the G7 launched 11 projects aimed at stimulating and promoting the application of information technology. The projects encompass education and training, electronic libraries museums and galleries, global health care applications, environment and natural resources management, government on-line services, and broadband networking.

ANNEXURE 2

CeBIT'95, HANOVER

CeBIT is the world's largest information technology and telecommunications trade fair, held annually in Hanover. It has grown at an extraordinary rate since its inception in 1986. In 1993, the fair was attended by over 660,000 visitors, with 5,800 exhibitors from 45 countries.

One partner country is selected each year - this year, Australia has been selected to fill that role. The partner country is given the opportunity to create an exhibit featuring:

- Information Technology
- Network computing
- Computer integrated manufacturing
- Software
- Consulting and services
- Office technology
- Banking technology
- Security equipment
- Research

As partner country, Australia will present a conference program to promote our technological achievements and potential, and the opportunities for investing and doing business in Australia. Australia's exhibit will also include economic and trade development agencies, industry associations, consulting firms, investment and technology brokers, and banks and other financial institutions.

The theme "**InTelligent Australia**" has been chosen for the partner country involvement. It is aimed at highlighting the following benefits.

Australian skill in creating and using IT applications: in finance, banking, mining, education, health, environmental management, transport, hospitality and government.

Australia as a source of innovation through federal and state programs of research and development.

Australia as a destination for investment by overseas firms - whether they seek equity interest in leading edge companies, or partnerships to access new markets.

Australia as the ideal location for US and European firms to establish their Asia Pacific regional headquarters.

Australia as a gateway to Asia, combining proximity with stability, competitive costs and a sophisticated telecommunications infrastructure.