



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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The Opening of the Black Mountain

Communications Tower

This occasion formalises another step in the modernisation of Australia's communications system and the development of Canberra.

Communications are essential to a competitive industrial nation. But it is equally important to the development and maintenance of personal and family ties. The word communications implies technology, a term which in some quarters has become associated with the supremacy of machines over people.

In fact, the history of communications in Australia, is the story of the need for men and women living in remote areas to make contact with a wider world.

We should not forget that apart from the isolation of a rural community, our cities are scattered over a continent, and as a nation many of our people are far distant from the countries of their birth.

So in many ways, good communications mean so much more for our people. Fortunately for us, times are changed for the communications industry. Just thirty five years ago - the end of the War - the only communications system over vast areas of Australia's outback was provided by the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

Here, in pedal wireless, was a very special communications system - perhaps unique in the world - which owed so much to the inventiveness and perseverance of the Reverend John Flynn.

Flynn understood the vital need for personal contact, and how essential this was for safety - indeed for survival, for the efficient conduct of business, and perhaps most of all, for keeping in touch with other Australians.

I was reminded of our early days in communication a few days ago in my office when I spoke with the British Prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher, in a telephone and television link-up to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the radio-telephone link between Australia and the United Kingdom.

In Flynn's day, such a conversation would have been a chancy business. In those days, before cable and satellite links, we often used to wait in vain for operator-connected international calls that never came, and if they did, the crackle and static stretched patience and hearing.

Today, as Margaret Thatcher herself remarked during our phone conversation, the call sounded as though it came from a neighbouring London suburb.

This new ease of communication has opened up another world for Australia, for government leaders, for businessmen and for families.

For myself, I am made more aware all the time of the increased importance of telephone communications for government leaders.

But speaking for a moment as a telephone user and not as Prime Minister, I do think that in one area of our telephone service there is room for improvement, and that is in the pushbutton telephone.

Overseas, for a long while, pushbutton phones have existed which make the connection as soon as the last button is pushed. This considerable advance came to the attention of Telecom, and eventually - after quite a few years - pushbutton phones appeared in Australia.

Aha, I thought, Australia is not so far behind after all. But I found that while the Australian pushbutton phone looks like its overseas counterpart, it, in fact, makes connections no faster than did the old dial telephone.

So what we have is the pushbutton look with the dial technology.

I say to Telecom: It is grand to have the button, but we would like the speed as well.

But to be fair to Telecom, they are working on the early introduction of an improved type of pushbutton telephone, and on a new type of telephone exchange.

When these are in place, I am assured that we shall be as well and as quickly connected as anywhere.

So, Telecom is keeping us near the forefront of technology.

Hand in hand with the technological progress that has already taken place has been a massive reduction in the cost of using telephones. I notice that when I declare the tower open tonight I am to use the switch that was used by Sir Robert Menzies when he opened the Sydney-Canberra-Melbourne co-axial cable in 1962.

In those days, the cheapest telephone call between Sydney and Melbourne was \$1.20. Today, an economy call, between the two capitals is little more than \$1.00 and Telecom aim to improve that before long.

Equally impressive are the present rates for overseas calls. In 1930, a three minute call to London cost \$12.00 - equivalent to one and a half week's pay. By 1945, the cost had been reduced to \$6.00 - in real terms half a week's pay. Today it costs \$5.50 - which is equal to less than one hour's pay.

This progress in telephone communications has transformed the way of life of individual Australians. In another area of communications, that of radio and T.V., we are on the verge of a major technological breakthrough as we move towards the advent of the domestic satellite system.

This system, together with other developments in the terrestrial network, would set the pattern for bringing the communications services available to remote areas of this country progressively into much closer relationship with those in more densely populated regions.

In this context it is expected that the satellite system would offer, over time, basic television, radio and telecommunication services to outback dwellers.

We would all agree that this would be a welcome remedy to the present communications difficulties suffered by people in remote areas of Australia. Such developments, now proceeding apace under Tony Staley's care, will open up a new world to many thousands of Australians.

The technical advances that have been of such value to individual Australians have been of similar benefit to our business community. The kind of facilities now in use - telex, mobile telephones, radio paging services, data communications - offer numerous savings and advantages to companies.

They add to efficiency, improve competitiveness, reduce error, and cut costs. In comprehending the size of the cost savings taking place, telex charges are an excellent example of what is being achieved.

I am pleased to announced at this function further cuts to a range of telex charges. Telex charge reductions of 46% and 20% respectively will apply from July 1 this year to calls made in the distance categories of 325 - 645 kilometres and over 645 kilometres.

After 6 p.m., a reduction of 50% will apply in call charges made in the distance category 325 - 645 kilometres and calls of over 645 kilometres will be reduced by 20%. For example, a three minute telex call from Albury-Wodonga to Sydney will reduce from 75 cents to 40 cents during the day and from 40 cents to 20 cents at night. These are impressive concessions for a message of nearly 200 words sent almost instantaneously over such a distance.

They will represent an estimated annual saving to commerce, industry and other telex users of over \$3 million. And they will apply to almost 2/3 of the national telex traffic.

They are part of the continuing reduction, since 1978, in the great majority of telex charges: and total reductions over some distances have been as high as almost 70%. The exceptions to this relate to manually operated telex calls and will apply to only 1½% of total telex traffic. At the same time, and as part of the determination to give people in remote areas access to technology at reasonable rates, S.T.D. telephone charges have also been reduced.

Daytime Sunday rates have been cut by 20% while evening calls since November 1978 have been reduced to 40% of the day rate. For distances between 50 - 165 kilometres there have been daytime reductions of between 10 - 20 per cent and since May this year, Telecom has created a single zone for distances between 165 - 645 kilometres. This has given a reduction in many long distance S.T.D. calls of over 10%.

These reductions are part of the picture of rapid change in telecommunications, sometimes incomprehensible innovation, the significance of which escapes those of us who are mere consumers of the benefits, but poor students of the mechanisms which provide them.

Needless to say, Black Mountain Tower, when first proposed was unable to escape the penalties of innovation. And because of this, its birth has been slow and sometimes difficult. But the challenge of censure has passed the Black Mountain Tower and it is now an important part of Canberra.

Built at a cost of \$15.3 million, it is now included in a great national communications asset whose value approaches \$7.5 billion, with an annual investment of around \$1 billion.

This network will continue to expand and improve to meet the public's needs. As one measure of this, I point to the fact that this year half a million new telephone services will be installed in Australia.

Tonight's gathering acknowledges the widespread benefits that modern technology properly applied can produce. The Telecommunications Tower on Black Mountain is an important development for Canberra; but it is more than that, it is a significant extension in the overall telecommunications facilities that we need as Australia gears up for the 1980's.

I am delighted to be with you tonight. I congratulate Telecom and all who have been responsible for this project. Particularly, I congratulate the workmen on the site of the tower, who have braved Canberra's own brand of chilly winter to bring this tower into being.

It is now my pleasant task, to coin a well known phrase - I can't remember who said it - to turn on the lights and declare the Black Mountain Tower open.