



PRIME MINISTER

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP

FIRST MEETING OF THE NATIONAL INFORMATION SERVICES COUNCIL (NISC)

Today I chaired the first meeting of the National Information Services Council.

The Council was established in response to a recommendation in the final report of the Broadband Services Expert Group. It is a high-level discussion forum for broad policy issues associated with Australia's development as an 'information society'.

The Council's role is to inform the policy debate in government, by encouraging input from members of the community, industry, and other relevant experts in the field. It is an important source of non-government views on information and communications services and technologies.

Today the Council focused on four important matters:

- access to the emerging information services and technologies;
- industry policy issues;
- the legal questions and challenges arising from the new technologies and services; and
- Australia's role in the international telecommunications environment.

Independent working parties prepared papers on each of these topics for the Council's consideration.

The paper on **access issues** argued that the right to communicate, and the right to access information, are fundamental to a democratic and equitable society. It identified a range of groups with particular access needs, including: rural and remote, indigenous and ethnic communities, older people, people on low incomes and the unemployed, women, and people with disabilities.

The report identifies a number of principles which the working group believe should be acted upon. A fundamental principle is that access should be non-discriminatory, so that all Australians can share in the benefits of the new services. A cooperative and coordinated approach between governments, industry and the community is also important.

The report argues that access is not only an issue for the future, but is already a problem, and action is needed to provide access to narrowband data services, particularly to rural and remote communities.

The paper on **industry issues** argues that Australia needs to establish a clear national vision for the information technology and communications industries, to provide a framework for cooperative activity within and between industry and governments.

It considers that information industries have the potential to become one of Australia's major net earners in the coming century, and Australia must plan to become a leading provider of broadband interactive services.

Market analysis and social research are also important, to assist in identifying and exploiting market opportunities. An adequate skills base is vital in achieving industry development goals. In addition, trials and demonstrations are a key means of developing technology, and accelerating its takeup by industry and the general community.

The report on **legal issues** addresses a range of matters such as competition, consumer protection, privacy, security and intellectual property. One of its key messages is that existing laws affecting the development of information and communications services are in many respects adequate and do not need revolutionary changes. Nevertheless, some review and adjustment is required in laws concerning industry structure, electronic commerce and privacy. Moreover, laws relating to classification of material need to be extended to the new information environment, and priority should be given to implementing recommendations of the Copyright Law Review Committee.

The **international issues** paper notes that the information services sector has become a critical part of the infrastructure of the global economy, to which Australian industry must have access.

It argues that Australia must participate in the development of international trade rules that foster open national markets, and international competition in basic telecommunications services. Structural impediments within Australia must be addressed, and the government must take a proactive role in the development of standards and codes of practice. Australia's performance in telecommunications must be benchmarked against world best practice standards.

The issues and recommendations in the papers will be given close attention by the government, and where appropriate taken up by the Committee of Officials on Information Services.

Printed papers are available from the Office of the Chief Scientist, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 3-5 National Circuit, Barton ACT 2600, or from Australian Government Publishing Service outlets. They have also been published on the World Wide Web at <http://www.nla.gov.au/pmc/nisc/aug95/nisc1.html> and available for downloading as a single document via <ftp://email.nla.gov.au/pub/nisc/aug95/>.

CANBERRA
10 August 1995

Contact: Dr David Swanton
Department of the Prime Minister
and Cabinet
Phone: (06) 271 5684