



13 March 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD, MP
BROADCAST TELEPHONE LINK-UP
WITH SENATOR RICHARD ALSTON
NORTHGATE TELECOMMUNICATIONS LAUNCH - BALLARAT**

E&OE.....

PRIME MINISTER:

How are you Richard?

ALSTON:

Well thank you.

PRIME MINISTER:

Where are you calling from?

ALSTON:

I'm calling from Ballarat. I've got a cast of thousands here - it's almost like the Ballarat Football Grounds. They're all very excited at the prospect of talking to you because I'm calling from McArthur Street Primary School courtesy of Northgate Communications who are offering some very exciting telephone arrangements including free local phone calls, which is an Australia wide first, and very significant discounts on a range of other products and I'm sure you'll understand the significance of that for business competitiveness and to ensure that people outside the capital cities get a fair deal.

PRIME MINISTER:

This is the first, as I understand it, example of why some of the competitive rates now available in the major metropolitan areas are being made available in regional areas and from what you've just said it's even better in relation to the free local call. I don't know of that anywhere else in Australia.

ALSTON:

No, it's going to be very hard to get on the line down here in Ballarat here I think.

PRIME MINISTER:

If you've got a teenage family you'll never get on the line.

ALSTON:

I never get them off - that's the problem.

PRIME MINISTER:

That is a very good example of what competition does because, let's face it, a few years ago you wouldn't have even dreamt of this occurring and it's just the advent of competition that has made it possible. The other great advantage of this is that it will give small business in regional areas a major boost because as you keep telling me - wearing your communications hat - that telecommunications costs are the second highest business cost behind wages and salaries. So anything that can be done to make that pricing structure more competitive is a damn good thing. Very good news for small business.

ALSTON:

Absolutely and I'm sure we'll see more of this in the months and years ahead.

PRIME MINISTER:

Where are we at now, just remind me where we're at with the regional telecommunications infrastructure fund : that's the extra \$250 million that we decided to set aside from the partial sale of Telstra to provide a capital injection to ensure that regional Australia gets a high level of telecommunications infrastructure.

ALSTON:

Well I'm pleased you asked that because we announced the composition of the board yesterday and it's to be chaired by Doug Anthony, who...

PRIME MINISTER:

He knows a bit about regional Australia.

ALSTON:

That he does indeed. And he's still, I think, living up in the north...

PRIME MINISTER:

I visited him there about eighteen months ago. His still living up at Mooloolaba.

ALSTON:

Well he'll have to travel all around Australia with this board because it will be responsible for making decision on a State by State basis about the monies that ought to be available to regional telecommunications. And the rest of the Fund members are very interesting, particularly for the people of Ballarat, because a local Professor Gerry Anderson who's the Vice Chancellor of the University of Ballarat will be on the Board together with Lindsay MacDonald, the Queensland wool farmer, Johanna Plante, Telecommunications Consultant and Eleanor Scholz, the Manager of regional South Australian Telecentre. As I've already told the multitudes here today, the money - the first round of money will be made available in the May Budget and we expect that the Board will be inundated with applications.

PRIME MINISTER:

That's, rightly speaking, a rate of \$50 million a year...

ALSTON:

That's right.

PRIME MINISTER:

Over five years. And with that amount of money we really ought, when it's completed, to be able to see a royal class telecommunications infrastructure in all the regional areas. But that is really essential for a country as big as Australia. You must make certain that people living in regional and rural Australia are - get the same telecommunications services and the same fruits of the communications exposure as the rest of the community. It's very important.

ALSTON:

Yes and it helps them to overcome the tyranny of distance.

PRIME MINISTER:

Indeed it does. Well you've got a very experienced board there. Can you tell all the people at Ballarat that I really am quite excited about this development. This is the first really visible sign that the modern competitive communications market has well and truly arrived in regional Australia. And, of course, from the first of July this year we'll have central deregulation and full-blooded competition in so much of the telecommunications market and, well, I think the benefits will become very, very obvious as the months go by.

ALSTON:

Yes and I think we're all very excited at the prospects after the first of July and we're very grateful to you, in particular, for your support...

PRIME MINISTER:

Well we've got to make certain there are no first and second class telecommunications or communications citizens in Australia and this notion that because you might live outside one of the big capital cities you somehow or other get short-changed is something we're absolutely determined to deny that because - it's very important if you can have competitive costs in regional areas like Ballarat it means you stop the population drift, particularly the young, you'll generate more jobs and have a more competitive pricing structure for small business and that's hugely important.

ALSTON:

John, there's just one other thing that the people of Ballarat are very much looking forward to and that's the test match tomorrow night and they all know...

PRIME MINISTER:

Not only the people of Ballarat, there's a bloke - sometimes in Kirribilli, sometime in the Lodge - who's also very interested in it too.

ALSTON:

We've got a bloke called Matthew Elliott who's obviously going to be making most of the runs but do you think there'll be anyone else in there helping him?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well if form is any guide a bloke called Waugh and bloke called Blewett will probably do pretty well. Mark Taylor, I hope he's fully recovered from his back injury and I reckon millions of Australians will be wishing him well. They had a tremendous start - that was a very classy performance in the first test, very classy performance. Now I'm very much of the view that they'll probably take this match out as well. I think it's a very good team and in a way it's all started to come together. The winning combination and the way which people have developed I think is just terrific.

ALSTON:

Yes it's a good all-round side isn't it?

PRIME MINISTER:

A great side.

ALSTON:

I can assure you that very many people here will be having late nights over the next...

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, well thank you for your efforts in making certain that the spirit of the anti siphoning laws were honoured in relation to the direct telecast. There's one thing that Australians are entitled to have and that is free to air television access to major sporting events. Very, very important - cricket, Aussie Rules, Rugby League, major Rugby Union tests, Tennis and Golf. Somebody will probably remind me that I've left something out.

ALSTON:

No, they want to know when you do any work if you're watching all of those.

PRIME MINISTER:

Okay. Give my regards to Ballarat. I was there only a few weeks ago.

ALSTON:

I've got Michael Ronaldson here...

PRIME MINISTER:

Yeah, well say hello to Rono.

ALSTON:

Right.

PRIME MINISTER:

We wish you well and thanks again for a great job you're doing in relation to communications and thank you to Northgate communications.

ALSTON:

Can I just ask Brad Weinstock on behalf of Northgate to say a few words to you?

WEINSTOCK:

Prime Minister Howard, I'd like to thank you very much for participating in this exciting launch here today and we'd just like to ask you if the voice quality on your end is as crystal clear as it is here?

PRIME MINISTER:

The voice quality is terrific here.

WEINSTOCK:

Terrific.

PRIME MINISTER:

It's, you know, very good. It's marvellous and I think it's a very, very important day for Ballarat. It's a great symbol of the coming of communications competition to regional Australia and I hope it's duplicated in many regional centres over the months and years ahead.

WEINSTOCK:

Well we look forward to making 40 more calls like throughout regional Australia.

PRIME MINISTER:

If the local calls are free - is that right - and the ones around Australia.

WEINSTOCK:

No, it's just local.

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh gee. Okay. Thanks a lot.

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