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PRIME MINISTER

THE INFORMATION ECONOMY

The boom in the information economy, properly harnessed and encouraged, will deliver more jobs, more small businesses, more choice for families and higher economic growth for all Australians, in urban and regional Australia alike.

In accordance with the high priority my Government places on initiatives aimed at realising Australia's potential for the 21st century, I announce today arrangements to elevate the importance and enhance the coordination of online policy making as we move into the next millennium.

The information age represents an opportunity to improve all Australians' living standards. This revolution in communications and online technology offers Australians enormous possibilities for the way we live, work, learn and interact.

The Government is committed to bringing all Australians together in this new information age, to offer security as well as choice for families and overcome disparities between the bush and the cities.

The challenge for the national Government is to improve the coordination and management of policies which will encourage the community and business to embrace technological improvements and take maximum advantage of new opportunities.

The arrangements I announce today are designed to better integrate and coordinate online policy formulation and implementation on a whole-of-government basis.

I have decided to recommend to His Excellency the Governor-General, the appointment of Senator the Honourable Richard Alston as Minister for Communications, the Information Economy and the Arts.

The Minister for Industry, Science and Tourism will continue to carry responsibility for industry development and investment issues.

The Government will establish a new National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) as a separate office in Senator Alston's portfolio, which will draw on extensive private sector expertise.

NOIE will develop, coordinate and overview broad policy relating to:

- the regulatory, legal and physical infrastructure environment for online activities, including facilitating electronic commerce;
- ensuring consistency of Commonwealth positions for international fora; and overseeing policies for applying new technology to government administration and information and service provision.

The Government has already started moving to address the issues of user authentication, legislative requirements for facilitating electronic commerce, copyright issues, information technology outsourcing, the Millennium Bug and easier entry points for government information, compliance reporting and service provisions.

Notwithstanding this, there is scope to progress these activities and also to better coordinate activities with the States and Territories. NOIE will help ensure an integrated approach to delivery of online policy.

I will also be establishing a new Ministerial Council, chaired by Senator Alston, and including Ministers Tim Fischer, Peter Costello, John Moore, John Fahey, Daryl Williams and David Jull. I have charged the Council with responsibilities for the following whole-of-government action agenda, consulting as appropriate with the States and Territories:

- frame an approach to electronic commerce;
- formulate a comprehensive regulatory and legal framework for information and online services;
- further develop a National Information and Online Services Strategy, outlining public and private sector roles and priorities for action;
- oversee the Government's positions for international fora; and
- continue to design a whole-of-government blueprint for the Commonwealth as lead user of new information and online technology.

Information Policy Advisory Committee (IPAC) will remain in its current form, as an expert policy advisory body reporting to Senator Alston.

These arrangements are a precursor to the Government's response to the Goldsworthy and Information Policy Advisory Committee (IPAC) reports on "The Global Information Economy" and "A national policy framework for structural adjustment within the new Commonwealth of information" respectively. This response will further develop and implement the action agenda, including assisting the development of a National Information and Online Services Strategy.

The Commonwealth Government is committed to ensuring that all Australians are in the best possible position to benefit from the increasing opportunities presented by the information economy.

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