

Senate Standing Committees on Economics
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Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

To the Members of the Senate Economics References Committee:

On Australia's need for a standing Digital Affairs Committee

How the Internet and digital platforms are governed, how we relate to technology and how we rely on digital infrastructure in our daily lives are fundamental questions about our society and place in the world.

But our Parliament continues to treat digital and technology policy as an afterthought, relegated to a backseat in other portfolio committees.

Policy fragmentation in tech is a major roadblock to Australia's capacity to respond to emerging threats and opportunities — despite being home to some of the world's leading tech thinkers and entrepreneurs.

Australia's piecemeal approach to digital and technology policy is a symptom of the lack of ambition, coordination and capacity within our Parliament.

We are wasting our potential to be a world leader with our lack of political focus.

Since 2014, Germany, France and the Netherlands have had dedicated Parliamentary committees on digital and technology policy.

These committees contributed to an interdisciplinary understanding of digital and technology policy within their ranks and drove ambitious reform agendas both in their home countries and within the broader European Union.

Australia once had a reputation as the social laboratory of the world.

It's time we recaptured that — and put Australia back as a world leader in tech.

We are calling on Parliament to establish a new Joint Standing Committee on Digital Affairs and be a driving force for reform.

A dedicated standing Committee would allow for a better allocation of time, resources and expertise and help develop a more sophisticated understanding of digital and technology policy.

Existing portfolio committees are overworked and their broad remits mean that they neither have the capacity nor time to proactively interrogate emerging tech issues.

From tech ownership to online privacy, from cyber security to digital literacy, a single home for all digital affairs would position Australia as a leader, not a follower, in the global race towards a better digital future.

Every innovation has economic, social, environmental and technical consequences. We cannot afford too narrow a focus when we reflect on tech's impacts.

We must develop our capacity to invent, analyse and critique digital and technology policy properly.

Whether it's how our workplaces respond to disruption from artificial intelligence, what the legal status of property in the "metaverse" is, or how we protect our cultural heritage online as platforms are abandoned, we can no longer afford to merely react to technological change.

We need to be in front.

Yours sincerely

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