

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Additional Estimates March 2021

Communications Portfolio

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications

Question No: 22

Program 5.1

Hansard Ref: 100-102, 23/03/2020

Topic: NBN Co - Previous QoN – Costings methods

Senator Louise Pratt asked:

Senator PRATT: I have some questions relating to the last budget estimates, in October. There is question on notice No. 73. The question sources the two claims made by Mr Fletcher through his Twitter account on 12 August, and those claims, as referenced in the question on notice, were that, had the Liberals not abandoned Labor's fibre NBN, the rollout would have taken six to eight years longer and around 4.5 million premises in the fixed line footprint would be unable to connect to the NBN. The government responded to that question and said:

The Department provides information and fact checking in support of many of the Communications Minister's speeches. The Department does not directly provide input to tweets by the Communications Minister.

There are two primary sources used by the Minister for statements regarding the time and cost to deploy high speed broadband via fibre to the premises vs a multi-technology mix approach, which are:

- ... 2016 Corporate Plan, p. 39, published in 2015; and
- Strategic Review, Final Report ... Dec 2013

Minister Hume, how is it that the corporate plan is listed as a primary source for the six to eight years claim when Mr Windeyer has previously told the committee—and I can take you back through the Hansard if I need to—that the document did not contain a costing of a Labor policy or plan.

Senator Hume: I don't know. I can take that on notice.

Senator PRATT: Senator Urquhart asked Mr Windeyer:

Can I go back to you, Mr Windeyer. The 2016 corporate plan is not the original Labor policy? And, Mr Windeyer, you said:

That is what I said a second ago. No, it is a costing of reversion to a fibre to the premises. The point I was trying to make was solely that we are not sure what the source of those numbers are... And the statement goes on. We had a debate about the counterfactual evidence, about what would happen if you happened to be illogical enough to deploy a multitechnology mix, absorb massive cost blowouts, and then decide to go back and overbuild that network with fibre. Does that not sound remarkably similar to the point in time that we have arrived at now?

Senator Hume: Is that question directed to me or is that directed to—

Senator PRATT: Yes. Thank you.

Senator Hume: Senator Pratt, I know that you say this with feeling and conviction, but I'm not entirely sure what you are talking about. I'm going to unpack the question and take it on notice and I'll come back to you.

Senator PRATT: What we are talking about is the fact that Minister Fletcher has previously falsely ascribed costs to Labor's plan when they didn't cost the Labor policy. In fact, the scenario the minister referenced is, frankly, more closely aligned with the current backflip being formed by the Morrison government....

Senator Hume: Once again, there is an awful lot in that statement. I'm quite happy to take the question on notice and unpack what it is that you have asserted there.

...

Senator PRATT: But, the question on notice answer says: there are two primary sources used by the Minister for statements regarding the time and cost to deploy high speed broadband and they are the corporate plan of 2016 and the strategic review of 2013. So they're the main sources used, but there is no source that backs up the claim in relation to premises that would not be able to connect to the NBN. Can you point me to any other source?

Mr Windeyer: We'd have to take on notice the possibility of other sources. We can take that on notice and see if we can find anything.

Senator GREEN: It's a question on notice, and then you gave us an answer. Is the answer wrong?

Senator PRATT: It's not relevant?

Mr Windeyer: I'm not saying the answer is wrong. We've pointed you to two sources of information, and we have said, 'but we cannot tell you what the actual source used by the minister for the minister's tweets were'. We did not provide any advice on that. We can't answer that question.

Senator GREEN: Is he just making it up?....

...

Senator PRATT: On 23 February in the House of Reps the minister made the following claim, 'If we'd stuck with Labor's plan, then we would in 2020 have had five million fewer Australian premises able to connect.' What is the source of this statement?

Mr Windeyer: I would have to take that on notice.

Senator PRATT: Has he misled the parliament?

Mr Windeyer: I don't know the answer to the question as to the source, so I'd need to take that on notice.

Senator PRATT: Okay, but we've just had a very long debate about peak funding, parameters et cetera, and you've gone out of your way to make sure that I understand what's in and what's out in that regard so that those predictions about cost blowouts and debt and what is delivered in those parameters are accurate. Where is the evidence that 4½ million to five million premises would have been unable to connect?

Answer:

The Department does not manage the Minister's twitter account and did not provide advice on the Minister's statement to the House of Representatives on 23 February 2021. The Department has nothing further to add to its answer to Question on Notice No. 73 from the October 2020 Budget Estimates.