

COMPETITION POLICY REFORM AND NATIONAL COMMUNICATION POLICY

RECOMENDATIONS

This submission to the current Review of National Competition Policy Reforms recommends development of a national communications policy through commencing national and local reviews of communication requirements for sustainable development, lead by investigation of communication requirements for development in the health and human service industries.

It is also recommended that the implementation of the recent report on the review of the Human Services System in Redfern and Waterloo should be undertaken in this general environment of government support for improved communications development.

Recommendations regarding the current Commonwealth government inquiry into the provision of commercial television broadcast services after 2006, to decide whether a new commercial broadcaster should enter the arena, are also provided in this context.

HEALTH, HUMAN SERVICES AND COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT

As the report of the competition policy reform review notes, the provision of key human services such as health, education, aged care, and natural resource management (other than water), have been largely outside the purview of national competition policy (p.xxxi). The report recommends that the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) initiate an independent public review of Australia's health care system as a whole and that this should be the first step in the development of an integrated reform program to address structural problems of long standing that are preventing the health care system from performing to its potential (xlii).

The report makes no specific recommendations about the human services industry. However, it is clear to any health industry worker that effective service delivery and related savings can only be achieved when a suitably integrated approach is taken to care provision in hospitals and by general practitioners, on the one hand, and to community based services for injury prevention, rehabilitation and disability management, on the other. The report of the review of the Human Services System in Redfern and Waterloo has identified 102 organisations providing 192 services in the area, with around 30 services focused solely on Redfern and Waterloo. These services are funded by a combination of State, Commonwealth and Local Government resources with some contributions from non-government organizations. Taking account of the limitations in establishing accurate funding totals for the review, it estimates there is

in excess of \$35-40 million currently allocated to human services for residents in Redfern and Waterloo (Morgan Disney & Associates, 2004, p. 1). It recommends restructuring of current services in the light of a proposed Human Services Delivery Plan for the area, which looks excellent to me.

The Review of National Competition Policy Reforms recommends that the Australian Government should amend its broadcasting policy to remove the restrictions on the number of commercial free-to-air TV stations, multi-channelling, and data-casting. However, it recognises that competitive markets are not feasible in circumstances where significant externalities exist, for example in research and development. Australia has the highest immigration rate in the developed world, and its general community health, HIV/AIDS, and crime related death rates are comparatively good, unlike the United States (Tiffen and Gittins, 2004). Australians can thank their politicians and expert researchers that, unlike in the United States, the market interest has not prevailed in the design of health care policy in this country. Duckett (1997) has shown how the Australian Medicare design easily outperforms the United States market based health insurance system in terms of population access, equity and cost, although it is apparently behind on quality of service. Effective health related communication is obviously central to effective health and human service development and delivery. Communication must therefore be understood in a national and regional industry development context.

The National Expert Advisory Group on Safety and Quality in Australian Health Care (1999) recommended that health ministers lead the way in promoting a safety and quality enhancement ethos throughout the whole health system. They sought a national effort to improve the education and training of health providers and administrators in order to improve their readiness to work in a team environment. They advised that curricula for continuous quality improvement should be included in all undergraduate, postgraduate and continuing education and training. They specified that health ministers should support national actions for safety and quality related to strengthening the consumer voice; fostering clinical practice; learning from incidents, adverse events and complaints; development of frameworks for quality improvement and management; developing information systems to support quality; and education and training for quality improvement. Effective communication is central to this development process but it is also recognized that, particularly in rural areas, there are major shortages of key personnel, such as doctors and nurses (National Review of Nursing Education, 2002). Meanwhile, elite universities such as Sydney University are abandoning nursing courses because they do not bring in enough money. National communications policy must now be designed to meet industry need.

Identifying the appropriate role of national communications policy in order to support industry development and related education and research, generally requires consideration in appropriately coordinated national, regional and local community contexts. The market for Australian education to assist Asian development is likely to be enormous and information could be easily and effectively delivered by a combination of television and related institutional support. However, comparatively little consideration has been given to tapping this potential.

The Joint Standing Committee on Treaties report on the Australia /United States Free Trade Agreement (AUSFTA) stated that Australia has an existing requirement of a 55% local content quota on programming and 80% on advertising which applies to analogue and digital free to air commercial TV but not to multichanneling. Subquotas for particular program formats (such as drama or documentary) may be applied within the 55% quota (p. 166). The committee says it does not wish to see any lowering of current standards (p. 168). However, there is recognition that the Australian market is too small to sustain a diverse range of program types and recoup production costs, which gives the American market a competitive price advantage that Australia will never overcome. Coupled with this there is a ratchet mechanism which means, for example, that if a future Australian government reduced the local content requirement on local content for television to 45%, a future government could not increase it back to 55%. The ratchet mechanism applies only while Australia continues to have single channel, free to air TV (p. 173). The Australia Council for the Arts appears to be issuing a warning when it states that:

By 2010, virtually all entertainment and media is expected to be in digital formats, easily fed via satellites to cinemas and homes from sources outside Australia. As a result, many of the existing broadcasting rules governing local content will become irrelevant and new forces will come into play. (p.188).

In the light of all the above developments it is recommended that Commonwealth, state and local governments act together fast to develop national communications and Australian media content policy which puts health and sustainable development at the forefront of all regional community consideration. It is also recommended that the implementation of the recent report on the review of the Human Services System in Redfern and Waterloo should be undertaken in this general environment of government support for improved communications development. Related communication, education and research development is discussed below.

NATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS POLICY TO NETWORK AUSTRALIA

The Commonwealth government is currently holding an inquiry into the provision of commercial television broadcast services after 2006 specifically to decide whether a new commercial broadcaster should enter the arena. Alastair Birch, the Executive Director of Australian Unified Services states in his submission that the current regulatory environment in Australia seeks to guarantee a vibrant and independent free-to-air television sector primarily through geographically-limited licences with restrictions on ownership. In spite of this, just three networks control the programming of virtually all these supposedly independent commercial broadcasters.

Current policy seems to be preventing competitive innovation. Australia appears to need a more internationally competitive and cooperative approach. The following discussion and recommendations are designed to remedy this situation in an international environment where competition and related technological innovation must be highly valued by all. This is necessary to extend, diversify, improve and cheapen all communication, and also to meet the needs of all regional and related community environments, especially the poorest and least healthy. The situation of educational, non-profit and community based broadcasting should be considered in this Australian and international community and industry context.

It is recommended that the Commonwealth government should be responsible for the design of all standards for the regulation of all program content on Australian television and also for the standard of the services required of all broadcasters operating in this country.

Commonwealth broadcasting policy and industry design should encourage news, educational and related program content which is provided free or at the lowest possible cost to all Australians and their related communities. The Commonwealth should also encourage competition and technological innovation by all broadcasters, in order to meet all Australian community goals for health and sustainable development effectively.

Accordingly, Australian governments should openly invite funding partners from existing broadcasters and from new entrants to the marketplace, in order to establish a new Australian national channel, openly designed in the interests of key stakeholders and the Australian community, in order to meet all national and related regional and individual goals as effectively as possible. Non-profit, community broadcasters and related community service providers might join this national production partnership if they so wished.

The Australian Broadcasting Authority should administer Commonwealth broadcasting and content regulations using the stakeholder model of the NSW WorkCover statutory authority, which is funded by government and industry

stakeholders. This structure would help clarify national communications and related industry planning. It would also assist establishment of high quality education, research and related communication for all Australian industries and communities. The role of the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should be considered in this context.