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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

**BROADCASTING LEGISLATION
AMENDMENT (DIGITAL
TELEVISION) BILL 2010**

Second Reading

SPEECH

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SPEECH

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Speaker Sidebottom, Sid, MP

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Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (1.27 pm)—It is always a pleasure to speak on the matter of community television, given in this instance the Broadcasting Legislation Amendment (Digital Television) Bill 2010, which refers to the commencement of digital satellite broadcasting services. Unfortunately the member for Paterson's glass is never half full; it is always half empty. He is always full of doomsday predictions. Yet I find it very interesting, as is the case with most criticisms that are levelled at this government by the member for Paterson, that most of the origins of what we are talking about come from the former government. They include the process to bring about digital television in Australia.

Another thing I remind the member for Paterson about is that where we have community TV black-spot translators—and I congratulate again the former government on assisting those communities—many of those areas of reception did not receive analog television reception. There are many, many households around those areas that find it difficult to receive analog reception, who do not get television reception or who have to go to the satellite program to receive any reception at all. This legislation provides digital television and ensures that commitment to every Australian. But, if you listen to the member for Paterson, we are taking television reception away from people. It is absurd. If you go through his argument, that is exactly where it belongs—in the absurd basket.

This legislation will bring us into the 21st century. It deals with the transition to digital TV. Everybody in this House who has had anything to do with television reception—and all of us are affected by it, particularly in rural and regional Australia and particularly in areas such as where I come from in Tassie, where the topography is very mixed—knows that getting TV reception can be a very problematic and difficult situation. This legislation sets out the structural framework and regulations to allow every Australian to receive digital television reception. In instances where you cannot receive terrestrial digital signals, this legislation is intended to provide access to satellite digital television reception—not just reception but the full suite of digital channels available in metropolitan Australia. Without a lot of experience in metropolitan Australia myself, I would add that there are black spots with digital transmission even inside metropolitan areas. The great advantage with

this legislation, as my friend the member for Dunkley knows very well, is that it will allow people to receive digital television through satellite. In Australia you cannot totally rely on terrestrial signals—we know that—particularly where I come from. I know the member for Dunkley would accede that point at least, through his very good advocacy for better television reception in Australia over the years. I am happy to acknowledge that.

Why are we moving to digital television? It is something that the former government set in train, quite rightly, and we are implementing it. So I do not want to hear about all the tit-for-tat stuff—that under us there is ruination—when in fact we are complementing what came before us; we have created a framework for it to happen. It will not be without problems, as any reception of television and any changeover will be. You do not need to be Cassandra to predict that. It is important that Australia keeps pace with worldwide changes in technology. Overseas programs, for instance—for those interested who are listening—are increasingly being recorded in the digital format only. That is why you get dotted lines across some of your television screens—the programs are filmed for digital reception. Australian TV shows need to be recorded in digital format to be easily exported overseas. In Australia, TV is currently broadcast via both digital and analog signals. We need to free up broadcast space. It gives us greater options. Turning off the analog signals will free up space that could be used for other services for the community. The present system is costly and inefficient.

Those who have moved from analog to digital or visit people who have digital will know there is no doubt that it improves your viewing experience. The picture and sound quality on digital TV is much better. Pictures on digital television can be seen in widescreen. You still have the free-to-air channels, plus some new ones, so you have more choice. For the consumer it is absolutely terrific. As someone who lives in a valley and has to get analog signals from a community translator, there is a marked qualitative difference in looking at a digital picture—which I have to get via satellite at the moment, through Austar. It is fantastic. To see all the possibilities of channels through the spectrum is wonderful.

Digital television provides vastly improved picture and sound quality, including widescreen pictures, as I mentioned. There is digital audio—again, fantastic—including radio broadcasts. Digital television also offers the benefits of many more channels and content. For example, when you get the old analog ABC, you get ABC and that is it. You would never have heard of ABC1. With digital you have ABC1, ABC2 and ABC3, and they are only broadcast in digital. SBS has SBS2 in digital. The Seven, Nine and Ten Networks have introduced high-definition digital channels. The Ten Network launched a digital-only sports channel, named ONE, in March 2009; the Seven Network launched free-to-air digital channel 7TWO in November 2009. Gradually, each of the free-to-air television broadcasters will be introducing new digital channels and content.

I would say to the member for Paterson, who quite rightly takes seriously the comments of his constituents about their television reception: yes, people are having problems. They are having problems whether they are receiving analog or digital. There are lots of reasons why people are experiencing problems. For a start, if you do not have the appropriate antenna, appropriately positioned and appropriately connected, you will have trouble receiving signals, whether they are analog or digital. You could have the best digital TV in the world, but with a poor antenna connection or poor direction you are in trouble. I am talking about the tools of the trade. Clearly, if you are going to invest in a set-top box and/or a digital television, like anything in the consumer world it is about buyer beware—take care, inform yourself, take advice. You cannot blame the government for a poor antenna or a cruddy old TV, as the member for Paterson was implying. That is silly stuff. We as consumers have to take responsibility, otherwise the nanny state has gone mad.

Commercial TV broadcasters are in a very lucrative business. The government has been working with them to reconvert analog terrestrial sites to digital, 87 of them—only 87, said the member for Paterson. I would like them all done because I looked on the list and mine is on there. I was really pleased to find that. They will be rebroadcasting to digital, converting to digital, and that is fantastic. But I have to say that even in my own township of Forth, which will get a digital conversion, it will not allow everyone in my valley to receive TV. They are going to the satellite, and that is what we are doing with this, warts and all.

There are going to be implementation issues, there is no doubt about it, but they can include an issue as small as someone not having the right equipment or not taking the right advice or, worst of all, not seeking the right advice. We have got to be responsible for our commercial decisions. There is a website, and I know

not everyone is on the web but for broadcast's sake I would like to point out that www.digitalready.gov.au is sitting there on the net ready for people to click in and try and get as much information as possible. Ring antenna experts, ring your TV mechanics, ring and go to your TV stores and take care. Do not buy the first thing they offer you. For a start, find out if digital television reception exists in your area. The member for Paterson was blaming us for someone buying a television set when they did not even have digital television transmission. I mean, fair is fair. Those selling things in stores have got to be responsible too, and if people do not have digital TV transmission and reception then selling people a digital television is questionable. If you do and they have got an analog thing, you have got to make sure they can receive an analog signal and then make sure that the antenna is right. So people must take care, because half the problem is blaming the tools, rather than the signal itself.

Those areas that currently have a community translator—black spots, if you like—will receive a subsidy from us. I believe it is around \$400 but I am not sure whether it is has been absolutely set at that. This is to help people convert to digital, to get a set-top box, a satellite box, and then the dish and installation. We are going to assist in that process. I hope that our contribution is the greatest proportion of the cost involved. I hope that our subsidy will allow people to do that. I know the technologies are getting better and better each time and I know that those people doing installations will be doing critical mass installations. I agree with some of the other speakers that it is absolutely important that those people involved in the digital conversion have this transitional time frame to take note, to take care, to get informed and be prepared with their equipment to go out and start installing and implementing. I know those people listening to this are taking that on board, and it is very important. The person getting the new digital service has a responsibility too as a receiver to make sure we are doing the sensible thing.

People might be thinking, 'Sid, you haven't spoken about satellite reception.' Effectively what we are doing is creating the regulatory framework to allow people to receive essentially what metropolitan Australia is now receiving by terrestrial digital signals. I think that is absolutely marvellous, that there is going to be equitable reception of those services. We are regulating, in a pretty regulated market I have to say, to say what is going to happen with our satellite footprints. I think there are three major zones or footprints. Mine is south-east Australia and it comes into my part of beautiful, beautiful Tasmania. What are we going to do about our local news? As the member for Paterson quite rightly said, as one of the two things

he got right, we value our local programming, and I suppose we value our local ads. On local news, this legislation sets out how we are going to get that. When I first heard about this I said, 'This is a logistical nightmare how to work this out.' But boffins in the trade know a lot more than I do, and essentially what it is doing is mandating that local news will be available, say, an hour after it is transmitted by the normal commercial digital channels. It will be available to me through the red spot so that I can home in on my local news and see my mug on the telly, and others, to share in good news. I get the impression that I will be able to get others' news as well. There will be a news channel floating around that I will be red-spotting on and I think that is a clever, sensible and practical way for me to get my local news. So I congratulate those people that have worked within the industry, and they include the commercial channels, for making this possible. It is the same with local content. There are regulations within this, and I will not trouble people with all the details of it, but those arrangements for local content are mandated in the legislation.

I would point out too that some communities are a little bit concerned about how are they going to get their digital signal. It is not a question of whether—we will get it all right. And it is not weather, which the member for Paterson was going on about. I suggest that is problems with the antenna. There are 87 sites that the government has negotiated with the commercial channels for conversion of existing self-help sites. I notice that in my region Forth, my lovely little village, is one of them. Paloona up the road in the Forth Valley is another. Then there are Ringarooma and the upper Derwent Valley, in the seat of Lyons, Hillwood and Meeandah and Lesley Vale.

They are fortunate to be able to receive a commercial conversion, which is not to say that everyone there is going to get the signal. But—and this is the great thing about this legislation and also honours our election commitment—everyone will receive digital reception, because they will be able to access a satellite system. I note too that something like 44 digital-only terrestrial transmission sites that are owned and operated by the broadcasters may receive conversions from the commercial channels—they are called gap fillers—to enhance the digital signal and increase what is called the wider digital footprint. I notice that Currie on beautiful King Island is one of those, as are Derby, Maydena and St Helens in Tasmania—all beautiful spots, by the way, in which to receive your television reception.

Unlike the member for Paterson, I think this is wonderful news. I am asking people who are going to convert their households to digital television reception to take care, note the availability or otherwise of

the signal and when it is available and, of course, take advice, because you are purchasing reasonably expensive equipment that is going to last you a long time. Remember that, as with a lot of things, sometimes you need experts to help you and there will be a lot of people in the commercial sector who will be able to give you advice along with the technicians who are going to undertake the conversions. I congratulate the government on the legislation. I really look forward to getting digital television in my valley along with everyone else. This also honours the commitment that all Australians will receive an equitable signal from digital television.