

After 11 years, Australia declares its national broadband network is ‘built and fully operational’

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Australia has declared its national broadband network (NBN) is “built and fully operational”, ending a saga that stretches back to the mid-2000s.

Minister for communications, cyber safety and the arts Paul Fletcher declared the build complete in a Wednesday [statement](#) that admitted 35,000 premises remain unable to connect to the network. But seeing as that number was over 100,000 in August 2020 and over 11.86 million premises have been wired, he’s happy to say the job’s been done.

However Australian outlet [itnews points out](#) that over 230,000 premises can’t connect at 25Mbps, the speed deemed to represent “broadband” in Australia.

The minister’s statement also pointed out that legislation governing the NBN build requires a declaration the job is done before December 31st.

“New premises are being built all the time,” the minister said. “This means that there will always be a number of premises around Australia that are not yet ‘ready to connect’. The fact that there is a certain number of premises which are not ready to connect is not of itself evidence that the network cannot be treated as ‘built and fully operational’.”

Thus ends a saga that began in the mid-2000s when Australia figured out that ubiquitous broadband access was a good idea. Dominant telco Telstra proposed to build the network and operate as both a wholesaler to rivals and a retailer, but as that arrangement had stifled competition for years the government of the day wasn't keen on the idea. At the 2007 election the left-of-centre Australian Labor Party swept to power in part due to its plans to build a fast national broadband network.

That promise evolved into a commitment to build a fibre-to-the-premises (FTTP) network. NBN Co, the company charged with building and operating the network, was summoned into existence in April 2009 but struggled to get much done in its early years. By 2013, when a right-of-centre government won power, just over 350,000 premises had been connected.

The new government decided that a FTTP build would be too slow and expensive, despite leaks from within NBN Co purporting to say FTTP costs were falling fast. The new plan called for a "multi-technology mix" that emphasised fibre-to-the-node (FTTN) and use of existing cable TV networks, rather than FTTP everywhere.

Critics of that plan said its promise to deliver universal 25Mbps services was inadequate, would require costly re-builds, and would leave Australia struggling to compete with other nations building faster networks. The plan was said to retard wide adoption of digital services such as telemedicine or videoconferencing.

The government did not heed those critics and brushed them off when the project missed deadlines and build costs expanded. A decision to spend billions on a cable network that turned out not to be capable of delivering broadband services was one of many SNAFUs during the build.

Australia's economy outperformed many better-wired rivals throughout the build period and the likes of Netflix were happy to enter the market during the build. The NBN did not slow adoption of streaming video.

Nor did it cause widespread problems under the stresses of 2020's work-from-home wave. Australia has Zoomed as thoroughly as any other nation.

Critics now point to wholesale charges that make it hard for retailers to make a profit, and therefore leave Australian broadband prices high by world standards. Others maintain the NBN's utility will be eroded by 5G networks. Satellite services for remote users remain slow, and wireless services in regional areas are often adequate rather than brilliant. The NBN has also baked in one of the legacy problems in Australian telecoms, with retailers and the wholesale NBN both offering consumers frustratingly little insight about who has responsibility for restoring services after outages.

But the thing is now officially built. This story was filed over an NBN connection rated to 100Mbps and delivering 52Mbps downloads and 14Mbps uploads over WiFi. Which seldom troubles your text-dependent correspondent.

Minister Fletcher also decided that December 23rd was a fine day on which to announce new laws that introduce a scheme that will require digital platforms to take down "seriously harmful" material directed at adults, in addition to strengthening cyber-bullying protections for kids. The scheme proposes 24-hour takedown requirements for digital platforms after notification of harmful content. As Australia heads to

the beach, its Competition and Consumer Commission has revealed changes to the nation's Consumer Data Right Rules that will allow bank customers to allow sharing of their data with other financial institutions as a means of enabling easier purchasing of products from rivals. ®