

COMMUNITY TELEVISION FUNDING

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (17:49): I seek leave to move my Notice of Motion (Private Business) No. 8 in an amended form.

Leave granted.

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON: I move:

That this council urges—

1. The Premier to call upon the federal government, in particular the Prime Minister and the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, to provide appropriate and swift funding to enable community television to simulcast in both analogue and digital frequencies;
2. That the Premier, at the next meeting of the Council Of Australian Governments, insists that his state counterparts do the same; and
3. That the resolution be forwarded to the Premier, the Prime Minister and the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy for their urgent consideration.

As this is a matter of urgency for the community television industry, I will be asking that all members speak to this motion on the next Wednesday of sitting (15 July 2009) to allow ample time for the Premier to enter into discussions with his federal colleagues.

I rise today to bring this council's attention to the dire predicament that community television, both locally and nationally, is facing. Unlike other mainstream television broadcasters which simulcast in both analogue and digital frequencies, community television networks are being forced to languish on analogue by the inaction of the current and previous federal governments.

I am assured by the sector that we are staring at the imminent demise of community television, not just in South Australia but nationally, if adequate funding to make the transition to digital broadcasting is not provided post-haste. This would be a disaster. Community television serves many important functions. Channel 31, South Australia's community television station, promotes local people and events ranging from the Tour Down Under (a noted favourite of the Premier), which reached 19 million viewers, down to community level sports; specialist programs produced for and by ethnic communities in their own languages; and, my personal favourite, *The Noticeboard*, which has assisted more than 550 not-for-profit organisations gain the publicity they would otherwise struggle to receive. As the Premier noted, where else can programs designed specifically for deaf viewers be screened alongside a show about regional Italian cooking and classic Hollywood movies?

It also provides an important training ground for people wanting to enter the industry. Many of South Australia's brightest young media stars cut their teeth at Channel 31, including Kate Collins (host of *A Current Affair*), Tom Hicks and Caroline Hillman at Channel 9, and Kirsty Bennett at the ABC. Members may also be interested to know that Gold Logie winning presenter, Rove McManus, and the infamous duo, Hamish and Andy, also came out of community television in Victoria.

Then there are the grassroots volunteers. Currently, Channel 31 has more than 50 active volunteers with 320 members putting 100 hours of television to air each week. This has all been placed in jeopardy by Channel 31 not being able to digitally broadcast. If community television is left to die so, too, will the dreams of many South Australians, and we simply cannot let that happen.

The analogue signal will be switched off at the end of 2013. All major networks have already made the transition to digital—not without government assistance, I might add—and simulcast in both analogue and digital to ensure that they reach those consumers who are yet to make the transition. The federal government has run an extensive campaign encouraging Australians to purchase either a digital television or set-top box and, as of March this year, 47 per cent of South Australians had done as the federal government asked and converted.

The Hon. I.K. Hunter: I haven't.

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON: Me neither; I cannot afford to update. However, for Channel 31, which is marooned on analogue, this means that its local content reaches less than half of South Australians, and the proportion is getting higher as more people make the switch to digital. While the audience shrinks, inevitably so does the interest from sponsors and advertisers. As station manager Brian Dutton commented recently in the *Independent Weekly*, it is having an effect every day. This place—and, I hope, the federal government—must recognise the urgency of the situation.

Community television deserves our strong support, but instead it has suffered broken promise after broken promise. It is my understanding that this issue has been raised with the relevant authorities since the beginning of the decade, and community television has been consistently assured that the transition was coming. In 2006, mounting angst among the community television network at the delay in federal funding for the transition led to an inquiry into their predicament by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. A report tabled in federal parliament on 12 February 2007, entitled 'Community Television: Options for digital broadcasting', recommended, among other things, that community television must be provided access to digital transmission by no later than January 2008. Of course, that did not eventuate.

Following complete silence in the Rudd government's first budget, the sector had high expectations for this year; however, yet again the promises made in the hallways went undelivered. This motion calls upon the Premier to do all he can to ensure that the federal government finally delivers on the promises made to community television and to ensure, for South Australia in particular, a sustainable future for Channel 31. I also urge this council to lead the way for community television nationally, and at the next meeting of state premiers to ensure that this issue is on the agenda and that those premiers be encouraged to advocate and lobby for community television in their own states.

As the Premier himself noted at a recent launch of Channel 31's improved transmitter—which, I hasten to add, broadcasts only in analogue—the transition to digital broadcasting cannot be at the expense of diversity and independence, something Channel 31 embodies. As the Premier also noted, Channel 31 has given a voice to community organisations, local events and leadership programs, and with the new transmitter there is now the opportunity for Channel 31 to reach more than 1 million people. However, and I reiterate, until Channel 31 broadcasts digitally that transmitter can reach only half its potential audience, and this is decreasing day by day.

At the launch of the new transmitter, the Premier did boast that it was digitally compatible. This state government contributed just over \$200,000 to acquire this new transmitter; what a

shame it would be if we now see the demise of this vital community service after the government has shown an interest in it. We can only imagine the frustration of the industry, being so close that they can almost touch the prospect of digital upgrade but still being far enough away that they have to contemplate that by next year the transmitter will not be of any use because they will have had to close their doors.

It is not as if the money being sought by community television would be a huge burden. In fact, the \$3 million plus ongoing operational costs sought—and that is nationally—pales into insignificance compared to the government funding provided to the ABC and SBS, which received ongoing operational base funding of \$698.7 million and \$118.7 million respectively in this year's budget.

I commend this motion to members, and it is my sincere hope that members' support will result in Channel 31 being brought into the digital age.

Debate adjourned on motion of Hon. B.V. Finnigan.