Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure now for the opening address to welcome the minister for communication and the arts, and Manager of Government Business in the Senate, Senator Mitch Fifield. Please make him welcome.

(APPLAUSE)

MITCH FIFIELD: Thank you very much, Julie, and I acknowledge that, in Julie as MC today, we have a genuine multimedia star and Australian cultural icon, but Julie is someone who I think has given us a lot of joy over many years. It's wonderful to be with you, Julie. I also thank Uncle Allen Madden for his Welcome to Country. Allen always incorporates a bit of humour in his Welcome to Country, which we all appreciate greatly. And could I particularly, today, thank the Chair - our leader - Johanna - for the incredible work that she has done. As you know, her tour of duty will be concluded tomorrow, but Johanna - for everything that you have done for all of us, and for this sector - we say thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

Also, Teresa - I acknowledge the great leadership that you provide here. I'm a huge fan of ACCAN. As I previously said, if ACCAN didn't exist, you would have to invent it, because it fills such a need and plays such a leadership role for consumers. So, thank you to all the staff of ACCAN. I particularly make note of the Top Tips that ACCAN produces - a range of really great consumer material. And yes, we love telecommunications retailers, but they could, perhaps, learn a little bit from some of that which ACCAN produces. So that's terrific work.

My aim today is to talk to you a little bit about the nuts and bolts of what we're doing as a government to make sure that consumers get what it is that they want and need from telecommunications. Before I do so, I just want to spend a little bit of time setting the scene in terms of policy. We all know that the world is undergoing incredible digital transformation. Today's kids inhabit a world that's light years away from the one of their grandparents or even parents grew up in. Kids are virtually connected from birth. Parents announce the arrival of their kids on social media. They post about their first moments - walking, talking, and everything in between. Today's kids are very quick to embark upon their own digital journey. They find their own place in their own way in our connected world. They start reaching for a mobile device or a tablet almost as soon as they start reaching for food. Those who are parents or have nieces and nephews will know that it doesn't take long before they have greater degree of digital literacy than you do. This is all happening at an incredibly unprecedented pace, and it's harder and harder for us all to remember what life was like before, in the pre-digital world. For my part, if I stop and think very hard, I can remember that I went through all of primary school, secondary school, university and first job without touching a computer, a mobile phone, even at the university library in my day most of the catalogue was on microphish and cards. It doesn't seem all that long ago. Although I do remember in my second job when we first had a mobile phone in the office. It was a very impressive thing - about this big - had a shoulder strap, an aerial back high. I thought I looked pretty good putting it on my shoulder as we got out and about. Anyway. Things have changed. We can't remember - we can remember, but it's hard to imagine - a world without Google. 20 years ago, that was the case. iPhones - they've recently hit their 10-year anniversary, and our workplaces have been incredibly transformed, to the point where, if there's an IT outage at the office, everything grinds to a halt. We all get the shakes because we just can't cope without being able to touch a device of some sort that connects us with someone. It's like an Industrial Revolution on steroids. Clearly, there's an important job for government here to be able to look ahead, plan for the future, in terms of regulation and consumer safeguards. Also, for us to recognise the huge increases in productivity that there can be - also in terms of accessibility. We need to make sure, always, that we're as well-positioned as we can be, as a country, to capitalise on the social benefits and economic benefits and, importantly - and this is close to the heart of ACCAN - to make sure that no Australian is left behind. I see my portfolio very much as an enabler in terms of social interaction, but also in terms of commerce. But it's an area that is in constant transition. The conference that you're embarking upon over the next two days has a lot of great focuses - privacy and online safety, accessibility, building trust in a connected world, and what a 5G world is going to look like. I just want to spend a few moments this morning outlining some of the actions that we're taking as a government. First and foremost, I'd like to start with the nbn. I like to look at the nbn, or conceptualise it, in this way - that is, what we're seeking to do with the rollout of the nbn network is essentially to do, in the space of about eight years, what it took the PMG - for those who can remember - and Telecom, for those who can remember - the best part of 70 years to do. And that is - to connect every home and every business to a network. So it's a very compressed time frame, but it is as significant as that task by the PMG. Another way I like to characterise it is that the nbn really is, to Australians, what Australia Post was 30, 40, 50, 60 years ago. So fundamental was the postal service that my gig, as Comms Minister, up until 1975, was called the Postmaster-General. The nbn is going to be that important in today's world compared to what the post was previously. Just to give you a sense of how rapidly this is happening, there are more than 1,000 premises that are connecting to the nbn every working hour, week-in, week-out. 1,000 premises. And over the next 12 months or so, there'll be some 2 million consumers that will switch their broadband connection from ADSL and HFC to the nbn network. There is literally an army of skilled field technicians, mum-and-dad contracting businesses, nbn's own project managers, engineers and technical specialist whose are making this a reality. To give you a sense of the scale of the project, nbn estimates that the field workforce now exceeds 24,000 people - and that's on top of the 6,000 people who aren't directly employed by nbn. We recognise that households and businesses depend on their internet connections. Being offline - apart from being immensely frustrating and inconvenient - can also be very costly. We recognise that, for some people, some consumers transitioning to the nbn, things haven't always gone according to plan. Although in percentage terms, it might be a relatively small number, in absolute numbers - when you're talking about a venture of this scale - it's significant. I never want to diminish the experience of an individual or a business that hasn't been all that it should be. Which means, we still have more to do. Last month, I convened a round table with Australia's telco industry leaders to secure joint action to better support consumers switching to the nbn, and I can tell you that the entire industry is as one in wanting to improve the migration experience. Together, they're working to address the handballing of complaints. nbn is also making process changes to reduce the number of rescheduled appointments and speed up the time taken to connect the service once an order's received. There are a range of other consumer measures which we have under way. The government recently released a new and updated telecommunications industry guide, which sets out the roles and responsibilities of all parties in delivering a smoother transition to the nbn. Also, the ACMA is commissioning research to increase understanding of consumer experiences before, during and after the migration to the nbn. ACMA is also using its formal powers under the telco Act to collect information from businesses across the nbn supply chain, which has the objective of targeting industry improvements. You've got to see the metrics, you've got to see the numbers, so you know where to focus on and where improvements are needed. The government's also announced a broadband performance monitoring and reporting program which will independently test and report on the speeds experienced by broadband consumers. This is going to be run by the ACCC, and the program will help consumers identify the broadband plan that's right for them, and to make sure that they're receiving the services that they're paying for. Part of that will be the embedding of 4,000 probes - not in individuals, but in premises of people - and the ACCC is eagerly seeking volunteers to be probed in the nicest possible way. The ACCC has also released guidelines on how retailers should advertise speeds for fixed-line broadband services, including clearly identifying typical peak speeds. While this is non-binding, the ACCC has warned that these guidelines are the standard by which retailers will be judged in advertising. In addition, the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman has proposed expanding its terms of reference to make explicit inclusion of all parties in the supply chain that need to be involved in resolving any issues. The consumer experience is a shared responsibility of those players, of those regulators, of the TIO, of nbn, of retailers and of government. There is a lot of work under way. This is - and it will remain - a key priority for the government. There are, when it comes to telecommunications, two other things that the government is very serious about - particularly in relation to the nbn. That is - access and affordability. The multi-technology mix mandate we've given the nbn means that it will be completed six years faster than reverting to an all-fibre rollout, and at $30 billion less cost. So by 2020, Australia will be the only continent, or country, of its size with universal high-speed broadband access. That will be a significant achievement, and it will provide a strong competitive advantage for the nation. The latest ACAMI Speed Index Report shows that Australia is already leading the way in the highest average mobile connection speed in the Asia-Pacific, ahead of Japan and New Zealand. Currently, it also indicates a digital divide may exist for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and in some regional areas. The government is keenly aware of the opportunities, but also the challenges, inherent in the digital revolution. At the same time that we're working to assure Australia is a competitive digital player on the world stage, we're making every effort to ensure, at a domestic level, that no Australian is left behind. We're aware that older Australians, Indigenous Australians, people with disability, and those with lower levels of income, education and employment are most at risk of being digitally excluded. We will continue to monitor the needs of these people and to improve their digital literacy and digital inclusion. In particular, the government is aware that many older Australians lack the confidence and skills to engage in the digital economy, and that's why, in the 2016 election, we committed to delivering an initiative to improve the digital literacy and capability of older Australians. So, funding of almost $50 million has now been provided for a program that will target Australians over 50 who have limited or no engagement with digital technologies. The program will include a national network of participating committee organisations, a small grants program to support community organisations, and a national digital portal for training and online safety. That's a concrete step. More broadly, at a national level, digital inclusion in Australia is increasing. We recognise the importance of communications for people who are living and working and travelling in regional and remote Australia. Just as in our big cities, connectivity is increasingly becoming an essential part of life in regional Australia. That's why we're investing more in regional communications than ever before, and prioritising the regional rollout of the nbn. We are providing nbn fixed-line broadband services to 2.5 million regional premises. We've invested $2.5 billion in capital expenditure in nbn's fixed wireless network, and around $2 billion on its satellite network. Already, the rollout is more progressed in regional areas than in metropolitan Australia, so at present, about 81% of all homes and businesses outside major urban areas can either order nbn-based services or have new network construction under way. For more remote communities and hard-to-reach homes, two Sky Muster satellites are now available. To date, more than 78,000 premises have been connected to that. nbn has also recently announced it will double the maximum monthly wholesale data limits and increase average peak download speeds by up to 50% on the Sky Muster service at no extra charge. Retailers selling Sky Muster plans have indicated they will pass on the extra service at very little extra cost. Australia's mobile market is very competitive, driving great outcomes for many consumers, but there are still many parts of Australia with no coverage. That's why we're directing $220 million towards the Mobile Black Spot Program over three funding rounds to increase the mobile coverage of regional transport routes and in small communities. This program represents the largest one-time increase in mobile network coverage delivered in a single program in the history of mobile communications in Australia. The rollout's well under way, with upwards of 230 mobile base stations now up and running. By the second half of 2018, a total of 765 new mobile base stations will be in place. We've also got an additional $60 million for a round to target priority mobile black spot areas, which will go to market later this year. At an international level, Australia is also proving competitive when it comes to affordability. Over the past four years, consumer demand for data in Australia has grown rapidly, and affordability for communications services has improved for households. Demand for communications is growing faster than for all other goods and services in the Australian economy. The volume of broadband data downloaded over the last quarter of 2016 was 51% higher than the 2015 December quarter, and 366% higher than for the same period in 2012. In the six months to June 2016, almost 60% of Australians used five or more different types of communications devices, and a key objective of the nbn is to enable fairer and more effective retail competition that allows Australians to choose from a wide variety of plans that meet their needs and fit their budgets. To date, compared to ADSL, the price of fixed-line broadband services are broadly comparable or, in some cases, better over the nbn, and there is more choice for the consumer. Regional Australians are benefiting the most in terms of affordability over the fixed wireless and fixed line nbn, which will make up 98% of nbn premises activated. Competition in the retail market is intensifying. There are now more than 140 retail brands already offering services on the nbn, with others announcing their intention to do so - including Vodafone and Kogan. Since 2012-13, product inclusions have increased significantly, and a number of internet-based and mobile service providers have started building content and entertainment offers into their plans for free, or at a discounted rate. It's heartening to note that, as a share of disposal incomes, households are getting more and spending less on communications services than they did 10 years ago. Spending on services declined from 4.1% in 2008 to 3.5% in 2015, and that's primarily because, in an increasingly competitive market, consumers are getting better value as prices stay the same or fall while product inclusions increase. Beyond the nbn rollout, and the efforts under way to ensure no Australian is left behind, the government also has its eye on the horizon when it comes to consumer safeguards. I'll just touch on that briefly before I wrap up. One of the biggest pieces of work we have in the pipeline is the review of consumer safeguards. The relevance and usefulness of the existing safeguard framework is gradually diminishing, and it needs to be overhauled. A key objective of the review will be to examine the existing range of consumer safeguards, their effectiveness, their ongoing utility, and how the protections can deliver, in practise, what it is that people will need once the nbn is complete. A lot of the issues involved with this are closely linked to considerations of the universal service obligation - and as many in the room know, the USO is a longstanding consumer safeguard that was intended to ensure that everyone would have access to a voice-only stamped telephone service and payphones, regardless of where they live. In 2012, the former government entered a 20-year contract with Telstra that locked in certain aspects of the USO. A recent Productivity Commission inquiry that we commissioned into the USO found that the arrangements were, to quote them, "anachronistic, costly, and no longer served the best interests of Australians." The Productivity Commission also found that the USO didn't demand transparency and accountability, and I think it's clear that the crafting of the USO at that time didn't have taxpayers or consumers front of mind. So I'm taking the reform of the USO very seriously. I've established a task force in my department to consider the government's response to how to reshape the USO, and I will be absolutely ensuring that the focus is on making sure that there are ongoing and more appropriate protections for people who live in rural and regional areas, and the most vulnerable members of the community. I should also note that the audit office has also been undertaking an audit of the USO contractual arrangements, and I look forward to seeing their report when it's tabled. We will be implementing changes to the USO in a considered, careful and consultative manner. Similarly, the review of consumer safeguards is no small undertaking. There will be two rounds of public and industry consultations, and the development of proposals. This will be followed by a subsequent period of time for development and passage of resulting legislation and regulation. The government has also introduced legislation to parliament to establish a statutory infrastructure provider or SIP regime. This will ensure premises in Australia can be connected to superfast broadband network and provide certainty for consumers about their access to the next generation of broadband. So, friends, this morning, I've spoken at some length about what we're doing to advance our communications efforts to make sure that we're well-placed to face the future. The conference - you're focusing on your place in the connected world, so I thought I'd leave you with one of the related challenges facing governments and businesses and researchers the world over. I think you'd all agree that we live in a world, today, where technology is increasingly becoming an extension of who we are. It's always on. We're always on, 24/7, 365 days a year. Increasingly, the question is being asked - how do we switch off? What do we do about digital fatigue, of always being connected, always being available, always being accessible? There's growing research on the issue, but the jury is still out. It still remains divided as to whether an always-on culture is a good thing or a bad thing for productivity - not to mention our sanity, for that matter. In the meantime, there are some countries and businesses that are making disconnection a real option to help reduce digital burnout. This year, France introduced a law that requires firms with more than 50 employees to negotiate a disconnection rule for after hours and vacation communications. In Germany, automotive giants Volkswagen and Daimler have taken steps to limit workers' out-of-office connections. Daimler's efforts include an optional email feature called "mail on holiday", which is available to 100,000 workers to reduce pressure and prevent email congestion. It automatically deletes incoming emails during time off and sends an auto message offering alternative contacts or suggesting messages be re-sent when the employee returns. It mightn't have universal applicability - I'm not sure how Malcolm Turnbull might react if one of his emails to me was automatically deleted with a message returning to him saying, "I'll catch you later." I don't think it's one that I would try.

(LAUGHTER)

But, ladies and gentlemen, this is an important conference. ACCAN does important work. It's great to be a part of that here today, and I look forward to the results of the conference and working with you into the future to make sure that Australians remain connected and no-one gets left behind. Thanks very much.

(APPLAUSE)

JULIE McCROSSIN: Thank you so much, minister. I feel that last segment might have been your own heart yearning. I can't imagine ministerial staffers in Canberra ever being able to turn off. I want to commend you for your own Sunday morning work on Insiders with Barrie Cassidy. You handled the pressures of the interview so well. Did you notice the probe reference? As I understand it, there are now workers who are consenting to a little chip in the hand that enables them to go "ding" at various security options? We'll get it up, Wayne. We'll have it up on the screen in a matter of moments, because we're in a 24/7 environment. Seriously, please thank the minister for that thoughtful presentation.

(APPLAUSE)