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**Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN)**

**ACCAN Communications Consumer Congress**

**Wednesday, 13 September 2023**

Captioned by: Bernadette McGoldrick & Kasey Allen

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JULIAN THOMAS: So, it's now a pleasure to introduce our first speaker for the day. Now, unfortunately, Parliament is sitting right now, so she's not gonna be able to be with us in person, but we're very pleased that the Minister for Communications, the Honourable Michelle Rowland MP, has been able to record some introductory comments to lead us off. So, we'll start with the - it's over to the Minister on video. Thank you. (APPLAUSE)

MICHELLE ROWLAND: I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land we are meeting on this morning, the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation. I pay my respect to Elders past and present, and to all First Nations people here today. 2023 is a significant year. A year to stand united and say 'yes' to moving our nation forward. My thanks to Andrew Williams and ACCAN for inviting me to speak with you this morning.

Telecommunications are an essential part of our everyday lives. Staying connected is no longer a luxury. Effective and robust telecommunications are a necessity to support the very foundations of our education, work and medical systems. Like ACCAN, our Government remains a strong advocate for telecommunications services and consumer safeguards that are both accessible and fit-for-purpose. Whether it be navigating times of emergency and disaster or managing cost-of-living pressures, Australians must have confidence in, and access to, reliable services. That is why I have directed the Australian Communications and Media Authority to make an enforceable industry standard on financial hardship. I want to ensure that appropriate support is provided to those experiencing financial strain and that they stay connected through tough times. In my direction to the ACMA, I have made it clear that these rules need to come into force at the beginning of 2024. The cost-of-living crisis is impacting Australians now and we need this change as soon as possible. In saying this, I believe telcos shouldn't wait for the new rules to improve the way they approach these issues. I call on telcos to listen to stakeholder

concerns and do everything in their power to improve the support they provide to their customers and to do it now. Of course, industry is currently working to update and revise the TCP Code. This revision has been shaped by the detailed and thorough position paper issued by the ACMA in early July. I acknowledge the significant work that was put into submissions by ACCAN, the TIO, and others. I am confident we're on a path towards a better and more robust protections framework. Our Government will continue to engage with stakeholders on tangible steps to improve consumer outcomes. One of those is consulting on whether, and how, to establish a retailer registration scheme - something that consumer groups, the TIO and others have been advocating for, for many years. I'm conscious of the full range of possible reform areas on the table and I continue to give them my genuine consideration, including calls for reform of penalties, code enforcement, and ways in which we are able to provide valuable information at critical times. I look forward to working with you all on this important area of work. Not only are we working towards protecting vulnerable consumers through the consumer safeguard reforms, but are committed to ensuring Australia's communication infrastructure can stand the tests of our severe and often life-altering weather patterns. As part of the Australian Government's \$656 million Better Connectivity Plan, we are investing in measures to improve our disaster resilience. Through the plan, new and innovative solutions will improve the resilience of our nation's networks, in addition to current hardening measures. This will make us all better-prepared for future events. By the end of next year, I anticipate the full implementation and operation of the National Messaging System. This system will provide significant improvement in how emergency alerts and warnings are communicated. We recognise that many resilience and security issues are interrelated. We have commissioned work to be conducted by the Australian National University to bring together

industry, academia, and government to develop the first comprehensive telecommunications sector risk and resilience profile. From fire to floods, cyberattacks and terrorism, this profile will help us understand the interrelationships of different hazards and risks. It will help identify mitigation strategies and inform individual telco enterprise risk assessments. Many of the measures I have highlighted today were election commitments that have now been delivered. This time last year, I emphasised the importance of digital connectivity, affordable prices, and resilient networks. In relation to this year's theme, I look forward to working with ACCAN collaboratively on consumer communication issues so we can continue to deliver good policy to the benefit of all. Thank you.  
(APPLAUSE)