

MEET THE PRESS

29 SEPTEMBER 2013

INTERVIEW WITH ED HUSIC

KATHRYN ROBINSON, PRESENTER: This new plan, Malcolm Turnbull has said, is going to be delivered more quickly, and more cheaply. Surely that's a good thing?

ED HUSIC: On paper, it sounds fantastic. It's only when you dig deeper that you realise that the announcement that he made this week short-changes over 600,000 houses immediately. Because what he said before the election is he'd honour the contracts – the construction contracts. And this week he's said we'll honour the construction contracts where the build instruction's been issued. So unless there's actual – you know, the trucks are out there, rolling out the fibre, there's about 600,000-plus homes that are affected – with another 900,000, as you alluded to in your opening, on top of that – where the remediation work, the checking that the network was ready for the rollout. So, it could be between 600,000 to 1.5 million that are affected by this decision. And they'll lose out, because they will get slower broadband, and it won't be delivered to them faster. And we've already seen the delays happen from this week.

HUGH RIMINTON: Labor's difficulties in this though, surely, is that you set targets, you missed them. You didn't just miss them, you missed them by massive amounts. Where's your credibility, really, in slamming someone else who's trying to kick-start broadband again?

ED HUSIC: Well, we did – well, the other side of politics, Hugh – they botched broadband in the last Government. They'll do it again this time. We wanted to completely, instead of going through 20 plans, have one that worked right. And we had our game plan as to how we'd start the rollout. We were affected, too, by the biggest corporate deal we had to negotiate with Telstra, that took longer to actually bolt down. And we also had, in the form of the ACCC, come from left field, saying that they, through some of the decisions that they made, completely, basically, reformed the design process.

HUGH RIMINTON: But those surely should be anticipated. You knew you were going to have to negotiate with Telstra. You knew that, if you were going to put a monopoly thing in there, you're going to bring on the ACCC. So, I mean, the bare fact of it is that you either miscalculated what the issues were, or you understood them, but gave inflated expectations.

ED HUSIC: I think the benefit of hindsight on the ACCC – you know, you just can't – at that point in time, it caught everyone, actually – and most analysts themselves were sort of stunned by the degree to which the ACCC made that decision, on the points of interconnect, that forced a complete redesign. And so those things did take time. And where we also – and what I find amusing is we got criticised for both time and for cost. And where we actually worked, and took the time to play hardball with the contractors, because we didn't accept their initial cost that is they were putting forward that – now that involved a delay, but it also involved a saving as well. So – but ultimately we were able to, when we revised the targets, start meeting them – as was demonstrated this week as well through the leaked documents, that you could see that we were on track, too, for the next lot of targets. So –

JACKSON HEWETT: But the fact of the matter is you played hardball with contractors, sure. But if you look at what Kerry Schott said – a board member of the NBN – said that Mike Quigley, the head of the NBN Co was not remotely interested in logistics of laying down cable. Shouldn't you have acted sooner in stepping in?

ED HUSIC: Well I think – well, I mean, obviously Kerry Schott can speak to her own comments. But when you looked at – when the rollout started meeting its targets and also, importantly, the take-up too – I mean, we were hitting take-up rates that were better than ADSL. Over the eight years of ADSL, they were at 26%, and we were cracking well over 33%.

JACKSON HEWETT: But what were you told by other board members about whether or not Mike Quigley was the man for the job?

ED HUSIC: Okay, the board itself – like, what those discussions – you know, they occur in a particular context, which you don't necessarily ventilate in the public. And I don't necessarily come here with any of those, and I'm not in a position to be able to talk through those type of comments. What I can say is that we had a plan in place to make sure that 93% of homes received fibre, or the rest would get satellite or wireless. And this would be important not just in terms of from an infrastructure perspective, but from an economic and social one. We had a very good plan in terms of what we would do for infrastructure in this country – broadband infrastructure. The Coalition needs to get away from, you know, the plan that they're putting forward, that will be slower internet and will cost us more over the long run. And we would be perfectly happy if they started to involve more and more fibre rollout – which I think ultimately they're going to have to do anyway.

HUGH RIMINTON: On another subject – George Brandis was in the front of the prosecution against people like Craig Thomson. Do you see any signs that he did the wrong thing, in charging taxpayers – along with Barnaby Joyce – to attend a mate's wedding?

ED HUSIC: I – look, you always gotta be careful, and conscious of the fact that you're using public money, first thing. Me, myself, I'm a bit puritanical on this issue, in terms of travel allowance. And I'm very careful, and I think we get paid more than enough –

HUGH RIMINTON: But what about him? But what about him?

ED HUSIC: Well, we'll find out the details in due course as to what's gone on. But I think we get paid – I don't think any MP could complain about the money that they receive as a salary. And if they do have private expenses, in terms of flights and accommodation, they should meet them themselves. But if there's genuine government work, then obviously you've got room to deal with there.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Okay, we are out of time. Ed, thank you very much for joining us. We didn't get to Labor leadership – we believe, though, your vote is behind Bill Shorten?

ED HUSIC: Yes.