

## Australian telecommunications

# Private sector at arms' length

Canberra

THE Labour Government has been busily reversing the free-market bent of Mr Malcolm Fraser's policy on telecommunications in order to keep it in the public sector. The latest policy reversal is the decision on 15 November to retain full ownership of Aussat Pty Ltd, the company set up to own and operate the proposed domestic communications satellite system, Aussat, due to be launched in July and October 1985.

This decision has put paid to any hope of private sector equity in the satellite. The previous government's plan to sell off 49 per cent of the equity, chiefly to the commercial television networks, as soon as practicable (see *Nature* 297, 449; 1982) was provisionally endorsed by the new government in May this year. But it seems the government has now given in to pressure from the Australian Telecommunications Employees' Association which was against private ownership. The decreased deficit in the August budget has helped.

The government has also given Telecom Australia the option of taking up 25 per cent of Aussat's shares, which will strengthen Telecom's monopoly position by giving it participation in board decisions. Ironically, the satellite was originally seen as the first opportunity to set up communications and information services in competition with the public carrier, because by law Telecom has a monopoly over terrestrial microwave links, but this possibility now seems increasingly remote.

Aussat, operating as a self-contained commercial venture, would in theory lease its transponders to the highest bidder, so there may yet be private participation. But competition is likely to be closely regulated as a result of the referral by the Communications Minister (Mr Michael Duffy) to the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal of the decision on the allocation of the four high-powered transponders on the second satellite. (High-power transponders on the first satellite have already been allocated to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation for its homestead and community broadcast services, which will beam programmes directly to remote homes that have a 1-m reception dish.) Aussat's government and Telecom equity is likely to be entrenched by legislation to hinder another change of policy should the Labour Party again find itself in opposition.

In the meantime, the minister has hinted darkly that the first satellite may have been "oversold" in respect of services for the outback. While it may be possible for listeners to receive School of the Air or other city broadcasts, they will not be able to transmit replies without installing remote Earth stations at a cost of \$A10,000-15,000. In addition, direct satellite broadcasting by commercial

stations is no longer an option, that right being reserved exclusively for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. To prevent regional networks from going out of business, commercial stations will have to transmit to regional stations via satellite-scrambled signals which will be decoded by the local station and distributed through the network. Moreover, it now appears that the land-based digital radio concentrator system extending the terrestrial telephone network may yet prove to be more economical.

Another change of policy — the second in two years — concerns videotext services. Plans for Telecom to introduce videotext came to nothing when the then Minister for

Communications, Mr Ian Sinclair, handed over the market to the private sector in October 1981. Telecom was, however, given the go-ahead from Mr Duffy in November to sell the British Prestel system and ultimately to accommodate other systems, after an Australian Science and Technology Council report recommended that Telecom should establish a national videotext service.

Two extensive reports into ways of involving the private sector in telecommunications have also fallen by the wayside, one on telecommunications services in Australia by a committee under the chairmanship of Mr Jim Davidson of Commonwealth Industrial Gases and the second on cable television by Mr David Jones, who is the present chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal.

Vimala Sarma

## Laboratory animals

# Huxley attacks "animal rightists"

IN a stout defence of laboratory animal experiments, Sir Andrew Huxley, president of the Royal Society, last week let slip that he personally countersigns 1,500 applications a year by researchers to the Home Office — and that he sends about 100 of them back for amendment before adding his signature. This is not merely a proof that Huxley ("I do not use a rubber stamp") is a most meticulous holder of his office but also a reason why the Royal Society welcomes the British Government's plan to introduce new legislation on animal experiments, either in the autumn of 1984 or a year later.

Under the legislation, intended to conform with the Council of Europe's draft convention on animal experiments, Huxley (or his successor) and the presidents of the medical colleges will be relieved of their statutory responsibility to countersign applications for licences for experiments with animals. Huxley emphasized last week that most of the applications sent back for amendment had provided inadequate — "sometimes perfunctory" — information, and that only "once or twice" had Huxley doubted their ethical justification.

Huxley, in his anniversary address on 30 November, also complained at the disruptive activities of "groups of terrorist thugs" from organizations such as the Animal Liberation Front, who break into laboratories and abuse individual scientists, not only verbally. He went on to suggest that public opinion is often swayed by television and other "media", "perhaps to increase the circulation of a newspaper".

The essence of Huxley's argument last week was an echo of Edmund Burke attributed to Professor Bernard Williams, provost of King's College, Cambridge, and a member of the society's ethical working party: is the question whether "animals

have rights, or is it merely that humans have duties towards animals?" Huxley pointed to the difficulty of assessing the pain experienced even by other human beings, let alone animals, asked what importance can be attached to the painless killing of purpose-bred laboratory animals that otherwise would not have lived and pointed out that the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals kills 100,000 unwanted pet dogs and cats each year, ten times as many as are used in laboratories.

The Royal Society's view on future legislation, accepted by the British Government, is that there is no need to relax the "pain condition" which at present requires that animals suffering "severe pain which is likely to endure" should be killed immediately after an experiment except under special licence, even though the European convention will be less restrictive. According to Huxley, the explanation is that the commitment of the West German constitution to untrammelled scientific research accounts for the provision in the draft convention that such experiments might be permitted if judged to be of "exceptional importance".

In Huxley's opinion, while "urgent human need" (such as the need to understand and treat a newly emerged disease) might justify exceptions to the pain condition, the "advancement of knowledge" is not a sufficient reason so that "there are circumstances in which it is legitimate to restrict the freedom of scientific investigation". Huxley also said that in his opinion, the use of local ethical committees as a means of licensing experiments with animals, while successful in countries such as Sweden, was an alternative to the "well-tryed" British system based on the inspection of laboratories by the Home Office, and should not replace it.

John Maddox