

\$25 Billion Botch-Up Trade-off: A Cautionary Tale of Missed Innovation...

Ok so let's dream big together. Imagine if the powers that be had taken a more creative approach to the National Broadband Network (NBN) project. What could've been accomplished if we dared to reimagine this ambitious initiative from the ground up?

First, some background for those not fully up to speed on the NBN. Announced in 2009 under the Rudd government, the NBN aimed to replace Australia's aging copper wiring and HFC cable networks. The goal was to roll out new fibre optic connections delivering broadband speeds up to 100Mbps to Aussie homes and businesses.

This nation-building infrastructure project was initially costed at \$43 billion. The plan called for fibre-to-the-premises (FTTP) covering 90% of the population. But when the Coalition took power in 2013, they switched to a "multi-technology mix" model.

The new approach used a patchwork of technologies including existing copper wires, coaxial cable and fixed wireless alongside new FTTP. This change of tack was supposed to cut costs and speed up the rollout to completion by 2019.

Fast forward to today, and the NBN project has been plagued by delays and major budget overruns. Despite already spending over \$51 billion, the rollout is still ongoing.

Internet speeds continue to disappoint in many areas, with some urban connections stuck under 25Mbps. Coverage also remains sparse in numerous rural and regional parts of Australia despite initial promises of nationwide access.

Overall, the execution has left much to be desired. The current multi-technology model seems far from the most cost-effective or reliable solution. There were clear trade-offs in trying to salvage and upgrade pieces of the old network infrastructure.

But this patchwork quilt approach introduced major complexities and inefficiencies. Retrofitting new technologies onto legacy copper wiring and cable networks has proven difficult. Attempting to coordinate various companies and systems has added costs and delays.

Rather than trying to rework existing infrastructure, what if we'd been willing to start from scratch? This is where innovative options like low-orbit satellite broadband could've been game changing.

One provider leading the way is SpaceX's Starlink network. For those unfamiliar, Starlink offers high-speed broadband internet via a network of small low-Earth orbit satellites.

Speeds average around 50-150Mbps, rivalling or beating typical NBN connections. Latency of 20-40ms is excellent thanks to the closer satellite orbits. This makes online gaming, video calls and streaming very feasible over Starlink.

Starlink's service costs around \$139/month plus \$600 upfront for hardware/installation. For 11 million Aussie households, providing 1 year of Starlink would have cost approximately \$25 billion total.

Compared to the NBN's \$51+ billion and counting, that's savings of over \$25 billion! Not to mention Starlink could have achieved faster peak speeds and lower latency for many customers.

Centralising on one private provider like Starlink would also have lowered infrastructure costs and sped up the rollout. No need to coordinate between multiple companies and technologies.

There are risks relying on one sole provider - technical failures or company issues could leave customers without alternatives. But Starlink's satellite network offers redundancy and excellent uptime of 99.95% so far.

Given the ongoing problems achieving affordable universal access with the multi-technology NBN mix, a radical rethink could've been warranted. Starting fresh with a new unified satellite network may have better met the original goals.

The key is that Australia needs fresh thinking and a willingness to collaborate with innovation leaders in the private sector. Clinging to legacy systems and old ways of doing things is leaving us lagging.

By daring to reimagine ambitious national projects like the NBN from the ground up, we open up possibilities. If we put our heads together, what bold new innovations could we achieve?

Just think - with creative partnerships between government and industry we could've made the nationwide ultrafast broadband dream a reality for less money.

Kids could be video chatting across the globe, experiencing the world without borders. Businesses could thrive without geographic constraints. The potential is limitless if we demand better and embrace new ideas instead of remaining stuck in the past.

I welcome your thoughts on reimagining the NBN! How might we re-envision ambitious national projects if we dared to start from scratch? What possibilities could collaborations between government, academia and innovators unlock?

Let's dream big, Australia! We have so much potential if we're willing to think outside the box and not be afraid to try new approaches. Our future depends on it.

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