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Australia
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The Hon Alexander Downer MP
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Inadequate telephone service in Echunga

Dear Mr Downer,

In March of this year I wrote to you to express my concern about the manner in which Telstra handles faults in the Echunga area. As I stated at that time, it is evident that Telstra is not in a position to uphold the Customer Service Guarantee, and instead finds it cheaper to pay compensation than to maintain an adequate maintenance crew. Your office, in particular Kate, was very helpful in addressing these issues, but an isolated case is difficult to address.

Today I find myself in exactly the same situation as in March. After heavy rain, all five of my telephone lines have failed. Telstra acknowledges the fault and states that they will have a linesman on site no later than close of business on Tuesday, the time by which by law the fault should be repaired. If this occurs, the only way that they can uphold the Customer Service Guarantee is in the extremely unlikely case that the linesman can repair the faults immediately. I have registered complaints with Telstra, but I have little hope that they will have any effect. I am maintaining a web log of the incident at <http://www.lemis.com/grog/Telstra/outage-jul2003.html>.

As I wrote in March,

The linesmen with whom I spoke were unanimous that the entire cable is in need of replacement. Telstra proposes to replace only 150 metres of cable. There is already one temporary ("E71") repair a few hundred metres further down, and the linesmen found the line quality so bad that they expected further failures either side of the current repair site.

I am sure you will agree that this situation is unacceptable. The damages that I and others have experienced must run into the tens of thousands of dollars. There is every reason to believe that the cable will fail again in the near future, and based both on Telstra's past performance and my observations of their reaction times, I must assume that the next time it happens, we will lose the use of the phones for a similar period.

Once again, I ask you to investigate this problem and prevail upon Telstra to im-

prove their service and to consider performing a proper repair to the entire cable, rather than to individual pieces. Such a repair should also replace the old pair gain systems. I also believe that it is in the Government's interest to review the Customer Service guarantee: the penalties are so low that it is not in Telstra's interests to maintain the customer service guarantee in all cases. Also, the real problem with service is not voice lines, which can be adequately replaced with mobile telephones, but with faxes and Internet connections.

In connection with the customer service guarantee I would like to note that after the last fault condition, Telstra did not honour even the minimal penalty that they are required to pay by law: I had three lines down for three business days and another two lines down for five business days. The total refund due for this outage would thus have been 19×12 or \$228. In fact, Telstra only refunded a total of \$108: they refunded nothing at all for two lines which were down for five days. They also did not refund anything for diverted calls, nor for mobile phone charges during that time. I complained about this once, but the Telstra staff person did not seem to understand the issues, and in view of the minimal sums involved, I can't be bothered. I'm sure you'll agree, however, that this is not the intention of the legislation.

Sincerely

Greg Lehey