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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,

I am writing to you as my Federal Representative to bring to your attention the intolerable state of affairs in the Echunga telephone service. 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.

At 9 am on Thursday, 20 February 2003, all five telephone lines to my house in Echunga failed. They remained down for six days. I work from home and am heavily dependent on telephone services, so I was unable to work at all during this time. As a result, I had ample time to investigate the problem. The complete information is available on the World-Wide Web at <http://www.lemis.com/grog/Telstra/>, but in summary:

- I was by no means the only person affected. A total of 74 telephone lines were affected, including a number of other commercially used lines. I know that there are pair gain systems on at least some of the lines, so the real number might be much higher.
- The first Telstra serviceman arrived on site on Friday afternoon. According to the customer service guarantee, the fault should have been repaired by that evening. Linesmen confirm that they are so understaffed that even a “fast track” repair can seldom be started on the same day as the report.
- The telephone service was restored with a temporary repair. After the initial repair, I had a further failure on two lines which lasted nearly two days, so that my phone service was only completely restored on Friday afternoon, 28 February.
- At the time of writing, the original problem has still not been repaired. The estimated date of a “final” repair is 12 March.
- This is not the first case of cable damage in this area. There have been three cable faults in the last five years, all within a kilometre of each other, and each have taken about five days before service was restored.
- 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.

I ask you to investigate this problem and prevail upon Telstra to improve 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.

Sincerely

Greg Lehey