

- Editorial -

## Too much to read

Bastion Point's ocean access plan is poles apart from the national broadband network in cost, size and importance. Yet the two projects share an unlikely symmetry - both are unlikely to have received the thorough appraisal they deserve. Two minor incidents suggest that legislators are not always on top of the technical detail involved in large public expenditure.

At a recent meeting of the shire council, Cr Peter Neal stated that he had not read the Buchan Report on Bastion Point, which helped the council decide to proceed with Option 3B. His comments were reported in this newspaper on November 12.

In Canberra last week Shadow Treasurer Joe Hockey asked a question of the Prime Minister which *The Australian Financial Review* described as "simple but obvious". Had she, asked Mr Hockey, read the business case for the National Broadband Network and, if so, why couldn't everyone else? Ms Gillard dodged the question, prompting Opposition members to interject "You haven't read it; \$43 billion and you haven't read the report."

Cr Neal's admission and the PM's non-answer confirm a fact rarely mentioned; that legislation affecting the lives of all Australians in municipal, state and federal jurisdictions is likely to be passed for other reasons than thorough mastery of the facts.

On the broadband plan, federal MPs can hardly be blamed for lacking detailed awareness of its contents. They were denied access to the 400-page report until late in the parliamentary sitting, and even then the information was scrappy, with some sections censored. Yet this is a plan whose breadth and complexity is said to be bigger and more expensive than the Snowy Mountains hydro project.

## Flood of documents

In all its forms, the practitioners of modern government suffer from information overload. Decisions requiring expert knowledge and practical wisdom (which are not the same thing) are made by elected members who find it difficult to grasp complex details of planning, engineering, finance and social benefit. No-one can be an expert in every field of knowledge. The problem is exacerbated by the sheer volume of material that must be read.

Governments generate torrents of paper, despite dreams of paper-less offices thanks to computer technology. Projects large and small proceed only after one or more committees have reported, and committees are by nature prolix with statistics, graphs and commentary. They are the most prodigal producers of printed reports known to man.

As well, reports are mind-numbingly hard to assimilate. The combined product of 15 House Standing Committees and 10 Joint Committees - a small sector of the federal parliamentary apparatus - suggests that federal MPs cannot possibly vote intelligently on every piece of legislation before them. At present 123 bills are before the Parliament. All of them affect the quality of our lives.

Municipal councilors must scale similar mountains of paper work. They must ration the time spent on briefings with shire staff and public appearances. If they are wise, they also consult ratepayers whose local knowledge and experience are essential to good policy. Developing council-to-people relationships is invaluable, but is no substitute for mastering the detail of complex shire projects.