

Australian government cost-cutting results in death of 10-year-old boy

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The death of 10-year-old Sam Boulding on February 6 has highlighted, in the most tragic manner, the social cost of Australian government cuts to vital services. The small boy died in the arms of his blind mother, Rose Boulding, after suffering a severe asthma attack at his family home near Kergunyah, a town in remote northeast rural Victoria.

The boy's parents were unable to call for medical assistance because their telephone was out of commission. For 10 days the family had been imploring the government-controlled telecommunications giant, Telstra, to repair it. Rose Boulding's partner Barry Nugent was obliged to leave her to cope with the stricken child while he ran to a neighboring property to phone for an ambulance. The time involved proved to be fatal.

Deprived of her partner's assistance, Ms Boulding was forced to rely on her other children to inform her of Sam's vital signs. Throughout the ordeal she frantically asked the children what color the boy's lips and fingernails were turning.

Had a phone been available, Mr Nugent would have been on hand to assist Ms Boulding in monitoring the boy's symptoms. Medical personnel could have advised the parents by telephone what steps to take until an ambulance and paramedics arrived. In remote areas, the practice of "talking through"—that is, giving emergency medical directions over the phone, has proven to be crucial in saving lives.

A tearful and distraught Ms Boulding told the media this week that on the fatal day she had held Sam in her arms and promised, "I will not let you die. Then he held my hand and just said 'I love you' and then he died," she said.

Both parents unequivocally blame Telstra for the death of their child. Rose Boulding said: "They

[Telstra] are not to blame for Sam having asthma, but they are to blame for us not having every medical chance to save him. The day after Sammy died a Telstra representative came out and said sorry."

Nugent said he was angry by the lack of concern shown by the communications provider for the needs of rural clients. "I should have been with my boy and the paramedics could have talked us through. Rose could not see his vital signs."

The asthma attack occurred just hours after the child's mother had traveled into Kergunyah and called Telstra from a public phone to again plead that her exceptional circumstances be taken into consideration and for a speedy restoration of the phone service. Besides Sam, Ms Boulding has two other children suffering chronic asthma and she was caring for her daughter who has a broken leg. Telstra finally repaired the phone following the child's death, but only after intervention by local police.

On February 14, Communications Minister Richard Alston directed the Australian Communications Authority (ACA) to conduct an inquiry into the Boulding incident. Releasing the terms of reference, an ACA spokesman said the investigation was seeking—amongst other things—to establish whether the failure to provide adequate maintenance to the Boulding home was an "isolated incident" or symptomatic of something "systematically wrong" with Telstra services.

Alston is already fully aware, however, that the tragic incident is the outcome of the ongoing and savage cost cutting that has been carried out by the Howard Liberal government to prepare for the full privatisation of the once totally publicly-owned communications carrier.

In March 2000, the government was forced to shelve the privatisation of the remaining 50.1 percent of

Telstra in the face of growing opposition. Howard's coalition partners in the National Party feared an electoral backlash in their rural-based constituencies, where farmers, small business-people and workers were already seething over the deterioration in basic services such as postal, banking, health and education. A three-man inquiry was hastily set up to assess whether communication services in rural and regional areas fulfilled the government's Customer Services Guarantee.

The committee's findings revealed serious shortcomings. Alston responded by promising that privatisation would not proceed until services in rural and regional areas reached the required standard. From then on, the situation was supposed to be closely monitored.

In reality, the entire exercise was a smokescreen. The government's priority has never shifted from placing Telstra on a commercial footing, no matter what the impact on rural communities, in preparation for privatisation. Telstra's two-year agenda, announced in March 2000, of axing 10,000 more jobs from its 51,000-strong workforce, with up to 2,000 from rural and regional areas, has proceeded unabated. And these cuts came on top of the destruction of 26,000 Telstra jobs between 1996-97 and 2000.

In June 2000, under the guise of improving rural services, Telstra's CEO Ziggy Switkowski announced the creation of a separate business unit called Telstra Country Wide (TCW), boasting that the move would mean regional clients would have "faster local response from Telstra", including "fixing faults". Instead, the creation of TCW allowed Telstra to shed thousands of full-time skilled technical staff and outsource maintenance and basic installation work to local tradesmen employed on a "needs basis". Complex work was to be carried out by the remaining handful of qualified staff located in larger regional towns situated many miles from the more remote districts. Technicians were required to spend hours traveling to fix breakdowns, guaranteeing long delays in reestablishing services.

Services in many rural areas are now on a knife-edge. Even under normal conditions residents suffer long delays for installations and repairs. When the inevitable happens, and natural disasters such as floods and bushfires occur, maintenance staff cannot cope, and the

whole system begins to collapse.

The Boulding tragedy is a case in point. Telstra claimed that the reason it could not respond immediately to Rose Boulding's pleas for help was that the area had recently experienced bush fires, causing breakdowns and a backlog of repair work. The truth is that the elimination of ongoing maintenance, due to staff cuts, is causing constant equipment failures. The problem with the Boulding's telephone was the breakdown of cabling, which is now commonplace due to lack of maintenance.

A leaked Telstra report, tabled in federal parliament last September, pointed to a backlog of some 100,000 ETI faults (cabling faults) nationally awaiting attention, with over 10,000 of these located in Victoria. According to the Communication Electrical and Plumbers Union Victorian branch, (CEPU), staff cuts across the state have resulted in Telstra doing "patch ups" to overcome cabling problems. In some cases, the company runs cables above the ground to temporarily overcome faults in submerged cabling. The union claims there have been instances of temporary measures remaining in place for up to five years, exposing the cables involved to further damage.

The crisis is not restricted to rural areas. Thousands of complaints over long delays and breakdowns are registered each day in densely-populated urban areas. Heavy rain and severe storms can lead to residents being left without phone services for days and even weeks.

The tragic death of Sam Boulding was unnecessary and avoidable. It was the direct product of the process—pursued by successive Labor and Coalition governments during the past two decades—of subordinating essential services, and the needs of ordinary people, to the dictates of the market.



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