

Connecting Victorians

Labor's plan for Information Technology and Multimedia

Community Networking Engaging Regionalism Conference

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One of the highlights of the recent State Election was the use of the Internet in the political arena. Major political parties and other interested parties released a prolethora of information online.

On September 18 the Victorian people had available to them more information than ever before about the various parties platforms, and opinions on the major parties than ever before – in theory.

In fact the different styles and use of the Internet affected the ability of many Victorian's to access this information. So while some group's such as Labor, and former Liberal Advisor come Independent Candidate Stephen Mayne used web sites that were designed so that they could be accessed by all web users, the Liberal Party were more interested in presenting style – Jeff.com - over substance and accuracy.

Jeff.com was a great looking website which created broad interest in politics on the net but it was also memory and bandwidth intensive, demanded the use of the latest browsers and plug-ins.

Jeff Kennett said after its release that he would have to update to a new high end computer to play the grand prix game.

The defeat of hype and style at the ballot box offers the opportunity for Victoria to carve out a new policy framework for Information Technology.

Since 1992, Victoria's Information Technology agenda – while clearly better than the Federal Liberal Governments efforts - has been criticised as being too focused on "launchism" and short term projects.

Labor is committed to building on Victoria's achievements to date and carving out a new agenda that is about people, about connecting Victorians.

LABOR'S VISION

Victorian Labor's vision for Information Technology is about making sure that all Victorian's share and are active participants in the 21st century information society.

It is about ensuring that, unlike the Liberal Government, the focus of Labor's Information

Technology initiatives is firmly on people as citizens, not customers, as active participants in our democratic society.

The use of information technology is now generic to all commercial activity, industrial production, government administration and service provision as well as social and cultural activity.

Labor's challenge is to make sure that this growth continues with sustained job and wealth creation.

Labor's vision for information technology is:

"Information Technology as a tool to empower and enable the creativity and productivity of every Victorian; with an overall aim of enhancing Victoria's global competitiveness and enriching the quality of life for all Victorians."

Victorian Labor's Information Technology Challenge is to foster new industry and new politics.

Building the Learning Society

Labor believes that information technology literacy is important as written and numerical literacy.

The basic public policy issue related to Information Technology and Multimedia is similar to that which confronted government leading up to the 1872 Victorian Education Act which sought to bring literacy and education to all Victorians by making schooling free, secular and compulsory. At the time there were detractors who believed that the working class did not need literacy or that it may undermine society. For supporters, literacy was a form of empowerment as well as providing important economic benefit.

Similar to literacy in the 19th Century, the policy objective for us now should be to give everyone computer access and the necessary computer skills. Equally, there will be supporters and detractors of the move towards an information-based society and the notion of universality of participation in this revolution.

The Learning Society will be a whole of society project that will see interlocking networks and education services that are based on the Internet delivered to Victorian schools, communities, libraries, workplaces and the home. These services will support teaching, learning, training and administration.

For the first time we have the opportunity to link all our learning institutions, cultural institutions, and training providers. More so we have the opportunity to link them purposefully to an agenda for developing the learning society. To achieve the learning society these links must extend to our homes, the workplace, hospitals, the street corner in the same way that public utilities like the telephone are now universally available.

As technology advances, links are becoming faster. Connection to networks including the Internet is already possible through computers and it will soon be possible to

connect through televisions, and even phones. This coupled with high speed networks offers enormous potential for education, just as it does for business and other sectors of society.

The Learning Society Initiative is a project that will be the infrastructure and service for networked lifelong learning. It is the Learning Society that can make available to learners the riches of the world's intellectual, cultural and scientific heritage.

A Victorian Labor Government will develop and implement the Learning Society plan to:

- ◆ Work towards ensuring that every VCE student has 24 hour a day access to Information Technology;
- ◆ Reform IT funding arrangements for schools and school communities;
- ◆ Assist schools to properly support their students and communities IT needs
- ◆ Support and develop the learning applications required to support IT based learning.
- ◆ Negotiate with the private sector to supply all members of the community with an e-mail address;
- ◆ Ensure that all teachers and mentors have the training in not only information technology, but also the skills to manage and incorporate information into the curriculum to achieve the best learning outcomes.
- ◆ Seek the establishment of community based homework centres that will support school students as well as adult learning.

Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure

The issue of regional telecommunications and regional access to the Internet is a major unresolved problem.

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that the digital divide between metropolitan and regional users is greater than in other comparable countries, such as the United States.

The sale of Telstra and the Networking the Nation program have done little to introduce real competition and quantifiable improvements to the situation in regional Victoria. There is a demonstrated need for State Government to take a pro-active role in encouraging the development of regional telecommunications infrastructure.

Accordingly a Labor Government will raise the level of information technology infrastructure throughout regional Victoria in its first term. To achieve this a Labor Government will allocate \$16 million to encourage improved information technology linkages throughout regional Victoria.

A Labor Government will conduct an audit of the VICONE contract with AAPT with a view to reducing the gap between city and country Internet costs from the current outrageous levels.

Public Access to the Internet in the Community

Bridging the digital divide is a key challenge facing the Victorian Community.

This issue is similar to the issue of literacy in the 19th Century when it was recognised that economic and social development demanded broad literacy, not just a small number of literate specialists.

Labor is willing to confront the issues about access, government support and involvement, regulation, and universality in relation to the Internet and other manifestations of multi-media.

Information networks are a form of power; the power to communicate and to get knowledge. They are potentially very democratic. The technology is here now to make it available to everyone. A policy framework is needed to make that happen.

A Labor Government will raise the level of public access to the Internet in the community by continuing to fund the Skillsnet Program for three years.

Public Access to the Internet in Town Halls

Many local communities suffer from a lack of public spaces for Internet access. One of the most cost effective ways of boosting access will be to give Local Government Authorities the funding to place terminals at service centres and other civic venues.

A Labor Government will provide funding to Local Government Authorities to provide community based access to the Internet at town halls and council service centres.

A maximum of \$5.25 million will be allocated over four years from 1999-2000 to 2002-2003 as additional funds within the Department of State Development recurrent budget to fund this initiative.

Government Net Access Centres

With much government information on the Internet, including the ability to pay bills to government authorities, it is essential that there are dedicated public spaces where Victorians can freely access this.

A Labor Government will establish Internet Access Points where Victorians can access online government information and conduct transactions with government agencies online.

A Labor Government will allocate \$1.75 million over three years to establish these Net Access Centres across Victoria through additional funds within the Department of State Development recurrent budget.

Multilingual Access to the Internet

Victoria has a diverse multicultural community, with a large number of languages being spoken and written by Victorians. As yet the Liberal-National Government has provided few online services in languages other than English. In a multilingual society such as Victoria this situation is intolerable.

A Labor Government will seek to encourage investment in Victorian projects developing multilingual content and Internet publishing.

A Labor Government will also ensure that all Government information and applications online will be multilingual.

Information and Multimedia Centre

The Information and Multimedia Industries are one of the drivers of economic and social change. To ensure that this change benefits Victoria and encourages the growth of Victorian indigenous IT businesses Victoria needs an effective Information and Multimedia Centre to offer assistance to micro, small and medium businesses and content creators.

A Labor Government shall work to enhance and upgrade VICNET to become Victoria's premier Information and Multimedia Centre so it will:

- ◆ focus on projects and activities for SME's, the community sector, content creators, information workers and cultural organisations;
- ◆ develop projects and activities focussing on multimedia and industry applications in emerging sectors, especially the cultural, design and information sectors;
- ◆ be located in an accessible shop front location;
- ◆ run community awareness activities through offering internet access from the shop front, general information services on Victoria's Information Industries, run regular multimedia exhibitions from its shop front and run regional industry awareness seminars in regional Victoria.

New Politics

The Information Revolution has a profound effect on all aspects of modern society - and none more so than on our representative democracy.

The Information Revolution has the power to foster democratic participation in government, alternatively to facilitate a new tyranny of the elite - the information rich - information poor divide. Victorian Labor is committed to preventing this from happening.

The very ability to participate in society will become more reliant on information technologies, like e-mail and the Internet.

The new politics of the 21st century will reassert the values of representative democracy. It will reassert the centrality of citizenship and reject the notion of the citizen

as a client or customer. New Politics is about active citizenship.

In the 21st century information will not only flow to the governed but back to the governors. It will be more difficult to control the flow of information and hence the power that information disposes will be distributed in the hands of the many, not just the few.

Victorian Labor will not hesitate to embrace this challenge, to encourage the flourishing of an online civic society that has the potential to revitalise democracy.

A Labor Government will actively encourage the public discussion of government policies, business of parliament and other issues online by Victorian citizens.