

Politicians betray rural industries

One wonders why so many rural industry bodies, such as the Beef Council, consistently act against the interests of their members and Australia. If it were not for the vigilance of Sydney University professor Linda Weiss, government and these industry bodies would lower our quarantine and trade standards without a murmur ("How safe is your food? Chew it over", October 1-2).

With bird flu rife in countries on our northern borders, documented BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy or Mad Cow Disease) outbreaks in the US, the risk of foot and mouth from recent imports of Brazilian beef and outbreaks of citrus canker, our quarantine laws should be strengthened.

Instead the federal government includes a BSE side letter in the US free-trade agreement which commits Australia to accept inferior American BSE standards, thereby placing at risk our existing trade markets and our own food safety.

The US make no allowances where its national interests are at stake and neither should we.

This is the same political betrayal of Australians and our national interest that underlies the recent sale of Telstra and the destruction of so many of our rural and manufacturing industries through so-called free-trade and national competition policy.

With all major political parties supporting these policies, will it take a national health crisis before this treachery is abandoned?

Margaret Menzel,
Ayr, Qld.



Hollow health vow

Neither Premier Peter Beattie nor any other politician will fix Queensland's health system because they do not realise that the government is the problem ("I'm staying put: Beattie vows to fix health", October 4).

Politicians have no place in health care (as was the case in Australia for about 170 years) and they are now proving they have no answers for the people they are elected to look after.

As a famous comedian said: "If you think health care is expensive now wait until you see what it costs when it's free."

Geoff Layton,
Milton, Qld.

to terms with its frivolous consumption patterns rather than be obsessed with finding cheaper alternatives.

Nigel Carney,
Armadale, Vic.

Lines of defence

When we invested in Telstra 1 and 2 shares at an extremely high price we understood that we were buying shares in a company that owned the copper line networks, which would be a huge source of revenue in the future, like road tolls.

Some correspondents now claim that Australians paid for the copper lines, but we reimbursed them at a very high cost. We feel we should be able to charge other telcos a market rent for those lines plus CPI, as otherwise their shareholders are getting a benefit at our expense.

If this is not forthcoming we shareholders should take a class action against the federal government to refund us a substantial proportion of our cost price, plus interest.

Gordon Martin,
Rose Bay, NSW.

\$150m solution to improve digital TV

Former Telstra chief executive Ziggy Switkowski's comments ("Ziggy confronts Packer and Murdoch", October 6) show how little he (similar to so many others in positions of authority) actually understands digital TV in practical terms.

It is not merely a question of providing an \$80 set-top box to each household and closing down analogue in 2009, as this would still render several million televisions instantly inoperative. Many households have multiple TVs and a separate set-top box is needed for each one.

There is, however, a simple solution. It is for the government to provide free of charge the more than 10 million basic but quality set-top boxes that would be required to satisfy every applicable TV in

Australia. This would cost about \$150 million on a direct ex-factory import basis and include distribution. This cost estimate has been checked internationally and can be substantiated. Such a low cost is possible because of the enormous size of the order for a single model of set-top box without unnecessary extras. Immediately, digital coverage would be improved in areas where power is kept down to avoid interference with analogue.

This is just one of the many benefits in store for television owners with a fast-track conversion in 2006.

The government issues paper, Driving Digital, says analogue transmission costs for the ABC and SBS are more than \$50 million per year and we can assume the commercial TV networks' costs will be comparable. The paper mentions

increasing difficulties and costs for broadcasters with analogue over time. So closing analogue with free set-top boxes in 2006 instead of many years later will provide rapid overall operational cost benefits plus we will all have the great advantages and value of the freed analogue spectrum made available, a spectrum previously valued in the billions if it were to be auctioned.

Realising the value of this freed spectrum-space was one of the many justifications for going digital in the first place. There will be some readily solvable adjustments with a 2006 close down of analogue but the same factors will have to be dealt with irrespective of the close-down time selected.

Alex Encel,
Richmond, Vic.

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