

The cabal that connected Canberra



Within hours of the federal budget hitting the Internet in May, more than 1,200 computers around the country had accessed it. After two weeks, up to 7,000 'hits' had been recorded.

For people like Kerry Webb from the National Library of Australia and Tony Barry from the Australian National University, Australia's first online budget was like the first step on the moon. As key players in a 'cabal' of Canberra academics and bureaucrats with a passion for the Internet, Webb and Barry have managed to convince a somewhat reticent bureaucracy to get its information out to the world.

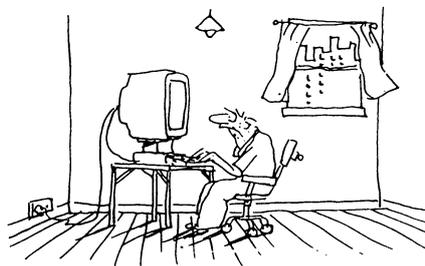
As a result, it is now possible to access the once impenetrable Parliamentary Library, trawl the offerings of the National Library, find out about the Department of Social Security's new community information network and even look at the Defence Department's strategic plan. The pages which appear under the banner of the Commonwealth Internet Reference Group (CIRG) are part of a six-month trial between the Federal Government and the Australian National University, currently into its third month.

While the information available now is a little on the 'skimpy' side (you can't call up the text of a particular government report just yet), before long it will be possible to access Hansard, government bills and note papers, annual reports, departmental reports, and library catalogues. Links have been established to State and local government servers, where they exist.

Given that the first meeting of the CIRG happened as recently as November last year, it's quite a miracle that so much information has already

become available. That's where the enthusiastic 'cabal' enters the picture. Deep within Canberra's labyrinthine underbelly, this small group of determined infobrain managed to move the bureaucracy from anti or unaware to pro-Internet in a matter of months.

One of the cabal - Tom Worthington, a senior policy adviser to the Defence Department and director of the community affairs board of the Australian Computer Society, refers to it as a battle between the 'internauts' and the bureaucrats.



The internauts just wanted to do it. The bureaucrats thought it should wait until a report had been written.

A key 'internaut' was Tony Barry, librarian, physicist and director of the Centre for Internet Access to Scholarly Information at the ANU, regarded as a guru in Canberra IT circles. As a pioneer of electronic publishing, Barry was convinced that what Australian academia had managed to achieve in several years of research and development was long overdue within government. After considerable frustration at trying to convince senior public servants to get their departments on-line, Barry produced his own spoof government home page for the World Wide Web and included links to the few operating government pages - one of which was based in Tasmania.

Not long after Barry's home page appeared, CIRG was set up amid calls for action from a number of Minis-

ters. With the Broadband Services Expert Group nearing the end of its deliberations and following Keating's call for a 'clever nation', the pressure from Ministerial level started to be applied.

A keen operative from the Department of Finance, Ian Barndt - one of the cabal - offered to be the CIRG convenor and spread the word within State bureaucracies to get involved.

The National Library stepped in and offered to provide a web server for government information, having been working on its own Internet project for some time. And so, the Australian Government Home Page was born in March, 1995 - just five months after CIRG's initial meeting.

From an initial group made up of officers from the Departments of Social Security, Defence, Finance, Primary Industry, Environment, the National Library and a representative from the WA government, CIRG now represents every federal agency including the Parliament and provides links to State governments and overseas government pages.

Tony Barry thinks the Australian government offerings on the Net are second only to those of the US Congress which puts 'terabytes' of government information on the Net, including updates on the progress of legislation and the full text of government reports and inquiries.

Tom Worthington believes the CIRG experience has rewritten the textbook on how to get things done in the bureaucracy. The anarchy of the Internet, he says, has challenged public service culture. Rather than the bureaucratic method of 'don't do it, or at least don't be the first', the Internet method is 'just do it'. □

To access the Australian Government pages on the World Wide Web call up:
<http://www.nla.gov.au/oz/gov/>