

Wake-up call for a country left behind

By Keith Newman

The Government's deregulated, hands-off stance on telecommunications and information technology may have backfired, judging by two documents circulating the corridors of power.

The first report making its way to high-tech minister Maurice Williamson is still being edited by the minister's IT advisory group and is due for publication at the end of this month.

It is intended as a wake-up call, claiming we risk becoming an amusement park among nations with our fumbling efforts to change to a knowledge-based economy. In draft form it said Government must have a role in moving us from dependence on commodity-based exports to embrace e-commerce. Several options were suggested: become interventionist, an active participant, a facilitator or a champion for the new economy.

Co-author of the draft with the working title New Zealand's Voyage Into The Knowledge Economy was Victoria University professor Howard Frederick, who also gave evidence in a second report that hit Mr Williamson's desk last week.

The Waitangi Tribunal finding on Maori claims to the radio spectrum was an equally damning indictment of the way things have been handled from a Maori perspective. It claims the Government is in breach of the treaty and should have been consulting Maori over the sale of radio frequencies, mainly being sold to multinationals without any real benefit to New Zealand.

It asserts the Crown has treaty rights to regulate resources in the public interest, not convert those rights into private property, even if, technically, it is for 20 years. Maori

are drawing together a national spectrum body to negotiate compensation and an equitable share of the spoils.

In the meantime the value of the spectrum will go up, the technology will get more mature and New Zealand will be handicapped once again as the

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ture first and everyone else is still learning from our mistakes.

Brain-drain statistics in high-tech industries tell the real story: we're losing far too many of our smart people. A lot of noise is made about new technology fundamentally changing the business world, but we haven't

Just maybe, hands-off minister Mr Williamson has been doing some hard thinking after his recent trip to Finland and Ireland, both of which actively support and promote high-tech industries as major export earners.

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rest of the Western world wires up for the new economy.

New Zealand has been the great social experiment, and technology beta test site for the world, for too long. We deregulated key infrastruc-