



NORTHERN TERRITORY
***of* AUSTRALIA**

Dr TANZIL RAHMAN MLA

Member for Fong Lim

HANSARD EXTRACT

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTIONS

WEDNESDAY 27 NOVEMBER 2024

This extract is taken from the Official Hansard of the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory

I have seen some of these notices, and they boggle the mind of any long-term Territorian. They were expecting landholders to do compliance to eradicate all gamba plants within 10 or 15 metres of the boundary by the end of February.

Some of those listening to or reading this may not be aware, but February in the NT is the middle of the monsoon. I do not know how they were expecting landholders to get out, because if you drove a tractor onto that land at that time of year, you would be bogged to the axles. You would not be going anywhere. You would be walking around pulling it out. You cannot drive a LandCruiser, as it would get bogged. Unless you had a hose about three kilometres long for some of these properties, good luck. That is what they were doing.

Instead of helping landholders and supporting them to manage gamba in a productive way, they went around using the big hand of government to whack them and say, 'Here is a fine. You must do the impossible; walk around in the middle of the monsoon and try to pull out the big clumps by hand, or we will fine you. We will use the big stick of government to perform enforcement. We will not look at helping you by increasing the budget for this useful program.'

I wanted to bring that to the attention of the Assembly because many people in the Litchfield area I spoke to were so disappointed. In 2020 the former Chief Minister was going around making such a big song and dance—Boundless Possible, the comeback capital of the Territory. He said the Gamba Army would save us from the green bulldozer of gamba grass. All we got was a few public servants in a shiny car driving around writing tickets, which was not useful.

I thank the Member for Gwoja for bringing this motion to the House. We are all Territorians who love and support our environment. It is one of the great things about the Territory. We all love fishing and getting away on the weekend for a camp. We need the environment, and we need it to be maintained for future generations but also need to balance that with sustainable development.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Madam Speaker, it has been a great day for bipartisanship. What a pleasure to be in the Chamber on a day when we have been able to work constructively across the floor to try to execute a positive outcome for the Northern Territory in relation to the preceding motion.

I welcome the motion and thank the mover for giving us the opportunity to think about environmental protections, specifically recognising the importance of safeguarding the Territory environment for future generations and in support of our Territory lifestyle. We can all agree we want to live in a Northern Territory where we can enjoy our natural environment. There is nobody here who wants to wantonly destroy what we have in terms of landscape and amenity.

We are pleased to reaffirm support for our critical environmental protections. What is there to say? We are not seeking to tamper with our protections; we are seeking to maintain our environmental status quo. We are seeking to break the status quo in relation to our economic malaise. The two can happen at the same time. There is no reason for us to fear sustainable, economic development under the auspices of all or any of what we have been proposing to this point—likewise, that this motion seeks to have us commit not to undermine our strong legislative and regulatory framework to environmental protections is a welcome development.

The question of my political leanings is a recurrent fixation of the opposition, so let me deal with it for the benefit of contextualising my contribution to this debate. Let me freely declare that whilst I was a member of the World Wildlife Fund at age 10, I am not a member of the Greens Party. I do, however, applaud the sole member of the crossbench who has consistently provided evidence relying on actual data and research as opposed to the opposition who thus far demonstrated no such attention to detail in any regard. There has been lots of talk about evidence and data well into our second sittings day. Having beseeched opposition members to look into something in practical terms, there still is not a fact or figure of substance, just obfuscation, motherhood statements and grandstanding. I find it flabbergasting that opposition members could get to this point with so little information to rely upon in building all or any of their arguments.

Meanwhile, the Member for Nightcliff has logical consistency to her arguments with what she provides by way of evidence and data. That said, the key is that I respectfully agree to disagree with the Member for Nightcliff's conclusions and her substantive assessment of a range of issues. It is possible to look at the same set of information and respectfully disagree.

We are looking at the information and data, whereas the entirety of the opposition chooses to be wantonly blind to the reality of our demographic and economic decline and, indeed, the details of what we are putting forward in relation to our legislation on improving economic prospects.

This year would have marked the 20th year of my association with the Oxford University Centre for the Environment. That is where I was based before I came here. I mention it because it is relevant to establishing bona fides on this debate. The insinuation and assertion is consistently that we are all pro-development monsters over here who are out for all our monopoly money buddies, desperately trying to dig up every tree with every bulldozer at our disposal.

The fact is I was based at a place which is one of the world centres for research on climate change, carbon capture and storage and climate modelling. Even prior to my association with that place I was based—fortuitously, on the basis of the excellent public schooling education I received under a strong and stable CLP government for 27 years—at the University of Sydney in the school of geography where, again, sustainable economic development, mining sustainably, protecting our waterways, looking after our built environment and urban planning are matters of deep consideration and have been of great interest to me over many years.

One of the places associated with that School of Geosciences at the University of Sydney was the Australian Mekong Resource Centre which is renowned as a place of research, discussion and debate on development and environmental issues in the Mekong Delta region. Why do I mention the Mekong Delta? Because we are talking about water and rivers which we are all concerned about.

It is not just me who wants to protect our waterways; it is our many members who would be devastated at the loss of the capacity to catch a fish in the Northern Territory. We are not looking to exploit our natural resources to the detriment of the Northern Territory; we are looking to sustainably develop our economy and provide the regulatory frameworks with which to do so.

The point is that opposition members have no unique claim to being defenders of the environment, nor can they assume any specific moral high ground on issues pertaining to environmental protection. It is a shared and common aspiration for us to sustainably develop the Northern Territory whilst not damaging our environment. For that reason I reiterate that I welcome the motion and opportunity to debate it.

As I pointed out only yesterday in the reflections that this House had on the 50th anniversary of this Legislative Assembly, one of the ministers who spoke to provide context on our history was Hon Daryl Manzie. He weaved in noteworthy remarks regarding the foundations upon which our economic growth was predicated, including laying the preconditions for sustainable resource development, being in gas and mining generally, and providing the regulatory frameworks that have to date ensured we have been blessed to create economic growth using mining and resource extraction without compromising our lifestyle and environmental protections.

We are fortunate to have had virtually no incidents of catastrophe in the Northern Territory over our period of development. People have fought for protections and for development, and they had the opportunity to have their say. People will continue to have the opportunity to have their say under the auspices of this government and the frameworks we provide.

There have been developments since the 1980s, including many positive ones provided by both sides of government in the Northern Territory. That is great and how it should be. Frankly, I am delighted that Labor did useful work in this regard, alongside driving the economy into the ground over the last eight years. It is fortuitous that we have accelerated an agenda that may have been dated in some regard and that we have a foundation upon which to sustainably develop the economy.

I have personal experiences in and around decision-making in the major project space in the Northern Territory. This is key because it is clear that the opposition and the crossbench to a large extent have a real lack of understanding of what came out of the Territory Economic Reconstruction Commission report about the creation of the commission structures, under its auspices to streamline and fast-track major projects within a regulatory environment that was still robust, to provide major project delivery on any front.

The reason we have had such poor execution and delivery on major projects is that, undoubtedly, duplication exists, as does a lack of clarity on decision-making authority. We have a series of public service structures that were put in place over the eight years of the last government which resulted in nobody being able to make a decision definitively or pick up the ball to try to run it into the tryline. That is part of the reason we do not have any major projects to show for ourselves, other than works in progress.

The Territory Coordinator proposal is genuinely a sensible, good-faith, well-foreshadowed attempt to address a large part of this. The now Chief Minister introduced a private member's Bill in relation to the Territory Coordinator more than four years ago. There have been two parliaments' worth of discussion in this area,

and a great deal of thought has been put into this. I believe it to be a sensible good-faith attempt to address a lot of these issues.

One of the great concerns in the House is about gas. We are talking about the gas industry in broad terms without much reference to detail. I implore you to read the document in my hand, which is the October 2017 ACIL Allen Scientific Inquiry into Hydraulic Fracturing in the Northern Territory, otherwise known as 'The Economic Impacts of a Potential Shale Gas Development in the Northern Territory'. I bring this up because lots of people have an opinion that they are positive about this document, but I am not convinced many people have read it cover to cover. I will be honest with you, I have not read it cover to cover yet either, but on the basis of the decisions that we have to make in this place it is incumbent on everyone in this House to know the detail. It is clear that people are picking bits out of it as and when it suits them to try to defend or discredit the idea of sustainable economic development in the Northern Territory.

The contrast of opinions on it reflects that it has been poorly read, but I confess that I am not the person who sourced this document. I took the opportunity to meet with people from Frack Free NT, because they wanted to voice their concerns in relation to a range of these matters. I am not the only one; many of my colleagues are making time to consult and hear a diversity of opinions. Sometimes we agree; sometimes we disagree, but we are trying to respectfully take on all the opinions and assuage reasonable concerns.

I met with Frack Free NT, in good faith, which provided me this document, which has provided me something to do over Christmas. It is disappointing that other institutional advocates for the environment have clearly compromised their own integrity in recent times by trying to fudge the facts and figures and/or the narrative. It is timely and serendipitous that today in the *Australian* there is an article titled, 'Serpent and a total Croc: emails expose collusion'.

I have friends who are anthropologists and scientists who work in related fields. When people fudge the figures, it discredits their work as well. It is about making sure we look at robust work, read it, take it on board and can balance sustainable economic development with environmental protections.

I confess that the other favour Frack Free NT did for me the other day was drawing to my attention this briefing note produced by none other than the Environmental Defenders Office. This briefing note on the role of the Territory Coordinator, dated 31 October 2024, is a great piece of work.

Interestingly, by the time I finished reading it I was much more comforted by the idea of the direction we are taking and the Territory Coordinator model. It points out a range of things that do not seem to be coming up in this debate at all in relation to the real scope of the Territory Coordinator's powers and the fact that it is not a superhuman Wizard of Oz but a statutory body that will be informed by other arms of government. We are vesting in a statutory body the capacity to finally make a decision to move things forward. I read nothing in this that suddenly horrified me and made me think we are dismantling democracy. We are trying to streamline a process and create efficiencies in a system that clearly is gridlocked and replete with inefficiencies.

A key thing to note is how the Territory Coordinator model will work with federal laws. It is clear that the Northern Territory Government does not have the power to modify, exclude or override Commonwealth laws which apply to projects. These include approvals under a range of Commonwealth legislation.

We are seeking to do our part of the heavy lifting of promoting sustainable economic development whilst protecting our environment. We are not seeking to autocratically dictate what should happen, where it should happen and why it should happen or to discredit any subject matter expert who contributes information.

I encourage you all to look at this document. By the end of reading it, I thought, 'This is great; these guys are on the right track.' We can respectfully agree to disagree, but we need to be looking at the same information. It is not possible to have these debates meaningfully unless we are willing to hear a plurality of voices and respectfully debate the issues.

In relation to the Territory Coordinator, the Chief Minister has been fair in providing opportunity for people to express concern, dissent or offer support. The consultation and review process has been clearly and publicly articulated, and there is every reason to believe if we follow that process, everyone will have the opportunity to contribute to the debate and these matters will come before this parliament again.

I am supportive of the proposition and motion put forward, and I see no logical inconsistencies with being supportive of this government's efforts to try to streamline economic activity in this polity.

My position on energy security is in the public domain. As far as I am concerned, we have an abundance of sun and gas, and we should seek to make the best possible use of both of those things.

Recent announcements by our Deputy Chief Minister point to our commitment to continuing to support solar technologies as part of a holistic approach to ensuring energy security. We recognise that large-scale solar generation supported by adequate battery storage is an important component of a stable and cost-efficient electricity system.

I am especially encouraged by the detail provided by the minister in recent weeks on our renewable energy hub. Our commitment to that renewable energy hub involves the co-location of up to six large-scale solar farms. Those farms would be capable of generating 200-odd megawatts of renewable energy alongside a battery energy storage system.

Mr CHARLS: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Pursuant to Standing Order 43, I move that an extension of time be granted to the member.

Motion agreed to.

Dr RAHMAN: The renewable energy hub will be capable of generating 180 to 210 megawatts of renewable energy, alongside a battery energy storage system, all on a single site. This is proximate to existing network infrastructure. That site is 940 hectares of Crown land located on the west side of Finn Road, just 19 kilometres south of Palmerston and four kilometres north of Berry Springs. The electricity produced in that hub will be fed directly into the Darwin–Katherine grid, supplying clean and renewable power to Territory households and businesses.

We are trying to balance things without turning this into an ideological stomping ground. We are utilising our natural resources, which are sun and gas in abundance. It makes good sense for us to have mature debates about utilising all of these in pursuit of energy security for the Northern Territory.

I am saddened by suggestions that we are all climate denialists and haters over here. To hear the word ‘hate’ is frankly nonsense and unfair. The reality and the rhetoric of climate change decision-making is different.

The fact of the matter is that the 1.5-degree targets on climate change and temperature change were long ago abandoned by the real decision-makers globally and top-tier scientists involved in those processes. I have not been to every COP, but I have been to climate change forums where these matters are discussed openly, frankly and transparently with a view of ensuring we do not destroy our planet while trying to do the right thing by future generations.

Multilateral spaces within which we have these discussions about trying to mitigate global climate change are the forums where these meaningful conversations should be had. You will find increasingly in multilateral spaces that the conversations are leaning towards pragmatism. It is not the overarching statements or headlines coming out at the end of COP summits that are of most interest to people; it is the important sidebar discussions where pragmatic solutions are made to try to mitigate climate change and create sustainable economic growth.

It is a reality that this government has chosen to no longer have a specific climate change portfolio. I do not think there is anything problematic in that decision insofar as the last climate change portfolio was not making great leaps and bounds in mitigating climate change in any practical way on any scale.

To what effect do we have a ministry—to what end and purpose? It makes no sense to create unnecessary administration and bureaucracy. We have not dispensed with caring about the environment or wanting to protect the Northern Territory’s natural resources simply because we have organisationally restructured the public service to ensure that there are better reporting lines and greater clarity for decision-making.

The Territory Coordinator model is an expansion of precisely that. It is the continuation of a model that has been in play from a time when we had ministers with high-level subject matter expertise surrounded by advisers with even greater expertise to the devolution of that model, creating greater powers in the public service and greater layers within the system to speed up processes whilst adding people to the equation, like commissioners. It is a model now where we are trying to put everything in a one-stop shop to make sensible decisions about cutting through paperwork and tape of all forms.

Climate refugees were referred to as well. As someone who has worked in both the climate and refugee space, we are playing pretty fast and loose with some of those terms. Yes, I am concerned about climate

refugees. However, I will be honest with you: I am concerned about them in Bangladesh, not the Barkly. Those are the places that will have people who are imminently facing loss of life and livelihood because of the downstream consequences of global climate change.

We have much more pressing socioeconomic matters to address in our remote and country areas of Australia and the Northern Territory specifically before we start worrying about creating climate refugees from south of the Berrimah Line. A modicum of perspective is warranted. What we have had to a large extent today—not entirely but to a large extent—is a bit of activism for activism's sake. We have had grandstanding; a lazy conflation of issues—specifically by the Labor opposition—fearmongering and an extremely lazy, if well-intentioned, voicing of concern.

I note that other members of the House on the crossbench raised some valid and well-informed concerns. I respectfully disagree with some of their conclusion. However, I find it galling that we keep hearing this nonsense from the Labor opposition about the model we are putting forward trampling democracy and ensuring that nobody can make a decision or be heard, with all-powerful Wizard of Oz-like figures who will determine the fate of the entire jurisdiction.

The Territory Coordinator is a statutory office, not a person who will singularly make decisions. The sad reality is within government there is considerable red, green and, probably most importantly, beige tape. The proof of those obstructions existing is work previously conducted within NTG. My Cabinet colleagues and former Labor members can dig up that work if they so choose. They will find that work on all the regulatory hurdles in this place has been buried, as with a range of other problematic information produced by good public servants in large numbers over the last eight years.

We will ensure that the gas industry is safe and strongly regulated as its presence grows in the Northern Territory. The onshore petroleum industry is regulated under Territory and Commonwealth laws, and we will ensure that continues to happen in line with community expectations. Do not forget just how many regulators are involved in the safe regulation of the industry. We have the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority, the independent Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority, the Environment Regulation Division, the Water Resources Division, NT Bushfires, the weeds unit and the Heritage branch.

The reality is we have a regulatory framework to govern the onshore gas industry, and it is designed to ensure that petroleum activities are carried out in a way that reduces risks to a minimum. Through a combination of risk assessments and safety standards, environmental management and community engagement, those regulations will minimise potential hazards to the environment, public health and workers whilst allowing for responsible development of the petroleum industry.

We are here to talk about the environment writ large, which is bigger than just one industry, person or set of laws. You must look at the entire landscape, and there is a lack of faith in or appreciation for Commonwealth environmental legislation and oversight.

I return to where I started in noting that it has been a great day for bipartisanship, in my opinion. Therefore, I welcome the motion. Further to that, I, along with my CLP colleagues, look forward to continuing to support the NT's framework for environmental protections and promote models for sustainable development.

Mr MALEY (Agriculture and Fisheries): Madam Speaker, before I get started I pick up on one point that the Member for Fong Lim forgot when he was talking about the government regulating the gas industry.

The gas industry will regulate the gas industry because it has big companies, and they have an environmental licence—a social licence—to look after the environment and their workers. They know if there is an environmental issue they will be held to account by the government and their investors. Their investors are looking for companies that will have a well-managed corporate structure that will look after the environment and, of course, make money.

The gas industry occurs not only in the Northern Territory but also across Australia and the globe. Investors in this industry are looking for investment across the globe, so we are in a competitive global market. I have been to the Beetaloo and spoken to general managers and major investors in the gas and mining industry, and they all raise the same thing with me. They care about the environment. They want to make sure their industry moves forward while looking after the environment and their assets because—I am not sure if you have seen a fracking fleet, but it is a lot—there is a lot of money and technology involved in that fleet. The industry looks after itself.