



NORTHERN TERRITORY
***of* AUSTRALIA**

Dr TANZIL RAHMAN MLA

Member for Fong Lim

HANSARD EXTRACT

**POPULATION GROWTH &
DEMOGRAPHIC DECLINE**

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Education is a pillar of anybody's success. Whether it is through school, training or adult education, the work our educators do day-in and day-out across Territory daycares, preschools, schools, middle schools and high schools and educators who work in the field of vocational education and training often create critical pathways for employment for our school leavers and trainees. We say a huge thank you.

I know that there is a lot of movement across the NT from school students who may move from school to school. Our educators are always flexible and adaptable in providing a student the best possible opportunity in education and always cater for the circumstances of the child in the school.

I remind the Assembly of wording that I shared yesterday through the General Business day motion on education: we must remember that the children and the young people who are going to our schools come with a rich diverse knowledge and experience to add value to that environment of learning and to thrive in that environment.

Our educators do a phenomenal amount of work to harness that. I know it is challenging at times. I have had the experience of being a teacher—a high school teacher at that—but the success at the end or that 'ah-ha' moment when they get it is invaluable and precious to see. When you see a young person sharing their moment, helping to support another young person's learning, it is an amazing thing to watch and know that you are creating this benefit of a journey and a cycle of lifelong learning.

I truly believe, even as adults, we should not forget that love of learning. There are a lot of people in here who have been learning a lot in the last two weeks as adult learners. We should not forget that our children need to flourish to truly ensure the Territory will be a strong and flourishing jurisdiction in this country. We cannot leave them behind or ever forget the importance of education.

The people who support that journey—our hardworking teachers, principals and, as we have seen in award categories, the school support staff—who also connect to the community provide another level of support that is not necessarily always classroom based. It is another level of support for our schools, staff and students so that our communities can engage in the best possible way, and when there are challenges and tricky points in someone's learning day, they get that extra support.

We thank, acknowledge and appreciate all our Territory educators across the NT. We do not just want to honour you tomorrow on World Teachers' Day; we honour you every day you work and particularly the days you are not supposed to be working, like your weekends or after hours. We know you are always thinking about those kids and often still putting in your own personal time and effort to make sure young people in your classroom have the best option for the most quality education you can offer. We thank you for that.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Madam Speaker, many of the problems we seek to address in this House will take time and patience. They also require cooperation and a better shared understanding of the underlying dynamics of the problems. With that in mind, I will speak more about our population growth, demographic decline and loss of human capital in recent years.

When I grew up here and left for university interstate, I honestly believed that by the time I returned, there would be half a million people, we would be a state and there would be a David Jones and a Myer. That was what I had been told for time immemorial.

It is sad for all of us that things have gone backwards. One of the reasons things have gone backwards is that we have dropped the ball on cultivating, securing and prioritising our human capital. As I have said, this is part of the reason I have returned, to help us with skilled migration and population growth. I am encouraged that some of these bigger-picture issues may have the possibility of being addressed by the new government.

I am not here to politicise the facts tonight; I wish to put information on the record for the benefit of everyone because these are discussions we will return to in different ways, and it is useful for us to have a shared frame of reference.

Our population growth over the last 40 years is wildly differential. In the pre-2000 period, the Northern Territory used to outpace the rest of the country on population growth. From about 2012 onwards it starts to fall dramatically.

Years ago Arthur Calwell, an immigration minister, popularised the phrase 'populate or perish'. That is not dissimilar to where we are now. We are in real terms declining in population and viable workforce, and it affects all the areas we want to work in and all the services we want to provide. It matters because as the TERC report from 2020 stated:

Until such time there is a significantly larger base population, the Territory will continue to rely on interstate and overseas migration to fill ... jobs

Our overseas migration stocks over the last 40 years have also been wildly differential. Why it matters is that overseas migration has become very low, and if population growth is our goal we must start thinking about how to attract, retain and develop migrants from overseas because Australia's immigration policy is its de facto population policy, so the Productivity Commission has said for years.

What about the other components of population? They are natural increase, which is births minus deaths, and interstate migrants. There was a time in the last 20 years when everyone was growing less but still growing, but the most salient part of that picture is net interstate migration which has been negative for a long time in the Northern Territory; this is our resting state, essentially. We need to think about how to mitigate that because we cannot turn it around overnight, but if we want to populate the Northern Territory with a skilled workforce to support all the areas we want to support, we must understand that there is no other way to do that than to look to overseas skilled people. This requires the right conditions here for them to come back to.

People often think in the last 10 years things were significantly better in periods that correlated with our gas boom. However, what you will find—this is not drawing a causal relationship or a correlated one—is in that period our population stocks got even worse and our net interstate migration was even lower because we started to create substitute capacity in our economy by having so much FIFO work, agency workforce labour and reliance on temporary migration mechanisms in place of permanent migration mechanisms.

We need to band together to change that story. If we turn this into a political football as well, there will be no-one left to work, live or grow up in the Northern Territory. Treasury data shows that negative interstate migration has been our resting state and that our population growth is trending downwards on every metric.

Treasury was hoping it would be 1.1%, then it turned out to be 0.9%, and now it is 0.8% year on year. Deloitte Access Economics, which is the most bullish forecaster, will tell you it needs to be somewhere around 1.4%. For us to get anywhere near 300,000 people in this place, we must grow in excess of 2.5% population growth. That means we have to do things radically differently and will have to cooperate, or this will be gridlocked and there will not be enough Territorians to make the Territory realise its potential.

Charles Darwin University has done good work on this. I urge you to look at the work done by Professor Andrew Taylor, who has pointed out that our periods of positive interstate migration correlate with when we build things. In the early 1980s when we were building new suburbs like Karama and Palmerston and the then Northern Territory University; in the mid-1990s, when we were building Cullen Bay which created headroom in the market for people to move up and on; or again when we had projects like Conoco Phillips when we prioritised opex and capex in the same place, we grew our economy and population at the same time. Those are the periods we had positive interstate migration. The last time we had it was for a perverse reason—a bunch of Canberra bureaucrats here because of the Northern Territory intervention.

If we want to grow our population, we have to start thinking about how to make this an attractive place in every regard, and we are trying in different ways to create those conditions. We will need to work together on this. It is important to understand this is not how it always was, though. In the 1980s we were growing at 30% population growth, which elapsed over the decade. In the 1990s and 2000s, we had 20% population growth. These are rough figures.

It is only in the last decade that the economic policy choices made by both sides of government resulted in us having less than 5% population growth, and that is a failure of economic policy. I am genuinely proud to be part of this government, which is facing up to this reality at least, creating ministries to look at this seriously. These issues are being taken seriously. I do not want to politicise this, but the last government was not interested in facing the reality of our demographic decline. There was wilful blindness about it, and it was a serious problem. It is part of the reason none of these projects are off the ground, because we frankly do not have the workforce to support them.

Migration is not a substitute for investing in the skills of Australians, but the Australian Government's White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities said 10 times over that well-targeted migration can complement local skills while contributing to productivity growth. That is why it is important for us to have a sensible discussion in the Northern Territory—where we all love and care about Laksa festivals and multiculturalism—to genuinely invest in multiculturalism when it comes to migration. We need to be welcoming people, laying out the welcome mat, integrating and settling them and making them long-term Territorians.

Our plans to create new housing supply are important in that regard, because even if we can find all the people in the world, where will we put them? We need to create housing stock, and we are incentivising new supply. That is a critical part of this.

I could go on about this for a long time, but I wanted to put down foundational data tonight so that we might have a think about it collectively, going forward, noting that this discussion will come up in a lot of forums, I imagine, over the coming months.

We know that for overseas and interstate migrants and Territorians, different things have to be addressed when we diagnose the situation and look at what needs to be done to attract, retain and develop our population. The single most important metric when it comes to attracting overseas migrants is the lure of permanent residency. We want to get the right people here and then we want to make sure, to retain them, that we settle them. Then to develop them, we integrate them.

When it comes to interstate migrants, we know that liveability, opportunity and upward mobility are the most important things. If you cannot provide a better deal here than elsewhere, people will go back interstate.

Finally, for Territorians, we need to reinforce our existing population because, unless we can improve lifestyle and provide opportunities for growth, there are not salient reasons to stick around.

I appreciate your indulgence at the end of a long day and fortnight on these issues. I sincerely hope we can work together on sustainable population growth to underpin sustainable economic growth for the benefit of all Northern Territorians.

Mrs HERSEY (Katherine): Madam Speaker, it is the day before World Teachers' Day. Today I attended Darwin High School with the Member for Fannie Bay for a Year 12 high achievers' function. It was lovely to see about 60 kids were in the list of high achievers.

Thank you to Jill, the principal, for the invitation. Attendees also included the Year 12 Assistant Principal, Nick Ergos; Aaron Dalglish, Year 12 coordinator; Erin Jovanovich, Year 12 coordinator; and Sophie Butler, NTCET coordinator.

They had an amazing cake that was large, which a couple of the students helped to cut. We all gathered around for a photo. If anyone needs a cake, Jimjam's Cakes was amazing; they did a good job.

It is important to reward these high achiever students who are doing Year 12 and let the Assembly know who they are: Suzi Akumu; Lara Borbon; Kosta Chatzipapas; Feifan Chen; Jennifer Choi; Bill Cotter; Andrea Critchley; David Dela Vega-Dela Pena; Paris Diamandopoulos; Joel Durrheim; Rebekah Ebin; Raymond Eliorda; Nadishka Fernando; Gabriella Francis; Nathaniel Freeland; Tahlia Freijah; Abbey George; Mia Gilbert; Niyaz Hasan; Laura Henssen; Hyunwoo Jeong; Naomi Jia; Afiya Khan; Toby Koefoed; Tom Kuswadi; Cassia Latz; Mari-Dine Laubscher; Zoe Lim; Muxi Lin; Anna Lindsay; Lily Lewellyn; Pheebi Lockley; Taufiq Lubis; Rupendren Manimaran; Harriet Matthiesson; Vincent Mondol; Vic Nguyen; Gerome Nguyen; Svanik Pande; Larissa Pandey; Mahi Patel; Leo Perry; Aidan Pevely; Lily Purdon; Maaz Qasim; Atif Saeed; Pedro Sanches Luiz; Jorge Saroukos; Amby Shinmarh; Hrithik Singh; Panayioti Siskamanis; Myles Smith; Frencessca Sparrow; Gayatri Sureshbabu; Rangchak Tripura; Shane West; Phoebe Wiltshire; Jia You; Evelyn Zheng; Karis Zheng; and Haoyang Zheng.

All of those students were enjoying a lovely lunch that was put on by the school for them as high achievers for their year. I said to them, 'Remember it is World Teachers' Day tomorrow, so be nice to your teachers'.

I give a shout-out to and congratulate all of the amazing educators across the Territory. Happy World Teachers' Day for them tomorrow. In the next sittings I will go through those who won the awards

I will be back in Katherine dropping off goods to all of the schools in my community. I look forward to seeing them and being home after being here for a couple of weeks.

This year's theme is 'Valuing teachers' voices'. We value our teachers' voices. Our CLP government acknowledges the effort put in by teachers and supports them in a safe workplace. We will bring back school-based policing to intervene and stop crime.

I again thank all of the teachers and support staff across the Territory who work hard every day in shaping the minds of young people. Congratulations to all who were nominated for the awards tomorrow. I will be in