



NORTHERN TERRITORY
***of* AUSTRALIA**

Dr TANZIL RAHMAN MLA

Member for Fong Lim

HANSARD EXTRACT

COMPLEMENTARY PATHWAYS
MIGRATION

THURSDAY 27 NOVEMBER 2025

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

The Territory population is estimated to have grown by 1.4% to 264,377 persons in 2024–25, above the 0.7% forecast in the 2025–26 budget. This is because under this CLP government people want to live, work and invest in the Territory again. We have seen stronger net overseas migration and stronger net interstate migration expectations relative to the 2025–26 budget.

Population growth is also expected to be stronger in 2025–26. The Territory's population growth is forecast to be 1.1% in 2025–26, slightly higher than the 1% forecast in the 2025–26 budget. Again, it is supported by stronger net overseas migration expectations. Over the forward estimates population growth is expected to average 1.2% per annum as the Territory's migration flows stabilise. This is in line with the 2025–26 budget.

Overall, the 2025–26 Mid-Year Report shows an economy that is strengthening, a population that is growing and net debt that is decelerating under this government's responsible fiscal leadership.

I commend the 2025–26 Mid-Year Report to the Assembly.

SPEAKER'S STATEMENT AusMusic T-Shirt Day

Madam SPEAKER: Given that it is AusMusic T-Shirt Day, I will allow members to put on a T-shirt this evening if they feel the need to—as the Member for Nightcliff has.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr EDGINGTON (Leader of Government Business): Madam Speaker, I move that the Assembly do now adjourn.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Madam Speaker, of all the events I have attended in Parliament House, none has brought me greater joy than the event that was held here last Tuesday, which commemorated the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the first East Timorese refugees to Darwin.

It is a salient reminder of the value of humanitarian migration and its contribution towards the NT historically and ongoing. I say ongoing because one of the people I bumped into there was Maria Albion, who is the Principal at Stuart Park Primary School, whom I have mentioned on a number of occasions. She told me that night something I did not know: she was amongst those first cohort of refugees in 1975 who came here from East Timor.

In the spirit of this being our final sitting day, tonight I share a related story of hope for everybody in this Chamber and for all of us this Christmas. Before I came to this place I was an academic, as many of you know. My area of expertise was competitiveness in the global market of skilled migrants. I returned to Darwin a couple of years ago to try to put some of my subject matter expertise to good use.

I did not return to become a politician; I returned to be a senior public servant, and my remit was to lead and focus the Northern Territory Government's strategy on migration, population and talent acquisition because we are experiencing demographic decline, albeit encouragingly, our population growth figures are starting to stabilise.

The reason that has been happening for a number of years, and the argument that I prosecuted, was that we have been competing—valiantly but potentially in vain—against a global market we cannot compete with. Noting also that Australia itself is not necessarily winning in the global race for talent, we are also competing against other states and territories in Australia for immigrant labour, and historically the problem has been that we were unable to be more attractive than a lot of other states and territories on a level playing field.

In order to fill our sink faster than it drains, as it were—that is, achieve substantive population growth—I argued that we need to find ways to slow the rate of drainage and evaporation with social and economic policy levers, if you like, and to fill our sink using new hoses, finding new inputs to fill into the system.

I had a small amount of success in trying to address those matters between August 2023 and 2024 and worked under the auspices of a population policy working group in the public service. For the first time in the Northern Territory's history, we introduced population policy into the administrative orders under the auspices of the Chief Minister, recognising it was something that needed to be dealt with.

Most importantly of all was the work I progressed under the auspices of the federal government on something called complementary pathways migration. That is really what I want to speak about tonight.

Complementary pathways migration was first countenanced by the Global Compact on Refugees, the 2018 UN agreement designed to improve the worldwide response towards the needs of refugees. There are 33 million refugees in the world, and less than 0.5% of those refugees are resettled using existing mechanisms.

In April 2022 a global taskforce was established to expand these complementary pathways mechanisms, with representatives from UNHCR, the international migration organisation; Fragomen, the world's largest global law firm dealing exclusively with immigration; the governments of Canada, the UK, Germany and Australia; and NGOs connected to humanitarian labour pools.

It put together a model which enabled skilled people, who just happened to be refugees, to take up fast-tracked permanent migration quickly and legally, recognising them for their talent and easing tough labour market access by harnessing private sector involvement for administration.

In the Australian context an NGO called Talent Beyond Boundaries is the key organisation that helps to work on complementary pathways. In conjunction with the federal government, it came up with the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement, which has been hiding in plain sight for years.

In a short space of time we used it to create a competitive advantage for the Northern Territory to stimulate population growth. We brokered an arrangement to job match and bring 100 skilled workers and their families permanently to the Northern Territory to help us with our workforce needs. This is not some humanitarian sidebar; this is a global program that some of the biggest players in the corporate world utilise. Massive companies use it across the world. For example, it is how the NHS in the UK has been procuring nurses.

In Darwin we were trying to get 100 workers to create momentum towards critical mass because we recognised that we needed momentum in the capital city first before moving on to other places like Alice Springs. We did outreach with the private sector and proponents, including INPEX in the gas industry and Arafura Nolans in the mining industry, which we hear about all the time.

Our first goal was to work with healthcare. In late 2023 we had the first tranche of healthcare workers coming to the Northern Territory to work and build something here. My crowning achievement in my time in the public service in that regard was multi-stakeholder pledge 07521—which you can google on the United Nations Global Refugee Forum site—which reads:

The Australian Federal Government, in partnership with the Northern Territory Government, Talent Beyond Boundaries and Fragomen, pledge to facilitate 100 job matches by June 2024 under Australia's Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot, providing a pathway for skilled refugees and displaced persons to live and work in the Northern Territory, Australia. The partnership is a practical example of how businesses and business leaders can harness the talent of refugees to address skills shortages, creating a win-win for displaced people, employers and the wider community.

That agreement should have brought 100 skilled workers and their families to the Northern Territory, but, unfortunately, the former Labor government did not see the merit in it. That is why I left my job and entered this place to progress that work and try to address our demographic decline.

I am proud to announce that although we could not get 100 workers and their families here and that most of the deal evaporated and fell apart, the last four of those people—a renal nurse, an emergency care nurse, an oncology nurse and a hospital pharmacist—and their families from other countries had their permanent visas issued. In December, God willing, they and their families will arrive in Darwin to build a new life, contribute and hopefully be like the Timor-Leste refugees who came 50 years ago.

It is a small thing, and I am sad we could not realise the full totality of the program, but I am hopeful that it may be the beginning of something where we not only open our hearts but also use our heads to try to turn around demographic decline in the north of Australia.

Some of the biggest players in the world have said things like:

'Consider refugees, undocumented labour migrants, as a source of labour. With the growing worldwide turmoil poised by political conflict, economic distress and climate disasters, this group of individuals offer skills and opportunities. Some governments are ahead of the curve and are already creating concessions to fill labour gaps. Further, complementary pathways, though still nascent, can match displaced talent with employers.'

That was a quote from the Fragomen report provided the world over to some of the biggest corporates.

The former minister for immigration wrote to the former Chief Minister of the Northern Territory in the last government to say:

'The Northern Territory Government's involvement in the pilot represents an exciting opportunity to be involved in a novel migration concept at the outset, which could over time have real and lasting benefits for NT employers, the NT economy, as well as the wider NT community. The partnership is a win-win for refugees and displaced people and for the NT as it gains highly sought-after skills that boost the economy and enrich society.'

Complementary pathways is not a silver bullet, but it is an opportunity. It is one of the many opportunities I would like us to seize when we are trying to rebuild the Northern Territory economically and demographically.

The Department of Home Affairs was onboard and willing to hear us out if we could demonstrate independent evidence of successful execution of this pilot. I am hoping that although the original deal has lapsed, we will still be able to demonstrate that we can grow the Territory by utilising bespoke migration mechanisms in the north of Australia. We need to do so; it is vital for north Australia and national security, and it is a win-win for all involved.

There are global eyes on this program still. The World Health Organization, the UK Government, the global forum on refugee mobility and the University of Sydney and ANU are still auditing the work we are doing. We need to accommodate these people and settle them into the Northern Territory. Housing will be a challenge.

I thank the Minister for International Education, Migration and Population and the Minister for Health in particular for allowing me to continue this work in earnest and supporting me wholeheartedly. They could have killed the program, and they did not. I am grateful that they have given it room to run. I likewise want to thank our partners with Talent Beyond Boundaries, Jemma Bailey and Louna Ghawi; and at Fragomen, Teresa Liu and Jannet Balite.

Whilst migration is not a substitute for investing in the skills of Australians, well-targeted migration can complement local skills while contributing to productivity growth. We need dialogues not just on size but on the composition of the migration program.

Just like those first East Timorese refugees to Darwin, I pray that in another 50 years there will be another story of hope and triumph that we will be able to tell and that we will welcome these people with open arms and open hearts.

DISTINGUISHED VISITOR
Hon Peter Chandler

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Honourable members, in the gallery we have the former Member for Brennan and minister in the NT Government, Peter Chandler, and his wife Robyn. Welcome Peter; good to see you here. For those who do not know, Peter is part of the band, Peter, Paul & Jacko. They play wonderful music, and he will be playing at a special event for us in December.

Members: Hear, hear!

Mrs FINOCCHIARO (Spillett): Mr Deputy Speaker, today is the last day of parliamentary sittings for 2025, and I wish everyone in the Chamber a safe and merry Christmas.

It has been a big year, and I thank my parliamentary team, who have been incredible to work with over the last 15 months of government. We have just achieved our first full year in government; it is a 12-month period that we can be proud of.

This year we have pushed through more reform than the Territory has seen in a generation, and we have stayed true to our belief of reducing crime, rebooting the economy and restoring our beautiful lifestyle. To the entire team, I say thank you so much for all your support, hard work, dedication and tenacity, making sure we are delivering the change that the Territory needs and deserves.