NORTHERN TERRITORY
of AUSTRALIA

Dr TANZIL RAHMAN MLA

Member for Fong Lim

HANSARD EXTRACT

NATIONAL ANTHEM IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

TUESDAY 3 FEBRUARY 2026

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

PARLIAMENT HOUSE, DARWIN NT 0800

sandwiches and fruit supplied by council members and volunteers. I thank the Katherine Town Council for putting on such a great celebration for our national day, with members taking part in many of the activities.

Last week was the first week of school for our Territory children for 2026. Approximately 32,000 students returned to the 153 Northern Territory Government schools, with 230 new teachers in the Northern Territory this year. I spent the first day of the school year in regional and remote schools to highlight the Finocchiaro CLP government's commitment to regional and remote education outcomes.

In the morning I joined the Principal of Katherine High School, Nick Lovering, to welcome back students followed by an assembly in the gym. Principal Lovering laid the law for the year ahead about respect for teachers and peers, singing the national anthem at school assemblies and our firm no phones in schools policy. You guessed it—we sang the national anthem, both verses.

Following the assembly I had a meeting with Principal Lovering, Sean Gordon and Andrew Lloyd from the Yadha Muru Foundation. The Yadha Muru Foundation runs city–country partnerships between remote and city schools as a way for schools to learn from each other, take immersion trips and have staff exchanges. We discussed opportunities for the partnership and how we can engage disengaged high-school-age students through job opportunities, such as school-based apprenticeships and traineeships.

Later in the morning and into the afternoon I visited Barunga School with Principal Malcolm Hales. Mr Hales highlighted the barriers some students face in getting to school, especially during peak Wet Season—which it was the day we went out there; the Central Arnhem Highway had flooding across most of the crossings. It was not that we could not get through, but the amount of water was incredible. It is to be expected in the Wet Season and was spectacular to see.

At Barunga School I met a couple of new teachers who have moved north from Victoria. I am pleased to report that we have only 55 teacher vacancies across the Territory, which is the lowest number of vacancies, down from 130 this time last year. Every child in every classroom will have a teacher in front of them this year. I attribute this strong rebound to the Finocchiaro CLP government under which we are seeing a decrease in the number of victims of crime, a flurry of strong economic activity and a lifestyle that keeps getting better.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Mr Deputy Speaker, I will speak about the 27 January announcement by the minister for Education regarding the singing of our national anthem in NT public schools, specifically about it being utilised at assemblies and special events to encourage people to stand and sing in English two verses as codified in Australian practice.

The policy goal that was specified when this was discussed was to boost national pride and create consistency. Generally speaking, there is no compulsion on this issue around the country, whether in educational or other settings. There was no punitive aspect to this announcement or a suggestion that it would be a heavy-handed mandate; it was more a suggestion that we could create consistency and do something constructive in our school space to encourage kids to have a sense of pride in the national anthem.

This did not seem like a particularly controversial idea to most people, including the federal Education minister, Jason Clare, who said that the singing of the anthem already happens a lot in lots of schools around Australia. He said, and I quote from a report:

> *'I never knew the second verse until I became a pollie, but you go to schools across the country, and kids sing the first verse and the second verse,' he told Channel 7's Sunrise program.*
>
> *'There's a great line in the second verse which says "with courage let us all combine to Advance Australia Fair" … if kids are singing that in the NT and in other parts of the country I reckon that's a good thing.'*

I thought so too. I did not think it was a controversial wedge policy, which is why I was shocked to discover that it received a mixed response and a polarised one at that. Unconstructive things were said about this, and there was lots of outright hostility and vitriol surrounding this issue. Sure, there were some people who made cheeky remarks about the timing of announcements. Newsflash—people announce things when they are convenient to time, and after Australia Day was not a particularly bad choice regarding singing the national anthem.

What were the concerns we received? These concerns were not about authoritarianism, personal liberty or violating freedom of expression; they were basically polarised responses in relation to whether this would

achieve anything useful at all. I have zero interest, as most of you know, in prosecuting idiotic culture wars in the Northern Territory or in conflating a specific policy with a wider discussion about nationalism, so I chose to speak seriously in defence of the idea because I think it is a decent idea that is not getting a fair shake. This is not least because, I have to tell you in 18 months since starting this job, I am shocked at the number of people who are not familiar with the national anthem. Forget the second verse—I see people barely mumbling out the first verse, and that includes a whole lot of grown-ups.

Let us go back a step. First of all, our national anthem is not that old. It was written by a Scottish teacher in 1878. It was used in the Federation but was officially made our national anthem only in 1984 in spite of it winning a competition in 1974—ahead of *Waltzing Matilda* I might say—to be our national anthem.

A lot of people looked at the 2021 lyric change where we went from talking about being 'young and free' to being 'one and free' to try to represent a more inclusive Australia. The fact is it has been changing over a long time. In 1984 all four verses were looked at seriously, and we went from 'Australian sons let us rejoice'—to people being like, clearly not—to 'Australians all'. The point I am making is that it is not a static composition. It has never been a static composition; it is evolving, and it is a live work. Previously it referred to all sorts of things to do with British imperialism but it does not anymore.

Why is it that I think, generally speaking, this is a good idea for us to be doing? In a nutshell, civics and civics education. All of us should be mindful of the fact that there is a push to teach Australian students about civics. In 2025 a parliamentary inquiry recommended that civics and citizenship become a compulsory part of our education. That committee also recommended that we not just do it in Year 10 but also have mandatory citizenship courses in Years 11 and 12 to prepare young people to vote. This came about due to growing concern about misinformation on social media, increasing anti-Semitism and declining social cohesion. We need more civics education; it is widely recognised. At the moment civics education is not mandatory, and a lot of states do not even do it. In a lot of places primary schools have little engagement with civics education.

What does 'civics' mean? Basically, we are talking about covering how governments and democracy work, how laws work, the rights of individuals, diversity, national identity and how to critically evaluate sources of information.

ACARA, which does all the accreditation work and assesses curriculum, has done work since 2004 sampling Year 6 and Year 10 students on their knowledge of civics. The most recent results are not encouraging, with something like only 53% of Year 6 students at the national proficiency standard. Indeed, Year 10 results have been substantially declining over 20 years. This suggests that many young people are leaving school without the knowledge, skills and values to sustain our democracy. That is not something we want.

Australian and international studies have repeatedly shown that civics and citizenship education makes a positive difference in a young person's political participation, including increasing the likelihood that they will vote and increasing their understanding of democracy and support for democratic values.

What does good civics education look like? It has to be a separate subject. People say that it needs to be for junior and senior school students; it has to be relevant; kids have to be able to discuss it; things like school elections are great; and teachers need to be trained to talk about law and governance. However, these are longer-term goals. What can we do now? Start small with the national anthem. It ain't the worst idea in the world.

I did not speak on the condolence motion because of time constraints. I have a lot I would like to say. I thought it was heartening that everyone in this room talked a lot about social cohesion and wanting to improve it.

In that spirit, when the announcement was made I posted online, saying, 'With courage, let us all combine to advance Australia fair'. I said that this is a constructive initiative to foster unity and promote social cohesion. I am seriously shocked at the response I got. I do not edit anything on my page; you are welcome to have a look. I would love to have been more provocative and have said, 'For those who come across the seas we have boundless plains to share'. I have plenty to say about that, as you all know, but that is not what I was talking about.

This is a lowest common denominator thing we are pushing. Why does this matter? Does this really matter? It matters. I do not have the time to go into the detail, but I encourage you all to look at a book called *Patriotism and Nationalism in Music Education*, an edited work by Hebert and Kertz-Welzel, specifically chapter 3, Nationalism and School Music in Australia, by Jane Southcott. From that book you can learn about this in relation to Germany, Taiwan, Singapore, South Africa, Canada or the US, if you like.

Here is a tip: nationalism is a pervasive and often understated force in shaping educational systems. Patriotic songs and national anthems have been a staple of Australian school music activity since the inception of our modern school system from the late 19th century. It matters, and it has an effect. This is something small and simple that we can do that should not be polarising us. I honestly want to make clear that the Education minister's announcement in that regard was not a polarising announcement; it was a gentle nudge to say, 'We will encourage everyone to sing the national anthem from now on, the whole thing, so everyone knows it better'. It is not that controversial.

If you want to critique this policy or the national anthem on musical grounds, fair enough. It has a 17-semitone range that half the people cannot sing properly. A lot of people complain about the dirge-like quality. It was not composed by a Nobel laureate like some national anthems around the world. There might be better alternatives. I like singing, 'I am, you are, we are Australian' as well; maybe that will eventually get a guernsey. For now, we have a great national anthem that we should be proud of, can rally behind and, perhaps, collectively work on as a nation to improve over time.

At its core a national anthem is about facilitating unity and fostering a sense of pride, identity and shared belonging, so it is great that we are encouraging kids to sing the national anthem together. I wholly support Territory kids being nudged to lead the nation in knowing the words to our national anthem and having a shared ethic and musical accompaniment to guide them in their civics education.

We have to start somewhere and sometimes we have to start small. We have tonnes of big-ticket problems to solve and a lot of them will be unable to be solved unless we can build bigger bridges and work with people within this building and across the country. For now, I hope we can all find a way to at least, with gusto, collectively sing *Advance Australia Fair*.

J DAVIS (Johnston): Mr Deputy Speaker, in case anyone missed it, a major independent report was issued late last year and what it contained should alarm all of us in this Chamber. The Independence of the Australasian Auditors General Report 2025, released in November, ranks the Northern Territory as the worst jurisdiction in Australasia for Auditor-General independence. We are not only behind every other state and territory in Australia but also ranked behind Papua New Guinea and Fiji. Once again, in case you missed it, we are coming last.

This report confirmed what many in the community and all the major integrity organisations in Australia—although no-one in the CLP government—have been warning of for some time: the systems designed to scrutinise government in the Northern Territory are being steadily weakened. That should shock every Territorian. This is not a technical or abstract issue; it goes to the heart of whether public money, including the billions of dollars we receive from the Commonwealth every year, is being spent transparently, responsibly and in the public interest.

The report found that the NT Auditor-General lacks adequate protection from executive government influence and is denied fundamental powers that Auditors-General elsewhere take for granted. The NT Auditor-General does not have full access to performance audits and is restricted in access to Cabinet information.

These are not optional extras. Performance audits are basic accountability tools. They allow the public to know whether government programs are effective, whether risks are managed and whether public money is delivering value for money—is Territorians' money being spent properly? Without these powers, Territorians are left once again in the dark.

The findings of this report echo the serious concerns raised at our Community Scrutiny Forum on the Integrity Commissioner, when integrity experts from across Australia warned that recent reforms risk weakening oversight rather than strengthening it. Those experts were clear that independence must be real, not cosmetic, particularly in a small jurisdiction like the Northern Territory where power is concentrated and relationships are close. Instead, the new integrity model consolidates oversight bodies while introducing new risks. The Auditor-General position is now subject to discretionary oversight by the Integrity and Ethics Inspector, a change that further threatens independence rather than safeguarding it.

The Auditor-General must be able to scrutinise government freely and fearlessly. That includes the ability to properly examine major projects such as the Darwin ship lift, large infrastructure investments and programs involving significant public expenditure, without political direction, interference and restricted access to information.