NORTHERN TERRITORY
***of* AUSTRALIA**

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Member for Fong Lim

HANSARD EXTRACT

THE YEAR AHEAD 2026

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Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Mr Deputy Speaker, action, certainty and security were the hallmarks of 2025, and it cannot be denied that this government has acted decisively over the last 12 months.

There are promising statistical signs of crime reduction. In keeping with that, as we move forward to our next level of positivity, I am delighted that 2026 will be headlined by the ideal of growth, certainty and security. It is a small point, but not for nothing, that I pushed hard at the 2024 election campaign for us to lead with the idea of growth as something desirable for the Northern Territory because it is the foundation upon which we can build opportunity.

Achieving sustainable economic growth will be paramount to addressing the social and economic mess that was sadly created by Territory Labor over almost a decade. The question of how to achieve growth is a complex and contested one. One thing you need is to improve economic fundamentals. I am heartened, as somebody who cares about data and economic indicators, to see that in recent CommSec data there are encouraging signs of activity. It is not insignificant that we went from being in a position where we had little to no economic activity to having signs of movement on a range of indicators and metrics.

Sustained economic growth also requires specific economic initiatives. Things like the payroll tax reforms that we put in place last year and improving our labour force capacity via, for example, the payroll tax exemptions for apprentice and trainee wages are the kind of specific initiatives that underpin the idea of achieving growth with action and security.

I look forward to supporting more of our forthcoming initiatives to stimulate and support sustainable long-term economic growth over the course of the year. In the short term, having heard a number of people reflect on the macro picture for what will happen in the reform space for 2026, I want to drill down to something smaller but important that is an underpinning for growth.

One of the things we all agree upon in the NT context is the need to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). As we heard earlier and have been reminded on a number of occasions, 96% of private businesses in the Northern Territory are small and medium-sized enterprises. They have small turnover, a handful of employees and fledgling premises. They are not monolithic entities that can weather the storm without the support of government and the right economic levers in motion.

Likewise, I remind the Assembly—not that it necessarily needs reminding—that my electorate of Fong Lim is the industrial engine of the Northern Territory. What I lack in primary schools I make up for in businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises, that drive economic growth. They are the mum-and-pop operations and the ones that will become the next level up of operation.

Those businesses are in East Arm where, for example, we are using the Territory Coordinator's power, and in the year ahead we hope to drive the marine precinct. That will be an important development if it can get off the ground. Here's hoping that the Territory Coordinator can drive it with gusto.

In Berrimah, Wishart, Woolner and especially Winnellie there are businesses we need to support and which, as a local member, I want to drive. I want us all to understand how important it is that we get behind these businesses, because those precincts are filled with voters who cut across the whole of the Northern Territory and contribute to the Territory's economic fabric. It is important for us to support them and their endeavours.

For me, 2026 will be a year focused on supporting our small and medium-sized enterprises. This is an opportune time to briefly shine a light on some of them that I recently had the pleasure of engaging with.

Over the holidays, many of us end up doing a bit of DIY. I had a crack at trying to fix a bed frame and realised that I am not a welder. Do you know who does welding? The people at Top End Welding Services do, so I went to them with my cast iron bed frame. I was dressed like a civilian; they did not know who I was.

I asked Ben Proctor, the owner—who is a helpful, super guy—'Mate, I do not know what I am doing in spot welding. Could you help me out?' They were so good about helping me with a small job. It seems like a niche parochial story, but in all seriousness it is all these small jobs that add up to sustainable economic growth. They do large jobs as well; they have a laser-cutting machine for steel and a bandsaw—neither of which they would let me touch. They were helpful in supporting me.

To Ben Proctor I say: what a great business you have. Spot welders make the difference. Another person at that business was Jacques 'Sharky' van der Meulen, and I mention him because I went out to chat with him afterwards. He has trained 163 apprentices.

That is what small businesses we support to become medium enterprises do to create sustainable economic growth. That is invaluable knowledge transfer. If we do not support businesses like that with the right economic levers and initiatives, we lose them and the capital, institutional memory and corporate knowledge of an important bloke like Sharky.

Speaking of valuable knowledge transfer, another little mom-and-pop shop I popped into the other day was Kim's Upholstery, which …

Mrs Carlson: I have to go there.

Dr RAHMAN: Thank you, Member for Wanguri; I take the interjection. I want you all to support these small mom-and-pop shops.

Kim's Upholstery is one woman—Kim Howard, the owner—in two adjacent small workspaces doing unbelievably specialised work and high-level craftsmanship. There are so few people left in the Northern Territory who do upholstery work. I went to that place and could not believe …

Mrs Hersey: We have one in Katherine.

Dr RAHMAN: Thank you, Member for Katherine; there are few places to get that work done.

Go to that shop and watch the care, attention and detail that Kim provides to bringing things back to life. It not only reduces waste but also beautifies our landscape and provides us with somebody who does an important job. It is not just couches and cushions; she does sails, awnings, car upholstery—all manner of things. I do not want to play favourites, but I picked Kim's because it is a new enterprise, and I want to support it.

Winnellie is more than just welders and upholsterers; there is a tonne of food and hospitality there. I mention that because food and hospitality, as we all know, are critical to sustainable economic growth. We cannot lose those small businesses.

Tip Top Snack Bar in Winnellie has some of the best Greek food you will find in this town. The reason those guys have been in that shop since 1999 and at the Mindil Beach Sunset Markets since 1988 is that they are providing a high-quality service. Do you know how tough it is to stay in catering long term? Anyone who knows anyone associated with catering will know what hard graft it is. Those guys have been in the business for a long time. I know I will risk upsetting a lot of my Greek constituents, but that is some of the best souvla in this town. Places like Tip Top provide excellent service thanks to Peter and, more importantly, his mother, who was running the operation before Peter was back when I was in high school.

On the other end of the scale is Darwin Sheetmetal, the largest sheet fabricator in the Northern Territory. Ashton Simpson runs an amazing operation. I mention that business because it is not just making small panels; it is a critical component of our supply chain. Think about how many people that business feeds into and how many other businesses are dependent on it producing sheet metal to order on its amazing machines. There are 20 employees, and it has a fantastic work culture.

I encourage you all to check out our small and medium-sized enterprises. I assure you that, yes, they are my constituent businesses, but they are all your voters. Check out these fantastic businesses.

Darwin Sheetmetal is a fantastic operation and is critical in supporting our industrial supply chain. Member for Drysdale, I note that at the front it has a fine collection of memorabilia associated with Anzac Day and for the Defence forces. It does beautiful work that you should check out.

Speaking of work that supports all of us, Territory Uniforms has been in business for 30-plus years. It recently changed hands from the old owners to Gerry and John Travers. What a fantastic business they run. There are people who have been working in that business for 25-plus years doing embroidery and fine craftsmanship work. That provides us with a supply chain locally so that we do not have to outsource everything to a niche provider in another state or territory.

If we want to keep small and medium-sized enterprises in the Northern Territory we have to support them with the right economic initiatives. This government is doing that; it is providing a range of initiatives to support our industrial base. Our industrial base does not support itself. It works hard graft all the time, but it needs us to work with it, not against it.

I do not get any joy out of punching down on the last government—everyone knows it—but it is tragic that the economy was driven into the ground over the best part of two decades. In the last eight years of Labor governance there were poor economic and social policy choices. It is all well and good to make grandiose announcements, but what are you doing to help people on the ground in small and medium-sized enterprises? What are you doing to create sustainable economic growth?

I am sorry that the opposition is upset that we have not made a lot of big-ticket announcements on new economic projects, but that is because Labor made them all in the ongoing *Utopia*-esque series we were all party to for a decade. We will not make an announcement a day on a new project, mine, spaceship or road to oblivion. We are making careful and cautious decisions about what we say we will do because when we say we will do something, we actually do it.

I know that those opposite do not like everything we have done, but the fact is that we acted last year—action, certainty and security. We acted decisively, and there has been a lot of movement and change. Now we will see how it plays out. Some of it will be good, some will be great, and some might not go quite as well as we expect, but we have acted. It has not just been about hollow announcements in that regard. When the Chief Minister says, 'It is about growth, certainty and security', I expect there will be growth and support for small and medium-sized enterprises because, without that, there will be no sustainable economic growth.

We need labour as well as capital, which is why another great business that has been around forever, HPA (Helping People Achieve), is so important. Rachael Wright, CEO, and Sue Clarke, business development manager, were good enough to show me around, including all the guys who work in the workshop, like Al, who runs the Breaking Ground gardening crew. They do phenomenal work to support garden maintenance across the Northern Territory. This is an entity that supports people with disabilities to have enhanced opportunities to do value-adding work that is important, as a supplement to our workforce.

It is not the only one. I do not want to play favourites. When I am in the neighbourhood I always drop into Equal Grounds Cafe. It is a great social enterprise, which makes fantastic coffee and great cakes. It was good to hand out certificates I and II to people working in that space.

I could go on about a number of these businesses, but I will not go through them forensically; other people will want to speak. I am committed in 2026 to growth and to making it to many more of these SMEs in person. As my learned colleague the Treasurer pointed out earlier today, they are the canary in the coalmine. If the small and medium-sized enterprises are flourishing, succeeding, expanding and putting on new trainees, plant, capital and apprentices, we are all succeeding. If they are not, they are the canary in the coalmine.

I am optimistic and hopeful that this government will be as committed to growth as it was to action in its first year. You will note these businesses I picked out are not all random choices; I deliberately chose local businesses I use and support, and I want you all to do the same.

I sleep on a bed welded by Top End Welding Services. Kim is reupholstering a chair for me that I dragged back from England and was smashed to pieces. I am eating a lot from Tip Top cafe, and everyone can see it. I could go on. The uniforms for my office staff are made by Territory Uniforms. HPA's Breaking Ground crew help me pick up my thousand palm fronds. These are important businesses for us to get behind, and I encourage you all to do the same.

For my many constituents who have inquired about it, I am still as committed to the redevelopment of the Stuart Park high street as I always have been. I will continue to advocate for this excellent long-term project in 2026, fundamentally because it will seriously contribute to substantial, sustainable economic growth. That is why I will champion it.

I have been systematically consulting with land and business owners along that strip since coming to office to gain feedback and advice on what might be desirable and possible to reinvigorate that important historic area. We have had initial concepts, designs, artwork and architectural plans made, but why have we done it? To reflect a broad consensus starting concept, with the aim of improving amenity up and down that area to create a high street with a sense of character, a sense of place and well-thought-out access for pedestrians, cyclists, locals and visitors. It is the neck leading into the head which is the Darwin CBD. Growth in that corridor will create a knock-on effect for all of Darwin and, frankly speaking, all of the Northern Territory. If you want a high return on investment for infrastructure spend, I continue to maintain that you will find almost no better precinct.

Initially, you must start small. It is not the kind of thing that happens overnight. Traffic management will be the initial focus to try to make that promenade safer, parking easier and frequenting it easier and more desirable.

Our government—because we are good at reducing red tape—will not make it harder than it needs to be to make that happen. The NT Planning Scheme 2020 gives us everything we need to gradually develop gateway locations and improve building and laneway access, activate street frontages and balance options for commercial and residential mixed-use development.

I will continue to drive this initiative because it represents something great for my electorate. It is one of the best, ready-to-go areas of Darwin, with high scope for return on investment for the Territory. It supports the CBD growth, which we all want.

Growth is the mantra for 2026; I am delighted that we are targeting growth this year. I want that growth to be sustainable, as does everyone here. Nobody wants to live in a Northern Territory that is defined by boom-and-bust cycles. If you nurture small and medium enterprises, you lay a foundation for that. If you focus on key sectors, like agriculture, hospitality, tourism, mining and the industrial support required to wrap around all that, you can create the preconditions and the foundations for sustainable economic growth.

I want that for the Northern Territory, and I know everyone in this House, no matter their ideological position, also wants that because sustainable economic growth will lead to long-term opportunity for Territorians young and old. It will mean that we have the money and the economic base to support public health, housing, education, infrastructure and to create an architecture of opportunity in the Northern Territory again.

I will see many of you at small and medium enterprises in Winnellie, Wishart, Berrimah and East Arm over the course of this year, and I welcome all my government, crossbench and opposition colleagues to come and have a souvla at the Tip Top cafe with me any time you are available.

I will simply say that I am looking forward to nothing more than working with my government this year to start getting the Stuart Park high street project up and running.

Debate suspended.

SPEAKER'S STATEMENT
Disorderly Comments

Madam SPEAKER: I interrupt this debate on the ministerial statement. Member for Nightcliff, did you want to make a statement regarding the ruling I made earlier that your remarks to the Member for Drysdale were disorderly?

K McNAMARA: I would be happy if you could show me the *Hansard*. That was a heated moment running out there.

Madam SPEAKER: I am asking you to withdraw the comments that you made.

K McNAMARA: Which comments? I said a lot of things as I was walking out of the Chamber.

Madam SPEAKER: You were witnessed and heard calling the Member for Drysdale a racist.

K McNAMARA: I did not call the Member for Drysdale that.

Madam SPEAKER: Okay.

K McNAMARA: If I was saying anything, I was referring to the Administrator.

Madam SPEAKER: That is out of order too. Please take your seat.

What transpired in this Chamber during Question Time was nothing short of shocking, outrageous and extraordinary. As you all know, I have been working in this Chamber and a part of this Chamber in many different capacities for more than 15 years, and I have never witnessed the likes of it. I am staggered by the behaviour I saw from opposition and crossbench members.

Clearly, this was a well-organised, orchestrated and staged walkout of the opposition and crossbench members, screaming and shouting as they left through the front door of the Chamber. We all witnessed it; the public witnessed it. Obviously, people in the gallery were invited to witness it. People in the gallery were supportive of it, and they knew what to expect, unlike me as the Speaker. It came as a surprise and has caused a commotion and disruption in the parliament—no doubt, that is what was intended.