

NORTHERN TERRITORY
***of* AUSTRALIA**

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Member for Fong Lim

HANSARD EXTRACT

BUDGET THAT FAILS TERRITORIANS PART 2

WEDNESDAY 6 MAY 2026

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

PARLIAMENT HOUSE, DARWIN NT 0800

have been available long before things reach crisis point. This budget does not back those everyday Territorians. There is no dedicated mental health budget line in the Treasurer's speech.

With $80m redirected from Corrections infrastructure, we could build a real community mental health system; Step Up Step Down facilities in Darwin and Alice Springs so people can get support without going to an emergency department; mental health nurses embedded in remote community clinics; and an alcohol and drug treatment expansion that actually meets the Territory's need rather than a fraction of what we currently serve. This budget funds the consequences, not the causes.

Everyday Territorians are the households paying high power bills. They are the workers who could have secure jobs in renewable energy. They are communities who need reliable, affordable power, and these everyday Territorians are not who this budget backs. The budget continues to back the gas industry, and the scale of that commitment is staggering. Hidden in the budget papers are more than $2bn in liabilities and subsidies tied to gas development, including the Beetaloo. Hundreds of millions have already been spent with no return to Territorians to date, and even the most optimistic projections show royalties delivering less than 1% of Territory revenue.

At the same time, the Territory is carrying growing debt projected to reach $12.5bn, while underwriting private industry risk. We are borrowing money to subsidise an industry that is unlikely to ever pay us back. That is not a sound economic strategy, it is a public subsidy model where the risk sits with Territorians and the benefit goes somewhere else.

While that risk grows, investment in the things that actually reduce cost of living; housing, energy, services, is being left behind. With $50m we could fund remote community microgrids, Territory-owned rooftop solar and renewable workforce, lowering power bills, strengthening environmental resilience and creating real jobs. Instead, this budget continues to back an industry that has not delivered and expects everyday Territorians to carry the cost.

Everyday Territorians are the parents trying to get their kids to school, juggling work, transport, cost of living and everything else that comes with raising a family. They are also the kids who are falling behind, not because they do not want to learn but because they need more support to get them there in the first place. They need education that is appropriate and accessible and meets their needs so that when they are there, they stay. They are the teachers doing everything they can with limited resources, trying to keep students engaged and supported.

This budget does not back those everyday Territorians. It offers a small investment in literacy and numeracy, but that will not help get kids back into the classroom. Instead of supporting families, we see a continued focus on punitive approaches like fines for school non-attendance.

With real investment, we could support families to get kids to school and we could support kids to stay there and learn. We could invest in transport, community-based support and early intervention that actually addresses the reasons children are not attending. We could support teachers to do the job we know they are passionate about and trained for and build a properly resourced teacher workforce that stays in the Territory instead of burning out and leaving—support that works with families and children, not against them. You cannot punish your way to better education outcomes and you cannot fix education without the teachers to make it work.

If this budget was truly for everyday Territorians, we would have no child in detention on remand because there is nowhere else for them to go, no women turned away from a service that is there to keep them safe, mental health care before crisis point, homes that people can actually afford, remote communities with services and an energy system built for the future. That Territory is possible now within this budget. It does not require fairy dust; it just requires the political will to make different choices, because when this government says 'everyday Territorians', this budget shows us they are not talking about everyone. The cheapest, smartest and most effective way to build a stronger Territory is to put all people at the centre of every decision we make.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Madam Speaker, I had not anticipated to speak on this motion, let alone the amendment. I do so not to grandstand or try to set any sort of record, but because the Treasurer and the government whip asked me to speak. This has morphed into an important debate that is about more than just piling on the current budget; it is about what works and what does not, what constitutes success and what constitutes failure. We are starting to flesh out some issues underpinning this matter. It is about more than short-termism now, and that is why I am speaking again.

Before picking up on a couple of points made in the debate, I will simply frame the debate again. The amendment that the Treasurer has moved is not one that I ordinarily would want to jump on the bandwagon for, but this is an opportunity to sincerely condemn Labor for its legacy of debt, not just as a throwaway, but genuinely because this is the line in the sand. This government is two years into its term in August. We will not spend the next year and the next budget talking about what happened for the last eight years. I commit that I will not. You must draw a line in the sand somewhere in relation to this discussion and this debate.

What is obvious to me, and the reason I chose to speak on this at the length I did today, is that there is still a huge amount of misunderstanding. It is maybe not denialism; it is a fundamental misunderstanding that we have inherited a miserable position, and that miserable position is the function of choices that were made. I am not suggesting—hand on heart—that those choices were made maliciously, but they were conscious choices. Some may have been made as a function of ineptitude rather than malice, but they were made nonetheless, and the cumulative consequence of all those decisions—the tyranny of small choices, as I was pointing out today in the Kahn paper from 1966—is to result in where we are now, being under enormous amounts of debt.

Before I turn to debt, I clarify that the amendment is to condemn Labor for its legacy of debt; for delay and decline; and for leaving the CLP to clean up the mess, restore fiscal discipline, rebuild the economy and deliver the practical relief, infrastructure and jobs Territorians deserve. I do not have the time to break down every component, but the fact is I could.

In a nutshell I will talk about the legacy of debt first, with reference to what the Member for Gwoja just said. It is important to talk about delay and decline, or the forwarding on of what was happening in infrastructure. Where decline pertains to people, I could not agree with you more, Member for Johnston, that budgets are about people. We do not have enough of them, which is why we are in the mess we are in, and I will get to that in a second.

We have been left to clean up the mess. I will tell you what, not for nothing—a little footnote for the other side—it ain't much fun being a backbencher in a government that has to clean up the mess; we are cleaning up an even worse mess in some ways. I am not enjoying the mess we inherited, and I want you to understand once and for all what that mess is about so that we can agree on common terms and move forward on what we might do to actively stop creating more mess.

Restoring fiscal discipline—we are not bandying those words around. You can see the Treasurer is doing something about restoring fiscal discipline. I will come back to fiscal conservatism in a second because the fact is that I am the fiscal conservative in here. If I had my way, things would be different in terms of what we would do to turn the ship around faster, but I do not have my way, and the reality is that you should be thankful I do not in some ways.

Fiscal conservatism at this point is required, but fiscal integrity and discipline is required more. The Treasurer is doing that in the most manageable way possible. Would I spend all this money in the way we are spending it on a range of things? No, I would not, but I watched Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng just about tank the UK economy overnight by doing too much too soon, so I understand that sometimes it takes a long time to turn a barge around.

Practical relief is what we have in our cost-of-living stuff. That is the practical relief side of it—infrastructure, which we have bandied about in this house a lot, and the jobs Territorians deserve. You can say jobs, jobs, jobs as many times as you like, but no genie is coming to create those jobs. Whatever your past Treasurers might have said to you, it is just not how it works. Those jobs will come downstream when investment and economic confidence returns and when we restore some fiscal integrity to our marketplaces.

This speech is jumping around a lot more than my usual ones. The bottom line is that I am passionate about the subject matter. I have been asked to speak on the matter because this is our last best chance to frame discussions about why we are where we are and where we go from here.

There will be a next round of conversations that are coming next year, the year after and probably for a decade going forward about how we start institutionally making money, saving money, stopping the wastage of money and not just spending money.

I already gave a version of the speech where I explained budgets are about more than spending money. I will come back to some of the more workable propositions that came from the Members for Gwoja and Johnston, both of whom made many good points.

The first is the point made by the Member for Gwoja that not all debt is bad debt—absolutely. I have been saying from day one that not all debt is bad debt. However, $14bn of debt in a place with only 265,000 people, 27,000 public servants and no serviceable workforce or industry is bad debt. That is not good debt; that is too much debt. Serviceable debt, yes, it would be …

Mr Kerle: Borrowing to pay the bills.

Dr RAHMAN: I take the interjection from the Member for Blain; you do not want to be borrowing to pay the bills in perpetuity. What you want, at a certain point, is to start making money in some form. We need to have those conversations more honestly about what we are willing to risk to make money to spend on the things you want to spend on.

The first thing is I could not agree more; not all debt is bad debt. When we are having this conversation we are maligning two things: debt and credit, which are two different concepts. This is not an economic lecture, but the bottom line is that you want to, ultimately, borrow money to productively use to grow the economy and create not just growth for growth's sake—that is cancer, malignancy—but for the sake of creating productive opportunity.

I have spoken about my vision, which is my personal take, on an architectural opportunity for the north of Australia where we focus on public health, housing, education and infrastructure again to create common opportunity for people to pull themselves up by the bootstraps across all segments of society. That is my personal hobby horse. I can talk about that another time.

The bottom line is we are all using different language, but basically we want to create a place where people can get a leg up. None of us particularly want to destroy the Northern Territory lived or built environment either, or the natural environment for that matter. I will come back to that. The reason I am bringing it into debate is the fact is that a lot of our wealth creation prospects are tied to taking risks on our environment.

I will not foreshadow debate tomorrow. At some point on the Notice Paper there will be a discussion about minerals titles legislation and what we are willing to do to explore to give ourselves new opportunity again in resource extraction. That is a conversation I will be part of and I get behind. The fact is that is what the Northern Territory is built on.

My grandad was a hydrologist here. My family are all invested in mines and energy. The fact is we have not opened a new mine for over 10 years. The only one that opened was Core Lithium because we got out of its way. The fact is we need more mining if we are to grow the economy here, based on the fact that our natural resources are something that we can work with.

Gas and mineral extraction are two different conversations, but I am not into gas either. The bottom line is that gas is the biggest game in town. The major difference between the opposition and this side now is we have been unequivocal in our support of it in the sense that we are saying, 'No confusion. All signals to market are that if you can find it and get it out at the right price point and make it add up, we will back it and get out of your way in making it happen.' The other side could not decide which way they want to go on this.

I have said publicly as a political candidate, and I can say it as much as I like: I am not anti-gas, anti-fracking or anti-mining; I am pro things that add up. If it does not add up economically, why are we doing it?

The fact is there is still a real possibility that our gas ventures will add up. That is why we are still going down this road. There is no doubt about the fact that we have extended a huge line of credit and basically given a series of extractive industries the opportunity to demonstrate that this will work for everyone in the long run.

The multiplier effects of those industries are significant if they pay off. That is the thing; you cannot just pull the rug out at a point. I am not on the Public Accounts Committee, but those of you who are made the choice and decision that the ship lift will go ahead. It does not matter what crappy conditions we decided to persist with it for the last eight years; at this point, it will go ahead. I am simply not privy to the information to argue with that case at this point, so I will not.

It is basically the same proposition with gas. No matter what Senator Pocock wants to say—can I just say, I am a huge fan of his, as a rugby player predominantly, I mean, so I feel like I am nerding out—the bottom line is that debate is now becoming unconstructive.

It is not about starting from this point having a discussion about extraction of gas and what needs to be done to make it worth everyone's while; it is about looking at the totality of the situation and what has been invested

by many people, not just in financial terms but in labour, ideas and opportunity cost. The fact is that we will not just suddenly switch that off. We are maintaining consistency on that position until such time that it is obvious that it cannot persist and/or something horrible happens which makes it unviable.

Here is the thing about the 'something horrible happening' part. I know I am jumping around, but again, I want to come to water pricing, because that is a great idea, but not one that Labor was interested in discussing when in government. We will come back to that in a second. The bottom line is that we must have ways to make money, and we are not honestly discussing the ones that are in front of our faces that could create the possibility, the multiplier effects and the opportunity to refund and reorganise our spending priorities. What is mostly being spoken about in the context of the budget debate, or budget philosophy, is spending priorities, but not anything to do with, for example, risk, investment, overall structural reform or how we might reorganise our economic affairs.

Let me come back to some of the concrete points. The first is that not all debt is bad debt; I agree. Put simply, right now we have way too much debt. We have so much debt that, unfortunately, it is inhibiting anything else happening productively. That is the reality. You have to at least start the process of reducing debt so that you have a fighting chance of providing people with confidence to reinvest in this marketplace.

The Treasurer is not hiding anything. He is not hiding state final demand, private investment or where our growth prospects are. He is saying, 'I've been dealt a crappy hand and am doing my best to prioritise, consistent with the government's priorities, keeping on the same course of law and order and maintaining confidence in community safety as being the number one priority'.

We are doing that because we are hearing it loud and clear still. Even I hear it. I get frustrated about it. I have constituents coming in, and I want to talk about other, bigger stuff, but they say, 'No, I am still pissed off about the state of drunks on buses', or 'I'm still annoyed about X, Y, Z antisocial behaviour'. I say, 'Public safety officers are coming; they are on their way, and that should hopefully help. Let's see how that goes.' People are not already at one with the idea that we have solved the law and order problem. That is why the budget is devoted to basically continuing on the track of improving community safety and investing in police and Corrections. This is our mantra at this point. If we fail, we will have a consistent position of dying on this hill because we are staying true to our course.

I am waiting for the day when it starts to pay off so that we can move on to some of the other stuff—the more downstream rehabilitative stuff and the structural economic reform stuff. I want for that future as well, but for all of us to get to the next pass, we have to get past this hump. This hump is one that, honestly speaking, just about no-one in this room is super responsible for. It is other people who are above our pay grade, who were here for the last 20 years and made a series of imperfect choices, some lazy—probably not many were malicious—that genuinely cumulatively added up to the tyranny of small choices which resulted in astronomical levels of debt, stagnant population growth, low levels of private investment and imperfect arrangements with the Commonwealth. They do not want to own our problems nor pay us to fix them properly.

If you want to move forward on this, stop moving motions every day which are just about short-termism and getting something inflammatory on the Notice Paper—'I move that on the next General Business day, I want to prosecute this hobby horse that I am pissed off about now on the basis that it will track well for media today'. That is what we are dealing with here. If you want an honest conversation about budgets, reform and the economy, let us have it. Then we can actually make out like a grown-up parliament rather than a place of dysfunction and despair.

That is the way forward for us, but it will not happen if we just keep saying, 'He said, she said'. I assure you, this will be the last four-and-a-half—and then another 10, I assure you—minutes of me talking about the last eight years of Labor budgets. After that, we have to start agreeing on some terms; otherwise, we will keep going round in circles.

The Member for Johnston is 100% right on this. Budgets are about people, and that is the whole reason I came back to the Northern Territory. You could see from the other side of the planet that we had no vision for people, labour, migration, population, higher education and training—the tertiary sector—or talent acquisition. We do not have enough people to do the things we need to do in the Northern Territory.

We are not just short of doctors, teachers and nurses; we are short of bass players. If you do not get along with the one guy who plays the bass in this town you are not doing a gig.

The bottom line is that we need more people. I am glad the Member for Gwoja and I—we do not like each other and do not agree on anything—agree that we need more people. The more people we can get in this

place the less likely it is that he and I will have to interact with each other. We can interact with those other people instead.

Mr Paech: Hear, hear!

Dr RAHMAN: Hear, hear!

The fact of the matter is that budgets are about people, and I am supporting this motion, which is clean cut. At the beginning of these proceedings you would have seen there was a motion moved by the opposition. There were suggestions of that being amended. I did not want it to be amended because I said, 'Let the opposition have its motion. Let us talk about budgets and budget failure at large.' Then, once we have reached this point, it has been moved, because clearly we have exhausted that, we are condemning the former government for the mistakes that it has made in relation to debt, delay and decline.

Nothing is more obvious and ties this together more than population decline. We are all talking about the same thing. Every one of these lunches and breakfasts we go to at budget time, every conversation we have and every little news sound bite is always about how we do not have enough workers and do not have anyone sticking around—how will we attract and retain people?

Let us start having the conversation for real. We are mostly doing what we have already done. I think the Member for Port Darwin, the relevant minister in this space, is doing a better version and a better job of working on some of those areas with global worker attraction and whatnot. We are targeting better markets, making more savvy use of online mechanisms, and WorkerConnect is working better. We are definitely doing better, but we are basically doing the same.

If you want to do something new and better, work with us. You know who controls the levers on migration? The federal government. If we want more cooperation with the federal government on terms of migration for the north of Australia to create greater labour supply to support us across all sectors and industry, we need your help on that. We cannot do it alone. That is the reality of it. All significant manoeuvres in economic reform through Australian political history happened through behind-the-scenes horse trading.

If you want more people, skilled workers and workforce then band together with us to ask for it. We will not get it by ourselves, and you do not have the numbers to get it. Together we actually could.

The whole of the north of Australia for that matter, including north Queensland and northwest Australia, is in the same predicament. None of us can get the right people or keep them once we have them. The fact is that we all require better terms on migration for the north of Australia. That is the job I came back here to do.

If I get nothing done in this parliament, other than make a modest contribution on that before I lose my seat, then I will be happy. But before I go, I would love it if all of us could agree on that one thing and move forward on it. Right now, we know the federal government controls the levers on the two biggest things that matter to us: all of our pocket money in GST and grants; and the terms on migration—labour and capital. If we are moving ahead on labour and capital, we need cooperation across this parliament.

The trouble is sometimes, unless you are willing to …

Mr PAECH: A point of order, Madam Speaker!

Mr MALEY: A point of order, Madam Speaker! This is a group point of order.

Madam SPEAKER: This is a rare sight, multiple people wanting to extend your speech.

Mr PAECH: Pursuant to Standing Order 43, I move that an extension of time be granted to the member. I would love to continue to hear from the Member for Fong Lim, who I do not hate; I might dislike him, but I want to hear his contribution.

Members: Hear, hear!

Dr RAHMAN: I thank the members who are present and are tuning in.

There is a serious set of points to be made here. It is often said of student politics that it is hard fought because there is so little at stake. It is where you learn to cut your teeth and beat up on each other. The trouble is in a 25-person Assembly, when we are all trying to wear a lot of hats and have to individually know

6,000 peoples' names and the names of all their pets in order to get back into the building, we sometimes lose the wood for the trees on the higher-order political stuff.

It is great to see fresh faces in the room. I hope there is a future where we can work more cooperatively together. It is why I came here. I know that there is a time for us to be combative, but I hope that we can become a parliament again that boxes and punches above the belt and fights clean. If we do, we have a better chance of staging better fights and, ultimately, bringing in more people to watch them. Currently, a lot of Territorians are checked out as to what is happening here.

We are having this discussion, and I do not know what poor sucker public servant is still there at 6.15 pm watching us at this point, but there are not many people watching this debate now. We need to find a way to communicate to our constituency a shared vision on how to grow the Northern Territory economy not for the sake of not growth but for the sake of creating opportunity for people. We have to find a way to respectfully disagree on our prescription for that.

There is a tough law and order—more stick than carrot—approach to that on this side of the House. You can respectfully disagree with that—that is fine—but offer me your alternative instead. Offer me something concrete that is more than just platitude, specifically on economics. We are not just making serious policy choices; we are doing things that are reactionary and short-term in this place. The pace at which that has been happening has been getting faster, worse and is hollowing out the productive capacity of the Northern Territory. We lose people, ideas, money and confidence when we fail to cooperate; that is what ends up happening.

On the matter of fiscal conservatism, I make it clear that I am not pretending to be anything I am not; everybody knows that I am a liberal democrat. The bottom line, and what I am talking about in fiscal conservative terms, is that we need a smaller, tighter and more productive economy. Now we have a giant, bloated, ineffective edifice that does not generate enough activity or productivity. Everybody was too scared to do or say anything about it, but we are doing something about it. We are not doing it in a dim-witted, ham-fisted way like some past governments did when they said, 'Efficiency dividend—slash 20%'. Predictably, you hollow out the real workers when that happens, and management sticks around; it is management 101.

If you want to talk about it, we must have an honest conversation together about what we need to run the public sector so that we create options for the private sector. It does not pay off to be in the private sector in the north of Australia. We must create conditions for people to want to work in the private sector because it is not just competitive with but can be better than being in the public sector.

This is not about bashing public servants. The reality is that we need public servants—a civil service—and in a place that is state controlled, we need more of them than other places; that has always been the case. When you are a frontier economy, that is what you need. Nobody in their right mind will tell you that we have the mix right. You cannot have 265,000 people and 27,000 public servants with productivity that is this low; it is not feasible or realistic. Let us talk about it together and have an honest conversation about productivity reform, public sector reform and structural economic reform.

My learned colleague maybe is not using the words that I am using in this regard, but he is doing that. Give him some credit in that regard. The fact is that he has had to find a way to slow down the rate at which we are accumulating debt, and to also figure out a way to add value and keep investing in frontline services. No-one in their right mind is saying that public health, housing, education or infrastructure are tracking amazingly; nobody thinks that they are. We are all trying to make them better, but the way to do this is not to say, 'He said, she said', or to go backwards and forwards with, 'You did not do anything about private maternity services'. How about at this point, we all put down our weapons and agree that collectively we might have a better chance of bringing back confidence to our health ecosystem—private operators in that space, cooperation with the federal government and whoever the relevant ministers are—if we find more constructive ways to have the debate, and then with a considered position take it to people who can help and work with us.

It will not happen overnight. I am not in the business of supporting things like this which are just about punching down; I am supporting this because I think it is worth supporting today. I want the Notice Paper to read that this was the gamesmanship we started this discussion with, and I want the record to show that we evolved to a position where we as the government are condemning the last three lots of Labor governments for some of the poor choices they made, because that also holds us to account. Come back later and then say, 'You condemned us for X, Y and Z. What have you done to make it better?'

I will use my time here working with all the people here I can to try to make sure we do better on cleaning up the mess, restoring fiscal integrity, slowing down the rate of debt and/or starting to repay it, returning market confidence and ensuring that we turn around and arrest demographic decline. It will not happen overnight, but we have to start somewhere.

I have a couple of niche points that are important to clarify. The Member for Johnston pointed out that it is not a given that we need more prison cells. I am sorry, but I respectfully disagree. At the moment it is pretty clear that we need more prison cells because we have people who are surplus to capacity and we cannot accommodate them. It is that simple. I am not hoping that we keep jailing people at the rate that we have been for ever and a day in the north of Australia. Nobody wants that, but we need more space and capacity in the correctional services system.

There is a master plan that the minister is following through with. We have to give it a go. It is as simple as that. Some of these decisions could and should have been made—if I wanted to be an arse about it, I could pull out where these Treasurers tell you all about how they are investing in the long-term future of Corrections capacity, but that did not happen. We have a plan. We are now trying to build more prisons, not because our master plan is just to imprison everyone in the Northern Territory, but so that we can create the necessary space required to accommodate what is an expanded prison population. It is about facing reality.

Scarcity was a point brought up. We are restrained by scarcity. It is ridiculous to suggest that we are not. There is only so much money and so many people. We have an abundance of space and probably natural resources that we cannot find unless we facilitate the conditions to find that stuff and get it out at the right price point. Scarcity is a significant constraint. It is not productive in government or in opposition to just say, 'Give me more. I want more.' I agree that some things are time-sensitive and important to your community. Fine; fight for those things. I am not saying that if the Jabiru Airport is about to tank it, there is not a strong business case to salvage it and not to fight for it—I am just using that as a case in point—but the bottom line is that we are constrained by scarcity. Do not throw temper tantrums regarding small stuff. Pick the fights that are worth picking. A starving lion does not hunt mice. Preserve your energy. Wait for a gazelle or an antelope and then take it down. That is the reality of it. That is the way we work with scarcity.

Mr Maley: What about a goose?

Dr RAHMAN: I am not getting into geese today.

Budgets are about choices; the Member for Johnston is right in that regard. The choice I want you all to start thinking about is how to enlarge the size of the pie. There are so many ways to do that. In the short run, our best viable bet is in the extractive industry space. I have a slightly different philosophy from the deputy leader in this regard, but I am broadly on board with the fact that we have fantastic natural resources and have to find a way to capitalise on them. That could be stuff that is in the ground or in the sky. I am not interested in the cherrypicking and the culture war stuff. That will not help us grow the size of the pie. If you want to grow the size of the pie, having a coordinated position that we take to the federal government would get us a lot further than just slinging mud at one another.

There are a lot of legs in the idea of pricing water. Nobody has had the guts to do it. If you want to have an honest conversation regarding that, you can have it with me. I am the one guy who turns up to all the unpopular places. At every Environment Centre talk, I am there because somebody has to be there. We could price water. That is just one idea. There is a range of things. Bring new ideas to the table.

I look forward to contributing to other General Business motions and to the opposition bringing substantive ideas to the table for us to debate sensibly rather than us just cherrypicking inflammatory topics to fling mud at one another.

I support the amended motion. Labor deserves condemnation for its fiscal mismanagement over eight years, but I hope that we can move forward constructively from this point.

Mr SMELT (Nightcliff): Madam Speaker, I speak against the amendment.

I appreciate the contributions from the Member for Fong Lim. There is a lot to unpack there. I look forward to debating those topics with you in the next two-and-a-half years.

At a time when Territorians and Territory businesses need a government that actually steps up and delivers real cost-of-living relief, action on the housing crisis and economic stimulus, this CLP government continues to let them down.