

NORTHERN TERRITORY
***of* AUSTRALIA**

Dr TANZIL RAHMAN MLA

Member for Fong Lim

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from extreme weather events, the CLP has turned its back on them. Again, these are the everyday Territorians the government keeps referring to.

Many everyday Territorians work in our incredibly important job-creating tourism and hospitality sectors—tens of thousands of them, in fact. Under this government, like so many, they have become the forgotten Territorians. At a time when our tourism businesses—many of them small mum-and-dad operations—should be reaping the benefits of the Dry Season, they are instead staring down the barrel of cancelled bookings and an uncertain future. There are many reasons for this: flood impacts; fuel costs; and rising cost-of-living pressures for operators and customers. The drive market has reduced considerably as tourists decide to cancel or scale back their road trips. There are 45,000 fewer aviation seats coming into the Territory. Forward bookings are down by 39% and may even fall by 50%. It is the toughest period the sector has faced since COVID.

For those badly impacted by the floods, including a number of operators in the Member for Daly's electorate, they are still counting the costs and dealing with ongoing impacts before they can even think about trading again. Meanwhile, the recent closures of much-loved institutions like Epilogue in Alice Springs and Flora's Temper in my electorate of Nightcliff are heartbreaking. They are the heart and soul of our local communities and a sign of just how fragile our hospitality sector is now.

Our tourism sector is resilient. It has been through many ups and downs, but it needs a government that backs it with not just nice words, but real and measurable support. The sector has asked for practical targeted support from the CLP government to help it through this period. It needs demand stimulation measures, like the Territory Tourism Voucher implemented by the former Territory Labor government during COVID; aviation support to get more people flying into the Territory; or targeted relief for operators to help them get through. The minister can spruik the $10m barbecue fund all she wants, but when operators are dealing with reduced bookings and rising costs, they need to rethink their priorities.

Meanwhile, two significant visitor-boosting initiatives have been effectively cancelled by this government—the State Square art gallery in Darwin and the Alice Springs art gallery. This is incredibly short-sighted decision-making. The State Square art gallery would have given visitors a reason to stay another night in Darwin, injecting significant additional spend into the economy. As with the Alice Springs art gallery, these projects have been left to languish. There is no visibility about the government's misguided expression of interest process. It has disappeared.

The government's recent tourism strategy talked up infrastructure upgrades across our parks, public–private partnerships to support tourism developments, funding for all-weather visitor experiences and sustainable utilities for parks and reserves, such as solar power and waterless toilets, but none of this was to be seen in the budget. When you compare the strategy with the budget you see that there is a clear disconnect between what the CLP says it will do for our valuable tourism sector and what it is delivering.

Tourism businesses are not just numbers; they are Territory families, or individuals having a go and doing what they love. They are the everyday Territorians, and like so many other Territorians, they have been left behind by this budget and this CLP government.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, this is a budget of missed opportunities and misguided priorities. It is a budget without a clear plan, vision and ambition. It is a maintenance budget that will not build the Territory. It fails to meet the moment when it comes to the pressures faced by households, businesses and communities. Ultimately, it is everyday Territorians who will pay the price.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Mr Deputy Speaker, last week was significant for me for a number of reasons.

The first was that it was budget week. I have a lot of thoughts about our economic affairs, so it is always nice to say a few words about our fiscal fortunes.

Last week was also significant for not only me but also a lot of people around the world because it marked the 100th birthday of Sir David Attenborough, the natural historian and widely respected man who I do not think anyone would pick fault with.

It may not be known to everyone in the House, but in the early 1960s Sir David Attenborough visited Darwin and the Northern Territory. He subsequently wrote *Quest Under Capricorn* in 1963. I recently re-read it. It is a fantastic book that I encourage you all to read. What is amazing about that book, which was written 63 years ago, is how prescient it is to our situation and how telling and timely it is to explain where the Northern Territory is at and where it is not at.

I will read a few short paragraphs from it because they offer an enormous amount of insight from a man who nobody could possibly suggest is anything other than …

Ms Uibo: A legend.

Dr RAHMAN: A legend and a treasure—thank you, Leader of the Opposition.

Chapter 1, 'East from Darwin', states:

> *DARWIN, perched on the northern rim of Australia, is a lonely town. Its nearest big city, Adelaide, is as far away as London is from the centre of the Sahara. It is closer to Singapore than it is to Sydney. Its doorstep is lapped by a tropical ocean, empty except for the obscure coral-girt islands of eastern Indonesia; at its back stretches a million square miles of desert.*
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> *The town has proffered many excuses for its existence since it was named in 1836—a port for pearlers, a clearing house for bullion during the gold rushes of the eighties and nineties, a terminal for oil tankers, a link between the end of the Overland Telegraph that reached here in 1872 and the submarine cables that took messages on to London—but none has been convincing enough to sustain a town of any size. Today, having been designated the capital of the Northern Territory, it lives on its administrators and the airlines, who use it as a convenient half-way stage on the long haul between Asia and Southern Australia. It has no industries of its own. Its citizens tell you its only import is civil servants and its only export empty beer bottles.*
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> *Yet it has all the trappings of a modern metropolis. A huge new government building is rising above the harbour. The shops are full of refrigerators, transistor radios, long-playing gramophone records and all the nick-nacks of the twentieth century. Both the Protestant and Catholic Churches have built splendid stylish cathedrals. Away beyond the commercial centre, on the shores of the Timor Sea, stand rows of elegant expensive houses inhabited by Government officials and bank managers. But the place, perhaps because it has to grow so fast to keep pace with its diet of bureaucrats, still has an unsettled temporary look about it. Buildings appear to have been set down in an arbitrary fashion—a modern concrete bank with a glass and mosaic porch garlanded with cacti, stands opposite an empty plot strewn with the twisted wrecks of cars and rusting petrol drums; a half-demolished shack squats beside a villa built with confident dignity thirty years ago.*
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> *The town has drawn its population from all over the world. Chinese families, whose forebears came here to work the gold mines, now run several of the stores. Newly immigrated Italians and Viennese have travelled up from Sydney to start restaurants and serve schnitzels and ravioli which were revelations to bushmen brought up on damper and wallaby stew. In the Post Office, you meet Cockneys and New Zealanders, a man from Birmingham and another from Brisbane. Only a minority seem involved in the ferocious wilderness that begins at the end of the main street. You may occasionally hear about a man in a pub talking about gold strikes or a lonely uranium mine. A few aborigines in vividly coloured sweatshirts lounge outside the cinemas sucking soft drinks through straws. And occasionally a tall cattleman in a cowboy hat and spurs strides down the street among the dapper bank clerks.*

Why did I read that? Because 63 years ago this man, who surveys the natural world and provides erudite commentary on the state of places, came here. He talked about three things in relation to the Northern Territory: the public service; infrastructure; and population. Here we are 63 years later having the same conversations about frontier towns not developing in a sustainable way; infrastructure that is haphazard and failed to be delivered properly; and a population which is wide and diverse, but ultimately disaggregated. We are still having these conversations because the Northern Territory has never economically emancipated itself.

Last week I was grateful for the opportunity that the Leader of the Opposition provided to allow us all to think at length about budgetary failure. There was a series of excellent contributions, and I thank everyone in the House for affording me the indulgence to speak at length about what works, what does not and how we can move forward. As was reported widely in the press, there was bipartisan support, including from my nemesis the Member for Gwoja, whom I thank for extending me some time in the House to speak further on this topic.

Mr Paech: I will do it again today.

Dr RAHMAN: Last week we had what I felt was one of the first serious constructive conversations in here about our fiscal and economic fortunes and a way forward, facing reality and acknowledging that budgets are not just about cherrypicking line items and talking about spending, but starting to seriously talk about how

we make and save money and stop the wastage of money institutionally. That is what grown-up conversations about the budget discuss.

The sad truth of it is, after five speeches from the opposition, I heard only one idea about how to do any of the latter. I have heard plenty about how we should spend money. I would like to spend money on a lot of the same priorities that the opposition identified; indeed, I believe, so would many of my colleagues. We would all like to create more opportunity in the Northern Territory, but we cannot provide opportunity sustainably and enduringly until we fix our finances. That requires having an honest grown-up conversation about where we are at and how we got here.

I will not fling mud. You can keep flinging much mud, cherrypicking the arguments, trying to sensationalise things, catastrophising and scaremongering, but I will not indulge in it. It is more important that we have the real conversations.

I acknowledged the Member for Gwoja's salient and sensible idea about water pricing the other day. I did not turn it on its head; I acknowledged it as a legitimate discussion point.

I am tired of having bare-knuckle boxing matches in here. I do not think it is productive. We should be pugilists, and we should box and punch hard, but we should punch above the belt.

Last week I spoke, with the indulgence of the Treasurer and my nemesis in a moment of cross-party unity, for 70 minutes about where we are at economically and how we might go forward constructively. Bless—the ABC chose to focus on 70 seconds of that 70 minutes, framing my contribution as a slash and burn of the public service. It is disappointing because that is not constructive to the debate. I encourage anyone tuning in, particularly from the public service ranks, to listen to all 70 minutes of what I had to say and then come back and tell me what you think.

Here is the thing that floored me over the last few days since the Assembly rose: I could not believe the number of people who got in touch with me over the last weekend—I will not say it was hundreds, but it was not far off—to say, 'Good on you and good on your government for having the courage to finally start to do the hard work to deliver grown-up governance and budgeting and face the reality of the fact that our wages bill is astronomically high, and we must collectively work together to figure out a way to address it'.

The best part about it was that I was not contacted by right-wing Liberal ideologues; I was contacted by everyday Territorians of all stripes and by people in our public service at the highest levels. I will not out anyone or name and shame them or anything like that. It taught me that the everyday Territorians we talk about want us to do better, have the real conversations and create opportunity in housing, health, education and infrastructure. They are not stupid. They get that we are super in debt and that part of the reason for that is we have not had the courage to make tough choices to repair and rebuild our economy.

The opposition and the crossbench have an opportunity; this is an inflection point. You are not to blame in large part for the budgetary choices made over the last three Labor governments. Some of you were ministers, but largely you just had to take orders and be complicit in the decisions that were made for you.

No-one on this side of the House is responsible for the choices we made. We are not talking about selling off TIO or public assets; nor were we complicit in those decisions. We are moving forward positively and constructively.

Ms Uibo: The Chief Minister was part of that government.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Leader of the Opposition, stop the interjections, please.

Dr RAHMAN: This is what I am getting at: there are people who care about the Northern Territory and are staying the course and want us in this House to do better. It starts and finishes—certainly for me—with economic affairs. All the social priorities can be funded only if we start accepting the reality about what we are doing in the budgetary and fiscal space. I will not fight back without gloves or throw mud; I will not have that. If you want to do that, do it; however, I think you can do better.

I will not point out the litany of people who contacted me to say, 'Good on you for having tough conversations. Good on your government for having robust discussions and not just gagging you, as is the way in many governments.' I am not being gagged. Just because I do not choose to go on the ABC and jump to its tune at a moment's notice, that does not say anything about being gagged. I speak my mind. My colleagues and I have robust discussions respectfully.

I do not have any closer colleague in the team than the Member for Drysdale who is at the opposite end of the pole to me ideologically. We are two bookends of this party continuum. He is a real conservative and I am a real liberal democrat. We both know that, but we have respectful discussions. We are both invested in the future of the Territory and opportunity for people.

I thank the Treasurer, my learned colleague, for not reprimanding me, putting me in a box, locking me up, shutting me down and gagging me in the way that happened in previous governments to Ken Vowles, Scott McConnell and Jeff Collins. They raised the alarm about you blowing the budget. What did you do? You threw them out of parliament. I thank my learned colleague the Treasurer for allowing us to have these discussions. He could be a draconian Treasurer and say, 'No. Read off the talking points. Shut up; that is all you will do', but we are having real discussions because we are trying to fix real problems.

I will single out only one person who got in touch with me about my comments last week. He took the time to watch all 70 minutes of it. I reckon he is a significant person worth pointing out to the Treasurer, the Member for Gwoja and Madam Speaker—Mr Alex Nelson. He wrote enormously long emails to me, providing fantastic commentary. I will not pat myself on the back, but he said nice things about what I had to say, and I am grateful to Mr Nelson for saying them. However, the main reason I bring up his contribution and the fact he got in touch with me is that Alex Nelson is a much-respected Centralian who speaks with authority regarding Centralian history and has written extensively regarding economic affairs. He is a well-regarded individual. He is not a partisan hack who got in touch to say, 'Good on you for thumping Labor', or something like that, but to say, 'I am impressed that you and your government are having the tough discussions and are trying to fix things. I hope you keep it up and keep up the standard rather than just flinging mud, which people are sick and tired of.' He did not exactly say that; I do not want to misquote him, just to be clear.

As is obvious to everyone in the House, from time to time I read a bit and I try to read widely. I do not often read the Alice Springs News. It is not a publication I am particularly across. Mr Nelson very kindly sent me a series of articles he had written around 2018-ish and then again recently. These articles were instructive. He said that the ABC story focused on my remarks about the NT public service, which instantly brought to mind the situation that prevailed in 1990–91. This period marked the largest imposition of restrained public service growth and recruitment in the history of the Territory. He went on to talk about the same thing in late 2018 in relation to the Gunner government appointing John Langoulant to Chair the fiscal strategy panel and the comments that he made at the time.

You would think from what was in the press that I had been the first person to say that we might need to start thinking about how we manage our economy and its structural reform. I have been talking about this for three years. Literally from when I was a senior public servant in this building, in Chief Minister and Cabinet, to when I was a political candidate to when I have been in the House, I have consistently talked about structural economic reform, productivity reform and public sector reform. I am not hiding any of this; I have said it all along. I have said it in probably 20 speeches in the House, and everyone here knows it. There is no secret to any of this, and the reason we are saying it is that we all know we have to face reality and move forward.

I restrained myself from doing it in the past, but last week I went through the difference between the rhetoric and the reality of Labor budgets for the last eight years, where that gap was really wide and why we are in the mess we are in. I promised that would be the first and last time I did it. This time next year I will not be looking backwards; I will be looking forwards at what our government is doing now that we have full control of the economic levers. However, it was important to talk about those things because we had to address them at some point.

I spoke about 10 things in that 70 minutes. I spoke about the structural deficit; record net debt per capita; over-reliance on GST windfalls; failure to achieve population growth targets; the Darwin ship lift blowout; stagnant private investment; the failure in revoting projects over and again; the cost of living and utility price squeezes; housing supply and homelessness; and, lastly, for about 70 seconds of my 70 minutes, the public service bracket creep. The preceding nine items were equally important.

I do not want to do this all the time. All we do is bare-knuckle box for short-term political gain without fixing anything for anyone in the Northern Territory.

I want a future where we have more money and more capacity to spend it on all the priorities that all of you have. We all have priorities. It is traditional at budget time to talk at length about the specific commitments in your electorate.

For Fong Lim there is $1.6m, of which $825,000 is basically to upgrade curves in Hidden Valley. I am not getting a vote out of that, but it is necessary stuff. I am keen to support it, because the government has made the tough choices this year to give nobody bells and whistles; nobody gets sweets, lollies and trinkets. We are doing the essential things that need to happen, so I am delighted to say that in my area we are drain clearing and doing investigation works in Berrimah for $400,000. I am pleased that we are putting a new electric front gate on the Darwin Fire Station in my patch and that we are spending $825,000 to basically tidy up and bring up to code things in Hidden Valley. I may not be a super-duper motorsport enthusiast and people in my electorate may not be, but it matters to all of us economically.

The government is making decent choices. There is no pork-barrelling and no prioritising. Nobody is getting anything special. The Chief Minister, after 15 years of campaigning, is finally getting a roundabout in Kirkland Road. If you want to call that pork-barrelling, go for it.

Mr Kerle: We actually need that one.

Dr RAHMAN: Absolutely we need that one, Member for Blain; I take the interjection.

My point is simply that we are not cherrypicking or pork-barrelling; we are spending on the things that are needed. People in the wider Territory ecosystem—in our public service, hospitals, police force and private sector—have told me, 'Well done to you guys for not just spending and spending'. When we are spending, it is consistent with what we said we would spend on. We are spending on correctional services, crime reduction, the police force and frontline workers. We are staying true to what we said we would do; we are not making this up on the fly.

I am grateful to Alex Nelson for all the material he sent and his kind words. On 24 December 2018 he wrote an article called, 'The forgotten lesson: Take tough decisions now or borrow against tomorrow into unmanageable debt'. The first two sentences of that article read:

> *The Northern Territory's economy is staggering and its immediate future prospects look bleak. The public service is bloated and the NT Government is spending beyond its means.*

I am not the first person in the world to call for a reality check. We need to take the temperature down and agree that we have to work together to figure out what the priorities are. I do not have a specific hit list. It is not about having a 20% efficiency dividend and saying, 'Sack all those people'; that is not how it works.

In my time as a public servant for nine months when I came back, from August 2023, I was on a floor with I do not know how many commissioners and executive directors, and nobody could work the photocopier. You need more soldiers than generals to run an efficient army, and we do not; we have wild distortions throughout lots of parts of our public service. There are too many backend people in some places and not enough frontline people—too many generals and not enough soldiers.

We can either have an honest conversation about this and work together to look at what we have and what we want to prioritise, or we can just keep flinging mud. I will give it to you, Member for Gwoja: you have outmatched me. I cannot bare-knuckle box with you and win; I will go down valiantly. I think you have more to offer this House in that regard. I still dislike you, but want to work with you to try to improve our fiscal fortunes because I believe you have a contribution to make in that regard …

Ms Uibo: Work with the Treasurer; he is the decision-maker.

Madam SPEAKER: Silence, please!

Dr RAHMAN: This is the frustration. The Leader of the Opposition is just—I will not dignify it.

The first line from an article from 28 December 2018 called, 'NT a "failed state"? Too harsh, said Perron … a year ago', is:

> *Territory governments have faced difficult times before although none have amassed a mind boggling debt, with a cynical lack of transparency, as has the Gunner Government.*

You would think I was the first person who suddenly had something to say about the fact that we need structural economic reform, productivity reform and public service reform. Why do I want to do that? It is not for the sake of balancing the books arbitrarily; it is so that we can create more opportunity and have more money to spend on public health, housing, education and infrastructure. You have to do the hard work

because you cannot attract private investment at the rate you want to unless you create the conditions to make this an attractive investment destination. The Treasurer is starting to do that work. We are doing the outreach better than we have done it before to try to attract that investment. However, it will not happen unless we all agree that we are over-leveraged and at this point have to collectively do something about it or we simply will not come back from it.

I could have been a real so-and-so the other day, if I wanted to, and destroyed or shamed Treasurers Manison, Gunner and Lawler for the hypocrisy and the things that do not add up in these budget papers. There is so much to pick from in the massive gap between the rhetoric and reality, but I am trying to punch with gloves on and fight the fair fight. Therefore, I have not exhaustively gone through the millions of things in the budget papers. However, I will read two lines that are instructive of where we are at. In the first budget Treasurer Manison handed down on 2 May 2017 she said:

> *The previous government failed to have plans in place for either public or private investment, preferring instead an ad hoc approach to public policy making that saw the Territory chasing one shiny object after another.*
>
> *Our predecessors left a legacy of slowing population growth and a loss of people interstate.*

You had eight years, and we went backwards on all of that. As I said last week, I do not think a lot of this happened because of malice necessarily; it may have happened because of the tyranny of small choices à la the Alfred Kahn paper from 1966 which I quoted the other day whereby lots of small bad decisions cumulatively put you in a position that is suboptimal.

We are where we are. We can sling mud or we can all collectively draw a line in the sand, face reality and say, 'We are in a tough financial spot. We are seriously in debt. We have serous workforce and population problems. We still need to stabilise antisocial behaviour and reduce crime. Let us do it together.'

We have a plan for how we will go about it. We modulate our plans and listen to opposition members when they provide us with something we can work with. However, if all you want to do is cherrypick, fling mud and bare-knuckle box, we will not get anywhere. We will be peddling the same nonsense and crying for a bailout from the federal government because we are over-leveraged beyond an inch of our lives. Pretty soon it will not be possible to come back unless we are careful.

The Chief Minister stayed true to her word on our spending priorities. Contrast that with—this is the only other thing I will point out from these eight years of budget speeches—what then Treasurer Michael Gunner said on 4 May 2021:

> *And now that we are moving out of our health emergency phase, I am giving two new directions to CEs:*
>
> - *don't blow your budget*
> - *don't blow your wages bill.*
>
> *In the future, if any CE breaches their budget by anything more than 1%, the Chief Minister will use his powers to act. These powers range from a formal explanation, to an independent financial audit, to a suspension of the CE, right through to the sacking of the CE.*

Can anyone in here—I am happy to be corrected—show me one instance of the use of any of those powers?

I do not blame the opposition as it stands for the state of our financial fortunes; I blame its masters from the past. It is up to you whether you want to stand by them or draw a line in the sand and move forward with us to create opportunity for Territorians. We do not create opportunity by spending our entire time in here flinging mud. It is not productive anymore.

Mr MACKAY: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Pursuant to Standing Order 43, I move that an extension of time be granted to the member.

Motion agreed to.

Mr Paech: I was going to wait for it to be a minute.

Madam SPEAKER: He got in early, so an extension has been granted, there being no objections.

Dr RAHMAN: I object to the Member for Gwoja not moving my extension of time on this occasion, but I will take it on the chin.

Ms Uibo: You had two minutes left.

Dr RAHMAN: I am just being cheeky. Thank you for the indulgence and the opportunity to speak about the budget.

It is not easy to have the tough conversations, but we must have them. I will not go over my 70 minutes' worth of critique from last week. We do not need to do that. We need to talk about our budget Bill, what is in it and why it is a good budget. We need to focus on the things that are constructive and headline them, if you like.

The 2026–27 budget papers confirm that the Territory is forecasting a $95m operating surplus for 2025–26 and we are aiming to end the cycle of borrowing for wages. That is a good thing that we should all get behind. Net debt is projected to stabilise at $13.2bn, which we all agree is a huge number that needs to come down, but for now that is the work we could do on turning around the debt barge, with a net-debt-to-revenue ratio of 15 percentage points better than we had previously projected.

The papers acknowledge the substantial $800m blowout of the ship lift, but we have also framed the project as being past the point of return. What we are committing to is strict management, rather than cancellation, of that endeavour. The Public Accounts Committee advised that is the direction we should take.

Importantly, given everybody in this House is fixated on it, the infrastructure focus has shifted to a $4.25bn program with $460m of new, fresh cash to start ensuring there is actual delivery.

Debate suspended.

The Assembly suspended.

NOTICES

Mr MALEY (Corrections): Madam Speaker, I give notice that on the next meeting day I shall present a Bill titled Youth Justice and Criminal Code Amendment Bill 2026, Serial 66.

Ms BOOTHBY (Attorney-General): Madam Speaker, I give notice that on the next meeting day I shall present a Bill titled Attorney-General Legislation Amendment (Boards, Committees and Statutory Offices) Bill 2026, Serial 65.

Ms CAHILL (Trade, Business and Asian Relations): Madam Speaker, I give notice that on the next meeting day I shall present a Bill titled Consumer Affairs and Essential Goods and Services Legislation Amendment Bill 2026, Serial 68.

Ms CAHILL (Child Protection): Madam Speaker, I give notice that on the next meeting day I shall present a Bill titled Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026, Serial 67.

QUESTION TIME

Budget 2026–27 – Health Infrastructure

Ms UIBO to MINISTER for HEALTH

Madam Speaker, I put on the record a welcome to the ALPA student experience participants who have come to watch parliament. Welcome to Parliament House.

Members: Hear, hear!

Ms UIBO: Minister, despite overseeing a $4.25bn infrastructure program, your budget allocates just $8m to new health infrastructure across the Territory. At the same time, overall capital infrastructure funding has dropped by $56m. The bulk of projects underway were already initiated under the former Territory Labor government. Your Health department CEO has publicly called for a new Darwin hospital, yet there is still no meaningful investment in expanding hospital capacity, no serious commitment to maternity ward upgrades and no clear plan to deal with a health system under enormous strain.