

NORTHERN TERRITORY
***of* AUSTRALIA**

Dr TANZIL RAHMAN MLA

Member for Fong Lim

HANSARD EXTRACT

APPROPRIATION 2026
PART 2

TUESDAY 12 MAY 2026

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

PARLIAMENT HOUSE, DARWIN NT 0800

We on this side of the House value the Swimming in Schools program which we announced last year. I am sure I have spoken about my previous experience teaching swimming before I came to this role. It is valued on this side of the Chamber. It is a $3m commitment from our government to schools and parents to offer real cost-of-living relief. It is something that the Member for Casuarina knows about with the pool in his electorate. I was at the Nightcliff pool with the Member for Braitling this morning, having a swim.

People have access to a lot of water across the Territory, including backyard pools. These free swimming lessons are lifesaving for many families. Every child needs to know how to swim.

This year the School of Sport Education NT, under Principal Tim East—I shout out to Tim, who is an ex-Katherine teacher as well; all good people come from Katherine—has a booking schedule for schools to book their swimming. I caught up with the Ramingining students this morning who were doing their swimming lessons and looking forward to it this afternoon. That is what it is about. Last week the Member for Arafura asked about swimming and remote schools. He talked about swimming at Warruwi. Those schools all go through the School of Sport Education to book their swimming lessons. Those lifesaving lessons across the Territory are all being paid for by the department.

Last year almost 18,000 students accessed those swimming lessons. When I was in the Barkly last year students from about four remote communities came to Tennant Creek and were having a fantastic time learning how to swim. That finished with a swimming carnival.

There are not only are the lifesaving swimming lessons at school but also the $200 Sport Vouchers for the under-fives. Again, the Finocchiaro CLP government is delivering real cost-of-living relief.

Mr EDGINGTON (Leader of Government Business): Madam Speaker, I ask that further questions be placed on the Written Question Paper.

APPROPRIATION (2026–27) BILL
Serial 63
and
TREASURY LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL
Serial 64

Continued from earlier this day.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Madam Speaker, fearmongering and flinging mud will not fix our economy, but grown-up governance will. It will rebuild our economy and is what the Treasurer has provided in the 2026–27 budget, laying the foundations for opportunity for everyday Territorians into the future.

I have given wide-ranging commentary on the budget and our budgetary failures in the past. It is time to move past that and speak specifically to a strategic defence of our budget, contrasting our current fiscal pivot with the structural economic failures of the past once and for all. Let us do so from the perspective of a neutral economic observer who is focused on long-term fiscal sustainability.

I will speak on four points of contrast in this, my final of four addresses on the economy. The headline item is that we are moving from borrowing for consumption—which happened for years as we tried to spend our way out of the problem—towards investing for resilience. These budget papers provide an investment for long-term fiscal resilience.

Under the first head, it is important we understand that we are restoring fiscal integrity. We are ending the cycle of recurrent debt cycles. The primary improvement of the 2026–27 budget is the definitive break from unsustainable positions of borrowing to fund recurrent activities. Instead, we are specifically paying public sector wages and interest costs without having to do it on a credit card. The discipline we are showing is in trying to deliver a $95m operating surplus for 2025–26, which will be the first since 2022–23. This ensures that the Territory is finally living within its means for daily operations rather than paying wages on credit.

Contrast that with what was a core failure identified in the Langoulant report in 2018, which warned that the NT was in structural deficit cycles where debt was being used to fund consumption rather than productive assets. Between 2016 and 2024 we know that net debt spiralled from $1.8bn to more than $10bn due to a lack of expenditure restraint.

We are providing sustainability by trying to achieve a surplus. The government has reduced projected debt growth by 18% and improved the net-debt-to-revenue ratio by 15 percentage points compared with previous

forecasts. That stabilisation is validated by what looks to be a stable credit rating from Moody's as well, providing a foundation for lower future interest bills.

The second head we should consider as a point of contrast is infrastructure realism. We are replacing phantom projects with funded delivery, meaning that the hallmark of previous economic management, which was the announcement of major projects and the lack of business cases that led to massive blowouts and revoted funding, will not happen going forward for us.

The discipline we are showing is in removing those phantom projects and initiatives that existed only in rhetoric and not in reality and did not have realistic pathways. The current $4.25bn infrastructure program is backed by $460m in additional capital works cash to ensure projects move to construction, rather than remaining undelivered in perpetuity.

We have spoken about the ship lift, and we have committed to strict Treasury-level oversight to maximise the asset's return on investment for a maritime precinct over the long haul.

We are also focused on resilience, which we had little chance to speak about. The flood recovery fund of $100m and the $30.5m in the roads repair package are a shift towards building back better for the long term to reduce the long-term maintenance burden caused by the NT's exposure to extreme weather.

The third head is population and community safety, which we are now utilising as an economic lever. For a decade, the Territory has attempted to solve its population stagnation through expensive campaigns without doing the real work to arrest the loss of residents to other states. The realism we are bringing is to move away from shiny marketing campaigns and instead address the primary reasons people leave, which include antisocial behaviour, crime, social dysfunction and the cost of living. They are the things we are consistently tackling.

We acknowledge that population growth will be modest but realistic over the forward estimates, hovering at about 1.1%. If we improve on that position, it will be great for everyone in the Territory.

The first most important thing to do is treat safety as economy now. We are investing $1.7bn in law and order, introducing 100 more police on the streets and establishing a 212-strong police public safety officer workforce because we are framing it as an economic necessity at this point. We are trying to reduce crime further, stabilise the population base and restore business confidence.

For the cost of living we are providing $290m in practical concessions, including a $19.7m contribution to reducing fuel excise. That is a targeted attempt to mitigate the inflation gap that previously made the NT less competitive than the east coast.

The last head is frontline priority versus bureaucratic restraint. Previous budgets saw significant growth in the non-frontline public service, even as we had ongoing code yellows and shortages of police. The discipline that we are trying to instil now is in providing a 6% growth in frontline workers—that is in the budget papers—such as nurses, police, teachers whilst explicitly directing agencies to restrain back office administrative staffing. We are trying to ensure that taxpayer funds are directed towards service delivery rather than head office bloat. I will be specific about this because I feel that it may have been missed by some.

It is not in Budget Paper No 1, 2, 3 or 4; it is in the Budget and Regional Overview. If you look at page 4, Fiscal outlook, you will see the giant box titled 'Restraining non-frontline staffing growth'. It spells out all the extra areas that we are adding frontline staff to—assistant teachers, police, classroom teachers, medical officers, correctional officers, nurses, police auxiliaries and senior teachers. It is there in black and white; read the papers. We are trying to slowly deal with the state of our wages bill by ensuring that we prioritise the front line, create efficiencies and improve productivity over time.

The end strategic verdict of this all is that in this budget we are trying to transition to grown-up governance. We are prioritising operating surpluses, stabilising debt and funding essential services with cash rather than credit. This budget addresses the structural failures of the preceding decade. For the taxpayer I believe this budget offers the first credible pathway towards long-term fiscal resilience.

The budget Bill is being debated in cognate with a Bill regarding the first home owner grants and some adjustments to payroll tax. I make it clear that I am supportive of those manoeuvres. Continuing HomeGrown Territory, which sees more action in the Fong Lim electorate than anywhere else, is a great step forward; likewise, introducing a payroll tax rate of 6.5%—an increase of 1%—for large national businesses to ensure that we continue to grow our additional payroll tax revenue and, hopefully, raise an extra $25m per annum.

We are in charge of ensuring community safety. This budget will continue to invest in law and order, police, courts and Corrections. It is not about new promises; it is about sticking to our plans and continuing to deliver them.

Net debt will remain a challenge for everyone in this House, and we will have to work collectively on that by not flinging mud and fearmongering but working out where we want to try to create efficiencies and improve productivity. This government has a clear plan and a responsibility it takes seriously to manage debt responsibly whilst continuing to invest in priority areas. We are not shirking our responsibilities by simply kicking the can down the road and leaving it to future generations or future governments to pick up the pieces. Instead, we are staying focused on our priorities. Those priorities mean that in this budget we are not focused on spending; we are focused on creating restraint. Sometimes the best investment a government can make is restraint. We did not create the debt problem, but we will be the ones to fix it over time.

How will we do that? With my final minute, I simply say to everyone in the House: look at the Industry Outlook. It is not distributed with the other budget papers we get; it is available online from Treasury. It explains how important the minerals and onshore gas industries are to our long-term future potentially. We are supportive of trying to generate wealth and create opportunity for the Northern Territory because the multiplier effect of those industries, once seeded, will create an architecture of opportunity for the everyday Territorian in public health, housing, education and infrastructure.

It is my great privilege and joy this year to speak on the Appropriation Bill, support my learned colleague the Treasurer and endorse wholeheartedly this Bill.

I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Mr HOWE (Drysdale): Madam Speaker, I noted a few points made earlier. The selling of assets was raised multiple times. It is interesting to look back at the history of assets. A bit of corporate knowledge goes a long way.

It was interesting for me to discover that in 2012 during caretaker mode the Labor government gave the Stella Maris building to Unions NT for free. In caretaker mode it gave away assets. I can see why there is now a gap with Labor and the unions; it is because they do not get free buildings anymore. We also discussed at length the giving of $1.8bn for the ship lift and what that has added up to, so I remind those opposite that when they give away things for free it seems to be to very good friends and connected people.

We stand by the sales that were made because it was for financial reasons for the health of the overall NT people, not given to union friends and personal friends. There is a vast difference in those two.

I give credit where credit is due. On my history endeavour I noted that the Member for Gwoja spoke out against ‘He who shall not be named’ in 2019. There were leaked messages about the Member for Gwoja’s disappointment with how the budget was going and the lines that they were being told they had to wheel out and say. Credit where credit is due, Member for Gwoja.

There is a great danger posed to every government in the modern world, which is inflation. It is a toxic cancer to the economy. When government convinces the public that it can spend and print money endlessly without consequence, it is straightforward that it leads to inflation. I will outline what inflation does to people in my electorate of Drysdale and why I care so much about the inflation rate.

Printing money does not create wealth, and I think we all agree with that. I will outline how it does the opposite. It makes the people of Drysdale poorer. Why does this bother me so much? It is because the ordinary people of Drysdale, the Northern Territory and the wider country, pay for inflation. It is not the bureaucracy or politicians, but the people who pay when inflation is high. Everyday Territorians, families who buy groceries, apprentices trying to move out of home, pensioners watching power bills rise and small business owners paying more for freight, insurance, wages, fuel and interest rates—they are the real people who pay for inflation.

Ultimately, inflation is the decline in the purchasing power of honest work. The people of Drysdale are still doing their jobs, and the reason I hate inflation is that it devalues their productive work. Every time they go to work, their real earning power is less. That means less money for school, education, sport, a family holiday, rent or a mortgage. This is what inflation does.

Inflation is fundamentally a monetary phenomenon. It is driven by monetary policy. It is simple: when more money is injected into the economy than it is producing, the dollar is devalued.