NORTHERN TERRITORY
of AUSTRALIA

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HANSARD EXTRACT

AIRFARES AND AIRLINE CONNECTIVITY

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Parents' Association fought for many years to ensure their children are not negatively impacted by living so far from major areas. The government continues to support them through these assistance schemes.

It is not often spoken about, so I thank the Member for Daly for bringing on this motion. It is not often I thank the Member for Daly, but I thank him because this is important. The Member for Daly, having many electors living in regional and remote areas, would understand. I cannot imagine how difficult it would be to get all the way in to travel to the east coast of Australia from Nauiyu and other areas that are often impacted by flooding.

The Member for Gwoja mentioned the exemplary service we receive on planes. The planes are a bit old and tired. A lot of people may not realise that they used to have 'Alliance' written on them; when Qantas bought a large share of Alliance, it essentially stickered over the old Alliance badge, put a Qantas one on there and refurbished some of the seating inside. They are old Alliance planes. I believe we predominantly fly on Embraer 100s between Alice Springs and Darwin. They are older planes, but they get us to where we need to go. There are lots of things that do not always work on them appropriately. It is important that we continue to strongly advocate to Qantas that we deserve to have newer planes. That will cut down on costs because the planes will use less fuel, enabling us to have cheaper airfares.

As the Member for Gwoja pointed out, the flight attendants work their backsides off. I thank Zalia, Beth, Jenny, Sandra and Sahara. They know us by our first names, ask after our families and look after us every time we fly. Recently they have been finding it difficult to get people to come to Darwin and take up those flight attendant jobs. I thank the hostesses and hosties from Queensland who have been covering shifts. I always notice them because they are a new face, and I ask them how long they are in Darwin for. They leave their families to come here to ensure we have that level of service. I can tell you now that I have had it happen to me. If there are too many people crook who would be working on that day, the flight does not go. That has happened in the past. They call up as many people as they can, but at the end of the day if no-one is available, that flight does not go. I thank all the incredible air hostesses who are constantly working between Alice and Darwin and the people who are often covering.

I lend my support for continuing advocacy to address high airfares. I support remote and regional Territorians, like those who are part of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA) and who have advocated over a long period to get schemes to support their students to travel to school, whether it be in Alice Springs, Katherine and Darwin or interstate, should they choose—and that is the important thing. I will be honest: I wish that every Territorian student attended a boarding school in the Territory, but I understand that some families have a history of children travelling interstate to attend school and we need to support them to make the best decisions for their children as they see fit.

Thank you, Member for Daly. Thank you to all the other people, like the Treasurer, who contributed to this conversation that, once again, puts airfares at the front of everyone's mind.

I am frustrated and sick and tired of seeing small carriers come to the Territory that cannot make it work and then leave. We need to look at how we can get additional bums on seats into Alice Springs and Darwin because, at the end of the day, it is supply and demand. If we can increase the amount of demand coming into these areas, we will see an uplift in supply and then those planes will be fuller more of the time, which means the airlines will make more money and can bring down the cost. While they are flying often at a 75% or lower capacity, we will continue to see high airfares.

I will continue to do everything I can. Recently the Northern Territory Government supported the Tasmanian Walking Company to set up at Ayers Rock. That will bring more people into the Territory which is great, but instead of having them fly to the Rock directly, let us work—we are already doing as much as we can through the Tourism minister—to drive additional people to the Larapinta Trail. The more offerings we have, the more tourists will take up these opportunities. They will fly to the Territory and hopefully drive down airfares.

We will continue to increase the number of reasons for people to travel to the Territory to enjoy this beautiful place so that those who live here every day can benefit from lower airfares.

Thank you for allowing me to contribute to this and thank you to those from the other side for bringing it to the Assembly. I look forward to hearing the wrap-up speech and everything else we can do to continue to drive airfares lower.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Madam Speaker, I am having a day of winging it when it comes to speeches. I had zero interest in speaking on this on the basis that, honestly, I do not know enough about it. I know that we do not have competitive airline pricing, and it is a massive economic problem. I can talk about how it affects our

population prospects until the cows come home. I got up to speak because, at the risk of being too kumbaya about it all, I am blown away by what I just heard across the Chamber—maybe not so much from the Member for Daly; that was a bit disappointing, but putting that to one side—because after the general flinging of mud to start with, we have moved onto something seriously important that maybe we can just grasp.

As I said, I am winging it today. Madam Speaker, I regret not making a submission to that same inquiry. I saw it at the time and thought, 'You came to this parliament with the capacity to make an economic contribution, and they are the things to do'. I already spend so much time prosecuting big-ticket arguments like that; it comes at a cost. It means time that I am not out there pounding the pavement in my electorate as well. I have tried to maintain a balance, but this is one that I let go through to the keeper. I thought, 'You know what'—I suspect a bit like yourself, Madam Speaker—'it will possibly be a damp squib and they will, frankly, do nothing interesting with that inquiry'. However, it was a real opportunity, and I give credit to you, Madam Speaker, and the Leader of the Opposition and the minister for making submissions to that inquiry.

I appreciated your contribution and what I heard from the others substantively about this, being things that I know about roughly in the ballpark. We know about all the failed airlines, the attempts to subsidise staff, the mayor in budgie smugglers and Bonza going bust. We have heard and seen this all before, but I could not believe the richness of what I just heard about the subject matter detail on this topic.

I find it genuinely remarkable that we have been unable to come up with a coordinated policy position. The remonstrance is not the worst idea in the world, but if we are to go and bang on the doors, maybe we should go with something a little more coordinated. The unity ticket today—goodness me. Pretty much all of what the Member for Gwoja said sounded bang on to me. The subject matter expertise was coming from all of you from Central Australia in particular.

It is pertinent. It is clear that Central Australia is economically collapsing and suffering and has not been looked after. It is actually costing the Northern Territory; there is no doubt about that. It is not just about banging on about your electorate; it is a serious problem for the whole Territory.

Why did I get up? What do I have to offer? I do not have a silver bullet. I wish I had thought about this properly and could say, 'Here are 10 policy options for silver bullets that we might pursue'. I have a suggestion in earnest for everyone in this House: it would appear that the same common public servant pool that we leverage from, the same idea makers in this space that we keep rely on in good faith, have only been able to get us so far on this one.

Aside from a little of the characteristic mudslinging about who spent what where and went to where on what fuel card and all that sort of stuff—put that to one side for a second and put on your serious thinking hat—this feels like one issue we could have a serious conversation about, and not just performatively or in parliament necessarily. This could be a standalone issue that we could have a real policy conversation about. Almost nothing happens in this parliament—it happens in other parliaments, sometimes in committees but also independently of that—when we find a genuine issue that people care enough about across party lines and are willing to put down tools on. We could have a serious think about how to put out a coordinated policy position.

It would appear that despite all our best efforts—we are making good efforts; I do not think Minister Cahill has done anything wrong in this space—we are still being screwed by the same bigger bullies and cycles and airline metrics that previous governments were as well. We all know that throwing infinite amounts of money at the problem will not fix it. We can dispense with that idea because we know that we will just get another flaky airline for god knows how long. Independent of the stuff that is happening at a government level, why can this not be an issue we have a serious policy conversation about?

In all the conversations we have had, all this stuff has been conflated in terms of real-world data, economic data, actors and stakeholders and policy approaches. We heard some wildcard solutions. I had not heard about the Qantas training centre option in Alice in the past. I have no idea what that involved or whether that is complete …

Ms Uibo: We came down to the last two.

Dr RAHMAN: I freely confess I did not know anything about it. I do not know whether it is a bonkers idea.

Can you all imagine for a fraction of a second what the Northern Territory populace would think of all 25 of us in this place if we managed to do one thing right on this issue? If we managed to find a way, somehow in a coordinated lobby and policy effort—having put together a forum to say, 'We seriously agree that this is

one issue we have all had a crack at and keep getting bullied by bigger players in the market, whether they are commercial or government players or federal government indifference to our plight', this is one issue we could rally on and create a structure around.

This is an out-and-out economic policy challenge. As I was listening, I wondered whether I could figure out how to crack this in 30 minutes or less. Then I thought, 'Don't be stupid. People have spent a long time thinking about this.' However, what people have not spent a long time doing is thinking about it together, in the same room with the same suite of information. There was so much agreement today, and most of what we heard was not defeatist. It was not a case of thinking this is too hard or impossible.

My gut instinct when I saw this motion was that it is a nice idea to have a bleat about this, but it is too hard. This is about straight-up economics—numbers, the price of fuel and passenger loads. A thin market aviation crisis problem is how it would be framed in economic parlance. Money will play a part in addressing this problem, but it requires a coordinated policy solution and more political capital than any one of us in this place has individually. Even when you have a thumping majority, like the Gunner government had, it could not parlay that into sufficient levels of cooperation and a durable policy solution. I have to figure that with all the conversations on energy resilience, security, transport, travel, aviation and making social cohesion a priority—frankly speaking, all the terrible press Alice has gotten, some unfairly over the last few years—this would have to be a smart policy challenge for us.

I have been lucky to participate in a couple of forums where, behind the scenes, people try to solve Australia's big problems and put down their weapons. They leave their weapons at the door, check their holsters and say, 'All right, we will take one day, guided by facilitators who have an idea of what they are talking about in this space, to help us troubleshoot a problem'. I have been in the rooms where that happens. It is amazing what can come out, but it cannot happen unless everybody agrees on terms. It is a bit like watching one of those *Braveheart*-like movies where all the warring clans have to come together and somehow leave all their pickaxes, swords and whatnot at the gate. Seriously, Member for Drysdale, you will have to leave your Viking helmet, pickaxe and sword at the gate for us to do this, and Member for Daly, you will have to do the same.

There is something significant here for you to all think about. I note that today marks the second instance of us resuscitating having parliamentary dinners under the auspices of the Speaker and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association—I think? Or not so much; sorry, I spoke out of turn. It is an opportunity for us to break bread together.

For a long time, for those listening at home who may be confused—I digress slightly—there was a time when this parliament, like every other parliament in Australia, had a members' dining room. The good thing about that is it forces all parliamentarians, whether on the same team or not, to break bread, have a chat and basically put down their weapons on their way in the door and talk about something. Here is the rub: in other parliaments across the country when people have to do that, a lot of the time it is pretty awkward at first, because you think, 'I hate that guy. What will I talk about with him?' However, you also think, 'That fish looks pretty good. I kind of fancy dinner.'

Here is my only policy suggestion for how to fix the airline crisis. I put it to anyone in this room who might be popping up for dinner tonight, our second of these events, to talk about airline connectivity with any of your peers. I will have a conversation with anybody who wants to talk about airline connectivity and how to lower prices. I will put down my tools and promise to sling no mud. I would like to talk about the economics of air connectivity with somebody tonight, because I cannot believe how little hostility there was, other than the initial predictable hostility. Having put that to one side, we are at a point where everybody seems to want to provide cheaper airfares because it might help reinvigorate economic prospects in the Centre and help skilled workers in Darwin to stick around longer in electorates like Nightcliff. It might result in a more sustainable workforce across lots of sectors, including the ones that we care about and are prioritising, like tourism—all of them, for that matter.

I was thinking through all the tools I had been taught for how to solve a policy problem. It starts by putting it all out there so that everyone has the same set of information. This issue is unique compared with other things that we talk about because for those things there are real winners and losers if you get to crack the problem. With this, everybody has tried hard with different things, but it has not gone the way we hoped it would go. I do not necessarily think that needs to be the case in perpetuity.

We seem to agree on a few common things. First of all, we are not the problem. That is one of the first things we seemed to agree on in everything I heard. The problem is airlines, economics, the federal government not giving two hoots about doing much in this space and multiple inquiries that pay lip-service on this issue. At least we have common ground to work with on this issue.

Think laterally for a second: what if this was the one thing we made serious headway on? We can do it on the basis of saying, 'Enough is enough. For all intents and purposes, we are doing a policy remonstrance. We are not throwing a tantrum; we had a good sit-down together and worked out that this parliament in order to be self-sustaining, this polity in order to emancipate itself and this place in order to have sustainable population and economic growth need better connectivity. We cannot do it because you are prohibiting us from doing so, and this is how we suggest to do it.' If we put the ball back in the court of the people who are the big baddies in this conversation, maybe we have a fighting chance of resolving some aspects of it.

It is easy to look at where this has failed time and again. I wish I had a sensible silver-bullet solution, but no-one does; we know that. If you think about the stakeholders in this space, surely by now the Department of Logistics and Infrastructure—and whoever is in there recycling this stuff—the Department of Trade, Business and Asian Relations or their predecessors have done this to death. Surely, they could use new stimulus in this space. I presume that every minister comes into this, one after the other, saying, 'Help me fix this problem', and the same handful of people are left with intractable impossible problems to fix. It would appear that we have a better shot at lobbying the federal government and the major players in the market space on this than those people or any single government would have.

I have nothing but good things to say about the on-ground service of people in the airline industry and the people who know our names when we go to check-in counters; we cannot take it out on them. Likewise, the people who try their hardest through the downstream side of it—tourism, marketing, airport development corporations and whoever else—are banging the drum to try to say that this is a place to visit.

It would appear that this is a well-identified policy challenge that everyone in this room seems to have agreed upon. Subsidies for providers alone have not done it; cabotage is an ongoing discussion which we can never seem to resolve; and there are fiscal constraints and issues about the infrastructure associated with the airport and the planes.

There is a policy problem-solving window. I got up because I did not want this to die on the notice paper until we choose to talk about it next time there is another airline collapse or we all get frustrated again because people have massively kicked off because—I do not know—whatever new externality basically screws the Northern Territory on connectivity, development or your relatives being able to visit. It does not seem fair.

I read yesterday from Sir David Attenborough's 1963 book that he wrote about the Northern Territory. Again, literally page 1 of that is him talking about this place being an airline pitstop and hub, and that is why it matters and people know it is here. That is built into our thinking on this place. In fact, now that I think about it, in COVID times, I could not believe that for the first time in my life I got a direct flight from London to Darwin. It was like all my Christmases came at once when I finally managed to get back in the country. It was London to Darwin direct, which was not a thing I thought would ever happen. Maybe it stopped in Singapore; I cannot remember. I do not think it did; I think it was direct.

The point is that this should, geographically speaking, be a proper airline pivot point. Alice Springs is the same. All that land is associated with Alice Springs Airport because both these places are meant to be pivot points for air travel in this country. Somewhere along the way, again probably with economic policy choices we made, we definitely dropped the ball. I do not know the full ins and outs of it, but there was a point when it was us or Cairns, and it became Cairns.

That is not set in stone or forever; we could probably still turn that around. I wonder what it would take in terms of serendipity and what we would have to cross over with, whether it would be major events, times of the year, specific market players or going back to this inquiry and saying, 'We have a follow-up. We see your submissions and your recommendations and find them to be unsatisfactory. Here is our counteroffer because we had a broader think about it and now we can see a way forward that is different.'

I am winging it. Apologies to anyone who is not enjoying it. I got up because I was encouraged by the fact that we seem to agree on wanting to solve a problem; nobody can seem to figure out how to solve it; and we can probably talk about it over dinner without all trying to kill one another and potentially come up with something. I learned a lot today about the airline policy problem that I did not know before, and that was by hearing about it from all of you as colleagues. I want to continue the conversation. It is an open offer: if anyone wants to talk about it with me, I would like to have a crack at this as a policy challenge because it is one thing we could work on without playing political games, for the betterment of everyone in the Northern Territory.

I thank the Member for Daly for bringing the motion to the Assembly. It has been useful for us to discuss it.