

NORTHERN TERRITORY
***of* AUSTRALIA**

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HANSARD EXTRACT

MINERALS TITLES AND MINING EXPLORATION

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Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Madam Speaker, the Mineral Titles Legislation Amendment Bill is an enormously consequential Bill. It is great that we have ironed out some of the kinks in relation to fossicking to ensure that Territorians can still do something they love with minimal impediments.

What is astonishing is the odd scenario in this House at the moment. We have the government putting forward a significant important Bill, and the opposition has nothing coherent to say about it. Those opposite are not even speaking on it; they do not seem to want to have skin in the game or an opinion on whether to signal to the market that we want to back our mining industry. You have the one person in opposition who I agree with, saying that this is a consequential Bill. It is a good Bill, and I will support it; you may not, Member for Johnston. Nothing demonstrated the strawman opposition that we have in this parliament more than what we have just seen. This is unbelievable.

We are talking about something that constitutes 25% of our gross state product. This is huge. We are in the budget fortnight and nobody in the opposition has anything to say about mining or what we should be doing …

Mr PAECH: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 31; the Member for Fong Lim claims that no-one from the opposition has spoken. The opposition has spoken to this legislation. That should be reflected in the record.

Madam SPEAKER: The opposition has spoken in this debate, but you can continue, Member for Fong Lim. There is no point of order.

Dr RAHMAN: I recognise that the Leader of the Opposition made a contribution. I am inclined to believe that no-one is making a further contribution, and that is the point I am trying to make. I find that rather astonishing. The contribution made by the Leader of the Opposition was incredibly perfunctory and indicative of a lack of coherence. Is it tepid support for the mining industry? Is it non-support for the mining industry?

By contrast, the Minister for Trade, Business and Asian Relations made a clear statement of why we support this. We are trying to provide unequivocal unmistakeable signals to market that this is a place open for business when it comes to mining and mining exploration activity. I, personally, am behind that.

The Member for Johnston and others of the Zeitgeist might be surprised by that, because this is not my usual subject choice. You would not necessarily think that I would speak about minerals and mining, but that is off the mark. As somebody who has a background in economics, geography was the mainstay of what I did. The mainstay of what I did in my university degree on this was on mining in society.

Do you know why it was my core area of interest? Not just because of the subject matter being novel or interesting, but because I remember being at the University of Sydney and everyone there being taught about the Northern Territory because of mining. This is a mining powerhouse, and it always has been. Everything that has been built and developed here has happened as a consequence of us coherently supporting mining in a balanced way. Over the years there has been a contest between environmentalists and development, and somehow we have not mucked it up to this point.

I do not think we are mucking it up in doing any of this either. We are creating a framework to create opportunity in the Northern Territory again. Here is a hot tip: realise that mining and gas are still the biggest game in town. They are the most probable possibilities for generating revenue. We had discussions this week about the budget where nobody seemed to pay any attention to anything other than how to spend money. Meanwhile, this is part of the strategy for how to make money so that we have more money to spend on the things that matter to us all.

I find it astonishing that there has been such tepid support for and commentary on this Bill, given it is hugely consequential. I will not go through all the changes in it because, apparently, none of you care except for the government. The Minister for Trade, Business and Asian Relations already pointed out how much certainty we are providing by, for example, extending lease provisions for exploration.

The fossicking part is significant to a small number of people but also economically extremely small.

The big-ticket part of this is about mining exploration which constitutes, as I said, 25% of our economic activity, at least by GSP. That is not insignificant.

I could easily talk about the historic or positively anticipated numbers on mining forever and a day, but I will not because it is clear that there will be no resistance or commentary provided in relation to this. I am happy to just pass the Bill and get on with the job for the Territory. However, I will say a few basic things because it

is important to have them on the record for all the people who read these speeches, look for facts and figures and want to know why we are so gung-ho about supporting mining.

The numbers make it clear how important it is. The first set of numbers worth looking at is in the Industry Outlook, which I pointed out from the budget papers. It was not distributed with the packs we got the other day. Look at the Industry Outlook from pages 9 to 15—which takes a lot of time and effort to produce, I might add, as any of you have ever written these kinds of things and been public servants would know—which will explain to you just how big the economic footprint of mining is, what the growth sectors are and why we are excited about the fact that new goldmines are looking probable. There is significant activity in the gold space, and it is worth knowing. Know about why manganese is on the down slightly, but it has been a big part of what we did before. Know about why lithium is on the up again.

This is how we will make money in the Northern Territory to fund all the things you want. The Northern Territory's development history is almost entirely predicated on the backbone of mining when it comes to our own revenue—that is, actual revenue, not our maintenance money, pocket money, GST money, grants money or whatever you want to call it.

I do not understand how the opposition cares so little about this, but the fact is that NT royalties for minerals and petroleum constitute $300m-odd and will be up to close to $400m-odd by 2025–26. We have nine operating mines, and they have slowed down over the last few years. We are talking about the same nine mines. We have 20-odd mines that are in development, six of which are approaching final investment decision. We have to move that forward or we will just keep talking about how the same old X and Y may be approaching FID soon. They will not approach FID unless you provide greater investment and regulatory certainty and frameworks to entice people to mine in the Northern Territory.

The workforce statistics are staggering. We have 5,000-odd people who are full-time workers. In the latest ABS data there is almost $700m in wages and salaries for all of this. Mineral production value is $4.3bn. These are significant amounts of money. Overall, in sum we are talking about $8.37bn in contribution to GSP—that is almost 25% of all the economic activity that we generate. Look at the numbers: how can you not care about this?

I respect the crossbench members for at least saying that they have concerns and they do not support this. That is fine; at least you care. It is clear that you care and you have a position. You want greater consultation on these issues, and there is a legitimate point to be made there.

We seem to care only about things that are extremely small and insignificant and not care about the massive things that actually matter. It is mind-boggling.

We have mines operating for gold, zinc, manganese, bauxite, lithium, phosphate, and neodymium and praseodymium—the Arafura Nolans stuff. Learn something about that and why it matters.

The thing to basically understand is that exploration activity has slowed in the recent past. There is this narrative that suddenly we are digging holes in the ground at a rate of knots and exploration activity is going through the roof, but it is not; it is slowing down.

The minister has been unequivocal in his support for this, signalling to market loud and clear that we want minerals exploration, mining activity, exploration activity and to make money for the Territory because we want to create opportunity. We have a fighting chance of that happening.

You have to understand that exploration licence statistics are going backwards, not at a dramatic rate; they have not fallen off a cliff. If you want them to keep growing steadily and hopefully improve, and if you want to have the chance of somebody striking gold—hitting oil as it were—and finding a rich vein of a resource that we can extract at a great commercial pricepoint to make money for the Territory faster, you have to support exploration licences. That is why we created a regulatory framework for it. I will not go through the nuts and bolts of it, but that is what the Bill fundamentally does. That is the big-ticket stuff. It is unbelievable.

There are 62 applications for exploration licences in 2026 to date, 10 of which are on Aboriginal freehold land. There is a reasonable conversation to be had, Members for Mulka and Johnston, with other people to make sure that mining benefits everyone. That is fair enough. We have had those conversations in the Northern Territory since self-government, and so far it turns out that nothing catastrophic or cataclysmic has happened. There has always been a contest—sometimes it ends up in the courts—but the bottom line is that there has always been a balance here, and that will always happen.

There will be people who want to preserve things as they are without any mining or exploratory activity and people concerned about sacred sites, and all of this is fair game—it is fair enough—but do not make out like what we are doing over here will destroy all of that, because it will not. None of what I see here suggests that will happen. If you ask your mates over there in the Labor opposition, apparently nothing will happen. There is nothing to worry about and nothing to comment about; wave this Bill through.

The quantum of mining to the NTG historically has been higher; that is what you have to understand—$10bn-odd and 4,000 direct jobs. The sector supports hundreds of small businesses, and resources royalty is the revenue that we use to fund things and have built infrastructure with in the past. The 20-odd developing mining projects that are in various stages of approval, financing or the construction process represent another possible $6bn in proposed capex—that is a huge amount of capital expenditure—and a possible, let us say 3,000, to round it up, direct jobs in construction and production down the line. These things do not happen unless you provide market confidence for them to happen.

Everybody seems to agree—that is the only salient point the Leader of the Opposition made—that we have great natural resources in the ground. Great. They will be stuck there forever and a day unless a government like us does something to help get them out, because it has not happened for a long time. We have been trading on old legacy mines that historic governments gave approval for. In the last 10 years there was nothing but smoke and mirrors in that space and confusing signals to market. That is why a lot of that stuff has not come out of the ground as fast as it should have.

The extractive minerals industry is critical to ensuring sufficient supplies of sand, gravel and crushed rock to supply the construction industry and support future development. Again, maybe it is not sexy to talk about sand and gravel, but it is super important. In 2024–25 we produced 2.6 million tonnes of crushed rock, 170 tonnes of gravel and 310 tonnes of sand and gravel. The total of that was $67m.

Let us talk about $67m worth of sand and gravel. I will not say much more because this Bill will just be waved through; nobody who actually should seems to care. What I will say is that budget week's aims should be fourfold: to save; to stop; to spend; to make. To save money institutionally, to stop the wastage of money institutionally, to spend money sensibly and to make money as well. Here is a tip: this is the make money part of it.

If you want to participate in budget week, join us in the conversation about what we do to make money. Stop being so tepid in your support of this—at least with mining. With gas there are other concerns that people can have, but that is a separate conversation. This is a mining Bill.

Make no mistake: mining has been and will continue to be a critical component of the Northern Territory development story. I support the government's efforts to support mining and exploratory activity; to improve regulatory frameworks and administrative efficiency, like the Minister for Trade, Business and Asian Relations so well articulated; and to create the preconditions for real sustainable investment and growth in the Northern Territory. As I keep saying, that is what will lead to opportunity for Territorians, for everyone's kids and grandkids, in housing, health, education and infrastructure.

This is not about good guys and bad guys. We have always had a robust development versus environment contest in the NT. To date, the checks and balances that we have embedded in the system have been enough to make sure we do not make major mistakes in resource exploration. I want us to continue to proceed in good faith, mindful of the significant benefits for the NT historically and, hopefully, going into the future.

On that note, I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Mr MALEY (Mining and Energy)(in reply): Madam Speaker, today we had a classic example of why it is so important to get the balance right. The Leader of the Opposition said that it is too slow, we are dragging the chain and we should have done this years ago. Then the Member for Mulka said that it is too quick and we are rushing it.

Today is a classic example of why getting that balance right in the middle is so important, as is doing the work and the consultation to get it right. Like the Member for Goyder said, we do that by talking to people, talking to the prospectors and making those amendments.

I am not sure if the Member for Johnston misled parliament on purpose; I do not think she would have misled the parliament …