

NORTHERN TERRITORY
***of* AUSTRALIA**

Dr TANZIL RAHMAN MLA

Member for Fong Lim

HANSARD EXTRACT

BERNARD SALT AM DEMOGRAPHY AND HEALTHCARE PLANNING

THURSDAY 23 JULY 2026

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

PARLIAMENT HOUSE, DARWIN NT 0800

I recognise the outstanding achievements celebrated at the 2026 Civil Contractors Federation Northern Territory Earth Awards held in June. These awards recognise excellence in civil construction across the Territory and acknowledge the people and businesses delivering the infrastructure that keeps our communities connected and supports our economy.

I congratulate all the finalists, nominees and award recipients. Every project recognised reflects the skill, hard work and commitment of the Territory's civil construction industry. The winners reflected the scale and quality of work being delivered across the Territory.

Project award recipients included Mbudg-Mburrum's culturally sensitive rehabilitation works in Kakadu National Park; DAC Enterprise's outstanding improvements along the Vic Highway; Advanced Civil Engineering's upgrades at the Dundee Beach boat ramp, and we know that Territorians enjoy those upgrades; BMD's critical Defence infrastructure at RAAF Base Tindal; SMC Marine's delivery of the Mandorah marine facility; and Exact Contracting's remarkable Tanami Road upgrades, which are still ongoing. These projects showcase the capability of Territory industry to deliver complex projects in some of Australia's most challenging environments.

I also congratulate the recipients of this year's CCF NT Industry Awards which recognise excellence in business across the civil construction sector. Whether suppliers, subcontractors or specialist service providers, these businesses are an essential part of every successful infrastructure project. Their expertise, reliability and commitment help keep projects moving, support local jobs and strengthen the Territory's civil construction industries. Congratulations to Arjay's Sales & Service, Rhino Industrial and Keegan Group on their well-deserved recognition.

It is also important to acknowledge the many apprentices, trainees, supervisors, operators and support staff recognised on the night. A strong industry depends on skilled people, and investing in the next generation is essential to building the Territory's future. Congratulations to the individuals recognised this year for their stand-out performance. A final congratulations to Tom Harris, who received an NT Service Award in appreciation of his outstanding contribution to the industry.

Whether it is roads, bridges, marine infrastructure, subdivisions, Defence projects or remote community work, these businesses and their workforce are helping to build a stronger, more resilient Northern Territory.

This year that resilience has been on full display. Following significant flooding across the Territory, civil contractors have worked tirelessly to restore access, repair damaged roads and reconnect remote communities. Their willingness to mobilise quickly, often in difficult and demanding conditions, has been critical to our flood recovery efforts. On behalf of the Northern Territory Government, I thank every contractor, operator, engineer, supervisor and worker who contributed to that recovery.

I also acknowledge the strong partnership between the Northern Territory Government and the Civil Contractors Federation. CCF continues to be a constructive and valued partner, providing practical advice, sharing industry expertise and working collaboratively with government to improve project delivery, build workforce capability and strengthen local industry.

As the Territory continues to deliver one of the largest infrastructure programs in our history, the capability of our local civil construction sector has never been more important.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Madam Acting Deputy Speaker, have you ever wondered where the term 'smashed avocado' comes from? The modern smashed avocado cafe phenomenon arguably originated in Sydney, probably around 1993, when the Aussie chef Bill Granger first featured a version of it on his menu in his iconic Darlinghurst cafe called Bills. However, it became a global sensation as an idea and a term that we all know following a viral article in 2016 by the *Australian* columnist Bernard Salt AM, who used the popular $22 breakfast as a symbol of millennial spending habits.

Recently, we were lucky enough to have Bernard Salt in Darwin giving a phenomenal lecture. Bernard Salt is truly one of Australia's most distinguished demographers and social commentators. His expert analysis of consumer and cultural trends is probably unmatched, and people take seriously what he has to say. As a result, I was grateful to attend a brilliant lecture at CDU. There have been good ones recently, but none more so than the Dr Bilawara Lee OAM (Aunty B) Faculty of Health Public Lecture 2026 on 8 July, called Baby Boomers and the Care Economy: Planning for Healthcare in Australia 2026–2036.

It was honestly a brilliant lecture—the best thing I have heard for a while and extraordinarily thought provoking. It was engaging and entertaining and spoke about demographic trends, data and futures in not

only Australia but also the Northern Territory specifically. I will liberally pilfer—share—from Mr Salt's lecture to give us all food for thought because I think there is a tonne in there that is worth us thinking about.

Interest in population and demographic affairs is high. As you all know, population policy was not introduced into our administrative orders until a couple of years ago and it is because we are now recognising the importance of population. We have ministries associated with thinking about population as well.

It is important that we are across the details, especially given that the Northern Territory is still the most racially, religiously, culturally and socially diverse population per capita in the country. While the rest of the country is having half-arsed debates about migration, it is important that everyone in this building understands our demographic composition and what is happening with our ageing population.

Interest is extraordinarily high, and there is no accounting for what goes viral on social media. I was surprised when I posted a couple of innocent-sounding ABS statistics on 22 June that they suddenly had 10,000 or 15,000 people going bananas, having something to say about them. It is indicative of the fact that we need to have conversations about demography and population so that we all understand what is going on and are not just shooting from the hip and making things up as we go. This is exactly what I said in my fairly innocuous post on Facebook and LinkedIn and a few other places:

> *The NT's population is growing at 1.6% year on year, as per the Dec 2025 quarterly ABS data released last week. That's the best result for the Territory since 2013–14. Incoherent policy choices undoubtedly exacerbated demographic decline here from 2016–24; both interstate and overseas migration are stabilising under our Government.*

I maintain that is a perfectly defensible position. I was shocked at the number of comments. Frankly, a lot of people who had a lot to say were looking at tiny bits of the picture without looking at the totality of the picture. People commented on the birthrate and how the answer was that we all need to have more children. They commented about how all the immigrants were coming to steal our jobs; how we need more immigrants to do our jobs; and how net interstate migration was negative, as if we had not realised that was our resting state for the last 40 years, essentially. There were things about visa policy changes, tourism, Defence being good, Defence being bad, FIFO being good and FIFO being bad. The bottom line is that these things all play a part in it, but if we are to have honest conversations about migration, its composition, its quantum and how that relates to us in the Northern Territory, we have to be across the data first; otherwise, we will be ignored.

To the many people who commented on those posts, I respectfully disagree with you. This government and the things it has been doing have stabilised population decline. I am not suggesting it could not be better or that we could not aim to grow the population even more aggressively. I am saying that since the CLP came to power, in every quarter the government has incrementally stabilised the population. Net interstate migration is mitigated; it is not haemorrhaging as fast. Overseas migration is growing ever so slightly. Natural increase is more or less stable, which is pretty much what it has been for a while. It is important to understand that what the government is doing is engendering confidence in people to stick around in the Territory. We can do more, but let us understand where we are at now.

Returning to Bernard Salt's lecture, there are some headline things I want to get across that I think are super important. The first is the global population is flattening out. It will not keep going up; we will reach 10 billion at some point—probably when we are all dead—but it is important to understand that it will not keep growing.

The next is what Australians spend their money on. We are 10th on GDP per capita, and we spend our money on housing and super but also increasingly on lifestyle and wellness. That is important because per capita the Northern Territory has a significantly lower population aged 65-plus; however, Indigenous people are still getting lesser access to ageing—that is, they die younger—and the NT is still experiencing uneven population gains.

There are uneven population gains and losses. Whilst Australian cities are on the rise, Darwin is still 15th and is not going anywhere between 2016 and 2036. We should be overtaking Cairns. We need to start making choices and thinking about how to compete with comparable places like that.

There are big shifts happening, though, in immigrant source countries nationally. In about 18 months' time when we get the new census data, we will see how fundamentally the demographic composition of Darwin and the Northern Territory are changing. That will affect social cohesion, how we work together, who is here and what sort of communities we need to support.

The census is happening on 11 August. I encourage all members to encourage everyone in their electorates to fill in the census because it matters so much in understanding what we do here, prosecuting arguments with the federal government and making sure we get our fair share.

The NT essentially—this is the important one to understand—has a late forties/early fifties millennial wall that is surging towards retirement. You can see from this graph I am holding—have a look at it; you can find all Bernard Salt's stuff online—we have an ageing population that is about to hit us like a freight train. We will need to look after all those people. The even more worrying part about all this is the giant dip on the graph that shows we do not have people in their thirties. When you look at the net annual change in the NT population by age between 2026 and 2036, you see that people in their thirties are leaving the Territory. Think about what people in their thirties do. They build families, homes and populations. They have kids. That is our long-term workforce, so it is important that we figure out how the Northern Territory can retain people in their thirties, because if we do not do that we will have big problems.

Consumer spending has widened dramatically from lifestyle to wellness. What do I mean by that? When you look at the percentage change in retail sales by category from 2015 to 2025, you see that a decade ago we used to spend most of our money—about 58%—on cafes, restaurants and catering. Do you know what is at the top now? Pharmaceutical, cosmetic and toiletry goods are up, at 57%. Basically, we spend our money in Chemist Warehouse rather than in cafes and on catering and hospitality.

When you think about what is happening to our ageing population, you realise that aged-care and disabled care workers will be needed, and it turns out they can be drawn from any demographic bin. The peak age of care workers is in their mid-fifties, so we need to be thinking about attracting not only youthful people from England and Ireland to try to service our workforce needs and look after our elderly but also 50-year-olds who stay the course and work in aged care.

The most common jobs in the NT are changing. While sales assistants are still at the top from 2011 to 2026, registered nurses are up to second, and aged-care and disability care workers—who were not even in the top five before—are fourth. Proportionally speaking, the NT has a paucity of medical specialists, when we should have way more compared with the rest of the Australian population. There will be a need for 85-plus care in the NT, and it will surge from 2032.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about our demographic outlook in Australia. It is challenging across the country, but it will be especially challenging in the Northern Territory. We, as representatives of the Northern Territory who need to think about how to look after our respective communities and populations, must understand what the needs and real numbers are. If we look at them, we can come up with better solutions, because better solutions start with a better understanding of our present demographic situation.

Mr CHARLS (Sanderson): Madam Acting Deputy Speaker, I acknowledge the outstanding success of Sanderson Day 2026, held on Saturday 14 June at Yanyula Park in Anula. As the Member for Sanderson, it was once again a privilege and an honour to host this wonderful annual community event.

Sanderson Day has become much more than a community gathering. It is now a celebration of the people, organisations and volunteers who make our electorate one of the most vibrant, diverse and welcoming communities in the Northern Territory. Every year I am reminded that while governments build infrastructure and deliver services, it is people who build communities.

Sanderson Day is a shining example of what can be achieved when neighbours, volunteers, community organisations, local businesses and electorate representatives come together with a common purpose to celebrate our community and create a welcoming environment for everyone. Yanyula Park was transformed into a hub of activity, laughter and friendship all afternoon. Families from Sanderson and surrounding suburbs came together in a safe, relaxed and inclusive environment where people of every age and background were welcome.

There truly was something for everyone. Children delighted in the interactive activities provided by Norman Millington and his family-owned and operated business Speed Dart. His enthusiasm and energy ensured that there was never a dull moment. The incredibly talented artists from CGee Face Painting had queues throughout the day as children eagerly awaited their colourful and imaginative creations.

For those thinking something a little more active, AFL NT and the South Darwin Rabbitohs Rugby League Club provided opportunities for young Territorians to test their skills, learn new techniques and perhaps even inspire the next generation of sporting stars.