I am here in Adelaide to try and get South Australians to share a Northern Territory vision which is in your best interests, the Territory's best interests and the nation's.

I ask you to imagine a future where South Australia is the hub of a transport link direct into the heart of the growth economies of Asia.

You can have that within four years.

The issue is the half completed north south transcontinental rail link which stops at Alice Springs. We should all be asking why it isn't finished.

It was part of the original vision for South Australia dating back to last century. It can today be a real force for productive economic gain for this state.

The benefits are major.

South Australia gets an immediate advantage into the Territory market - your share of that market has been halved, and is still falling.

Adelaide secures a distribution role for Australian trade with South East Asia.

Adelaide's manufacturers get rapid access to the world's fastest growing markets.

And Whyalla could start rolling steel rails tomorrow because this project is ready to go.

The design and EIS for the next 200 kilometres north of Alice Springs is done.

As Australia's leaders cast their eyes around the country for big projects that can make an instant impact on our economic woes they are finding the list is pretty short.

On the employment front alone this project is unique because there is no time lag. It can start tomorrow.

What's missing is political will. Not in the Northern Territory, nor South Australia. We've got bipartisan support in the Territory and in the last 24 hours both Lynn Arnold and Dean Brown have personally reaffirmed their commitment.

I am asking people with your influence to mobilise behind the idea so that Labor and the Coalition both commit to it during the Federal election campaign. Not mere expressions of support. But a solid gold YES to build the line.

For the Territory and South Australia the rail project is a priority. It should have the same high rating at national level.

We should settle for nothing less than absolute unequivocal bipartisan commitment from Canberra.

This project will be 100 percent Australian using Australian resources, companies and employees.

It will employ 2,000 people during construction.

It will generate massive orders for Australian steel and concrete, particularly here in South Australia.

Over its 14-hundred kilometre distance the line will consume 155,000 tonnes of steel rails, more than two million sleepers, 15 kilometres of concrete culvert pipe, 3,500 tonnes of structural steel, and 2 million cubic metres of ballast.
It will involve earthworks totalling 14 million cubic metres, the upgrading of 160 bridges and culverts and 80 new bridges.

It is interesting to reflect for a moment on South Australia’s view of the world last century when this state stretched from Spencer Gulf to the Timor Sea.

An area bigger than the whole of Europe.

To develop it, to defend it, to even possess it, must have seemed a daunting task for those brave pioneers.

Population and wealth they may not have had. But vision and faith they did.

As they toiled to build a new life here in the south they dreamed of the riches that could flow from the north. And they did something about it.

By 1872 they had built the four thousand kilometre overland telegraph, a feat of endurance which linked Australia to the world.

Then they began an even more remarkable project.

They started to build the railway, from both ends. By 1891 it stretched north to Oodnadatta and from Darwin south to Pine Creek.

But the burden of developing the north was too great for such a tiny population.

They ceded the Territory to the new Australian Commonwealth which saw the task as a national responsibility. Canberra promised to complete the rail link.

This agreement, to compensate South Australia in just terms for its property and investments in the Territory, was confirmed in legislation in 1911.

Today, 82 years later, South Australia is still waiting for the railway to be finished because successive Federal Governments have ignored the agreement.

I believe the time is now ripe for this state to demand the debt be honoured.

Because this project is right for Australia at this time as we face up to the reality that our destiny lies with the dynamic economies of Asia.

Darwin wants to be a major player in that. Adelaide can be a major player too. The north south rail corridor will make that happen.

As a politician sensitive to the location that Darwin occupies between Australia and Asia, it’s a destiny that can’t come soon enough.

It is long past time that Australia got a move on in its relationships with other nations in Asia.

I can think of no one action or decision which would send a signal of greater clarity to Asia that this country is serious about its future with this vibrant region than a clear bipartisan statement confirming completion of the north south transcontinental rail link.

I am sure most of us can readily appreciate the advantages that will flow from what will be a fast, efficient freight system.

By routing containers through Darwin and Adelaide delivery times will be slashed.

And the container trade is immense. The nation’s total is some 1.3 million units a year, with more than 50 percent traded with Asia, and of that our nearest neighbours in the ASEAN region account for over 200,000 container units.

But the benefits go beyond just a more practical and efficient method to handle container cargo and the immediate creation of jobs.
From a national public sector perspective, the rail link will pay for itself in tradeoffs because with the shift of freight to rail, road fuel savings will amount to $800 million over the project's economic life, virtually its entire initial cost.

In the same time frame the Commonwealth will save another $600 million in road maintenance costs in the Territory alone.

On defence grounds the project warrants national endorsement. It is a fact that a large slice of the national defence investment is now located at Katherine and Darwin, and it is a fact that the Top End has become a vital training area for joint operations with our near Asian neighbours.

There are pluses for the environment too. For example, the fuel savings on the roads will eliminate each year more than 100,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide - and I add that it's a national goal to move to transport alternatives where such action reduces greenhouse gas emissions.

The timing is also absolutely right from the perspective of developing our national rail network.

The National Rail Corporation has now been established with a mission to provide competitive, profitable and commercial rail freight services.

We estimate the completed north/south corridor will attract an extra 400,000 tonnes of cargo into the southern line network alone, and that must surely help the NRC meet its mission.

Legally, there are no impediments for the Commonwealth to construct the railway and inject it as equity into the NRC. Already they are doing precisely that with the rail link from Tarcoola to Alice Springs.

With the new line completed, your state can be confident of its supply role for development in the north where this nation's best new economic growth opportunities exist.

In the north, you can see the potential of some of the world's biggest and best mineral deposits, outstanding natural gas fields and Australia’s future premier oil reserves in the Timor Sea.

You can see a substantial build-up in defence, but if you are really looking to the future, you are looking further north than that.

You're looking beyond Alice Springs and a half built railway line.

You're looking beyond Darwin. You are looking at Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and even beyond - to Taiwan, Hong Kong, China Korea and Japan.

This the future for Australia. That is our destiny.

No matter what you and I do or don't do in our time at the tillers of government and industry, that will happen. Future generations of Australians will be firmly locked into trading, cultural and defence alignments with the nations of Asia, particularly South East Asia.

The question facing us is not if it is going to happen, but when and how we do it.

I believe the time is now.

Already we have seen how the project will just about twice pay for itself in dollars saved on road fuel and road reconstruction.

On the operational side of the equation, the project will return a cash surplus but from a private sector viewpoint the projections are just not enough to service the capital cost.

The starting point represents a real return projected at four percent a year before depreciation, and that return will increase as trade flows with Asia and the north's population increases.
This is a key point because since the early 1980's, when Canberra turned away from this project, my Government has put in an enormous effort to encourage private investors to take up the challenge.

Regrettably, those investors cannot capture the massive external public benefits which flow from the project.

The plain fact is that no Investor, except the Commonwealth itself, can capture both the cash returns from the line, as well as those indirect savings, which in combination make the line commercial.

These benefits are those things I've spoken of. Our relationships with Asia, regional defence, northern economic development, road and fuel savings, the extra freight muscle for the NRC, the environment and the immediate surge for construction material demands and employment.

None of these are available to private sector investors.

They are available to us as a nation.

After exhaustive research and analysis, we are saying to Canberra there will be an operational cash surplus plus massive offsets elsewhere in the public ledger. It will not require an annual operational subsidy.

So it would be the right course prospectively, and the honourable course retrospectively, for the Commonwealth to finish the job promised to South Australia at the turn of the century.

I have pledged to the Prime Minister that the Northern Territory will work with the Commonwealth in every possible way, and contribute $100 million towards your land bridge to Asia.

The rail line will require an efficient port in the Top End and my government is going to build that port with Territory funds. That will happen.

That is the measure of my determination and my guarantee to you.

I am of the view that if together we can convince both sides in Canberra to give the green light then this project will fire the national imagination in much the same way that the Snowy Mountains scheme generated a feeling of national confidence.

This is not just a project for the Northern Territory. Nor for South Australia. It should be a national enterprise.

And the time is right now.

Before the election, our objective must be to secure unequivocal commitments from both Labor and the Coalition parties to complete the north south transcontinental railway, with construction to start this year.

We have the support of both sides of politics in the Territory and South Australia, and of business and union leaders.

We now need to harness that and build on it and so generate a groundswell of active support throughout the community demanding that work begins this year in the national interest.