Mr EVERINGHAM (Chief Minister) (by leave): Mr Speaker, I would like to formally advise members of the decision of the Commonwealth government to complete the Alice Springs to Darwin rail link by 1988. The announcement was made by the then Prime Minister on 14 January 1983 and, although there has been a change of government since that time, from the statements that have been made by spokesmen for the new government, the Territory anticipates that the commitment of the previous government will be honoured.

The announcement made by Mr Fraser has already cost me one bottle of champagne and I am quite willing to provide another to Mr Hawke for the same assurances - although, noting Mr Hawke's abstemious habits, it may not be put to quite the same good use. He might in fact give it back to me so that I can drink it.

The intention to construct the line is a decision which goes beyond the bounds of political interests. It is a decision not only of primary importance to Territorians but one which warrants the support of all Australians. The railway will complement the network of national railway systems and form part of the basic infrastructure of this nation. Apart from any social and economic considerations, the decision will be seen historically as honouring a promise the Commonwealth made at federation and later endorsed in legislation under the Northern Territory Acceptance Act of 1911.

The promise of the rail link was made as much to South Australians as it was to Territorians. The benefit of the railway to our southern neighbours is recognised today by the South Australian government, and both the present Premier, Mr Bannon, and the former Premier, Mr Tonkin, gave their support to my government's campaign for construction to be completed by 1988. An agreement is currently being drafted between the Territory and the Commonwealth to give a formal basis for the construction.

The linking of the completion of the railway with Australia's bi-centennial year, with the full endorsement of the Bi-centennial Authority, is an achievement in itself and highlights my earlier point: this is an event which will make all Australians feel a sense of national pride. It is a time, therefore, to look forward rather than lament the fact that we have waited for 70 years to complete this vital transportation link. The commitment to the construction of the railway, leaving aside defence and economic justifications, has been most aptly described by the former Chairman of Australian National Railways, Mr Keith Smith, as a national act of faith. It is, however, worth while reflecting that the completion of the railway line in 1988 will have historical significance in that the first train from Darwin to Adelaide River ran 100 years ago in 1888.

Mr Speaker, when the line is completed, Territorians will have a fast, efficient, national surface transport link which will form part of the Australian standard gauge system. The implications for the Territory are enormous if one observes the trends which have occurred worldwide when rail systems have been introduced. It is an established fact that development follows railways not vice versa. A look at trends in both freight and passenger traffic which have occurred in just over 2 years of operation of the new standard gauge service from Tarcoola to Alice Springs shows that the assumption is valid. Since the opening of the line, freight traffic has more than doubled and passenger numbers have similarly increased. New opportunities for trade and passenger traffic are being opened up with New South Wales and Victoria, and the pilot Sydney-Adelaide-Alice Springs passenger service has proven an unqualified success.

South Australia, which was estimated to have lost some $70m worth of trade into the Territory because of unreliable surface transport links, is fast winning that back. It is a matter of record that
over 20 South Australian exhibitors were present at the trade fair in Alice Springs to mark the
inaugural Tarcoola to Alice Springs standard gauge rail service in 1980. At the June expo this year,
representatives of South Australian trade and industry will similarly participate in a Territory-based
exhibition to promote South Australian goods. It is an initiative which is to be welcomed and
commended. Trade is a two-way affair and, with improved transport links to the south, Territory
companies will obviously look to penetrating the larger southern markets.

With the completion of the railway and the upgrading of the port, the Territory will have
reliable transportation links with South-east Asia. I predict that the day is not too far away when we
will have regular shipping to our port, transporting Territory and Australian goods overseas and
acting as a receiving point for national imports. The use of an uncluttered port such as Darwin may
provide an economic alternative to the congested ports of the south and this will be backed up with
reliable rail service to all southern capitals. As long as ships have to wait in Sydney for 2 weeks and
then sail away without discharging their cargoes, the future of the port of Darwin to me looks right.
In other words, the land-bridge concept will become a reality. The markets to the north will be
opened up to us and the concept of establishing a free trade zone, which this government intends to
pursue actively in the months ahead, will become more than just a hope.

In the course of negotiating with the Commonwealth on the need for the railway, convincing
arguments emerged as to the importance of the rail link from the point of view of defence of the
country. While I am pleased to say that a threat to our country is not perceived by the defence experts
at this time, it is reassuring to know that we will have a rail link that is capable of assisting in the
moving of our defence forces northwards should this be necessary. There is an interesting parallel in
the fact that the Stuart Highway was first sealed for defence purposes during the Second World War.
However, examination of defence logistics has now proved that roads alone cannot support highly
mobile defence logistical needs and railways are an essential. The rail link will complement in a very
real way the development which is likely to occur at Tindal in the next few years and will become a
distinct asset in the shipment of fuel and other supplies to that important base.

Mr Speaker, my colleagues in the ministry will be addressing the Assembly on the impact of
the railway on their portfolio responsibilities. I will now turn to the effect of the railway on my areas
of responsibility.

Many of the benefits to industry of the railway, during both the construction and operational
stages, will be obvious to honourable members. The railway construction will directly employ
around 300 people. These jobs will be in earthworks, bridge and culvert construction, sleeper and
track laying and so on. Additionally, the manufacture of the enormous quantities of concrete, steel
and rock metal needed in the track laying will create at least a further 1000 jobs. These figures are
conservative. If the laying of the track commences from Alice Springs and the Top End, construction
employment will be accelerated and increased.

To maximise the Territory benefit from this construction activity, the Territory Development
Corporation will be holding a series of discussions and seminars to help identify products and
services able to be provided by local companies. If the decision is made to commence building the
railway from both the north as well as the south - and I am pressing for this approach - major
opportunities will be offered to a number of existing and potential industries. Cement could be
supplied from numerous plants. Metal casting could be done at a ferrous foundry likely to be
established in Darwin. Other general opportunities involved are immense.

After construction, the obvious need for maintenance will create a further opportunity for local
industry. Besides its impact as a thoroughfare for trade between southern and northern markets, it
will also enable local goods to penetrate new markets. Territory-made clay bricks and fibre cartons
could be distributed to other Australian markets. Improvements to the port of Darwin to the tune of
$25m will complement the rail link. Increased usage of the port will result in an increased need for
mercantile services provided by customs and shipping agents, freight and insurance brokers, and
other related professions. These services will provide the necessary infrastructure web for the
development of Darwin as a major commercial import and export centre. All industries would
benefit from the railway. Minerals, beef, grain, horticultural products, manufactured goods etc.
would all be freighted by cost-effective rail transport. Coal, fuel and minerals could be carried in the
near future.

Transport costs have played an increasingly significant part in the tourist industry recently.
Australia has seen tourism suffer because of high fuel prices. Trends in the industry are towards
cheaper, more efficient, methods of travel. The family car, coaches and railways are all increasing
their importance as a means of tourist travel. In this context, the Alice to Darwin railway will
significantly bolster the number of tourists coming to the Territory. The passenger use of the Alice to
Adelaide rail service has far outstripped expectations.

I spoke earlier of the Sydney to Alice Springs rail trips. Eight services are planned for 1983,
each with a capacity of 320 passengers, a total of over 2000 tourists. Bookings indicate that these
visits will become more regular in future and this will be assured when Darwin becomes the rail
terminal.

Think of the horizons that the railway will open up for the budget conscious traveller. Let's
face it, who is not budget conscious these days? On one holiday, people would be able to witness the
panorama of Ayers Rock and the Red Centre and then visit the contrasting Top End and the
waterways of Kakadu. Packages will be put together offering the tourist alternatives of rail, road and
air travel. The railway will place the Territory in a comparable position with the states in offering a
range of transport modes to the tourist. Indeed, the rail link will be a much more exotic proposition
than rail journeys in other parts of Australia.

Whilst the construction of the line and ancillary facilities is a Commonwealth responsibility, it
will also impact on the operations of the Department of Lands. Its involvement includes assistance in
identification of route, acquisition of the reserve, survey of the reserve, planning and development of
the rail service, industrial land and support infrastructure. I am pleased to advise that the acquisition
program is well under way.

Honourable members will be pleased to hear of the consideration being given to Aboriginal
interests. Changes to the alignment, particularly between Alice Springs and Devil's Marbles, have
been agreed upon. The degree of cooperation extended from all sides in identifying sacred sites and
extending clearance from the alignment of the railway is commendable. This work will be completed
before the end of the year. Of course, like all Territorians, Aboriginals stand to benefit substantially
from the railway. Employment opportunity along the route of the railway, during both construction
and maintenance phases, will assist people in the more remote locations. The social and economic
impact upon such communities will open up opportunities that have been available to date. I will not
attempt to say that they will be because that will be up to the communities to decide. I only say that
they will be there.

Mr Speaker, the task of constructing the railway is an enormous one by any yardstick. It
involves laying 1500 km of track, 156 000 t of standard gauge rail and 2.4 million sleepers. The
commitment to the railway is the result of the untiring efforts - I should really say 'tiring' efforts - of
my government, Territory public servants, Australian National Railways staff, the South Australian
government and our Territory federal representatives.

The political badgering is not over yet. I am to bring to the full attention of the
Commonwealth government the benefits of starting the construction of the rail from both ends of the
line. An early commencement of a Darwin to Katherine rail line would have considerable benefit for
the construction of the Tindal air base. Supplies and equipment could be brought in through the port
of Darwin and rail freighted to Tindal. I understand that Defence officials would support the logic
and cost savings behind this approach.
Mr Speaker, I call upon all Territorians to give continued support to see this project through to completion by 1988. I also call on honourable members from both sides of this Assembly and our Canberra counterparts to continue their bipartisan endeavours to have the railway completed on time.

Mr Speaker, just before I move that the statement be noted, I would particularly like to record the efforts of 3 officials: Mr Ray McHenry, now the Chairman of the Northern Territory Development Corporation and then Co-ordinator-General, supported me tremendously in this campaign; Mr Allan Morris, the present Deputy Director-General and then Director of the Office of Policy and Planning, extended the same sort of selfless support; and Mr Bill Fu in the Department of Transport and Works. I would also like to thank the people who work for those men, the Government Printer and those people in the public service who had good ideas such as the bits of railway line that we made into keepsakes that are sought after nationally. I would like to extend my personal thanks to all those people because, without their efforts, it just would not have happened.

Mr Speaker, I move that the Assembly take note of the statement.

Mr B. COLLINS (Opposition Leader): Mr Speaker, I will speak briefly in reply to the statement in order to get it off the Notice Paper. I would hate to force another prorogation of the Assembly. I will speak briefly to the statement because there is very little in it with which the Opposition has any disagreement. The main reason why I wish to speak is because of a great deal of misinformed speculation that occurred in the press yesterday in respect to the rail link and some statements that I obtained from both the federal Minister for Transport and the Treasurer in respect of those statements.

Mr Speaker, there is one paragraph in the Chief Minister's statement that I would like to comment on. It points up something that was brought home to me yesterday: people taking about the irresponsibility of politicians, particularly during election campaign periods, in unreasonably and unrealistically lifting the people's expectations. There is a classic paragraph in this statement that demonstrates how this can be done when people get carried away with political euphoria. I would just like to bring the Chief Minister down to earth a little bit on the question of the railway and perhaps ask a few questions that he might like to answer for me at some later stage. I will read the paragraph: 'Besides its impact as a thoroughfare for trade between southern and northern markets, it will also enable local goods to penetrate new markets'. There is no argument with that. He went on to give 2 examples of this new horizon that will be opened for the Territory: ' Territory-made clay bricks and fibre cartons could be distributed to Australian and other markets'. We know why the Chief Minister put that in there: we have a fibre carton factory in Darwin and a clay brick kiln has recently opened for business. Everyone wishes those industries very well.

I ask the Chief Minister a couple of questions. We both know why those industries are here in Darwin, and why they have a good market even though the cost of their products is certainly higher than the equivalent cost of those products in southern states. We know we pay a little bit more for bricks and cartons in Darwin than people pay down south. However, that is offset by the freight because there is a high freight component on those goods. We know that, by producing them locally, we can offset that cost and sell those products at a competitive price here in the Northern Territory. However, does the Chief Minister seriously expect people to believe that we will shift bricks 2500 miles down south to market them in high growth building areas that are supplied with southern bricks? Perhaps he could give me some information as to the economics of that nonsense. Does he seriously expect anyone to believe that a fibre carton factory - and I might say it is welcomed by the Labor Party - which was established to offset the freight costs of importing those great bales of fibre cartons into the Northern Territory will be able to ship its fibre cartons on the railway 2500 miles south or somewhere else?

Mr Speaker, if one is to make a case for a railway or anything else, at least make it a believable one and not some cloud-cuckoo, fantasy-land project such as we have in the statement. We are going
to ship Territory bricks and fibre cartons on the railway to 'Australian and other markets'. Is the rail link going to go to Indonesia? Is it in fact going to go north of Darwin? Is this a new scheme the Chief Minister is currently proposing? I would ask the Chief Minister what other markets south of Darwin …

Mr Everingham: New Zealand.

Mr B. COLLINS: The Northern Territory railway is going to tranship Darwin bricks to New Zealand. I think that the Chief Minister has just confirmed the nonsense that I am pointing out.

This country is in the throes of an economic disaster. The Chief Minister referred to buying a bottle of champagne for Bob Hawke. Having recently been to Parliament House in Canberra, I can advise the Chief Minister that not only is Bob Hawke not interested in drinking the Chief Minister’s champagne, no one else is either. I arrived at Parliament House on Friday some hours after a new crop of minister had just been sworn in. I did not expect to see ministers tripping along the corridors wearing party hats but I would have expected to see quiet celebrations occurring around the place but I can tell the Chief Minister that there were none. The ministers that I saw that afternoon were in their offices up to their ears in work wondering how in the hell they were to implement the needs of their portfolio areas with a $10 000m deficit to look after. There is not a lot of champagne around Parliament House at the moment, particularly not in Treasury. Considering that considerable restraint will be applied by Treasury, the Chief Minister does his case no good at all when he seeks to support the promotion of Northern Territory interests by arrant nonsense.

Mr Speaker, the Chief Minister said, by way of interjection and by way of answer to my question, that the other market he is talking about for our clay bricks and fibre cartons via the railway is New Zealand. Seriously, does the Chief Minister expect to advance the Northern Territory’s interests by that kind of rubbish? I can assure the Chief Minister that, if he is to make a case for the railway, the new Minister for Transport, Peter Morris, who is a very down-to-earth fellow, will not be impressed with that. In promoting the Territory’s interest, it is foolish to peddle nonsense. It is foolish to raise unrealistically the expectations of Territorians and indeed Australians.

Mr Speaker, I want to put on record something about the story which appeared yesterday on the front page of ‘The Australian’ purporting to come from somebody from the Treasurer’s office saying that the railway had been targeted for extinction - not cutback or restraint - in the programs of the new Labor government. Considering what both the federal Minister for Transport and the Treasurer told me yesterday, those statement were pure press speculation and had no basis in fact. A financial review committee is being set up by the Treasurer to overview the question of the deficit, and I will be saying more about that later in this sittings. I will not dwell on it now. The composition of that committee has not been established at this time. It is hoped that it will be established towards the end of this week. But it is not even clear yet who will be sitting on it, let along targeting areas for specific restraint.

What I have been told by the Minister for Primary Industry, John Kerin, in respect of the BTB program for the Territory, by Morris in respect of the transport needs of the Territory and by all the ministers I spoke to in respect of commitments to the Territory is that all of their programs will be subjected to the same degree of review that every other minister's portfolio area receives. No statement was made by any spokesperson from Keating's office or Morris's office or indeed by the ministers themselves. I simply want to correct the record on that.

In conclusion, I say to the Chief Minister: if he wishes to make a case to advance the Territory's interests in getting our railway, at least make it a believable one.

Mr ROBERTSON (Attorney-General): Mr Speaker, I find it a shame that one has to rise in a debate before one is ready. I had hoped to address the Assembly in some detail in relation to how
members opposite perhaps saw the railway affecting portfolio areas. Nonetheless, having listened to what the Leader of the Opposition has just said, I feel obliged to say a few words now.

Mr Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition seems to have learnt nothing from the foolishness of his predecessor. He cannot control himself at all. He has the remarkable propensity that all members of the ALP have, particularly the leaders, for knocking everything and everyone no matter how stupid the tactic used to do the knocking. The Leader of the Opposition belittled himself in a puerile effort to belittle illustrative examples put forward by the Chief Minister in relation to new and expanding Territory industries which have resulted from initiatives of this government.

The honourable member finds that this propensity for knocking is so overpowering that he must denigrate even the establishment of those 2 industries. In his hell-bent desire to knock, he has totally ignored the existence of Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs in respect of those same 2 products.

Mr B. Collins: Read the …

Mr ROBERTSON: Mr Speaker, I listened to the honourable gentleman in silence. He not only does not extend the Territory's new industries the courtesy of reasonable understanding and consideration but he does not extend members of this Assembly that sort of courtesy either. I would suggest that the honourable member be quiet, listen and he might learn, although I very much doubt it.

Mr B. Collins: So do I.

Mr ROBERTSON: Mr Speaker, the very products that the honourable member referred to are this very moment being imported into Alice Springs in huge quantities by rail from south Australia. The cost to do the same thing with Territory bricks from Darwin to Alice Springs will be equal. Why not promote the idea of a rail link? I note that he is merely going to make submissions to Canberra. I dare say they will be about whether or not the rail will go ahead.

The same bricks come from South Australia and from Melbourne. Packaging material comes from Perth. How much more cheaply can Alice Springs receive these goods via this rail? The Chief Minister, notwithstanding the constant knocking from the Leader of the Opposition, worked with the previous federal government to achieve such objectives. It is not only relevant to say that it will assist Darwin's secondary industry by supplying these goods to Alice Springs, which currently comes from as far away as Perth and Sydney, but the honourable member clearly forgets about Katherine and Tennant Creek as well. They are even closer to Darwin manufacturers and even further from manufacturers down south.

I find it extremely disappointing that the ALP still has this total mind-block in terms of anything positive for the Northern Territory. The 2 items selected for ridicule by the Leader of the Opposition were purely illustrative examples. All of the other matters relating to the positive points put forward by the Chief Minister were ignored, as indeed every single thing of a positive nature in the Northern Territory is ignored by the Labor opposition.

Mr SMITH (Millner): Mr Speaker, it is quite obvious that the Attorney-General and the Chief Minister did not get together before this debate to sort out what the paragraph means. It is quite clear to an unbiased observer that the Chief Minister's comments are directed to the wider Australian market and not the Territory market. In that sense, the Chief Minister has been somewhat careless and certainly has not benefited the case for a railway by that paragraph.

Mr Speaker, we have acknowledged over a long period the efforts of the government in reaching this stage in the achievement of the railway line in the Northern Territory but I think the point that needs to be made at this time is that the government has become hung up on the fact that it
has come very close to achieving the railway line. It has not put its efforts into making sure that the railway line works for the benefit of all Territorians. This is a point that I made in the Assembly in the November sittings when I called for a transport task force to make sure that the most effective utilisation of the railway is achieved. Judging by the address delivered by the Administrator yesterday, it is a point that the government hinted that it would accept. He recognised that there were a number of problems associated with maximising the input of the railway line and said that the government would address those problems. I think that the government is very close to taking up my idea of a transport task force - not that I expect that I or the member for Sanderson who floated the idea a number of years ago will receive any credit for it. It is obvious that that has to be done and it is equally clear that, while it is not being done, we will get stupid comments like that made by the Chief Minister and referred to earlier.

Now that the railway line is almost here, I think that it is time that everyone contributes to the effort to make sure that we get maximum utilisation of it. We should all start thinking about how that should be done so that we can present a united and better case to the federal government, and whoever else is involved, to make sure that it is completed and runs effectively.

Debate adjourned.