Mr COULTER (AustralAsia Railway): Madam Speaker, I consider it my duty at this opportune time to report to honourable members on the progress of the Adelaide to Darwin railway project, and ways and means of advancing other important infrastructure projects being developed, planned or proposed in the Northern Territory. I have been assigned by the Chief Minister the task of overseeing development of major projects yet to be identified and reporting to him and to Cabinet on their progress. The rationale is that, although these projects overlap into various departments and authorities, benefits to the government as a whole and to the people of the Territory can flow from a reporting and assessment structure that can get to close grips with the many problems and issues that are inevitably generated.

The leading example of such an approach is the Adelaide to Darwin railway. This project could not have reached the stage of its current development without the close attention, over the past 3 years or so in particular, of the Territory's own Railway Executive Group which has undertaken the lion's share of addressing and resolving issues that many critics and observers thought were insurmountable. This group has met as necessary - and that has been very frequently in recent times - to break down the barriers that existed between the dream of a railway and the reality.

For example, we took a project that the Wran committee in 1994 had labelled economically unviable and, using the same experts and consultants, we showed that Wran had got it wrong. Wran said the railway had an economic cost benefit ratio of 0.78. We showed the true figure was 1.27. We took a project the critics said would not be entertained by major and credible private sector corporations and marketed it to the world. More than 30 substantial bids, involving 60 companies, many of them major national and international construction, finance and transport corporations, were lodged when the initial expressions of interest in the project closed at the end of November last year. Three of those consortia have been shortlisted to build, own and operate the railway, and nobody disputes that these are companies and corporations with impressive credentials.

We took a project that required public seed funding, beyond the Territory's capacity, to make it work and which critics said would be ignored by Canberra. However, we joined forces with the South Australian government and brought in a matching $100m to our offer and, in August last year, we succeeded in securing a further $100m from the Commonwealth. Finally, we had what the project had always needed - a commitment from the federal government.

We took a project beset with land access problems along its transport and construction corridor throughout the Territory. Once again, the critics said that the task was too difficult and that a satisfactory agreement with Aboriginal landholders would be impossible to obtain. However, with persistence and patience through 14 months of intensive discussions and many setbacks, we have signed a heads of agreement with the Northern and Central Land Councils to secure access to a rail corridor through Aboriginal land. That agreement has still to be ratified by Aboriginal landholders, and the land councils have undertaken the task of attempting to secure that ratification by the end of next month. Finally, we took a project that had become something of a joke among many Australians, particularly on the eastern seaboard of this country. They called it a pipedream, an election gimmick to be taken with a grain of salt. Nobody is laughing now, and even the harshest of former critics are mustering faint praise at least.
The Territory government has just about completed everything in its power to ensure that the railway happens. I intend to travel to Adelaide and Canberra at the end of this week to tie up some loose ends as far as arrangements with the Commonwealth are concerned. These include the timing and the drawdown of the Commonwealth funding, through the Federation Fund, and details of the inclusion of the Tarcoola to Alice Springs section of the line.

Following that, the ball is in the court of the private sector. Honourable members will be aware that 3 consortia have been shortlisted to complete the project. They are: the Asia Pacific Transportation Corporation, comprising Brown & Root Engineering and Construction, Hutchison Port Holdings and Genesee & Wyoming, with financial advice from Bankers Trust Australia; the Southern Cross Consortium, comprising the Henry Walker Group, a major Brunei-based finance institution and the Australian Transport Network, made up of Wisconsin Central Transportation Corporation, Tranz Rail Holdings, Fay Richwhite and Company, and Berkshire Partners, with advice from Macquarie Bank and the Hongkong Bank of Australia; and the Northlink Consortium, comprising Thiess Contractors and the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, with advice from BHP Engineering. These 3 consortia are now undertaking further detailed analysis of the project and have until the end of October to make final submissions to the AustralAsia Railway Corporation which will evaluate them and make recommendations to the Northern Territory and South Australian governments. I expect a decision will be made on a winning bid by the end of the year, and that construction could start in the first quarter of 1999.

In summary, this shows what can be done with a dedicated approach and a team dedicated to that approach. I take this opportunity to recognise the efforts and skills of the Territory Railway Executive Group: Mr Paul Tyrrell, secretary of the Department of Transport and Works and Chief Executive Officer of the AustralAsia Railway Corporation; Mr Peter Conran, secretary of the Department of the Chief Minister; Mr Ken Clarke, Under Treasurer; Mr Barry Chambers, secretary of the Department of Lands, Planning and Environment; Mr Larry Bannister, executive officer of the AustralAsia Railway Corporation; and Mrs Sharon Mulholland, formerly of my office and now head of the Work Health Authority. Tribute should also be paid to our Administrator, Dr Neil Conn, who was a vital member of the team in his previous existence as Under Treasurer.

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Of course, many others have been involved and I would like in particular to recognise the contribution of the Treasurer and the Chief Minister who have been very supportive, particularly in negotiations with the Prime Minister on this issue. I acknowledge also all my colleagues in Cabinet who have had to undergo some very serious analysis of this project in some of the papers that I have brought before them. A great many others have contributed to continuing the progress of the railway project, but essentially, the tough issues, the problems which made the project too hard, were addressed and resolved by this group.

Thus, it has been decided that the railway model can be useful in forging the way for other major infrastructure projects. No two projects are the same. Each requires attention to particular areas and, in the Territory, that usually means land issues, access issues, including access on Aboriginal land or claimed land, finance issues, transport issues and economic issues, including access to and from large markets. Some wholly involve public financing and ownership, others are wholly financed by the private sector, but need the attention and assistance of the government to help solve problems and ensure project viability. However, one factor remains constant: big projects can create big numbers of jobs either directly or through the supply of services to them. It is beyond argument that the railway will generate 2000 jobs in the construction phase, and a further 200 when it is operational. The flow of benefits to Territory industry is almost incalculable.

At various times in my public career, I have been asked about my view of the role of government, why it exists and what it is trying to do. My answer is that it is essentially the job of the government to guarantee a high standard of quality of life for Territorians and, wherever possible, to improve it, and to broaden the economic base in the Territory, particularly the economic tax base. The key to quality of life is meaningful employment for Territorians, especially young Territorians emerging from the education system, and the key to employment opportunities is projects that generate new jobs and substantial requirements for services. If the Territory can gain a new income and employment-
generating big project every 5 years or so, then the future is guaranteed. That is what is at stake. That is why the government has adopted a concentrated approach to major projects and why we intend to use our best endeavours to bring them to fruition. We have adopted a targeted whole-of-government approach to management, coordination and decision-making for infrastructure development, both public and private, because, even when developments are privately funded, we need to ensure they complement and integrate with government endeavours and aspirations to the best advantage of Territory industry and for all Territorians.

Let me provide another example of this approach in action. We were advised by the Commonwealth that the FAC-controlled airports at Darwin, Alice Springs and Tennant Creek were to be sold into private hands. Naturally, we took a keen interest. Our requests to be formally represented in this process were politely rebuffed. That was not good enough. The role of our airports is absolutely critical to further Territory development, and disastrous consequences might have flowed from a Commonwealth decision to award airport control to an operator unsympathetic to Territory aspirations, especially in tourism. We viewed this matter so seriously that we even contemplated becoming a financial stakeholder in the bidding process. However, other ways and means prevailed, and prevailed successfully. Once again, with persistence and patience, we kept open the lines of communication with the Commonwealth and gradually strengthened them to such effect that, in the end, our advice and our views were instrumental in the decision process.

We also sought out and met with all the major players bidding for any or all of the airports, apprised them of the direction we thought airport development should proceed in, organised meetings for them with other interested parties, Territory industry and local government, assisted them with appropriate preparations for their bids and, in some cases, examined their bids before they proceeded to the Commonwealth, and in general sought to involve ourselves in every part of the process. We had an intimate knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the major bids put before the Commonwealth. We conveyed to the Commonwealth our view, and the view of local government, as to which bids were in the best interests of the Territory.

I am pleased to say that the winning bidder, the Airport Development Group, comprising Infratil Australia and the US-based operator Airport Group International (AGI), was the Territory's preferred candidate. AGI will be in Darwin this evening to announce details of its airport expansion plans. I will be part of that exercise and I am confident the announcements will meet with the broad approval of Territorians. Honourable members should note that AGI is owned by major international companies, including Lockheed Martin, Soros Capital, Infratil International, GE Capital, Duty Free Shoppers, Bechtel America and Sun America. It operates 22 airports around the world, processes 20 million passengers a year and handles about 700 000 aircraft movements a year. AGI-operated airports include Terminal 3 at Toronto in Canada, Atlanta International in the USA and Perth International in Australia. This is the sort of result that can happen with a clear-headed and concentrated approach and with a persistent attitude married to a belief in what is right for Territorians. I would like to thank Chris Bigg from the aviation section of the Department of Transport and Works for the role that he played, and the other staff involved in his section. They worked most diligently and their work was very professional. I was extremely proud of the analysis that those people carried out.

We plan to carry this attitude to other projects. Existing forums such as the Infrastructure Development Subcommittee of the Coordination Committee, the Railway Executive Group and the East Arm Development Group have been highly effective in achieving cross-portfolio coordination on major infrastructure initiatives. We are now building on those forums in a way that achieves a coordination and communication framework encompassing all relevant government agencies, ensuring that our efforts are aimed at getting results. This framework is applicable to a select group of major infrastructure projects, either publicly or privately funded, or a combination of both. Their requirement for special attention would be determined on the basis of their critical importance to Territory development.

I will explain how the linkages work. I table the organisational flow chart for the benefit of honourable members to enable them to understand the linkages and the flow chart mechanism that I am
referring to. The existing Infrastructure and Development Subcommittee of the Coordination Committee involves up to 12 relevant CEOs, chaired by the head of my department, Mr Tyrrell. This group will continue as an important forum at agency level for exchanging information and ensuring inter-agency coordination on the complete range of development and infrastructure projects, including major projects of critical importance. It will also continue its review role for proposals on the design list, the capital works list and maintenance programs.

For major new infrastructure projects on the horizon, both public and private, small interdepartmental groups will be formed for each, based on the successful railway model. Each project group will consist of a small number of CEOs or deputy CEOs representing those agencies that are essential to achieving an outcome. Each group will advise me, as Minister for Infrastructure Development, on progress, developments and issues at the individual agency level. They will also be keeping their own ministers apprised of matters specific to their portfolios. Let us hope the information is the same in both cases. Each project group will also be providing regular reports to the Infrastructure and Development Group to share information and seek additional support that may be required. Depending on the nature of the project, this may mean special commercial and/or legal advice needs to be sought, and appropriate funding has been identified to seek out the best commercial and legal expert advice that can be obtained. As well, it may be advisable on occasion to employ specialist consultants in various fields. This was a lesson we learnt, to our advantage, in the railway story.

To complement the work of the project specific groups within the government, my department has established a small but dynamic major project cell to support these arrangements. The primary focus of this cell is to provide overall project management in consultation with senior officers of other essential agencies. Honourable members may have mixed feelings about the head of that project cell. It is to be Mr Ken Hornsby who is known, I am sure, to many members for his work in respect of roads across the Territory over many years. He has moved now from the roads division to head this cell of major project groups. I wish Ken all the best. He has been a fantastic officer in relation to roads over a long period, and we wish him well in his new role of getting these major projects up and running. In turn, I will report to the Chief Minister and to Cabinet on the progress of projects on a regular basis or as and when necessary. In this way, the government will be able to initiate decisions to overcome delays and impediments to project delivery.

These explanations may seem to the uninitiated to be somewhat bureaucratic in nature, but let me assure honourable members of the intended end result. We have set up a framework to provide a springboard for fast-tracking of new and specifically targeted projects with an upgraded degree of integration and efficiency. We are cutting out duplication of effort. We are capitalising on the very great skills we have built up in the public system in the Northern Territory, and it is all about results and outcomes. It is all about delivery of key infrastructure in a shorter time frame, with resulting economic benefits for the whole Territory community. I commend these arrangements to honourable members.

Madam Speaker, I move that the Assembly take note of the statement.
Party's national conference, supporting the construction of the railway. The minister and I had correspondence on that matter. At both the local and federal level, Labor is ready to deliver the railway. Not long ago, the minister spent many days in Canberra, telling everyone that heads of agreement for the railway could not be entered into. I received quite a few bemused phone calls, I have to say, from people on my side of politics, asking me whether the minister had a home to go to because he seemed to spend so much time in Canberra. However, he was encouraged by Labor figures to try harder in respect of floating legislation for the acquisition of a railway corridor. We did not believe that was necessary and, within weeks, he had a result. That shows that, with a bit of effort, these matters can be resolved - well done, minister.

Let me put on the record recognition of the role played by the Northern and Central Land Councils in this matter. The Country Liberal Party likes to demonise these organisations in order to scare Territorians and in an attempt to gain some electoral advantage. Despite that, the land councils have continued to talk and attempt to find a resolution to the railway issue. If the minister has done well, so too have the land councils in relation to the securing of the heads of agreement. However, the champagne is yet to be popped in my office, and I guess in the minister's as well because a great deal of work remains to be done. The heads of agreement needs to be ratified by the landowners in question. This statement cannot go through without comment on the appalling performance of the Chief Minister in relation to development in the Territory. When I first read the draft ministerial statement, I was not surprised that the Chief Minister was not mentioned in it. I noted that the minister included the Chief Minister, the Treasurer and every other minister in his statement of congratulation today but, in fact, the Chief Minister has done very little to contribute to the railway project. It is well known that the railway heads of agreement deal has, as a key component of the agreement, native title interests of traditional landowners along the corridor. The deal seeks to buy out native title on pastoral leases, and this has exposed the Chief Minister's election scare tactics as cynical electioneering at its worst.

Members will recall that, in the last Territory election campaign just 7 months ago, the Chief Minister led the scare campaign against native title. The Chief Minister called the election on native title. He told Territorians that native title was a threat to development in the Territory. He said that John Howard's 10-point plan was the only way the Territory could escape the handbrake native title would apply to development in the Territory. The day the railway heads of agreement was signed, the Minister for the AustralAsia Railway told Territorians that the Chief Minister's Cabinet approved the heads of agreement with the major land councils to secure the railway corridor. A key component of the agreement relates to native title interests of traditional landowners along the corridor. The deal seeks to buy out native title on pastoral leases, and this has all happened without John Howard's 10-point plan being implemented. In fact, the law to do with native title has not changed one iota since the Chief Minister's alarmist electioneering.

The Chief Minister's alarmist scare tactics at the last election have been exposed as cynical electioneering at its very worst. Territorians deserve an explanation, and I look forward to the Chief Minister's contribution to the debate on this statement. I and many other Territorians would like to hear from him. We would like to know why native title was an impossible obstacle before the election but, after the election, it became a matter that could form the basis of a heads of agreement which he has approved. The Chief Minister was nowhere to be seen or heard on the day that the minister announced the railway deal. I believe he was in Perth. However, he needs to stop being shy about this and explain to Territorians why he said this deal could never be done, and why it was to have been necessary to introduce and invoke legislation from the federal parliament on this matter.

In addressing the minister's statement, I would like to turn to the issue of Telstra because today's statement portrays a very interventionist approach by the government to the development of infrastructure. The Country Liberal Party administration has some patchy form in this regard when it comes to modern telecommunications. Today, the development of infrastructure must take into account, or in some instances be centred around, telecommunications. Among the next wave of big projects will be some in the technology-based areas. The comments of the minister led to one obvious conclusion: Telstra should remain in the government's hands. The CLP administration supports the sell-
off of Telstra. Under the Howard plan, up to 35% of Telstra could be sold to foreigners. It amazes me that a minister, who claims a strong role for government, cannot see the folly in Australia, as a nation, losing control of its telecommunications industry. Does anyone seriously believe a profit-driven Telstra, owned by private shareholders, many of whom will be based overseas, will be interested in infrastructure projects for the Northern Territory? The use of Telstra as an electioneering cash cow is nothing short of a disgrace.

The minister's statement is full of self-congratulation and creates a false impression that the Country Liberal Party's is a successful administration when it comes to infrastructure projects. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Country Liberal Party administration rejected the offer of the Hawke government, which would have seen the railway operating today, and the minister himself has made that comment in the past. Certainly, the Yulara development has its strengths, but an enormous cost has been borne by Territorians as a result of the Country Liberal Party government's bungling. The current Treasurer is too embarrassed to open the books and admit how dearly that bungling has cost Northern Territorians. Many opportunities have been lost. In election campaign after election campaign, the Country Liberal Party has set about inflaming passions and scaring investors about matters such as native title and land rights. I wonder how many opportunities have been lost. We could provide an endless list. The minister's statement does not mention those matters and they are sadly more numerous than the success stories that the CLP can attest to. However, I thank the minister for his statement and encourage all concerned to work constructively to ensure the railway is delivered.

Before concluding, I would like to comment on other infrastructure required around the Territory. While we all applaud the development of major infrastructure for major economic benefit in the Northern Territory, there is no doubt that there are Territorians, especially those living in remote and regional centres, who are in desperate need of improved infrastructure in their communities. The Minister for the AustralAsia Railway, in his role as the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure Development, will recall that I have spoken long and often about issues such as the bridge across the McArthur River. These are modest issues, perhaps minor issues, in terms of the overall scheme of Territory development, but they are issues that impact on the lifestyle and the economic benefits accruable to Territorians living in remote regions. We will miss a great opportunity if we fail to recognise the prospects and what can be gained from areas such as the Gulf region with developments such as the McArthur River Mine and Century Zinc on our borders. The Territory's ability to capitalise on these assets will rely very largely on the type of infrastructure it is able to provide to developers and investors in those regions. It is costly, and some of those regions are at the developmental stage where it is necessary to look many years ahead. Nevertheless, if we are to be truly innovative in this regard, and if we are to take into account the needs and aspirations, not merely of the big investment issues, but of some of those smaller and community development issues, we need to be mindful that attention in respect of infrastructure needs to be paid to some of those other areas as well.

I would like to see a clear plan evolve from the minister's office relating to roads development in the remote areas. For years, we have seen these projects on forward plans, only to see them slip off from one budget to the next. The same applies, of course, to airstrips, roads and bridges in flood-prone areas. Members whose electorates suffer during the wet season know that, without some of those infrastructure benefits being provided, the rate of potential growth in those areas is slowed. That is one of the reasons why I flagged a holistic approach, such as the minister is instituting in his own portfolio areas, a whole-of-government approach to the organisation of a system whereby various departments can get together with a clear line of command and responsibility. If that could be done in areas such as Borroloola, for instance, I suggest that township would become an operational hub for development in the Gulf region. If we do not do it, we miss that opportunity and

my bet is that we will see that kind of infrastructure development occur on the other side of the border - in Queensland - and that would be an opportunity lost.

While we cannot replicate the member for Blain and put him in charge of every department, I believe some of the plans that his staff have developed and implemented over the years are worthy of consideration in other ministries and of being applied across the board. I am sure it is a source of frustration for ministers and departmental people not to know just who is in charge of what project and whether, at the end of the day, there is a boss in charge of some of these infrastructure developments
that are needed desperately. Some of them fall by the wayside basically because nobody is in charge of them. If we can develop our skills to ensure that we fast-track and competently advance big economic development prospects for the Northern Territory, such as the East Arm port and LNG or methanol development, it behoves us to do the same with some of the community development projects that are under way in the Northern Territory in order to encompass not only major economic development, but some of those micro-economic and social development issues that are important for Territorians.

I conclude by congratulating the minister on the statement, and by thanking him personally for the way in which he keeps the opposition briefed on these matters and, on behalf of all Territorians, for his enthusiasm in this regard. We need people like him to ensure that these projects do not slip under the table and become lost. I believe that, of all people, he needs to be congratulated on the railway development to date and on what is likely to happen in relation to that project in the future. We all wish him well on it and I look forward to the day when the train comes through my electorate and Tennant Creek is able provide services to that rail line. Congratulations to the minister on this, but let us also look at spreading some of these things across other areas in the Territory and across other portfolios.

Mr DUNHAM (Drysdale): Madam Speaker, I am very pleased to speak on this subject because the railway has been closely associated with my family for a long time. My grandfather, Jack Keaman was a fettler on the original railway and, as a result, he and his children lived at places like Birdum, Parap, Mataranka and Larrimah. The work he did on the railway was hard. In those days, there were not many machines. The fixing of the track was done by gangs of men and, on occasion, workers put their lives at risk. On one occasion, when the Katherine River flooded and debris and timber had built up against the railway bridge, the railwaymen had the job of standing on top of the bridge and pushing the timber underneath so it would flow down the river. My grandfather was doing this when he slipped, fell in and was feared drowned. In fact, it was much later that he was able to swim to shore and walk back into town, by which time his wake had started.

My great grandfather, Tim O'Shea, lived at Pine Creak and Emungalin on the north bank of the Katherine River when it was the railhead. He built the hotel at Birdum as the railhead and was therefore responsible for accommodating the people who had to travel across the great gap between the railhead in the south and the railhead in the north. The trains were not frequent and therefore people had often to stay a week or so at his hotel to wait for the train to arrive. As a town, Birdum was doomed because the major infrastructure was put into Larrimah, a few kilometres to the north. My great-grandfather agitated strongly for the town to move to Larrimah and, subsequently, he built the hotel at Larrimah. Thus, he had a very strong connection with it as a hotelier and most of his patrons were railway men. When we sold the hotel at Larrimah as a family concern in 1972, we were fortunate in that the railway was still running and many of the railway workers were known to have a drink on a hot day. The railway shut in 1976 and therefore it was probably a good business move to get out at that time.

My father also had connections with the railway. He was a linesman with the PMG and, in those days, if the line went down, the only way to fix it was to traverse the line and find where the break had occurred. That was done by the use of quads which were small open rail vehicles. The linesmen hopped on the railway line and followed the overland telegraph line until they found the break, climbed the pole and fixed it. I accompanied him once in a quad. I cannot recall why he was babysitting me that day, but it was a very memorable experience. I never actually travelled on the old railway line, but I wish I had.

The rail had a very big impact on the Northern Territory. The discovery of gold in the Pine Creek geosyncline occurred because the railway was being pushed through, earthworks were being pushed up and civilisation was coming to places that hitherto had seen very little geological survey work. We know also that the Chinese coolies who were imported to Australia to work as labourers on the railway became the miners in the Pine Creek area. Many of today's great citizens of Darwin, who are of Chinese extraction, can claim heritage from that era.

Given the long distance between the railheads, the railway line as it stood was never really viable. The railway was losing money and Cyclone Tracy provided a convenient excuse to shut the line down. That
was tantamount to shooting a man with a broken arm because the problem could have been rectified. The corridor and rolling stock were there and it was really a matter of ensuring that there was one continuous line from north to south.

The minister responsible for the AustralAsia railway, Hon Barry Coulter, deserves great praise for his work. This is an audacious and almost dreamlike project for many Territorians. We have regarded it as something of a never-never project that has been promised by a variety of federal governments. The Leader of the Opposition said that Labor would have done it for us, but we know that to be a fabrication. There is a very good little book that interested people might like to read: Rails to the Top End: the Adelaide-Darwin transcontinental railway by Robin Bromby. It discusses some of the history of the whole issue. The book has some discussion on the various promises. It talks about the Hawke government coming to power in 1983, deciding the cost of the line was too great, and scrapping it. It talks about a gentleman named David Hill who was preselected for the Labor Party and masqueraded as the independent chief of the ABC at one stage. Mr Hill left another little legacy to the Territory. He was commissioned to conduct an inquiry that actually shut down our railway. David Hill came here as the chief executive officer of the New South Wales State Rail Authority. He made a whole series of findings that determined the railway should not proceed.

The book provides an analysis of some of Mr Hill's figures and I will read them into Hansard. This should be done because, in respect of matters relating to the railway, history is often rewritten. As the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure Development has said, when this project is realised, we will have to undertake some paternity tests on the various people who claim to be the proponents of the scheme. David Hill's figures stated that the railway did not stack up. However, Chief Minister Tuxworth engaged Canadian Pacific Consulting Services (CPCS) which had a great deal of expertise in this regard than did Mr Hill. It is interesting to do a comparison of the figures. CPCS claimed that between $97m and $177m would be saved by a combination of reduced road maintenance costs and the onward rail traffic generated by the Alice-Darwin corridor for the rest of the Australian railway system. Between $109m and $141m would be saved by modifying the track design and reducing the construction schedule to about 4 years. Obviously, Mr Hill was working off the New South Wales rail system where things moved a little slowly. About $40m would be saved by eliminating passenger services, and I know that that is still factored in. The track-laying equipment and welding plant could be sold after construction for between $13m and $32m. The Hill inquiry assumed 3-man crews as opposed to CPCS's 2-man crews that would save up to $11m. Canadian Pacific also believed there would be an additional saving of $246m by using its traffic forecasts rather than those assumed by the Hill inquiry.

A variety of people have mocked this project from very pessimistic points of view. Some of them have extrapolated from the rather inefficient railway systems that operate in other parts of Australia. Certainly, that is what Hill did. So too did Wran in the report of the Committee on Darwin. The figures used by Wran were pessimistic. Nonetheless, as the minister pointed out, even with Wran's figures, the time was right to build the railway.

The history of promises is a very sad one for all Commonwealth governments of both persuasions. The Commonwealth has been promising the completion of this line for more than 70 years. The saga started on 1 January 1911 when, in its agreement with South Australia, which previously had administrative authority for the Northern Territory, the Commonwealth undertook to complete the line between the railhead at Oodnadatta and Pine Creek. However, the 1911 agreement did not state when that would be done. Thus, the Commonwealth agreed to build it, but did not say when it would do it. In 1949, the federal government again pledged itself to complete the line when it signed the South Australian Rail Standardisation Agreement, and it accepted a commitment to convert the existing corridor to standard gauge. In 1971, Commonwealth Railways announced that work would begin but, 18 months later, it was cancelled, and we know too that Prime Minister Fraser and Prime Minister Hawke both promised to build the railway. The railway has not had a chequered history, but a history of people knocking it. It has had a history of people assuming paternalistically that it is an endowment that the Territory does not need. It has had a history of people looking at railway systems in

Australia and extrapolating their findings to the Northern Territory rather than looking at how rail systems operate around the world and looking at best practice.
I believe the consortia that have been announced by the minister are very able. I am not familiar with the corporate profiles of them all, but it is quite easy to see the matchmaking that must have been done to ensure that each is comprised of people who will not embark on the very expensive and exhaustive work of looking at viability if they have not done some initial work to determine that the project stacks up. I am very optimistic about the railway. I see it as a catalyst for development for the Northern Territory. I see the corridor as having a great capacity to accommodate spur lines, as the Leader of the Opposition said, running into other areas, not only for mining but for other projects also. Eventually, the corridor might be used to provide water, power, gas and transport. The corridor could provide all of that over time.

It will assist the Territory also in some areas where the states have been able to compete unfairly. An example is freight costs with bulk haulage. In the past, the Territory has had to maintain extremely expensive roads infrastructure, and it has lacked access that would have enabled the development of some of the immense deposits that exist here. I believe the railway will assist us in these areas. I believe it will be an immense advantage to the Australian Defence Force. Anyone who has driven up the Stuart Highway will have been held up on the road by massive convoys of Sydney-type defence people who are turning into Darwin-type defence people. We have also seen the ships pull into the harbour and unload all manner of tanks and vehicles. The railway will be a great asset to the defence build-up in the north.

I would like to be a passenger on it, but I understand it is to be a freight train. I hope I can prevail on the minister to give me a ride, perhaps in the cabin, when operations start. I do not expect that I will be too much older. I think the bona fides of the companies that are bidding are such that, when the green light flashes, this will happen in a matter of months. I hope there will be rolling stock on the line in a matter of a few years. I am not saying the line will be completed, but obviously trains will start to chug up and down within the next couple of years.

I commend not only the good work done by the minister, but also his perseverance. There must have been times when it all seemed too hard. The hurdles confronting this project were immense. They were ideological, economic and, on occasion, simply the specious nonsense from knockers. The political will shown by the minister, in the arm-twisting that he had to be involved in over the last couple of years, is to his credit. I believe history will be very generous to the member for Blain for his role in this undertaking. I put it on record that I likewise commend him for his role.

Mr BALCH (Jingili): Madam Speaker, I support the minister's statement. I welcome his announcement of the concept of cross-departmental coordination for these major projects. In fact, this new bureaucratic mechanism is all about fast-tracking of projects - in other words, ensuring that a project is not delayed unduly either in the government system or outside of it. It is about problem-solving and bringing parties together to ensure projects happen as quickly as possible.

The organisational structure on which we have been briefed shows that reasonably short lines of communication and authority have been established. I believe this enhances the Northern Territory government's reputation as a can-do government. The structure is based on the experience of the Railway Executive Group. In fact, through the minister's office, the railway has given the government tremendous experience in planning, coordinating and putting together such major projects. That will provide an invaluable background in future years in major project areas.

The head of the major projects division in the Department of Transport and Works is Mr Ken Hornsby, an experienced senior officer and engineer who is well known to many honourable members and certainly to the construction industry. He was in charge of Territory roads for many years and will be mentioned in dispatches when the Territory development story is written.

One of the interesting things I found about the new structure, apart from the relatively short lines of communication and authority, is the Infrastructure Development Subcommittee of the Coordination Committee. In effect, its members examine the projects, and determine the benefits to the Territory and the need for cross-departmental liaison. With the approval of either Cabinet or the Chief Minister, the project then becomes
a major project and goes to the major projects group. That represents a tremendous shortening of lines of communication between various departments. As we know, major projects can become lost very easily among priorities that may be set in departments if they do not have some direction in this regard. The sorts of problems that can arise involve land access, particularly to Aboriginal land, perceived delays by private sector developers in dealing with government departments, lack of national and international markets, lack of commercial and legal advice, particularly in relation to Territory conditions, and lack of business plans. This whole structure has been set up in order that someone with responsibility is able to approach the project group with a project to which all the departments must be committed and ensure that it proceeds. Such issues can and will be addressed by the major projects group with a view to fast-tracking the project.

This structure will see positive benefits will flow to the Northern Territory by attracting major projects. The minister commented that the Territory needs probably to attract one such major project every few years to make a very significant input to our community. The minister used the railway as an example of this approach. To someone who has followed the railway project, as have many Territorians over many years, this and other recent announcements on the project are very exciting indeed. As the member for Drysdale said, many people have suggested spuriously that this would never happen. I would like to know where they all are now because this project is a reality. Like my colleague, I would love to be on that first train - the Coulter Flyer - when it pulls into Darwin station.

Mr Coulter: Provided you do not lose your parliamentary pass, you will be all right!

Mr BALCH: The evidence of the benefit to the Territory of major projects can be no better identified than it was in the minister's comment that there will be 2000 jobs in the construction phase and that 200 ongoing jobs will be associated with the rail link from Darwin to Alice Springs. Of course ...

Mr Poole: Alice Springs to Darwin.

Mr BALCH: Okay - it goes both ways.

Of course, the flow-on benefits to the Territory economy must not be underestimated. The port at East Arm is an integral part of the whole project, linking the railway to markets to our north. This major infrastructure project is part of the same package. Together, they will provide tremendous benefits and growth to the Territory economy for many years to come.

In his speech, the minister recognised a number of people who have made a dedicated and significant commitment to the railway project. I wish to go on record as recognising the minister himself for his long and dedicated commitment, without which we would not be where we are today with the railway project.

The minister also mentioned the sale of Territory airports. I spent a number of years in the tourism industry. Obviously, airports are vital to the tourism industry. We need an operator to run our airports who has a vital interest in and commitment to the Northern Territory tourism industry. Once again, the minister and his department are to be congratulated on taking an interest in this matter, and on not allowing the initial response of the federal government to deter them. The minister made our thoughts known and, in the end, our preferred choice of operator was the one who was given the nod. Darwin International Airport adjoins my electorate. It will be interesting to see how pro-active the new commercial operator will be in developing the airport and the surrounding areas. I guess airport hotels and similar infrastructure will be very much a part of the operator's planning for that whole complex.

In conclusion, I reiterate that the initiative the minister has implemented in establishing the Infrastructure Development Group, with the cross-department coordination, will bring tremendous flow-on benefits to the Northern Territory for many years to come. If any major projects are considered for the Northern Territory, we now have a structure that will be able to consider them and put them in place as efficiently as any other government in this country. I commend the minister's statement.

Mr BAILEY (Wanguri): Madam Speaker, I support the minister's statement on the railway and other major infrastructure projects. Most speakers have spoken about the railway as the major focus of this statement and I would like to comment on the history of that. I want to make it quite clear that the
opposition fully

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supports the development of the continuation of the railway from Adelaide through Alice Springs and on to Darwin. As the Leader of the Opposition said, she managed to secure support at the ALP national conference for that agenda. It is a goal that we will continue to support. We look forward to the announcement by the minister of the final proposal from the tenderers and the eventual completion of the railway.

It has taken a long time. I think members on both sides would say there have been ups and downs in the history of the project - the promises, and the opportunities that may have been missed. As the minister himself stated, one of the greatest missed opportunities was when the federal Labor government offered a 60:40 contribution to Paul Everingham. He thought it was not as good a deal as he could obtain, not quite what had been promised in the election campaign. Consequently, he pulled out of that deal. Whoever was at fault at that time, I think Territorians can look back on that as ...

Mr Poole: Bob Hawke was.

Mr BAILEY: It depends what you mean. The conservative government has said that it too will support the construction of the railway, but we are down to $100m from the $300m that was required. In fact, if we look at the percentages, what Bob Hawke offered was the equivalent of $600m. While it may not have been quite the deal that people expected when the federal government said it would contribute, with hindsight, I believe Labor's offer was actually very generous compared with any other offer made since.

Dr Lim interjecting.

Mr BAILEY: I will treat the irrelevant interjections from the member for Greatorex with the contempt they deserve.

As the minister stated, it was the best opportunity that the Territory government ever had, and it missed out on it. Perhaps the government should not have been so greedy. Perhaps it should not have looked a gift horse in the mouth even if the offer was not quite as much as the government wanted or as much as it thought had been proffered in the first instance.

A great deal of work has still to be done. I hope that this is the last leg of the long journey to complete a railway. I am concerned that financial problems in Asia may impede a project that is close to the threshold and may even be ready to proceed. I hope that is not the case, but one can never cover all the eventualities.

More than anything, the statement by the minister has shown the double standards under which this government operates, particularly in relation to Aboriginal land issues. Only a few short months ago, in the last election campaign, the government stated that it was impossible to work with Aboriginal people and the land councils. It is amazing how this government has said so often that projects cannot proceed and that development has been stifled because of issues related to land rights, only to say now, in respect of the railway project, that basically what was necessary was to sit down with traditional owners and the land councils to work out an appropriate solution.

I congratulate the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure Development on the work that he has done. It shows that, when both sides enter into negotiations in good faith, an adequate outcome can be achieved. That is not to say that the process is finished yet. There is still a long way to go. In many ways, I am surprised that matters have come this far, given the anti-Aboriginal rhetoric so often used by the CLP. It says that Aboriginals are the root cause of the stifling of almost all development in the Northern Territory. I am somewhat surprised that the land councils, which are bagged in here at almost every sittings, were happy to sit down with this government and negotiate the outcome that we see. There have been a number of developments, including some involving aquaculture, where this government has stepped in and put them out of action because they did not fit the CLP agenda of settling land claim issues. However, I look forward to that final outcome of the railway project to show what can be achieved when people with good intent sit down together to resolve issues. I point out also
that this has been achieved within the existing native title legislation. The 10-point Howard amendments were not required to reach the stage that was reached in those negotiations.

I am pleased also to read the comments by the minister in relation to his major development infrastructure advisory groups and their endeavours to obtain major projects for the Northern Territory. I hope some beneficial developments will result from those projects, but I sound a word of warning. In the past, the Northern Territory government has become involved in trying to develop infrastructure projects. Who can forget the Sheraton hotels fiasco and the development of Yulara which the government underwrote without any limits being placed on the level of subsidies that Territory taxpayers could be called on to provide in support of those projects? There are also issues such as the failure of the space base to get off the ground in the Northern Territory. That could be seen as a failure by the minister and others to deal appropriately with a wide range of consortia, preferring instead to deal with only one or two interested parties. At the end of the day, the Northern Territory obtained nothing. There have been other projects on which the government has tried to pick winners to the disadvantage of the people of the Northern Territory. I hope this major infrastructure projects group is looking in general terms at major infrastructure projects rather than trying to pick individual companies that may be winners and offering direct support to those companies.

I welcome the statement by the minister and I look forward to future statements from him in relation to, firstly, the railway as we move closer and closer to finality on that project, and also on other infrastructure projects. I must say that, in the past, this minister has probably made a few too many announcements on projects that have never actually gotten off the ground. Such announcements have often been made just before elections. I must say also that, in relation to the railway, this minister has always been happy to provide briefings. In fact, he is prepared to provide briefings in his own time and to put on his slide shows and computer presentations to show the work that he and his public sector and ministerial staff have done. Therefore, it comes as a surprise and disappointment that, in other portfolio areas, he does not provide the same level of briefings and support to the opposition as he does in relation the railway.

Mr Coulter: Not to you.

Mr BAILEY: In relation to the taxi industry, over a month ago, as the shadow minister responsible for that part of transport and infrastructure development, representations were made to me by members of the taxi industry, minibus operators and private hire car operators, on general issues in that industry. Given that I was brought into this shadow portfolio only towards the end of last year, I thought it appropriate to ask for a briefing from the minister's office or from departmental officers. To that end, I rang him and he said he would like my request in writing. Over a month ago, I wrote to the minister, asking for a general briefing on the industry. Basically, this request was ignored and I had to ring 2 or 3 times. Finally, on Monday, after asking categorically what the situation was, the minister refused a briefing on the general hire car and taxi industry. He refused a briefing, stating that a review was in progress. The issues that I wanted to talk about included the review. I wanted to know its terms of reference and to pass on to the person conducting the review concerns that had been raised with me by operators. It seems that, for one reason or another, the minister does not consider it appropriate for opposition members to be able, in a timely manner ...

Mr Coulter: No. From you in particular.

Mr BAILEY: From me in particular? I point out to the minister that there are public sector guidelines. Letters were sent out previously by the Chief Minister about providing appropriate briefings to opposition members. I put it to the Speaker that, in fact, what the minister is doing is close to a breach of parliamentary privilege ...

Members interjecting.

Mr BAILEY: ... in respect of a member of parliament carrying out their parliamentary duties. These ministers breach the public sector guideline that states that local members are allowed to approach
public service departments on local constituent issues. We are told now that that public sector guideline no longer applies. It appears that opposition members have to go through the minister's office in relation to both local constituent issues and matters relating to their shadow ministerial responsibilities.

Madam Speaker, obstructing members of parliament in carrying out their parliamentary duties is a breach of privilege, and I consider that the ministerial interference in that process is precisely that.

Mr POOLE: A point of order, Madam Speaker! The member is talking about rules and regulations under the Public Sector Employment and Management Act. He knows full well that standing orders require that a member shall not attribute, directly or by innuendo, to another member unbecoming conduct or motives. If he wishes to do that, he must do so by way of substantive motion.

Madam Speaker: I note your point of order. The member for Wanguri may continue.

Mr BAILEY: Madam Speaker, in essence, it is hypocritical for members of the government to say that opposition members are not fully briefed or on top of issues in their shadow portfolios when ministers refuse briefings. The minister is quite happy to provide briefings on railways - something he wants to brag about - but I consider it hypocritical for the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure Development to delay providing a briefing indefinitely. It was not a matter of deferring it for a day or so, but of delaying it indefinitely. He is not the only minister to do that to opposition members. I consider that the Chief Minister's statement about open, accountable government is a bald-faced lie because ministers are refusing briefings.

Mr POOLE: A point of order, Madam Speaker! The honourable member said that the Chief Minister's statement was a bald-faced lie. Beyond question, such language is contrary to standing orders.

Mr BAILEY: I withdraw my comment that the Chief Minister's statement in relation to open, accountable government is a bald-faced lie, but I place on the record that there seems to be a contradiction between open, accountable government and ministers refusing briefings for opposition members.

Mr Coulter: Speak to the bloke beside you. Does he have a problem?

Mr McCARTHY (Goyder): Madam Speaker, I would like to add a few words to this debate. It seems to me that this has been probably the second most debated issue in this House over the period that I have been a member. The first is matters related to Aboriginal land. The matter of the railway arises from time to time in debate, sometimes in debate on a related issue or, as is the case with this statement, in the context of infrastructure development. There is no doubt in my mind that both the Territory and Australia need this project. It is not simply something that a very small group of people in the northern part of Australia aspires to. All of Australia should desire to have this railway in place and want to see infrastructure development in this relatively undeveloped part of the country.

Like all previous speakers, I too pay tribute to the minister for pulling the railway project together. I believe few people could have achieved it in such a short time, and it has been only a short time in the overall scheme of things. At times, the obstructions to the project appeared insurmountable. For a range of reasons, very powerful interests were opposed to the development. Some of those may not have stood up to scrutiny, and I suspect that many previous detailed studies that have gone into the development of this railway have been designed to make it fail. Certainly, in the minds of most people, it was clear that the Hill inquiry was set up with the idea of ensuring that the railway did not get a guernsey.

I have often said, and I will say it again, that the development of the Territory to date has been along its spine. This railway will strengthen the spine of the Northern Territory and, hopefully, as the spine is strengthened over time, the ribs will be beefed out a little. We have seen development along the Stuart
Highway, and we will see development along the railway line. However, I believe the railway will have the capacity to fill some of those empty spaces to the east and the west of the spine. The announcements in recent months of developments in the Ord are good news. The Ord is a very worthy project for the Territory and for Western Australia, but the major part of that new development will be in the Territory. We need to see more of that type of development in the hinterland of the Territory. There will always be obstacles in the way of major infrastructure. The knockers are people who knock for the sake of knocking. Problems occur with land tenure and also with finance. These days, it is hard to secure the big dollars needed for major projects such as the railway. There are certainly other areas of the Territory that could and should develop once the railway is in place.

I mentioned that there are powerful interests opposed to this type of development. It is understandable that road transport operators would not be particularly keen to see this project up and running. There is considerable investment in the trucking industry by those large operators that transport goods up and down the Stuart Highway. The railway will impact on that and will create some redirection in the trucking industry. I imagine that the powerful trucking interests might be opposed to this railway development in the short term although, in the longer term, I believe they will probably want to be part of it.

The minister's announcement about continuing the concept of project groups such as those he put in place for the railway is a good one. In today's political climate, I believe there is difficulty in getting any major project up and going. Environmental and Aboriginal land issues intervene to make it difficult to put such projects in place, but I believe that, with the right kind of people, who have the capacity to cut across the red tape, successful outcomes can be achieved. I do not know where Australia would be now if the powerful and noisy interests that we have today had been in existence in previous times. Projects like the Snowy Mountains scheme and a range of other large developments, including the Ord River scheme, may not have occurred if some of the current interest groups had been around 40 and 50 years ago. I do not think we would have seen those projects, and Australia would have been the poorer for that. We need to have a balance. To have a group in place for every project, with the capacity to cut through red tape and provide answers to those who have objections, will provide a powerful force in ensuring that the Territory benefits from potential infrastructure developments.

I thank the minister again for his statement. I believe he will be remembered for the railway. Wherever you travel around the Territory, people talk about the member for Blain as the Minister for the Railway. I am sure he will go down in history as the person who saw this project through to fruition.

Mr LUGG (Nelson): Madam Speaker, most Territorians know a little about the history of the railway. They know about the promise, made by the Commonwealth decades ago, which committed the Northern Territory and the Commonwealth to a railway, but made cleverly without saying when. The issue has been ducked virtually ever since. We saw the election of Bob Hawke who promised to build the railway. Later, he sent David Hill to the Territory and elsewhere to manufacture some facts to allow him to renege on his promise and attempt to maintain some semblance of credibility and dignity. Mr Hawke's commitment to the railway ranks alongside one of his other great commitments - that no child would live in poverty after 1990.

Likewise, Mr Wran's efforts to torpedo the project were temporarily successful. That was yet another test of the resolve of Territorians. However, Territorians are bigger than that. They have longer memories, greater stoicism and a history of succeeding against all odds. One of the main players who is intimately involved in this project - pushing, persuading and never taking no for an answer - is a man of vision, Hon Barry Coulter. His boundless energy and infectious enthusiasm for the railway are legend. He seems unable to refuse an opportunity to promote the railway. At the celebration at Woods Street last year of the CLP's Territory election victory, he breezed by me, full of good humour and with a kind word for everybody. He thrust a stubby cooler into my hand. I turned it over and it read: 'Barry Coulter - railway worker'. That says it all. The railway is the result of Barry's work and the railway is about work. It is about work for Territorians. It is about work for South Australians. It is about jobs, development and prosperity for all Australians. It is of great national importance and, with the focus now on the southern ports, another option such as the land bridge is also important.
I am disappointed by the comments of the member for Wanguri. The double standard of Labor with regard to land rights and access to the rail corridor obviously shows that it is not au fait with the specific terms of the heads of agreement. For instance, the issue of native title over pastoral leases has been put completely to one side or, if you will, suspended. In other words, in effect, both parties have gone around the issue. The member for Wanguri is obviously not aware, when he touts how effectively this system works, that the opposite is precisely the case. It cannot work and therefore both parties have to step around it. This has been a major problem. In fact, the agreement still has not been ratified by the traditional owners of the land. However, the land councils have undertaken to obtain that ratification. Notwithstanding that, I thank the minister for his vision, his work and his commitment. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr MITCHELL (Millner): Madam Speaker, I welcome the minister's statement. I suppose it is the fruition of a long battle by the minister to bring the railway project to the stage it has reached. The enthusiasm that he has shown over the years has provided backbone for this project. Comments that he made in his statement put to rest the ridicule that has been hurled at the project, particularly from the knockers down south. I will not go over what other members have said today, except to say that the minister's place in history will be clearly marked.

I turn to what the minister had to say about the sale of the airports. Given that Darwin Airport is in my electorate, the statement is particularly welcome. Finally, after years of speculation about what was to happen with the airport, that appears to be resolved as well. I look forward to speaking in the next couple of months to the purchasers and finding out what they have planned. There is a stretch of country alongside McMillans Road and back up to Bagot Road that many people are chasing for developmental purposes. It also affects work that can be done on Bagot Road to improve peak hour access to and from the city - a problem that has existed for quite a few years. An extra lane is needed on Bagot Road, enabling lights to be installed at the corner of Totem Road - a bottleneck that affects almost every member with an electorate in the northern suburbs. Hopefully, this will finally bring to a head exactly what can and cannot be done along that stretch. I am sure the minister will keep me across what is happening in that regard. I thank the minister for his statement and commend it to honourable members.

Motion agreed to.