Mr VALE (Stuart): Mr Speaker, I would like to speak in support of the statement made by the Chief Minister concerning the Alice Springs-Darwin rail link. While some members of the opposition have already spoken and referred to the proposed rail line, it should be noted for historical purposes, if for no other reason, that work on this line has in fact commenced with the clearing of hundreds of kilometres of line through the first stage, which is in the Stuart electorate.

Some years ago, a journalist with the Bulletin, in an article on the Tarcoola to Alice Springs line, criticised the construction of that line with the headline ‘Dollars Lost in the Desert’. This article and others since then have ignored the fact that, until the mid-1960s, the central Australian line, as it was known by railway officials, was the only line in the Commonwealth operating at a profit. Continual flooding since 1996 saw this vital freight line being disrupted and suppliers were forced to look for alternative supply points and supply lines.

The commencement of services on the Tarcoola to Alice line has meant that these companies have been able to re-establish contacts in the South Australian marketplace. As a result, Alice Springs is once again becoming a major railhead for the supply of goods and services to all Northern Territory towns and communities. Given the vast distance to cover – over 2000 miles in round figures and not 2500 miles as continually stated by the Leader of the Opposition – it is quite probable that sooner rather than later this entire section of the line will ultimately operate at a profit. Unfortunately for all Territorians, the Leader of the Opposition, rather than take a positive and supportive stance on this line, picked on one point of the Chief Minister’s speech and attempted to downgrade the whole project. I suggest that the shadow spokesman for transport should take his leader aside and brief him on what is commonly referred to in the transport industry as backloading rates.

This rail project will provide a tremendous boost in employment for Territorians during the construction phase and I would like to pay tribute to those many people who worked so hard to bring the Tarcoola to Alice line in ahead of time and under budget. In particular, the Chief Civil Engineer, Des Smith, deserves particular credit. In my view, he must lead the future construction team.

The completion of the Darwin to Alice line will change the transport industry in the Northern Territory and, ultimately, we may see the popular road trains move from the Stuart Highway to work on the arterial roads delivering and supplying the rail line. Mr Speaker, one day, subject to disease status, Moroak cattle may ultimately appear in the Gepps Cross market in South Australia.

History will record that the construction of this line must be credited to the Chief Minister for initiating the project, the former Prime Minister, Mr Fraser, and many media representatives who enthusiastically embraced and publicised this project, and last, but certainly not least, all of the state premiers for their support.

I think it is interesting to note that a former Premier of South Australia, the late Sir Thomas Playford, a farmer, took legal action against the Commonwealth many years ago in an attempt to have it build the line but the court action failed. Our Chief Minister, a lawyer, ignored the possibility of legal action and took a publicity course and succeeded.

I hope that the Leader of the Opposition will also ultimately give his unqualified support to the rail line and not hedge his bets, or as the Minister for Primary Production said, ‘soften us up’. This project must not be delayed, deferred or cancelled. It must be completed by 1988 because the Territory has waited patiently for 74 years to see it completed.

Debate adjourned.