Mr Speaker, I could keep talking if it were not for the constant interjections of my ill-mannered friends on the other side of the Assembly. The honourable members for Port Darwin is interested no doubt because the rail link from Alice Springs will have a tremendous impact on his electorate, comprising as it does the Port of Darwin. As I understand it, at present the Northern Territory government, working with Australian National Railways, has prepared a submission which will go forward to federal Cabinet in the course of the next 6 weeks seeking, at this stage, a firm commitment for funding from federal Cabinet towards the commencement of construction of the rail link during the course of 1983. I understand from the Chairman of Australian National Railways Mr L. Marks, with whom I conferred yesterday, that if funding can be allocated during 1983 towards construction then it will be quite feasible to complete the rail link to Darwin by the bicentenary year, 1988. As you would know, Mr Speaker, the federal government’s present commitment is for completion of the rail link by 1990. It has always been the position of the Northern Territory government that we should aim to seek completion by the bicentenary year and the studies undertaken by ANR indicate that this is possible. In relation to the preliminary work, surveys are well on the way. A corridor has now been identified, I understand, all the way from Alice Springs to Darwin and more detailed surveys have taken place between Alice Springs and, I think, Tennant Creek and perhaps even somewhat to the north of Tennant Creek.

Mr Speaker, while this project is vital to the Northern Territory, it will also benefit the rest of Australia. It will facilitate the development of the hinterland of the Northern Territory in a way that has never previously been possible. It will also be important for the whole of this country at the present, particularly in view of the economic malaise. BHP, of course, has been laying off workers at its steel plants. I understand something in the order of 0.25 million tonnes of railway line will be required for the project. Obviously, that would bring a considerable number of people back into employment. You can imagine the tremendous amount of ballast that will be needed. Construction of the sleepers, which I understand are made of concrete these days, will obviously provide employment for a considerable number of people here and probably in South Australia from whence other supplies will be drawn. The project is very important for this Territory and for Australia. I repeat that I think that its cost, in the order of $500m, is more meaningful to this country than the acquisition of a new aircraft carrier, even in strictly defence terms.

In view of the fact that the matter is to go before Cabinet in the course of the next few weeks, whilst I am down south later this week in connection with the Australian Fisheries Council meeting in Hobart, I shall arrange to meet with the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Transport, Minister for Industry and Commerce, Minister for National Development, the Treasurer and the Minister for Finance to raise the matter with them again to ensure that the Territory’s point of view is put squarely before them. I hope that, with a out-of-turn allocation of funding so that construction can commence during the course of the next year.