Mr VALE to CHIEF MINISTER

Has his attention been drawn to media comment that, despite statements to the contrary by the Leader of the Opposition, the South Australian Premier will not accompany him to Canberra for talks on the future of the Alice Springs to Darwin rail line

ANSWER

My attention has been drawn to comments to this effect. I must say that I am extremely surprised by them. Last Friday, when the Leader of the Opposition was attempting to snow the media, he stated that he and the South Australian Premier would travel to Canberra for talks with the federal government. The front page of the Northern Territory News declared: ‘Collins and Bannon join forces’. The Leader of the Opposition was quoted as saying that he and South Australian Premier, John Bannon, would be joining forces to ask the federal government to reconsider its position on the railway.

Let me quote from the story in the NT News: ‘Mr Collins said that he and Mr Bannon would be going to Canberra at a time yet to be decided to suggest that the federal government should considerably moderate its request to the Territory to share the capital funding’. The Leader of the Opposition also made that claim in a press release that he issued last Friday. He said virtually the same thing: no decision had been made about the timing of the trip to Canberra but he and the South Australian Premier would be making a joint approach.

In case other honourable members have not seen the media reports, Mr Deputy Speaker, let me tell you what they say. The South Australian Premier is not travelling to Canberra with the Leader of the Opposition. He has gone on holiday. The Deputy Premier will not accompany the Leader of the Opposition. He had considered going but has a heavy schedule and has decided against it. The person who might go is the member for Stuart, an electorate in the north of the state. The member for Stuart is the Chief Secretary in South Australia, the man responsible for police and prisons. That is how much importance the South Australian government seems to attach to the Leader of the Opposition and his talks in Canberra. South Australia, which would certainly benefit from the steel and railway sleepers required, is a sleeper itself. The railway would need 156 000 t of steel for rails – steel that would be rolled at Whyalla. It needs 2.5 million sleepers which could be made at the concrete sleeper plant at Port Augusta. But the South Australian government attaches so little significance to the Leader of the Opposition that the Premier has gone on holiday and the Deputy Premier is too busy. Perhaps the Chief Secretary was the only person left standing when the rest of the Cabinet ducked for cover.

Mr Deputy Speaker, one point that emerges from this news item is the fact that the South Australian Premier never intended going to Canberra with the Leader of the Opposition. The Leader of the Opposition has misled the people of the Northern Territory once again with his willingness to mishandle the truth. Lest there be any confusion, let me make it quite clear that I am not misrepresenting the facts in this matter. The Premier’s office in Adelaide is telling the press, quote openly- and we have it from the ABC and AAP – that the Premier never had any intention of travelling to Canberra or anywhere else with the Leader of the Opposition. The honourable Leader of the Opposition seems to think he can give a version of what he does for consumption in the Northern Territory and that the real facts will never come to light. Mr Deputy Speaker, once again, he has been caught with his pants well and truly down and it is not a pretty sight.