QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE – Wednesday 30 April 1980

1541 Mr ISAACS to CHIEF MINISTER

Does he recall being reported in the NT News on 28 March as saying that the Alice Springs to Darwin railway feasibility study will be released in 2 or 3 weeks? In view of the answer given to me yesterday by the Minister of Transport and Works, can he tell the Assembly what has occurred to make his statement in March inoperative.

ANSWER

I am very pleased that the Leader of the Opposition has given me the opportunity to perhaps clear away some of the obscurity, doubts and persiflage that he has been attempting to raise about the government’s attitude towards the completion of the Alice Springs Darwin rail link and also the doubt he has been casting on the Commonwealth government’s attitude to the completion of this vital developmental, social and defence link for the Territory. Everybody knows that the completion of a rail link to Darwin must have a very beneficial effect on the cost of living in the Territory by reason of a fact that rail freight will be in competition with road transport. Obviously, moving freight in such bulk as only a railway can do must have a downward effect on freight costs and hence the cost of living in the Territory.

On information provided to me, I have indicated that this feasibility study would be ready on a number of occasions and, each time I have been given a date, I have been given reasons why the study cannot be ready by the particular date. At this time, I am not prepared to indicate when the feasibility study will be ready although I believe it will be ready in the near future. As fare as I am concerned, as soon as it has been considered by Cabinet, and with the concurrence of the Commonwealth government or perhaps even without their concurrence, we will release it to the public because the public of the Territory are the people concerned with this. It is an extremely complex question and we have been going to great lengths of research to establish that this railway line will be economical at the time it can be constructed. It has certainly not been the Commonwealth’s fault that the feasibility study has been late in coming out. It has been a result of indefatigable research and hard work on the part of the people representing the Northern Territory in this team which is putting together the feasibility study. I would think that every member of this House and every resident of the Northern Territory would want the Northern Territory government to do the best possible job in putting together this feasibility study. To my mind, there is absolutely no more important task being undertaken at the present time bar none by the Northern Territory government.

I can assure the House that, as soon as this feasibility study is ready, and I believe it will be ready soon, then it will be considered by Cabinet. It will be released then to the public provided the Commonwealth government has no major objection and I cannot see why they should. The Northern Territory government will then continue to go to bat for the completion of this length from Alice Springs to Darwin which was promised by the Commonwealth 70 years or more ago when the Territory was handed over from South Australia. I would ask all good Territorians and all people who have he interests of the Territory at heart to get behind us on this issue to see that maximum pressure from the Territory is applied to the Commonwealth government to expend an amount in the order of $400m. We are not talking about peanuts and we would hope that party political wrangles would not enter into this particular issue.