Mr Speaker, it is with pleasure that I take the opportunity to inform the Assembly of the position with respect to the construction of our much-awaited railway line from Alice Springs to Darwin. Honourable members will be aware that, over the last several years, our government has used every available avenue to try to promote the development of this line and to have the federal government honour its clear and unequivocal undertaking to the people of the Northern Territory, given in an agreement reached in 1910, that it would construct a railway line to Darwin. Territorians do have some patience, but I think that really is stretching patience to its absolute limits.

During the 1983 election campaign, there were clear and unequivocal promises, without qualification, by the current federal government that it would build a railway line. That promise lasted less than a month after it was elected. Despite that, we proceeded as diligently and as expeditiously as possible towards the construction of a line. Members will be aware that we formed a Railway Executive Group which prepared reports in 1986 on the financial viability of a railway line to be operated by private enterprise. That project was found to be viable in a 20-year time frame. The income generation would exceed well beyond the 20-year period. As a 20-year repayment period, it would work. I have made 2 statements in the Assembly in the last 12 months with respect to that.

Mr Speaker, recently, I visited Japan as part of the work towards the development of a private enterprise consortium for the construction of this railway line. I know there is degree of scepticism in the community as to whether or not this will be at all possible, and there is no doubt that it will not be an easy task to achieve a private enterprise line. However, it is far from being an impossible task. I have been very heartened by the response that has arisen in the last month and I suspect that that has been stimulated further by the recent re-election of a CLP government in the Northern Territory so that people will have the confidence of dealing with a government that is in existence.
It was our first visit to Japan and we anticipated opening the subject up and that, perhaps after several visits, we might arouse interest. The interest was far higher than that and, as a consequence, we have formed what we have called a Japan Australia Transport Study Group. This comprises, from the Japanese side, representatives from the Japan Railway Technical Services, known as JATS, Japan Railway and Freight Company and the Long Term Credit Bank of Japan, and from Australia, Henry and Walker, with the involvement of 1 of its shareholders, Kumagai Gumi. The study group will be chaired by a gentleman called Dr Robert Ishizaki. He is from Japan and he will be working as a coordinator of this project in Japan without consultancy fees or other costs. Dr Ishizaki will be in Australia next month and he will visit Darwin.

I was even more pleased when I arrived back in Australia on the morning of Good Friday and received a message at the airport that TNT Ltd had expressed keenness to be involved in the operational side of the railway. I have had brief discussions with Sir Peter Abeles since that time and, after these sittings, I will be taking the opportunity to have further discussions with Sir Peter Abeles and other potential Australian participants to bring together this consortium to develop a private enterprise line. I reiterate that it is and has been our intention that this be a completely private enterprise line if that is at all possible physically. I will not exclude the possibility of some government involvement, although my objective is to have no government involvement in the line.

I might say here that the project may involve more than a railway line. The line is really the linchpin in the development of a transportation system which involves shipping, ports and rail as related transport modes. It is possible that other projects can be mixed and matched with the railway in a consortium-backed, multi-project venture which could well improve the viability of the total scheme and provide more investment opportunities for the Northern Territory.

Mr Speaker, we have a long way to go. I am hopeful that I will be able to make a more definite statement to the Assembly in June. I am proceeding steadily but carefully, without making any wild claims. I made the statement yesterday and I repeat it again now: we will not rest until we see the railway line in place and the first train arrives in Darwin from Alice Springs.