Mr TUXWORTH: I wish it were. I would sell it.

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Mr Speaker, the point I wish to make is that, under the circumstances, I would have thought it reasonable for the Leader of the Opposition, or even yourself, Sir, to say, 'Look, we borrowed one of your personal effects last night and had a bit of fun with it'. I thought that any article that was left in the charge of the Clerk would remain in the charge of the Clerk and would not be carted around the precincts by anybody. I think any member of the Assembly would be offended if his or her mail or personal effects were taken from the charge of the attendants and Clerks and waltzed around the premises. It is a matter of courtesy, and I raise it in that light. I will not make a big deal of it.

There are a couple of issues that I would like to raise without any reflection on the government at all. In the last 15 years, particularly between 1967 and 1980, many of the buildings in the Northern Territory were built under the supervision of the Commonwealth and, more recently, by the Northern Territory government. In many of those buildings, a considerable amount of asbestos was used in the air-conditioning. In those days, it was not recognised that there was any real problem with asbestos. Everybody used it and it was not regarded as a health hazard. Until recently, very little had been done even to ensure that asbestos was not used in buildings any more.

I would like to raise a point for the benefit of the Minister for Transport and Works. I would be grateful if he could advise me during these sittings whether the government has commissioned a report into those buildings in the Territory that were built within the time frame that I outlined a moment ago and whether asbestos was used in the air-conditioning installed in them. I want to know whether the government has made a survey of the amount of asbestos in those buildings and whether it has a program to replace the asbestos in those buildings over the next few years. Could he give us an indication of what the cost of that is likely to be and whether there is any likelihood of the Territory government making a claim on the Commonwealth for the cost that will be incurred.

I would be the first to admit that, when the asbestos scare occurred in about 1976 or 1977, most people thought that the greenies were at work trying to frighten the living daylights out of everybody working and living in major buildings that had asbestos in the air-conditioning. However, I think it is fair to say with hindsight that it has been proven pretty conclusively that asbestos is a public health hazard and should be removed wherever possible. I would be interested to hear from the minister on that in due course.

The next item I would like to raise relates to the portfolio of the Minister for Industries and Development. It concerns the Tennant Creek Meatworks. The Tennant Creek Meatworks was sold up at auction today. That is regrettable, because many people put considerable time and effort into trying to get that works off the ground. In fact, the government made a considerable loan to it at one time to ensure that it would be successful. While, in recent years, the works suffered from the disadvantage of having a depleted herd in the region that would normally be its catchment area, one of the main factors leading to the closure of the works has been the militancy and the attitude of the meatworkers. To be economic, that works has always needed to process about 50,000 head per year. On one occasion only did the works process 40,000 head and, for most years, it had been flat out processing 20,000.
My question to the Minister for Industry is: could he give me, at some stage, an indication as to whether the government made any representations to the company about the closure of the works and whether it was possible to keep it open and, could he advise me whether the government got its money back or will it get it back after the sale has been finalised?

In my view, the closure of the Tennant Creek works is a very sad thing for the Territory. We have seen the closure of the Alice Springs works in recent years, Mr Speaker, which was a subject dear to your heart, and we have seen the incredible industrial dispute that has involved Mudginberri. We have a question mark about when the Katherine works will open. We are very quickly exporting all our jobs in this industry to the eastern seaboard and anything we can do to slow that down would be a worthwhile exercise.

The last point that I would like to raise tonight relates to the responsibilities of the Minister for Education. I have not had a chance to canvass the matter in detail with him but I will take the opportunity now because the point that I would like to raise is one that would probably escape the minds of most people.

In Tennant Creek and Katherine, there are Department of Education stores and personnel whose function is to deliver stores to remote schools. The word has gone out this week that the staff are to be retrenched and the stores are to be closed. I understand from the minister that it is a part of the belt-tightening exercise that has to occur. I understand that is the reality that will be with us for the next year or 2 in many places other than Tennant Creek and Katherine and in many departments other than the Department of Education. However, I would like to put it to the minister that these positions and the operation of the stores are really the key to the success of the operation and conduct of the schools in remote areas. If those stores are closed and those positions are retrenched or transferred, then the teachers in the remote areas will find it hard to teach, and the children in the schools will find it very hard to get an education.

From early experience, we found that one of the things that made it almost impossible for teachers in the really remote schools to keep their education system going was the non-availability of school books, paper, pens and all the rest of it. The other requirement was the capacity of the department to deliver materials to the school when they were required and not just when some truck happened to be going past or when a plane had time or space to put it on.

I would say to the minister quite sincerely that, if those stores are closed and if the positions are done away with, we are genuinely putting at risk the education of many children in remote areas who find it hard enough to get an education anyway. I am talking about the schools at Robinson River, the Aboriginal communities on the border, Borroloola, Anthony Lagoon, Walhallow, Alexandria Downs and Newcastle Waters, and I guess the other rural members in the Assembly could indicate 20 or 30 remote schools in their own electorates that depend on these stores and the jobs these drivers do to keep the schools adequately supplied with education materials and tools when they are needed. Mr Speaker, I say to the minister that I accept the challenge that he has before him in containing the budget, but it will be an extremely false economy if we close those stores and if those storemen and drivers are not available to deliver equipment and facilities to the children and the teachers involved.

I do not know if the minister has had an opportunity to have a look at schools in my electorate. If he has not, I invite him to come and see what some of the teachers and some of the children are doing in those schools. The programs they have set up and the effort they put in are tremendous. It is a
credit to themselves, and it is a credit to the department that they are able to sustain those schools and those places the way they do. Such a move would be a retrograde step.

My last point is addressed to the Chief Minister. The Chief Minister made a short statement in the Assembly earlier in the week about the railway. I welcome the possibility that we are making progress with the railway and I will look forward to seeing how negotiations and the study group proceed. I would be particularly interested to hear from the Chief Minister on the issue of freight, because the building of the railway is simple, the financing of it will be possible at some stage, but the key to its success will be freight: where the freight is to come from, when it will come, what levels of tonnage will be available, what sort of commodities will be trucked etc. I would say to the Chief Minister that, if he is making a statement to the Assembly, any delineation and explanation he would like to make about the freight that the railway is to carry and how that will pay for the railway, is a matter that I would particularly like to hear about and so would many other people who have a general interest in the railway. It is the most important aspect that we have to consider in relation to the construction of the railway.

I notice that the Chief Minister was very careful in his remarks the other day to say that he was not excluding the possibility of the government making a contribution or a commitment to the railway at some time. I would assume that we will have a government contribution in some way at some time and, that being the case, it will be all the more important for us to have some pretty detailed and solid facts and information about the freight that the railway is to carry.