Howard told: rail link vital

Prime Minister John Howard has been told to urgently declare his support for the Alice Springs-Darwin railway.

The call comes in a joint statement this week from Federal Labor leader Kim Beazley, South Australian ALP leader Mike Rann, and Territory Labor's Clare Martin.

They said Mr Howard must "show his willingness to increase the Commonwealth's financial support for the project".

Crucial

"We are now entering a critical period which will determine the fate of the proposal to complete the rail link between Alice Springs and Darwin," they said.

Ms Martin said the project must not be allowed to stall at this late stage.

She said the timing was crucial "because we expect to learn this week what level of finance the preferred bidder, Asia Pacific Transport Consortium, is willing to contribute to the project."

Mr Beazley said Labor had always strongly supported the proposal to complete the north-south rail link.

"At the last federal election we committed $100 million to the project."

"And we also said that, beyond 2001-2002, we would provide additional funding, up to a total of $300 million, if such funding was required."

The three leaders said Labor had always been confident that building the Alice Springs-Darwin railway would bring significant economic benefits to SA, the NT, and Australia as a whole.

"Further, we believe that the current circumstances of Australia's involvement in East Timor and the role being played by Darwin emphasise the importance and the urgency of finishing this vital rail project," they said in the statement.

"Mr Howard must give the project the support and assurances it needs."