Mr EVERINGHAM (Chief Minister)(by leave): Mr Speaker, I table 3 reports relating to the Alice Springs to Darwin railway. The first is a review of the economic viability of the railway prepared by Canadian Pacific Consulting Services, an arm of the Canadian Pacific Railroad Company. The second is a review of the defence implications of the railway prepared by the Strategic an Defence Studies Centre of the Australian National University. The third is an environmental assessment report prepared by the federal Department of Home Affairs and the Environment.

Mr Speaker, I have spoken in this Assembly on several occasions about the Alice Springs to Darwin railway and I think it is fitting that my last major statement in this place should be on this subject. Of course, this will certainly not be the last statement that I will make about the railway. All Territorians can be sure that I will be saying a lot about the railway in other places in the weeks and months to come. The railway project remains critical to the future of the Northern Territory. This Assembly is familiar with the story of the railway so far - a saga of broken promises and unfulfilled commitments, shameful chronicle of Commonwealth prevarication and lack of vision that stretches back 70 years.

All Territorians celebrated in September 1980 when, after years of federal hesitancy and after considerable effort by the Territory government, the then Prime Minister of Australia, Malcolm Fraser, confirmed that the railway would be completed. Malcolm Fraser subsequently announced the railway as a bicentennial project for completion in 1988. Territorians were assured that this commitment was bipartisan and we had every reason to believe that the railway was to be a reality. In March 1983, Mr Hawke made it a solemn promise. The federal Minister for Transport, Mr Morris, confirmed that promise and Mr Reeves gave his word that a federal Labor government would build the railway.

Mr Speaker, we all know what a charade that turned out to be. In a pathetic effort to diffuse and confuse the issue, we were told the railway could not be built because the federal budget deficit was too large. If that was so, the proper approach would have been to confirm that the railway would go ahead but perhaps over a longer construction period. Instead, 130 000 Territorians were asked to pay 40% of the cost - approximately $220m - for a project which has wide implications for national development and defence and which the Commonwealth has a legislative obligation to meet. The cost to the Territory taxpayer and the cost in services and facilities which all Territorians would have had to forgo made that deal totally unacceptable. Perhaps the sorriest chapter of all in the saga was the so-called independent economic inquiry. This inquiry, conceived and imposed on us by the federal government, was nothing more than a pretext against which to retract finally the promise that the railway would be built.

We accepted the inquiry only under great duress. Our views on the terms of reference were ignored. Our views on the structure and membership of the inquiry were ignored. Our views on its timing and conduct were ignored. But even given minimal time to prepare our case, we produced nonetheless a
comprehensive 3-volume submission which was then and remains now the most comprehensive assessment of the financial and economic viability of the railway that has been produced. That submission concluded that, in economic terms, the rail link is viable and its construction would provide economic benefits to the nation. Our submission had the full support of the Northern Territory Labor Party. So it was with considerable anger but not much surprise that we received the news that the inquiry had concluded that the railway would not be economically viable and should not be built. This so-called independent inquiry was totally cavalier and utterly irresponsible in its treatment of the very careful analysis of freight forecasts put forward by the Northern Territory. It produced its own illustrative projections of freight without any justification or supporting argument. The federal government could not wait to seize on this report to announce that the railway would not be built. The federal Minister for Transport had announced that even before I had received a copy of the report.

Mr Speaker, needless to say, the Territory examined the inquiry’s report very carefully and produced a detailed critique of it which raised a number of criticisms relating not only to the treatment of freight forecasts but also to a number of serious methodological questions. We endeavoured to resolve all of these issues by approaching the federal government to obtain further information on the approach taken by the inquiry. But these approaches were denied. Many months ago, we made a formal request under the Freedom of Information Act for access to the relevant papers and documents. The response after these months has been 350 pages of so-called documents which are in fact nothing more than press clippings and parliamentary questions and answers, information that we and the public were already aware of. Our real request has not been met, and it appears that it will not be met. I can only conclude that the request strikes too close to home.

The Commonwealth does have a lot to hide in the conduct of this exercise. It is significant that, although the Canadian Pacific consulting group offered to meet Mr Hill at a place of his choosing and discuss aspects of his report with him, Mr Hill turned down that request. The shallowness of the independent economic inquiry served only to strengthen our conviction that the railway was not only a viable project but one which was essential for the Territory and for Australia.

However, given the total intractability of the Commonwealth, we were forced to move forward on our own and it was in these circumstances that we commissioned the 2 reports which I have tabled this morning. Canadian Pacific Consulting Services is the consulting arm of the Canadian Pacific Railroad Company. This organisation is a world-renowned railway operator and the consultants have world-wide and impeccable credentials. It runs a very successful railway system over a country which bears considerable similarities to Australia. We requested Canadian Pacific to review the conclusions of the Hill Report and the Northern Territory submission and to provide us with an independent view as to the financial viability of the railway. In particular, we asked Canadian Pacific to test the essential conclusion in the Hill Report that the railway would impose a substantial economic cost to the Commonwealth.

The consultant reviewed all the material and had discussions with relevant people in the Northern Territory and in South Australia. At the urging of the Territory government, the consultant sought to meet with Mr David Hill who conducted the earlier inquiry to clarify a number of important issues arising out of the report. Mr Hill refused to meet with him on the grounds that all the relevant information was in the report and suggested that the consultant direct all questions to the federal Minister for Transport instead.

The Canadian Pacific report is available for honourable members to study. Therefore, I will not deal with its findings in great detail. But I do want to emphasise the conclusion: ‘The railway is essentially an economic break-even proposition likely neither to impose a major economic cost on the Commonwealth nor provide a significant return’.
Mr Speaker, that conclusion is a total repudiation of the Hill Inquiry's findings. The report contains an assessment of railway costs and the impact on costs and revenues of various potential freight volumes. It looks at the financial implications of a railway in terms of cost savings in areas such as road costs and road maintenance and, in a very important contribution, examines the appropriate methodology in assessing the costs and benefits of the project at this time. In that regard, honourable members may recall that, in March of this year, I said this about the Hill Report:

A major criticism of the report which should be made is of its methodological defects. As an exercise in the appraisal of the costs and benefits of the rail link, it fails to adopt universally-accepted procedures. As a result, its conclusions are wrong. The Alice to Darwin railway is not a freestanding proposal under which trains will simply run backwards and forwards between Alice Springs and Darwin, bringing benefits to no one other than those in that corridor. The line would be an integral part of the national rail system. Indeed, it is the only major missing link in such a national system. It follows from this that the completion of the link would generate additional rail traffic on other sections of the national rail system outside of the Northern Territory. Indeed, the report acknowledges that rail has advantages in the area of long-haul transport. The cost benefits of this additional traffic throughout the national rail system must be attributed to the Alice Springs to Darwin railway for the simple reason that, without that rail link, they will not occur.

That concept is quite fundamental in any project assessment of this type yet the inquiry chose to ignore it. More than that, it specifically rejected it.

Canadian Pacific has supported that view about methodology and has even pointed out that the Northern Territory submission erred in not extending this principle far enough in some important areas. During the conduct of this most recent assessment, Canadian Pacific has suggested that a further review of the engineering and design standards to apply to the railway could be warranted and that significant savings in capital costs might be possible by applying different standards. This is an area in which Canadian Pacific, as railway builders and operators, has considerable experience. We are therefore proceeding to a second phase study and we have asked Canadian Pacific to undertake this task.

Establishing the financial and economic viability of the railway is extremely important but there are other issues as well. There is the future of northern development. There is the consolidation of the investment which Australia is making in the future of the Northern Territory. There are the more than 2000 jobs which are at stake. Also at stake are important questions of national defence.

The issue of defence was excluded unilaterally from the terms of reference of the Hill Inquiry by the federal government. That was just one of the many decisions taken by the Commonwealth which the Territory opposed strenuously. The Commonwealth sought a defence assessment from the defence establishment and, after considerable prodding, an expurgated copy of that was eventually made available to myself and the Premier of South Australia. I read that assessment with interest. It seemed to me to be a fairly unequivocal statement of support for the railway and it emphasised the extreme significance of the railway in contingent circumstances. The Prime Minister and the Minister for Defence blithely concluded that these major defence issues in no way detracted from the so-called economic findings of the Hill Inquiry and that was the end of the matter. It is interesting that only last week a committee of the House of Representatives - I think the Defence Committee - reported through the
persona of its chairman, Manfred Cross MHR, the member for Brisbane, that Australia is poorly equipped to meet even a medium or small operation against us.

Once again, it fell to us to try to produce in a positive and constructive way some further insights into the defence issues. To do this, we engaged the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University. The team was led by the head of the centre, Dr Ball, supported by 2 former senior military officers, one of whom had been chief of army logistics. This study shows once again the totally cavalier approach by the federal government to important national issues. The report concludes that ‘in most defence contingencies, even at medium levels of threat, the availability of a rail link through Alice Springs to Darwin would be essential to the deployment and support of a defence force’.

The report provides a very detailed assessment of strategic considerations including likely threats, warning times and priorities. The centre calculated the quantities of fuel and other supplies, personnel and equipment moved at various levels of threat and concluded that road infrastructure lacked the required capacity. It also makes the very important point that infrastructure development in the defence of Australia must be indivisible when it comes to national planning. The study observes that a reliance on road transport to maintain any defence capability in the north and north-west of Australia is totally unacceptable. The report states:

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The strain on the road transport capability is likely to prove intolerable and the necessary support for the deployment of an operational force could not be guaranteed. The availability of a rail link between Alice Springs and Darwin is essential to the timely deployment and subsequent guaranteed logistic support of a force.

One of the key warnings in the report is that against waiting until there is some indication of an impending threat to Australia before developing infrastructures such as the railway. The report notes that the very existence of the railway would be an important deterrent. It also notes the considerable time which would be required to build a railway and the possibility of a major threat developing well within this time scale.

Mr Speaker, I commend this report to the careful study of honourable members. What emerges from these recent reports is a much clearer picture about the railway than we have ever had before. The railway is economically viable, it is essential to national defence and it is totally justified by the wider social audit and community issues. The project must proceed and we must continue to confront the federal government with the facts. The evidence is clear and the interests of the Northern Territory require the strongest possible bipartisan support for the project. I have said before that I will not rest on this isle until the railway is built. Mr Speaker, I renew that pledge and hope that all honourable members will join me in it.

Mr Speaker, I move that the Assembly take note of the statement.

Mr B. Collins (Opposition Leader): Mr Speaker, under normal circumstances, I would have preferred to have delayed my response to this matter until I had sufficient opportunity to debate the conclusions that have been reached in this most important report. Indeed, I point out to the Chief Minister and his government that reports that are tabled in this Assembly on the question of the Northern Territory railway are not simply brought before this Assembly for the personal political convenience and campaigning of the Chief Minister. They are for the benefit of the Northern Territory. With no prior notice to the opposition after it had been advised originally that these sittings would be of one week’s duration and considering the fact that this is a 7-week campaign the longest in federal history - it is a disgrace that we now find that the special adjournment moved this morning was to prorogue or end this sittings today
rather than on Thursday. This sittings is to be terminated 2 days early for the personal convenience of the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory. It is a matter of gross discourtesy, totally unlike the courtesies that the Leader of the House normally extends to the proper operation of this Assembly. The reason it is happening has more to do with the presence of the Chief Minister's film crew in the public gallery this morning than it has to do with any nonsense about federal politicking being kept out of this Assembly.

I assumed the November sittings would be cancelled. We all did. That would be appropriate and proper. However, considering the lack of sitting days in our small parliament, the fact that there are 21 items on this notice paper and the fact that I would like to have heard the Canadian Pacific report debated with some degree of authority and interest because it concerns Northern Territory development - and is not simply a campaign plank for the Chief Minister to run on - I would have liked to have had more time to study the report and respond to it perhaps the day after next. I assumed we would be sitting on Wednesday and Thursday. We were certainly not told there would be any other arrangements made. Of course, it makes sense to cancel the November sittings. If it was a 3-week campaign, I would have anticipated a phone call from the Leader of the House, as I normally receive, to let me know. I might add that that arrangement has worked extremely well in the past. If we do receive prior notice, on almost every occasion, if it is a reasonable case, we agree that it should be done. But it is not a 4-week campaign or a 3-week campaign; it will continue for 7 long weeks.

It is quite relevant in terms of the items of business that should be discussed that the Assembly should sit for the lousy 2 extra days allowed for this sittings. What reason do we have to believe that it should? It is no less an authority than the Chief Minister himself because, when he was interviewed last week as to why he was not resigning immediately as Chief Minister, he said: 'The reason is that there is important unfinished business before the Legislative Assembly. It would be quite improper for me to resign before that is completed. I intend to sit as Chief Minister of the Northern Territory during the sittings next week'. Under those circumstances, one could be expected to believe him.

Whilst the Canadian Pacific report provides very useful additional debating material for the push to get this railway, it casts as much doubt and validity on the Northern Territory government's own submission as it does on the Hill Inquiry or anything else. I agree with the Chief Minister that it is probably the best and most authoritative report that I have seen on the whole question of the railway, but it points up the deficiencies and inadequacies of the Northern Territory government's own original submission.

Such inadequacies were highlighted also in the absolutely ridiculous submission it put to the federal government in respect of the establishment of a Northern Territory university. That submission was so gross in its inaccuracies and so ridiculous in its contemplation that a university with 15 degree and sub-degree courses with an academic staff of 60 would be established in 6 months that it was laughed out of court. As I have pointed out before - and it is the case with the railway submission - by trying to sell people the town hall plot, as Northern Territory ministers tend to do, the Northern Territory's case is in fact prejudiced and not assisted. The Canadian Pacific report points up as much as anything else the inequities and the deficiencies in the government's own original submission to the Commonwealth government.

Mr Speaker, I reached that conclusion on a brief reading of the report yesterday. However, after being told by the Chief Minister that we had important business to debate during the sittings, which indeed we do, we expected to be given at least 48 hours to read the report. We expected the debate to be adjourned until Thursday when we could perhaps have some authoritative debate on this matter. The opposition, and indeed the governments own backbench, have been denied that opportunity quite unnecessarily.
Mr Speaker, the cold, hard facts are that, in a federal campaign of this length, there is no need whatsoever to cut off the 2 miserable days that are left this week. We are being put through this exercise purely for the convenience of the Northern Territory's departing Chief Minister. Once again, it indicates only too clearly how he is prepared to use his position and indeed wipe his boots on this Assembly when it suits him for his own campaign. I would be surprised if the Leader of the House would disagree that, at the very least, 5 minutes prior notice by telephone this morning would have been greatly appreciated. We were led to believe, not only by the adjournment moved by the Leader of the House at the last sittings, which is what I normally rely on, but indeed by the statement of the Chief Minister last week that the Assembly had important business to discuss, that we would sit for the full week.

I must say that my initial response to the Canadian Pacific report, from the brief reading I have been able to give it, is that it casts as much criticism on the Northern Territory government's own original submission as it does on the Hill Report or any other contribution to the railway debate. However, I want to place on record the disgust that I feel about the total discourtesy that has been extended by the government and, in particular, by the Leader of the House to the opposition and to the Assembly as well. I do not want to bore people to death by going through the notice paper and listing some of these 21 items which should be debated in the Northern Territory irrespective of what is happening in Canberra. I have never noticed any particular desire, thank goodness, to pay too much attention to what Canberra dictates, says or does in respect of discussing our own business in here. We have matters that need to be debated for the Territory's sake and not for the sake of the Chief Minister's campaign. The railway is one of them.

Mr Speaker, I say again that I protest at the performance of the government on this occasion. I protest at this Assembly simply being used as a convenience and a doormat by a Chief Minister who told us authoritatively 12 months ago that he would be serving out his full term as Chief Minister. He is now wiping his boots on this Assembly as he departs. It is an absolute disgrace. I must say in all honesty that it is a fairly uninspiring departure after what I consider to be 10 very valuable years of contribution to this legislature. Frankly, I am surprised and disappointed that the Chief Minister himself did not want to leave this Assembly with a little more dignity and a little more credit than he is doing. We have a great deal of unfinished business before us and a commitment was given by the Chief Minister that he has failed to honour.

It is not just a question of the railway debate and the Canadian Pacific report. Honourable members will recall the circumstances to which I am referring. Honourable members will recall the Chief Minister in a relaxed moment of frankness telling the truth to a journalist from the Woman's Day magazine and saying that, after 10 years - and it is 10 years on Friday -- he would have had enough and he thought that he might give it up then. However, the Chief Minister then realised how dangerous that was for the last Assembly election campaign so he categorically assured this Assembly that the journalist was wrong. She had to have her editor go on ABC radio to defend her. There were no problems about blaming the journalist instantly. However, the editor had the interview on tape. We had the Chief Minister saying: 'I can assure you that I will be serving out my full term as Chief Minister in this Assembly'. We have more than 3 years still to run.

The Chief Minister - and this is a matter about which I am particularly angry - told us that he would hold a public seminar and advise every member of this Assembly on the details of the phantom development at Myilly Point which appears to be exhibiting all kinds of strange twists and turns that are totally out of kilter with the original announcement that he made to the Assembly. After 10 years of what I have been prepared to acknowledge not once but a dozen times publicly as good stewardship of the Northern Territory and after 7 years of what has been a competent and professional job as Chief Minister and head of the Northern Territory government, one would have expected that the Chief Minister himself would have wanted to have departed this Assembly with a little less haste and a little more dignity than he
has demonstrated this morning. I must say that I was more taken aback by that particular aspect of the Leader of the House's announcement this morning than anything else. One would have thought that, after 10 years, he could have served out at least one complete week instead of terminating the sittings in the way it was terminated this morning.

The Chief Minister anticipated accurately that we intended to debate, as we should, the whole fiasco of his negotiations on the casinos and Myilly Point.

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I was in fact giving the Chief Minister 24 hours grace, assuming that Thursday would be the last day for him to honour the commitment that he gave to hold a public seminar to explain all of these unanswered questions in detail while he was still Chief Minister. He gave a commitment 12 months ago to the people of the Northern Territory that he would finish his term. There is one piece of grossly outstanding business which he committed himself to complete as Chief Minister, and he has failed to do so: the casinos and the Myilly Point development. We have 50 vital questions which remain unanswered even though we were promised in the last sittings that they would be answered in a public seminar. He will be running out of here with his tail between his legs at 5 o'clock this afternoon, not even seeing fit to finish one complete week of sittings in the Assembly after 10 years of good service.

Mr Speaker, I must say that I am genuinely taken aback that the Chief Minister could finish his career in this Assembly in such a peremptory manner with absolutely no advice to the Assembly. Despite the occasions that I have crossed swords with the government and despite the many disagreements that I have had with the Chief Minister on political issues, I think it is significant that a Northern Territory politician has managed to achieve national significance as he has. I know how insignificant Australia is overseas, let alone the Northern Territory. It is significant that this is his last week in parliament after 7 years as Chief Minister. As a Leader of the Opposition who has worked with him, against him and often for him in the 7 years that I have been here, I would have liked to have been given a little more notice that this would be his last day in the Assembly. I was not the only one under that impression. Every single journalist in Darwin was under that impression because they are all running around outside saying: ‘What is going on?’ I would like to know. If he wanted to finish his 10 years with a degree of dignity, and considering that his 10 years comes up on Friday, Thursday would have been a most appropriate time on which to finish his tenure as Chief Minister of the Northern Territory government. I cannot believe that, since this is the Chief Minister's last day as Chief Minister in the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly, this Assembly was given no prior notice whatsoever that that would be the case. I am sincerely disappointed that that kind of discourtesy was shown to this Assembly. I have placed on record outside and inside this Assembly my feelings about the Chief Minister's capabilities in the job, despite the political disagreements we have had.

Quite honestly, I would have liked to have been accorded a bit of courtesy as Leader of the Opposition, and I would have liked to have seen this Assembly accorded a bit of courtesy through the Chief Minister telling us that this would be his last day in this Assembly. That courtesy would not have taken much effort; a telephone call this morning would have been sufficient. I am extremely disappointed that that was not extended to this Assembly. It is bad for the Chief Minister because, instead of leaving the Assembly after 10 years' service - and 7 years as Chief Minister of the Northern Territory government with a little dignity on Thursday night, this information has been sprung on us this morning. It was not clear to me or indeed to other observers of the proceedings this morning what the import of that motion was otherwise I would have debated it at the appropriate time. Frankly, I do not think the Chief Minister has done himself the slightest bit of service by being so keen to sprint to the tape on 1 December after having given the Assembly a commitment 12 months ago that he would see out the full 4 years. He could not even complete this week.

Mr ROBERTSON (Attorney-General): Mr Speaker, it is very difficult to work out just what the speech from the Leader of the Opposition had to do with the railway line and the Hill Report.
Mr B. Collins: Nothing.

Mr ROBERTSON: As the honourable member interjects, Mr Speaker, absolutely nothing. Unfortunately, I will now not be able to spend the time debating this very important document which the Chief Minister has circulated. However, I really must pick up a couple of points made by the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr Speaker, clearly the Leader of the Opposition would lead us to believe that it was not an adjournment motion we moved this morning but the prorogation of the Assembly. He tried to give the impression that matters like the Hill Report will now not be able to be debated by honourable members of this Assembly.

Mr B. Collins: That is not what I said.

Mr SPEAKER: Order!

Mr ROBERTSON: Mr Speaker, he gave the clear impression that these matters would not be debated. Of course they will, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker, I must take issue with the Leader of the Opposition over the question of lack of notice. This morning, the opposition whip asked me if we would be sitting in November. I said to him: 'No. As a matter of fact, I will be moving a special adjournment motion immediately after question time'. There is only one form of special adjournment motion which I have used in this place and that is to notify honourable members that the next sitting day will be that which is notified by Mr Speaker in writing pursuant to sessional order. The opposition whip has been here for 7 years, the same time as the Leader of the Opposition. He must know the substance of a special adjournment motion. Not only did I move the special adjournment motion but, unlike my normal practice, I actually spoke to it and invited debate from the opposition. They know what a special adjournment is but there was not a peep out of them. Indeed, quite the contrary. Every one of them, and I watched them, sat there...

Mr B. Collins: I was outside the Assembly.

Mr ROBERTSON: The rest of his colleagues were here. Each and every one of them said 'aye' to the motion. What on earth is the nonsense about?

Mr B. Collins: I was speaking on my own behalf, James, as you know.

Mr ROBERTSON: Mr Speaker, no doubt, we will hear from the honourable member for MacDonnell. I saw him try to leap to his feet. I personally watched him vote for the motion which is now causing such concern.

Mr LEO (Nhulunbuy): Mr Speaker, as the Leader of the Opposition pointed out during the Leader of the House's brief attempt at a defence of his actions this morning - it was fairly pathetic - it would have been reasonable to assume, given that there were 4 notices of motion this morning, that those notices would have been proceeded with at this sittings. It was reasonable to assume that this Assembly would sit for 3 days this week. We have never opposed special adjournment motions. I took it in good faith that we would sit for the remainder of this week. For the Leader of the House to try to defend the indefensible is absolutely pathetic. For the rest of this government - for those mindless clowns who sit on the backbench - to agree to this Assembly closing down today is pathetic. It not only reflects on the Chief Minister but on all of his colleagues. They are pathetic clowns.
Mr Robertson: But you agreed to it!

Mr B. Collins: You put the kids behind you, that is for sure. You cannot get out of it.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! Order! Will the honourable member resume his seat. I think the debate has strayed far enough from the railway report. If there is any further irrelevant debate, the matter will be proceeded with in another way.

Mr BELL (MacDonnell): Mr Speaker, I have a couple of comments germane both to the report in question and to the announcement made by the Chief Minister and the comments he made in relation to this report. Like the Leader of the Opposition and every member of this Assembly, I have been regaled with the various reports and various questions and the desperate and not-so-desperate attempts of the Chief Minister to gain publicity over this matter. Under normal circumstances, it would have been my chosen course of action to adjourn the motion that this particular statement be noted. However, for this particular statement to remain on the notice paper for any length of time would have been quite pointless. Any subsequent debate would have been quite pointless.

Mr Speaker, you would be aware, as the Chief Minister would be well aware and I am sorry to see the Leader of the House leaving the Assembly because he too would be well aware - that the purpose of noting a statement and moving that such debate be adjourned is so that all members can have due time to give consideration to the statement. What could be of greater magnitude than the question of the Alice Springs to Darwin railway line? That very process of consideration has been aborted. Of course, the Chief Minister can sit with his feet up on the Deputy Chief Minister's desk and with his chin on his hand because he knows that he has been successful. I notice that the Chief Minister's mate from the Northern Territory News has already left the Press Gallery so he knows he will get page 1 or page 2 coverage. But let us be under no illusions, Mr Speaker. I dare say it is of as deep concern to you as it is to me that the Chief Minister has chosen to regard the deliberations of this Assembly as so unimportant, so irrelevant, so trite that he can move a motion that a statement be noted and then have it forgotten altogether. I think that it is not unreasonable for me...

Mr Perron: It goes on the notice paper.

Mr BELL: I hear the Minister for Lands. Maybe he is thinking of taking the Chief Minister's place and that is why he has decided to chip in at this particular stage. He says that it will go on the notice paper. I shall say again, for the benefit of the Minister for Lands that, if it is to go on the notice paper, there is an obligation on the person who moves that statement to be here to answer the debate otherwise the deliberations of this Assembly are as irrelevant as the Chief Minister is determined to regard them by his behaviour this morning.

We have witnessed a nice little parliamentary coup today, Mr Speaker. Let us have a look at the notice of procedure that the Clerk so kindly passed around to us. I believe that, in the context of this debate on this particular statement, that is quite relevant. We have proceeded quite well. We have had notices given by the Chief Minister and a clutch of his colleagues. Then, we had questions without notice, papers and ministerial statements by leave but nowhere does any special adjournment appear on that particular procedure list. Immediately, that raises the quite relevant question - and good luck, I see the Chief Minister is departing now. Obviously, he cannot stand any more. May he go outside and hang his head in shame.

The question then in relation to the procedures of this Assembly is: when did the government make the decision? Did the Chief Minister get out of bed
this morning and decide that he could not take 3 more days of this and that today was the best he could do? It would certainly appear to be that. You will recall, Mr Speaker, that during the last sittings we had a special adjournment motion moved. I sincerely trust that the Leader of the House recalls this because, at that stage, the Deputy Chief Minister moved a special adjournment motion saying that it is sittings would not last for 2 weeks, but for 1 week. Yet here we have a further special adjournment motion that prevents the orderly discussion and appropriate debate of the important question of the Alice Springs to Darwin railway line because the organisation of this Assembly has been left in shambles. I suggest that this is a harbinger of times to come because the Chief Minister has departed this Assembly this morning for good. Evidently, today is to be our last day but I suggest that this is a harbinger of the chaos that will descend on this government in the coming weeks and months.

I wish to make 2 further points, Mr Speaker, in relation to this statement and to the motion that the Assembly take note of the statement. One is the difficulty that will be created by the imminent departure of the Chief Minister and the prevention of proper debate on a number of motions. Clearly, this is one of them. This particular statement is only one of a number of motions that should be debated during this sittings. I draw your attention to 2 in particular, Mr Speaker. They appear at no 12 and no 13 on the notice paper.

Mr D.W. COLLINS: A point of order, Mr Speaker!

Mr SPEAKER: What is the point of order?

Mr D.W. COLLINS: The honourable member is not addressing the topic in question.

Mr BELL: Obviously, it is my intention to debate, in an orderly and proper fashion, the motion moved by the Chief Minister that his statement be noted. I believe that there are certain procedural considerations involved with the consideration of the motion of the Chief Minister that mean that honourable members should be permitted to debate in as wide a fashion as possible.

Mr D.W. COLLINS: Mr Speaker, I move that the debate be adjourned.

Mr SPEAKER: The question is that the debate be adjourned. All those of that opinion say 'aye'. I think the ayes have it.

Mr BELL: Mr Speaker, I move dissent from your ruling.

Mr SPEAKER: The honourable member will please resume his seat.

Mr BELL: I am moving dissent from your ruling, Mr Speaker, that the statement be noted because the point of order was not decided. I spoke to the point of order and you failed to make a ruling on that, Mr Speaker.

Mr SPEAKER: Honourable members, the member for MacDonnell is clearly out of order on both counts. At no stage was he speaking to the point of order nor has he moved a motion of dissent because there was no ruling. It is the accepted procedure of this Assembly that, if there is a question before the Chair, the question will be decided. On this occasion, the question has been decided and I now call for business of the day.