

Topic: MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Subject: The Northern Territory University Development To Date And Impact Of Fightback

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Member: Mr STONE

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Mr STONE (Education and Training): Mr Speaker, there is no doubt that, during the course of delivering this ministerial statement, I will be accused of being self-congratulatory because I will be speaking about the Northern Territory University. Every member on this side of the House can afford to pat himself on the back for what has been achieved in higher education in the Territory. This statement will place in perspective the important impact the Northern Territory University has in our community and will deal also with the federal Coalition's Fightback campaign as it relates to higher education.

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Members interjecting.

Mr STONE: This is an example of the team work on the other side of the House.

Mr BELL: A point of order, Mr Speaker!

Mr SPEAKER: By way of explanation for the member for MacDonnell, the original discussion this morning related to schools. This statement relates to the university and Fightback! ...

Members interjecting.

Mr SPEAKER: Order!

Mr STONE: The very significant development of the NTU is only now beginning to have its effect. I will come to the detail later but, today, I urge members to consider how very fortunate we are and the important way in which the university has changed the face of Darwin and the Territory. Today, the facts and the statistics I have to hand demonstrate without doubt that Darwin is well on its way to becoming a university city in the full sense of the term as it applies to the famous university cities of America and Europe. That is a surprise development that no Australian and no Territorian would have forecast 10

years ago. Whilst, 10 years ago, planning for the first Territory University was well advanced in the minds of many Territorians, still the likelihood of Darwin winning a reputation quickly as a home of academic study must have seemed remote. What they began with is a strong gut feeling and a determination to push ahead.

Today, most Territorians deserve to feel a little pride at the way in which the university they created has established itself and become an important part of the way of life enjoyed by us all. To most Australians, the Territory is a vast resource to be called on when we want to impress outsiders with our own mineral wealth, our national character, national symbols, parks, wildlife, Aborigines, the outback or even our ability to drink alcohol. It is a store cupboard in which we keep our national resources. The possibility that more than a small handful of Territorians would want a university or make use of one has surprised other Australians, in the same way that it surprised Susan Ryan and Hugh Hudson. As a Commonwealth minister and a departmental head, those were 2 Australians of the 1980s who should have known better. The political lesson to be learnt from the development of the Northern Territory University is that the only Australians with concrete plans for the real wealth in the store cupboard of the Territory are Territorians themselves.

Mr Bell: They are Australians of the 1990s as well as Australians of the 1980s.

Mr STONE: In response to the interjection from the member for MacDonnell, they are both still alive and they are both still actively involved in education. Certainly, Hugh Hudson is. That is why we have seen the shame on the faces of some members of the opposition whenever the issue of the university arises. At the time when we were fighting to build the NTU ...

Mr Bailey: You were not even here.

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Mr STONE: ... members of the opposition knew how important it was for us to succeed in providing local access to a university of standing, yet they contributed nothing to help or advance our case.

The Leader of the Opposition interjected that I was not even here. He was here and we know what he had to say at the time.

Mr Bailey: It was the deputy leader who interjected.

Mr STONE: I withdraw that, Mr Speaker.

Mr Ede: Thank you.

Mr STONE: It was the Deputy Leader of the Opposition who interjected.

Today, I believe there are signs that, at last, the opposition may be paying less attention to the wishes of Canberra and more to the urgent needs of Territorians. That change in attitude was evident in the March sittings when the member for Nhulunbuy responded positively to the Territory government's initiatives on TAFE and I congratulate him on his response. This political forum represents the hopes and the

aspirations of people in the Northern Territory. For that reason, we must urge the opposition to maintain its interest in initiatives that will improve local education services. I have a great deal of confidence in the member for Nhulunbuy and trust that he will maintain the track record that he has established to date in that way. At the same time, I am sure opposition members are beginning to realize developments at our university and within our wider education system hold tremendous new potential for the nation as a whole.

In the few short years since the ALP and the federal government sneered at our plans to launch the Northern Territory University, we have come a long way. In its first 3 years, the NTU generated a 40% increase in higher education enrolments. Using the Commonwealth's own measure of effective full-time student units, our higher education enrolment jumped by 38%, from 1695 in 1989 to 2343 last year. This year, the forecast is that by year's end we will have seen a further 10% increase in higher education enrolments. In terms of actual student numbers, a total of 5843 students were enrolled at the university by 27 February this year, 3579 in higher education and 2264 in TAFE. That compares to a total enrolment at the same time last year of 5124, being 2049 in TAFE and 3075 in higher education. By the end of 1992, the total student population is expected to have passed 7500.

To break those figures down further, faculty by faculty, growth at the university can be seen across the board. In arts, student numbers rose from 883 - or 611 EFTSU - in 1989, to 965 in 1990, to 1038 in 1991 and 1101 - or 863 EFTSU - in 1992. Business student numbers rose from 537 - or 355 EFTSU - in 1989 to 614 in 1990, to 691 in 1991 and 747 - or 548 EFTSU - in 1992. The education faculty has seen numbers rise from 718 - or 473 EFTSU - in 1989 to 800 in 1990, to 1006 in 1991 and 1023 - or 613 EFTSU - this year. The numbers of science students have also risen from 300 - or 200 EFTSU - to 332, 525 and this year 667 - or 447 EFTSU. Across all faculties, the number of full-fee-paying students has jumped from 61 - or 59 EFTSU - in 1989, to 143 in 1990 and 142 in 1991 to 151 this year. The most significant growth in this lucrative area has been in the faculty of business where numbers have more than doubled in the 4 years of statistics, from 36 to 81. The 1992 figures I have used in each of the above cases are, in fact, projections. The university informs me that,

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because of the circumstance that applies this year, all projections will be fulfilled.

Leaving aside universities and colleges affected by amalgamations, the university is confident that no higher education institution in the country can match our record of significant growth in that period. While doors for southern students have closed, doors for Territorians have opened. At page 9 of the university's 1992 Course and Admission Guide is an index of about 152 course areas now available to Territorians through their own seat of higher learning. When we discuss the dramatic increase in business enrolments, for example, we speak of individuals who have new opportunities in banking, economics, information systems and dozens of other areas of specialized learning. However, in the same breath, we are also discussing the creation of a vital new resource in business for our community. The same applies in science, education, horticulture, trade training or any of the dozens of important pursuits listed at page 9.

In 1991, the university attracted between 10% and 12% of its enrolment from interstate or overseas. Significantly, a large proportion of these students remain enrolled in the NTU beyond their first year. Sceptics who cast the university as a 1-year springboard from which poor performing southerners would

seek entry to southern institutions have been proved wrong. The number of our higher education courses has expanded from 29 in 1989 to 64 in 1992, while the number of TAFE courses has continued to increase from 101, in 1989, to 123 this year. The university predicts a slowing of growth after 1992 as it adjusts to Commonwealth rates of financial support. I need hardly repeat the fact that, unlike any other institution of its type in Australia, the NTU is built on \$69m-worth of Territory taxpayers' funds. I forecast that there would be no need for any slowing of growth at the NTU, and more doors would continue to open for Territorians if only the Commonwealth would accept that it was wrong and that Territorians were right, and return the \$69m debt it owes them.

The real challenge facing the member for Nhulunbuy is to ensure either the return of these funds or the provision of an entirely separate Commonwealth establishment grant. Either would double the amazing pace of development at the Northern Territory University. There would be no skin off the nose of the member for Nhulunbuy if he chose to support the Territory government in this regard, and I would urge him to help us obtain an establishment grant for the university. I believe that the member for Nhulunbuy has the best wishes of Territory students at heart, and there are signs in his comments that he is prepared to speak out occasionally against the Commonwealth. On 26 February, the member attacked his old employer, the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training, and I was happy to endorse his comments at that time. The member told the House that the education situation in the Territory was complicated by DEET, and I quote:

It is a mega-department with its hands in a dozen buckets of money which it doles out here and there. We need to look at the structure of DEET. There is a central office in Canberra which is responsible for policy formulation. Very few of those people who are formulating that policy ever visit the Territory.

Hear, hear, Mr Speaker! In calling for someone to have a close look at DEET, the member might also ask a few of these Canberra-based DEET policy makers to get out of their chairs and visit the NTU to see that it is worth supporting. He will find that Territorians, who have the same desire for

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access to higher education as other Australians, will be grateful for his support.

In the meantime, the NTU well knows that the provision of an establishment grant, which has been the right of every other Australian university, seems very unlikely. Accordingly, the NTU will be slowing our enrolments to avoid the problems that have occurred interstate where lecture rooms are overcrowded and resources are insufficient. We are fortunate today that overcrowding and a shortage of resources are not our lot in the Territory but one can imagine how we would have been placed in today's environment if we had endorsed the proposals favoured by a Canberra-prone opposition all those years ago. The ALP recipe in 1986 was for 20 university places, although I hope that is a policy that is well and truly disowned by the opposition today. We would have had 20 university places at the Darwin Institute of Technology in 1987, 40 in 1988, 60 in 1989 and, presumably, 80 in 1990 and 100 in 1991. That is 100 compared to the 2343, assessed on the Commonwealth's own measure of effective full-time student units, who studied at the higher education level here last year.

This year, the old ALP scheme would have been facing massive expansion even to provide for

Territorians the number of places the NTU provides currently to overseas students. At the time when that proposal was in vogue with the ALP, the brain drain carrying the Territory's top scholars away to study in the south was well established. At that time, 500 Territory students were studying at southern universities. In 1985, 695 Territory students were completing Year 12. Those who graduated had very little choice in fields of higher study that did not involve leaving the Territory for a considerable period. In 1986, that number was more than 900. It was forecast that, by 1989, up to 1200 Year 12 students could be in our schools wondering how long they would have to wait for reasonable access to higher education at home. Just 5 years later, in 1991, some 1300 young Territorians completed Year 12 absolutely free of the concerns which had so disrupted the future of many of their predecessors. That is a tremendous victory for them, for their families, for the Territory and for Australia as a whole.

In the context of employment and higher education realities today, the timely creation of the Northern Territory University is a landmark which deserves much wider recognition. Today, without the contribution of the Territory government and the NTU, the national media would not be reporting that up to 49 700 university applicants were turned away from southern institutions. Rather it would be reporting a figure of 50000 or perhaps 51 000. On the front page of yesterday's *The Australian*, it was reported that the number of qualified people missing out on university places this year rose by 70% and that, in Western Australia and Victoria, the unmet demand figure more than doubled. I draw the attention of honourable members to a table at page 13 of that newspaper which quantifies the number of students in each state who missed out. It shows, for example, that between 3200 and 4600 female and 2800 and 4200 male Victorians missed out on places in 1991. In 1992, those figures jumped by 110%. This year, between 6900 and 9900 Victorian women and 6100 and 6800 Victorian men are without a university course to attend. The Northern Territory situation, along with that of Tasmania and the ACT, is not documented in the table. Instead, there is a brief note under the table, which I will read out. It says: 'Most eligible applicants in the Northern Territory and Tasmania were able to obtain places'.

The impact of the establishment of the Northern Territory University on the national picture may not be acknowledged as a matter of significance by

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the Commonwealth but, to school leavers, especially those interstate, every additional opportunity is greeted by 100 people desperate to exploit it. I ask the opposition today to consider what the Labor Party would have had to offer young Territorians in this savage environment, and what also of the hundreds of other valued personnel who would have left the Territory simply because they were seeking access to further study to advance their careers. The opposition spokesman does have a positive outlook and I am sure that he will be honest enough to admit that, in higher education, the CLP government has served Territorians well. Surely it has come to pass that the Territory ALP now supports the provision of increased funding to the NTU, but let us hear members opposite say so. Let us make the call for a university establishment grant a bipartisan request, and Territorians will thank the member for Nhulunbuy for his stance.

The record of academic success at the NTU is underlined in the statistics relating to post-graduate students.

Mr Bell: Not in my electorate.

Mr STONE: Mr Speaker, the member for MacDonnell should not think poorly of himself. We acknowledge that doing a law degree part time is very difficult, and we would encourage him to continue to persevere.

Mr Finch: Speak for yourself.

Mr STONE: We want him to go and do something else.

In the past 3 years, the number of post-graduates undertaking research has more than trebled, from 30 to 112, while the number involved in course work has jumped to 378. Our researchers appear to have captured the imagination of the Australian Research Council. Its grants for NTU research have risen from \$94 000 in 1990 to \$556 000 this calendar year. The total of outside grants is not yet settled, but already we have watched them increase from \$254 000 to \$783 000 last year. This astonishing progress has resulted in a \$200 000 Commonwealth grant for research infrastructure. So far, we have counted the success of the university in terms of study and the numbers of students, but figures such as those for grants are the emerging tip that hint at the real size of the iceberg when we come to examine the impact the existence of the university has on the wider community. The Northern Territory University anticipates that it will spend between \$70m and \$80m on all of its activities this year. From overseas students alone, it expects to receive a total of \$1.6m this year.

In just 2 years, the university has generated construction and completion of \$14m-worth of new buildings at Casuarina. In the next 2 years, buildings worth another \$24m will be completed. This work has included: a new student amenities building; new accommodation for the Centre for Aboriginal and Islander Studies; a new high-quality aquaculture/horticulture facility recently completed and now in use; the refurbished and extended TAFE multi-skilling complex; a new university library, a landmark design, due for 1993; a large 350-seat lecture theatre to suit international meetings and other major functions; residences already have been extended by 183% to accommodate 340, and another \$750 000 in Commonwealth funds has now been allocated towards the next stage in 1993; and infrastructure works of \$2m have been allocated by the Territory government. In addition, the allocation of additional land and buildings at Tiwi by the Territory government will smooth the flow of change by making additional areas available for use during this period of vital growth.

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With an annual expenditure of some \$70m to \$80m and the major research and construction projects under way, the Northern Territory University is already a significant positive factor in the Territory economy. There are other significant positive factors which we have not yet considered. I am sure members opposite will be familiar with the mission statement at the university which sought to come to grips with the needs of the South-East Asian region. In 1990, it focused on Eastern Indonesia and so entered into a Memorandum of Cooperation with Nusa Cendang University in Kupang and Pattimura University in Ambon. Under the memorandum, the Northern Territory University has been training Nusa Cendang and Pattimura librarians, working on a joint aquaculture proposal, and participating in a collaborative effort on teaching Indonesian language to Australian students. NTU Indonesian language students are now to spend a period of time living in Kupang while they are tutored in Bahasa Indonesian at Nusa Cendang. This is a Bachelor of Arts element unique to the NTU and it has attracted high enrolments. In addition, the Territory university is assisting as a consultant with investigation into ways to overcome power supply irregularities at both those Indonesian universities. It has been approached also to take part in collaborative projects involving other and larger Australian universities.

I know the opposition has the good grace and sense to acknowledge these achievements but, as the NT News editorial on February 24 quite rightly observed: 'The federal Labor government remains entirely ambivalent to the progress, or lack of it, in the Territory today, just as it was in 1985 and 1986'. The most notable trends we are seeing from the federal ALP in higher education or elsewhere are backwards. Where the Territory is concerned, whether it be in relation to the university, the railway or Coronation Hill, progress is not on the agenda unless it is progress towards more centralized control. Under the Fightback initiatives of the Coalition, positive initiatives in higher education would result in significant advances for all universities. Among policies vital to the future of the NTU, and Australian higher education in general, the Coalition offers: an additional \$228m for opportunities for young researchers and to build links between universities and industry; restored freedom for universities to choose courses, making an end to the bureaucratically-driven university profile; the freeing-up of the academic labour market with forced administrative centralization replaced by institutional bargaining and voluntary employment agreements and improved academic conditions; universities are enabled to offer undergraduate places in addition to those funded by the government on terms determined by the universities themselves - in this way the problems of unmet demand and overcrowding will be addressed in an appropriate way; replacement of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training with an independent Higher Education Commission to advise on accreditation and funding; the review of student assistance to ensure students cannot be precluded from university on financial grounds, with particular attention paid to rural students; establishment of a \$25m matching grants program to support basic research by institutions successful in attracting industry research support; and the provision of 200 additional post-graduate research awards, with all such awards increased by \$2000. Those are the facts of Coalition policies in the federal sphere which will bring further benefit to the Territory university and to Territorians. They stand in sharp contrast to the power grabs, the quick fixes and the complete lack of vision apparent in years of stagnation under the ALP.

My closing thoughts are about the university's commitment to the community of Darwin. The NTU operates radio 8 TOP FM and, in its short history, has helped build several valuable community groups such as the Darwin Symphony Orchestra, which enjoyed the very strong support of the former member for Millner, the Centre of Youth Music and the University of

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the Third Age, to name but a few. I began by saying that Darwin is well on the way to becoming a university city. Southerners and some Territorians may scoff, but the facts that I have outlined show this to be true. The clincher is this. Today, 10% of the Darwin population either works or studies at the NTU. That is a tremendous vote of confidence in a facility which grew out of a bold Territory initiative. In many ways, what I am saying is self-congratulatory, but those of us who supported the university can afford to be. I believe that institution has the support now of all members of this House and I invite the opposition spokesman to address the current shortcomings in ALP policy in relation to the NTU in his reply.

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

Reference:

<http://notes.nt.gov.au/lant/hansard/HANSARD6.NSF/0044d01ca7b2aec748255fcd0024659c/b9ec41ea116a83004825601c001a4fc3?OpenDocument>