

Part 1

Speech

Delivered on

6 May 2008

by

The Hon. Delia Lawrie, MLA

Treasurer

of the

Northern Territory of Australia

I move that the Bill be read a second time and I table the 2008-09 Appropriation Bill and related papers.

Budget 2008 is the Labor Government's eighth budget and my first as Treasurer.

It delivers on the Henderson Government's key priorities of:

- growing our economy and cutting taxes;
- closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage;
- tackling crime;
- quality education and health services; and
- investing in infrastructure.

The Henderson Government is delivering on these priorities to make sure the Territory remains the best place in Australia to live, work and raise a family.

Budget 2008 delivers for Territory families today and it provides for a bright future. Wherever you live in the Territory, Budget 2008 invests in the fundamentals of a fair society, extending services throughout the bush, while strengthening our towns and capital city.

Strong Economy

As Treasurer I inherited a strong economy and a healthy budget.

Under Labor we have now had five consecutive budget surpluses and today we are projecting cash surpluses for the next five years.

Strong financial management is the cornerstone of a strong economy.

It is no accident that our economy is forecast to have the strongest growth in the country over the next five years.

Access Economics has forecast the Territory's economic growth to be at 7 per cent next financial year. We are a little more conservative and today's Budget Papers forecast growth at 6.6 per cent. Both forecasts are remarkable and the highest in the country.

The growth forecasts are driven by strong growth in exports from the mining and manufacturing industries.

The major contributors to the growth in exports will be increased production of alumina from the Alcan Gove refinery and lead-zinc from the McArthur River Mine, as well as a recovery in offshore oil and gas production, following temporary shutdowns of the liquefied natural gas (LNG) plant and associated gas field, and the Corallina oil field in late 2007.

Importantly, new projects are coming on line in 2008-09, including oilfield developments in the Timor Sea, the ongoing development of the Blacktip gas field and the expansion of the GEMCO manganese processing facility at Groote Eylandt, sustaining engineering activity.

So far this year, three Henderson Government ministers, including the Chief Minister, have been to China to talk up the Territory and what we have to offer. Obviously China is important to our extractive industry but the future of our relationship with China goes beyond just resources, and includes tourism.

Engaging China and promoting the Territory will continue to be a focus of this Government's economic strategy.

The Territory's labour force is expanding strongly in 2007-08, with resident employment increasing by 4.8 per cent.

More than 5000 jobs have been created in the year since the last Budget. This is a testament to the success of the Henderson Government's Jobs Plan 3.

Business and consumer confidence is high and retail spending is the highest in the country.

At the same time as we are experiencing strong economic, employment and consumption growth, Darwin also has the second lowest annual inflation rate in the country.

The Darwin CPI is estimated to moderate to 3.1 per cent in 2008 from 3.4 per cent reported for 2007, and is forecast to reduce further in 2009 to 2.8 per cent.

Our population is increasing and is estimated to grow by 1.9 per cent in 2008 compared to 1.5 per cent nationally.

The outlook for 2008-09 is positive, with the high levels of investment of recent years driving Territory exports and strong economic growth.

Delivering for Families

The benefits of a strong economy must flow through to Territory families. This is the underlying structure of Budget 2008.

There are tax cuts for families, improved home affordability, new and improved schools, improved hospitals and health services and a record infrastructure spend.

Budget 2008 delivers for Territory families while continuing to focus on fiscal responsibility and sustainability.

Financial Management

There is no greater threat to our growing economy than irresponsible financial management. We cannot go back to the days of black holes. We cannot go back to the days of a capital works program without cash.

Three years ago we said that the Budget would be in balance by 2008-09. In fact, we have now delivered five consecutive surpluses and are projecting cash surpluses in all years from 2007-08.

Long-term surpluses mean that the Government can plan for the future and deliver both service expansion and new infrastructure development.

We can deliver for families now and invest in the Territory's future.

Long-term surpluses give business the confidence required to invest.

A surplus of \$5 million is projected for 2007-08. This is a \$45 million improvement in the estimated outcome, and includes \$20 million set aside for future infrastructure and superannuation requirements.

During 2007-08 there has been a significant increase in both receipts and payments.

Receipts have increased by \$333 million to \$3.723 billion, largely due to an increase in Commonwealth revenue of \$246 million and taxes and mining royalties of \$47 million.

The higher Commonwealth revenue is the result of higher goods and services tax (GST) revenue of \$51 million due to increased Territory population, and the size of the GST pool. The remaining \$195 million of Commonwealth revenue is the result of additional specific purpose payment funding, with much of it related to the Federal intervention.

The balance of the increase is due to higher dividends and taxes from Government's business entities of \$11 million, increased interest revenue of \$21 million and a minor increase in agency revenue.

Payments in 2007-08 are estimated to be \$3.718 billion, \$331 million higher than the original Budget. This growth is largely attributable to additional Commonwealth revenue and initiatives associated with *Closing the Gap of Indigenous Disadvantage*.

For the 2008-09 Budget, total receipts are estimated to be \$3.855 billion and payments are estimated to be \$3.846 billion, resulting in a projected surplus for 2008-09 of \$9 million.

Net debt for 2008-09 is projected to be \$1.58 billion, with the net debt to revenue ratio at 38 per cent, falling to 36 per cent by 2011-12.

Net debt plus employee liabilities is expected to be \$4.4 billion in 2008-09, with a ratio to revenue of 106 per cent, falling to 101 per cent by 2011-12.

This is a significant reduction on the 134 per cent inherited in 2001 and demonstrates the sound fiscal responsibility of this Government while, at the same time, improving the services delivered to Territory families.

Budget 2008 will continue to deliver jobs growth critical to Territory families. Jobs Plan 3 continues with more Territorians in training than ever before.

Budget 2008 also provides for improved community safety with funding for 60 additional police dedicated to the streets of our suburbs.

The benefits of economic growth need to be applied to strengthening community – bringing harmony through opportunities for all.

Closing the Gap

Budget 2008 delivers critical funding towards the Northern Territory Government's Closing the Gap initiative to tackle Indigenous disadvantage.

Closing the Gap is supported by a five-year investment package of \$286 million.

Budget 2008 delivers a range of new investments in child protection, education, housing, community safety and regional economic development.

Closing the Gap – Child Protection

Our child protection and out of home care services budget is now \$48 million compared to less than \$8 million when we came to government, and there are 106 more child protection workers than in 2001.

As part of the Closing the Gap initiatives, \$5.9 million expands the Child Abuse Task Force, which involves 24 extra police and 23 extra Family and Community Services (FACS) staff.

There is also \$7 million for a range of child protection and family support services, designed to assist families in crisis and prevent child harm.

Closing the Gap – Education

Last week the Deputy Chief Minister outlined a comprehensive reform agenda for improving Indigenous education.

This is a priority for the Henderson Government and is a key element of Closing the Gap.

Budget 2008 delivers education initiatives including over \$17 million towards education in remote areas.

The Territory Government will spend \$6.6 million over the next five years to develop partnership programs to improve student engagement and community involvement in remote areas.

Funding of \$2.67 million is also provided for the National Accelerated Literacy program to improve the literacy skills of students who have failed to make appropriate literacy gains.

To accommodate increases in enrolments in the bush, schools facilities are being upgraded and improved with \$10 million worth of school and education centre upgrades and new classrooms.

Closing the Gap – Police

In supporting access to education, community safety is critical and Budget 2008 delivers additional funding for community safety initiatives in the bush.

Aside from the extra 47 staff in the Child Abuse Taskforce, there is an additional \$4.5 million being provided for increased policing, community courts, court clinicians, corrections officers and the expansion of the Indigenous Family Violence community based program.

A total of \$7.76 million will be funded by the Commonwealth for the construction and operation of the Galiwin'ku Police Station and police officer accommodation.

There is also \$1.8 million being provided in Budget 2008 to support the Closing the Gap initiatives in cracking down on the curse of alcohol abuse which so often is at the core of family and community dysfunction.

Closing the Gap – Economic Development

While we address need, it is also critical to provide opportunities.

The Territory Government is working to increase Indigenous participation in the workforce and this Budget includes the following initiatives to meet this priority:

- development of a new Indigenous Employment and Career Development Strategy;
- \$830 000 for targeted Indigenous ranger programs, including the Marine Ranger Program; and
- funding for the Indigenous Arts Strategy.

Closing the Gap – Housing

In conjunction with the Commonwealth, the Territory has contributed \$100 million, taking the total to \$893 million, for the five-year commitment to improving remote Indigenous housing.

Budget 2008 includes:

- \$108 million for Indigenous housing and infrastructure;
- implementation of a new housing management framework for remote communities and town camps; and
- \$38 million for the construction and replacement of remote Government employee houses.

This will build the bush socially and economically. Closing the Gap is an absolute priority of the Henderson Government and we will monitor its progress and work with communities and the Commonwealth to ensure that we succeed.

Tax Cuts

Budget 2008 cuts taxes with comprehensive reforms in stamp duty.

This Government continues to be the most tax reforming Government in the Territory's history.

Budget 2008 cuts stamp duty and it cuts payroll tax.

The tax cuts in Budget 2008 deliver for Territory families and they deliver for Territory business.

These tax cuts mean that the Northern Territory will remain the lowest taxing jurisdiction for small business in Australia.

The Henderson Government has taken the step of being the first jurisdiction to cut conveyance stamp duty rates for all purchasers and for all properties.

From today, it will be more affordable to buy your own home, an investment property or a business in the Territory.

The minimum tax rate will be just 1.5 per cent, down from 2.1 per cent and the maximum rate will reduce to 4.95 per cent from 5.4 per cent and the top rate will apply to properties valued at \$525 000 or more, up from \$500 000.

First home buyers will also benefit with an increase in the tax-free threshold from \$350 000 to \$385 000.

These cuts are estimated to deliver savings of \$12 million in 2008-09 for Territorians.

Budget 2008 cuts the payroll tax rate from 6.2 per cent to 5.9 per cent, a saving of \$7.2 million for business. The lower rate and the Territory's tax-free threshold of \$1.25 million means that Territory businesses with wages up to \$5 million pay the lowest payroll tax in Australia, and businesses up to 100 staff continue to pay the lowest recurrent taxes in Australia.

Budget 2008 cuts taxes and it cuts red tape.

We are harmonising payroll tax to provide a simpler system consistent with other jurisdictions to make doing business in the Territory easier.

We will introduce payroll tax exemptions from 1 July 2008 for a range of allowances that will save businesses \$1.7 million per year.

This Government also delivers an enhanced HomeNorth scheme which will help more Territorians own their own home sooner.

The main improvements are increased income thresholds, an increase in the value of properties that can be purchased and an increased level of government equity.

Based on sales over the last year, these changes will enable an average Territory family of two adults and two children access to over 65 per cent of the units and a quarter of the houses on the Territory market.

The Government recognises that the Territory has not been isolated from the national decrease in home affordability.

While Darwin remains the second most affordable capital city, we need to ensure that affordability improves for Territory families.

The stamp duty cuts and HomeNorth improvements in Budget 2008 will help deliver improved home affordability for Territory families.

Business

The stamp duty and payroll tax cuts will help small business, the families that run them and the Territorians employed by them.

It should also be pointed out that in Budget 2008 the Northern Territory remains the only jurisdiction to not impose a land tax, an annual tax on commercial properties that does not exist in the Northern Territory.

Budget 2008 also includes a range of other initiatives for improving business in the Territory.

An additional \$2.4 million will be provided over three years for Government-industry partnerships to increase mineral exploration in the Territory. This is on top of the \$12 million provided under the Bringing Forward Discovery program commenced in Budget 2007.

It is no accident that one of our key economic drivers, the minerals boom, is delivering results.

This Budget continues to fund the industry development support programs including peak business-related organisations, industry development grants and regional development grants of \$1.8 million.

Budget 2008 provides \$4.5 million for the Land Development Corporation to continue the development of industrial land including the Defence Support Hub, waterfront industrial land and stage 2 of the Darwin Business Park.

Tourism NT will have a budget of \$35.7 million in 2008-09.

There is funding to develop niche travel packages that appeal to global experience seekers who travel with a key purpose or special interest in mind such as Indigenous culture, wildlife or art.

Training

Talk to almost any Territory business, big or small, and they will tell you that their biggest problem is getting staff.

Notwithstanding the fact that more than 5000 extra jobs have been filled in the last year, the skills shortage remains a key issue for Territory businesses, as it does for businesses Australia wide.

Under Jobs Plan 3, there are now more Territorians in training than ever before and we have the highest number of people in training, on a per capita basis, in Australia.

The 2008-09 Budget maintains the Government's commitment to maximising employment opportunities for all Territorians and developing a highly skilled labour market that meets industry needs.

This Budget will invest \$6.3 million in strategic jobs and training initiatives.

There are now over 3300 apprentices and trainees in training. This is an increase of 1150 since 2001. Of those, 1760 are in skill shortage areas.

Budget 2008 continues to invest in the vital services provided to Territory families in community safety, health and education.

Community Safety

Budget 2008 is tough on crime with more police and funding to support our tough new laws.

The 2008-09 Budget for Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Services is now at \$247 million, an increase of 81 per cent since 2001.

In Budget 2008 the Henderson Government is providing an additional 60 police over two years dedicated to suburban streets. There will also be 10 additional auxiliaries placed in call centres by the end of next year. This is on top of the additional 40 police staff provided as part of Closing the Gap and takes the additional police resources approved since the 2007 Budget to 110.

The Safer Streets initiative will increase the number of patrols and assist in targeting youth crime and public disorder.

Budget 2008 is providing new and expanded police facilities. The new police station at Casuarina has been increased by \$2.5 million, taking the project to \$7.34 million. This station will provide state of the art facilities for police and the public.

To further assist police in their work, this budget includes \$5.16 million to upgrade the digital radio network. We are providing the police with the tools they need to do the job.

To strengthen community safety, Budget 2008 includes additional funding of \$2.5 million for a range of initiatives to address antisocial behaviour including:

- \$1.5 million for a first response patrol and a Darwin area night patrol;
- \$110 000 for a 24 hour antisocial behaviour reporting hotline; and
- ongoing funding of \$650 000 is being provided to install and monitor a closed circuit television network in the Darwin central business district.

Funding of \$750 000 is also provided in Budget 2008 for extra transport safety officers and more resources to reduce antisocial behaviour on the Darwin bus network.

Budget 2008 backs the Government's commitment to crack down on youth crime.

Where parents fail in their responsibilities to their children, the Government will step in.

Juvenile offenders will be targeted with \$2.5 million towards tough new measures including Family Responsibility Agreements and Orders and new youth camps to stop the revolving door of youth offending.

Assisting victims is important and as part of an ongoing package, an extra \$427 000 has been provided in Budget 2008 to expand the operation of the Crimes Victims Services unit and victims register.

Work will commence on detailed design of a new 1000-bed prison in Darwin.

The Government is committed to improving community safety and Budget 2008 provides more police, better resources and increased funding to support our tough new laws.

Health and Families

The Henderson Government is committed to improving the health and wellbeing of Territory families. We have announced that a new Department of Health and Families will be established from 1 July and will include NT Families and Children.

The new Department of Health and Families will receive \$915 million in 2008-09.

Budget 2008 will deliver more money for hospitals with:

- \$229 million for Royal Darwin;
- \$113 million for Alice Springs;
- \$26.3 million for Katherine;
- \$18.8 million for Gove; and
- \$11.6 million for Tennant Creek.

In 2008-09 an additional 6 beds will be provided in Royal Darwin Hospital.

Additional beds will also be opened in the Alice Springs Hospital as the redevelopment of the Emergency Department and fire safety rectification works are progressed.

Budget 2008 delivers improved health facilities across the Territory including:

- a new \$4.5 million health centre at Milingimbi;
- new sobering-up shelters in Katherine and Tennant Creek to be funded by the Commonwealth;
- \$1.7 million for stage 3 of fire upgrades at Tennant Creek Hospital; and
- the Allied Health Service at the Alice Springs Hospital will also be expanded with the allocation of an additional \$200 000.

Hospital in the Home will be expanded at both Royal Darwin Hospital and Alice Springs Hospital to increase the service to a seven day per week operation.

An important Budget 2008 initiative is the expansion of the Northern Territory Patient Assistance Travel Scheme. Travelling interstate for medical treatment can be a difficult experience for patients and their families. An additional \$2 million has been provided to improve and expand the scheme.

The community midwifery program has been successfully implemented at Royal Darwin Hospital and will be introduced to Alice Springs in 2008-09 with additional funding of \$280 000.

Renal health is a chronic issue for the Territory and Budget 2008 increases funding in this area by \$1 million.

As part of the Australian Health Care Agreement additional funding of \$3 million will be provided to enhance hospital core services.

The newly established NT Families and Children will support Territory families and children by bringing together a range of services including child protection, foster care, youth support and diversion programs.

In line with these changes, the first NT Children's Commissioner has been appointed.

An Office of Disability will be created. The Office will streamline the way families and people with disabilities access services by providing a single front door service for the Northern Territory.

\$3.7 million will be allocated to continued implementation of recommendations from the Northern Territory Disability Services Review.

An additional \$240 000 has also been provided to increase the Taxi Subsidy Scheme and the Territory Independence and Mobility Equipment Scheme.

Education

Spending on education and training this year will be \$719 million. This is in addition to the significant capital spending in both our urban and remote schools.

I talked earlier about the initiatives being undertaken in relation to Indigenous and remote education.

Budget 2008 also continues to build and upgrade urban education infrastructure.

The biggest urban initiative is the two new schools which will be built at Rosebery at a cost of \$48.8 million: a primary school for 600 students and a middle school for 850 students.

This is an exciting new development and acknowledges Palmerston's status as one of the fastest growing regions in the country.

Budget 2008 includes \$9.5 million for headworks and both schools are due to be open in 2011.

Other urban school upgrades in Darwin and Alice Springs total \$9.5 million.

Additional funding of \$2.7 million for school buses has been provided to cater for the introduction of middle years schooling and the introduction of seat belts on high risk regional school bus routes.

To assist students with intellectual disabilities and other special needs, this Budget provides additional funding of \$1.7 million.

Infrastructure

A growing economy requires infrastructure investment.

Budget 2008 delivers the highest ever Territory infrastructure spend – a record \$870 million.

Infrastructure spending creates jobs and has a flow-on effect through the whole economy.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this record infrastructure spend is roads. When we came to government in 2001, the roads budget we inherited was \$84 million. In Budget 2008 the roads budget is \$271 million – a record. We have more than tripled the roads budget.

The biggest road project is the Tiger Brennan extension which is being done in partnership with the Commonwealth. The \$110 million multi-year project has started and will ramp up in 2008-09. Budget 2008 includes stage 2 of the project at \$89 million.

Other specific road projects include:

- \$2.5 million for passing lanes on existing parts of Tiger Brennan Drive;
- \$35.8 million for the multi-year Victoria Highway project;
- \$4.3 million for railway crossing upgrades in 2008-09 as part of our \$6.4 million program;
- \$3.5 million for Maryvale Road upgrade; and
- \$4 million for road access to Pine Hill horticulture area.

Improving our economic infrastructure is a key priority for the Henderson Government.

We are spending more than \$60 million improving our port including a conveyor to increase the throughput of bulk minerals.

2008 will see the delivery of stage one of the Darwin Waterfront Development. The Convention Centre will open shortly with preparations for the first conventions and conferences well under way.

This \$1.1 billion development will be largely funded by the private sector and the costs of the precinct to Government substantially offset by returns from property sales of well in excess of \$100 million.

The wider economic benefit to the community has been estimated at \$350 million.

The provision of new land development is important for the growth of the Territory. The 2008-09 Budget sees the continuation of a number of projects to increase available land to assist Territorians with home ownership.

Our comprehensive land release strategy involves new residential housing for Darwin at Lyons, Muirhead, Bellamack and Berrimah Farm.

Our property market is showing signs of moderation and our land release strategy must ensure that excess supply does not distort the market.

Last year we announced an \$812 million, five-year program for essential services infrastructure. This year further projects have been added, with a total program of more than \$1 billion over the next five years, with a continued strategic focus on improving supply reliability and increasing capacity.

The Territory will provide a \$100 million capital contribution to power and water to assist in this significant investment.

The Government's commitment to undergrounding powerlines gets a further boost in Budget 2008. Nightcliff has already been completed and Rapid Creek will be finished by the end of this year.

Budget 2008 provides funding of \$16.6 million to continue the undergrounding project into Millner, with completion expected by December 2009. This will take the total cost of the project so far to \$50 million.

Local Government

While we are improving our capital city, we are determined to strengthen our regions.

Local government reform and the new shires will make the bush a better place to live, work and raise a family with improved services and investment in the regions.

Further funding of \$5 million has been committed in Budget 2008 to assist the new shires with additional establishment and infrastructure requirements. This takes the total Territory Government funding provided to local government reform to \$27 million.

Lifestyle and Environment

Preserving the Territory's environment is vital for all Territorians and contributes to the Territory's fantastic lifestyle.

The Henderson Government is committed to addressing climate change and has announced a dedicated Office of Climate Change to lead the Territory in this important area.

This Budget provides additional funding of \$5 million over three years to assist businesses and households to respond to climate change issues. In addition \$2 million has been provided in 2008-09 to upgrade Government buildings to appropriate energy efficient standards.

Other environment initiatives include:

- \$1.2 million for water and air quality programs;
- \$3.5 million for renewable energy rebates;
- \$10.8 million to deliver clean energy to remote Indigenous communities;
- increased funding of \$100 000 to the environment grants program for the inclusion of a wildlife category;
- \$1.5 million for control of weeds;
- \$2.8 million for the Solar Cities renewable energy program;
- \$344 000 for three years to monitor the Daly River catchment under the Living Rivers program;
- continued funding of \$100 000 for the Cool Communities initiative;
- continued funding of \$100 000 for the Alice Springs and Tennant Creek water initiative;

- increased funding of \$628 000 for the Environment Protection Authority; and
- \$6.7 million for the Bushfires NT program.

Preserving and improving our parks and reserves is not only in the best interests of the environment, but also promotes tourism and enhances our great Territory lifestyle.

This Budget includes infrastructure for our parks and reserves of:

- \$4.4 million to upgrade Litchfield National Park;
- \$5.2 million to upgrade Leanyer Recreation Park;
- \$1.5 million to rebuild the Fogg Dam Monsoon Forest Boardwalk; and
- \$1.5 million to develop the Red Centre Way interpretive centre for the West MacDonnell National Park.

Budget 2008 supports boat ramp improvements across the Territory including:

- \$4.6 million for continuing works to provide a new boat ramp and associated facilities at East Arm;
- \$1 million to improve on fishing infrastructure across the Top End; and
- \$450 000 for a new pontoon at Dinah Beach.

Territorians love their sport. Involvement in sport also assists in diverting young Territorians from harm and into positive outcomes.

In total \$25.9 million will be spent on sport and recreation by the Territory Government, throughout the Territory in 2008-09.

Funding of \$6.4 million will be provided for grassroots sport and recreation grants.

Budget 2008 has also increased sporting facility grants by \$1 million.

In the next 12 months, the Territory will host more elite sporting events than ever before.

The arts and cultural events are also important to Territorians, with the Territory becoming more recognised as a place to hold international events such as the Elton John concert later this month.

This Budget has also provided an additional \$777 000 over three years for the Darwin Festival in August. This event is becoming more popular with Territorians and visitors from interstate and overseas.

The arts grants budget for 2008-09 is \$5.25 million, including \$300 000 for a public art program.

Promoting our parks, our environment, our fishing, our sport and our arts is a very important component of the Henderson's Government commitment to continue to make the Territory the best place to live, work and raise a family.

Conclusion

This Budget is one for all Territorians. It is full of new initiatives right across the Territory.

More services, more infrastructure, less tax and a growing economy.

Budget 2008 does all this while strictly adhering to financial responsibility and sustainability.

It is this responsibility and the commitment to delivering surplus budgets that allows the Henderson Government to plan and provide for Territory families now and into the future.

This Budget delivers for Territory families and it invests in the future of the Northern Territory.

I commend Budget 2008 to the House.