



The Hon Paul Fletcher MP
Minister for Urban Infrastructure and Cities

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INTERVIEW

PFI020/2018

19 May 2018

Subjects: Barneson Boulevard project, Children
Commissioner Report

Nicole Manison: So it is just fantastic to be here today as we award the Barneson Boulevard contract. I am delighted today to have here in Darwin the Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack; the Minister for Cities Paul Fletcher; Senator Nigel Scullion; of course, we've got the Lord Mayor of Darwin Kon Vatskalis; and my colleague, the member for Port Darwin, Paul Kirby. It's great to have them here because what Barneson Boulevard really demonstrates is what can happen when you have the three tiers of Government working together on a project that is going to change the face of Darwin for the better.

We are thrilled today to be awarding the tender to Territoria Civil. This is a local company. This is going to mean local jobs. We are going to see a green infrastructure project going in here. We're going to see a fantastic third major entry point going into the Darwin CBD.

That is going to open up the middle of the Darwin City for more development and revitalisation, and that's a really important part of this. We are going to protect the fabulous Frog Hollow Park and bring it back to life, because that is a part of Darwin that has been long-forgotten for too long, and we are going to make sure that that becomes a better public space for people to enjoy.

This is going to open up more development opportunities here in the centre of the city, such as the potential for a university campus there at the corner of Barneson and Cavenagh Street.

We are seeing a fantastic contribution of about \$30 million from the Commonwealth Government and I thank them for their contribution; \$5 million from the City of Darwin; and the Northern Territory Government is putting in just over \$10 million too. We have had to increase our funds, because we wanted to do more greening work and we found that some of the earthworks here were a bit more complex than we anticipated, so we have put in an extra \$5 million into this project.

But this is a very important project for the future of Darwin. Not only is it about good transport access to get people in and out of the city, but it's about opening up the Darwin CBD for even more revitalisation for the future. I might hand over to the Deputy Prime

Minister to have a few words.

Michael McCormack: Well, thank you Nicole, and it's great to be here with my Ministerial colleagues, Senator Nigel Scullion, and the Minister for Urban Infrastructure and Cities Paul Fletcher.

Today we've been at the Transport Infrastructure Council meeting, where all the roads minister from all the states and territories came together to talk about how we can build a better Australia, and indeed, Nicole has just outlined how we're building—both the Federal Government in conjunction with the Northern Territory Government, in conjunction as well with the Darwin City Council—building a better Darwin.

This is important. This is transformational: \$29.5 million contribution from the Federal Government to ease congestion, to make sure that people get home sooner and safer and certainly, to do this project which is going to revitalise Darwin, make sure that we have an additional road there, a duplicated road, a significant investment. It does ease congestion, and I know that Paul Fletcher and I are working very hard to ease congestion in each and every one of the capital cities, working hard to make sure there is that regional connectivity.

It's all about the record \$75 billion of infrastructure investment that the Turnbull Government is putting into road links, rail links, and making sure that we have that sort of infrastructure that is going to be so important, not just for Darwin, not just for the Northern Territory, but indeed, right around our nation.

But I certainly welcome the investment and the confidence that Nicole and her Government has in this project. Certainly welcome the investment that the Darwin City Council has in this project, and Robert Wilson from Terratoria Civil just told me a minute ago that 130 people at the [indistinct] building peak of this particular project, the Barneson Boulevard, are going to be engaged in this.

And again, that's what the Turnbull Government is doing with its infrastructure: making sure there's jobs in the construction phase, making sure that there's safety aspects, making sure that there's the ease of congestion, whether it's Darwin, whatever capital city it is, but this is a transformational project, an historic day for Darwin, and I congratulate all involved. I'd ask Paul to make a few comments as well.

Paul Fletcher: Well, thank you very much. I'm very, very pleased to be here in Darwin with my friend and colleague the Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack; with, of course, the Deputy Chief Minister Nicole Manison; with Nigel Scullion, Cabinet minister and Senator for Northern Territory; and of course, Kon Vatskalis, the Mayor of Darwin. And this is a very important day with the commencement of work on this vital Barneson Boulevard project, which is going to transform the Darwin CBD and access to it.

The Turnbull Government is backing Darwin and backing the Northern Territory with \$29.5 million for the Barneson Boulevard project. And of course, we also want to back Darwin through the Darwin City Deal, and we're well advanced in our discussions.

I've valued the opportunity to discuss City Deal issues with both the Lord Mayor today and a couple months ago with the Deputy Chief Minister, and we'll be having a further meeting a little later this afternoon. I also had a very constructive meeting with the Vice-Chancellor of Charles Darwin University yesterday. And so the commitment that the Turnbull Government is making today—\$29.5 million for Barneson Boulevard—very important in itself, but it's also part of a broader focus that the Turnbull Government on working with the Northern Territory Government and the Darwin City Council to back Darwin and to work to achieve a Darwin City Deal. I think we might have a couple of other comments.

Kon Vatskalis: Thanks Paul, and you're one of the few who can spell my name properly! It is great to be here today, and it is a good example of how the three tiers of Government can work together successfully. The Territory Government, the Federal Government and the Council got together and they committed to this project. Now, I know that people say it shouldn't be done, can't be done, but I'm sick and tired of the don't do it brigade. I've had enough of it. If you look around you, some of the things you look, they have the same controversy [indistinct] change the face of Darwin. It did, positively. [Indistinct] shouldn't be done, can't be done. It's done, and everybody talks about it.

This Barneson Boulevard—and yes, we've had [indistinct] wanted four layers of bitumen, now it's totally transformed to an arterial that will bring people to Darwin, but with proper landscape. But the benefits from this design and the location are more than just bringing people to Darwin and taking them out. Bringing the university campus into town and bringing 1000 students, it will change the centre of Darwin. It will activate Darwin. All these empty lanes, mark my words, will be full of restaurants and coffee shops. All the buildings around the campus, there will be buildings that provide accommodation for students, because you just not bring the campus in, you have to bring the students. It will change the face of Darwin, the same way that Cullen Bay did. And in 10 years' time, people will say: that's not a bad project, it was a good project. Look how many people now come in, how many people live in Darwin, how many students come to Darwin.

I thank very much the Federal Government and I thank very much the Territory Government. Sometimes you don't get perfect. You can't please all people all the time. We can do the best of it and we are going to work together to make the best of it. Thank you.

Question: Looking at this Cities Deal, all the mistakes of the traffic-congested southern cities show that funnelling cars into your city makes it the opposite of liveable, and all the modern cities are doing things like putting light rail in, trams, et cetera. Why are we going for the old failed mistakes in terms of funding roads into cities?

Michael McCormack: This road project is transformational. You just heard the Mayor spell out exactly the reasons why this is going to be such a revitalising project, such a transformational project. This is an auspicious day.

It's going to, as he said, regenerate so much activity for Darwin, bringing the University into play, bringing people to and from Darwin CBD faster but safer. That is so important.

It capitalises on what we already have here in Darwin with Tiger Brennan Drive. It

capitalises on making sure that the Barneson Boulevard is going to be such a vital link road, making sure that we'll ease that congestion and getting people home—I can't emphasise it enough—sooner and safer.

That's why the Turnbull Government is investing. That's why we've got the confidence in this project and in Darwin. We're backing, as Paul Fletcher has just said, we're backing Darwin all the way.

Question: Minister, what's your understanding of how bad congestion actually is in Darwin and why this is the best use of \$30 million of your Government's money?

Michael McCormack: Well look, we can, of course, listen to the various Governments, the various Local Government authorities. I've spoken to Nicole about this project a number of times, as has Paul Fletcher, as have other Ministers previously in my portfolio, and we know that this is a good project.

We know it's a transformational project: \$29.5 million by the Turnbull Government is a significant investment, and we make sure that when we do these sorts of investments, that there is value for money. And, as you've just heard from the Mayor, in years to come people will look back on this day and say that was an important day, that was a very necessary day and we're so glad it's happened.

Question: Are your priorities slightly out of whack when people who live in Wadeye, one of the biggest communities in the Northern Territory, can't even access that community for six months of the year by road, yet you're pumping all of this money into [indistinct] CBD?

Michael McCormack: Well, it's not just this road that we're investing in for Darwin, and elsewhere in the Northern Territory we're investing \$100 million into the Buntine Highway. We're investing \$180 million as part of the Budget process into the Central Arnhem Highway. We're investing, indeed, \$1.5 billion of \$3.5 billion for the Roads of Strategic Importance into Northern Australia, dedicated to Northern Australia.

We're inviting Councils, Territory and State Governments in Western Australia, in the Territory and in Queensland to put projects forward so that we can make sure we have bitumen on those roads.

Perhaps they could be viewed as of secondary importance because they're not necessarily national highways but they're very important for those communities that they link, whether they're remote communities, whether they're regional communities. That's what the Roads of Strategic Importance is all about, and we're certainly inviting applications from interested parties, interested Governments, to take part in that process.

Question: How could the Government call the Royal Commission into youth detention and child protection and then not back up its recommendations with any funding?

Michael McCormack: Well look, this is an area of great importance. It's certainly of great importance to the Northern Territory and elsewhere. But the Government obviously stands

committed to making sure that recommendations that are passed down are looked at, examined carefully and considered closely, and we'll have more to say about that in future.

Question: Are you thinking there will be more money?

Question: Yesterday you criticised the former Labor Government's reaction to the *Four Corners* report into live cattle exports as a knee-jerk reaction to a television show. How would then describe the Prime Minister's decision to call a Royal Commission ten hours after that *Four Corners* program interview. It's the same thing, isn't it?

Michael McCormack: Well, Labor's decision in June 2011 to shut down the live cattle trade to one of our largest trading partners, Indonesia, was indeed a knee-jerk reaction. It was based on hysteria and the fact that we are continuing the live sheep trade to the Middle East is important. It's certainly important for Western Australia. It's certainly important to the farmers on the west coast of Australia, indeed right throughout Australia.

It's important to remember that we have changed the rules as far as making sure that there are inspectors on every ship, making sure that the stocking density is reduced by 28 per cent so that there is 39 per cent more room for those sheep to move around. So they're important moves and we'll certainly have more to say on the McCarthy Review in the future.

Question: But if, as you said yesterday, Labor's decision was a knee-jerk reaction, how would you describe your Government's decision to call a Royal Commission ten hours after that TV show?

Michael McCormack: I'll let Nigel Scullion make a few comments.

Nigel Scullion: Look, I don't think you'll get in too much strife, Matty, about comparing cattle with children. That'll probably go down really well.

But we take this very seriously, mate. It wasn't a knee-jerk reaction. I was part of the decision making process. There was myself, there was Adam Giles at the time, and there was Malcolm Turnbull.

There was no way we could actually get to the bottom of an issue where everything I had read in the media, all of the reports—including the Children's Commissioner reports—did not have any inkling about what we saw on that shocking footage. So we felt that the only way that we could have complete transparency into not only the system in the Northern Territory but right around Australia was to actually launch a Royal Commission.

So I don't think it was a knee-jerk reaction. It was an appropriate and justified reaction and we've seen from the report the extent of which we needed to reform the youth justice circumstances both in the Northern Territory and around Australia.

And I'm going to just answer Jane's question in regard to the funding around that. The principal recommendation is that it doesn't need more money. Now for that

recommendation, clearly we've met that requirement. But what it was indicating was that we needed to change the processes, we needed to change the training, we needed to change the culture, which is what is being done. But can I tell you, the Commonwealth have committed to funding 100 per cent of the recommendations that were directed at us.

We are always standing by in a partnership-like approach to the recommendations that the Northern Territory have, and of course many of our responsibilities have crossover. Wherever they cross over in the Commission we've also indicated that we're going to bear our share of the funds.

So it's not a question about funding. It's about changing the culture and I have to commend both the Northern Territory Government and the Commonwealth Government as it's been involved about—it's happened quickly, it's happened effectively, it's been a huge period of time under which these recommendations can really help the youth justice system in the future. I think it's actually been quite successful.

Question: I'm not comparing children to animals.

Nigel Scullion: Cracker. It's a good decision, mate.

Question: What I am comparing is the Deputy Prime Minister's comments yesterday when he said it was a knee-jerk reaction to go so quickly to a ban. I mean, ten hours after a show went to air, shouldn't there have been a little more introspection before you went to a position of calling a Royal Commission so soon after that report?

Nigel Scullion: Well, I don't think so. I think the Royal Commission has shown why it was necessary.

Just the levels of detail and the powers of a Royal Commission that was necessary to get right down to the levels of detail of responsibility, the levels of detail that you need to probe into a culture like the corrective system in the Northern Territory.

So I think the actual Royal Commission itself has justified that decision, and there's a vast difference between what I think a knee-jerk reaction by saying well what are we going to do about some footage we've seen about some cattle overseas, so you actually send a message to our key trading partner in Indonesia by the way you're going to read this in your newspaper in the morning that we have ceased to trade with you.

Now that was a knee-jerk reaction that historically we can now see was a knee-jerk reaction. It was a stupid thing to do. It showed very, very poor judgement. It showed particularly a lack of consideration for the people and producers of regional and rural Australia.

Question: Why has your Department had to basically apologise to the people of Yarralin over delays in the Indigenous housing program?

Nigel Scullion: Because in Yarralin we have a particular and individual circumstance that hasn't happened anywhere in Australia. In Yarralin we've had land in a relative sense

handed back very recently. There were some houses that had been allocated to that place notionally, but because there was no township lease in place- I was in negotiations personally and through the Northern Land Council in Timber Creek and in Yarralin and I decided that I would make an unprecedented step to move away from the township lease to allow a further five years for them to be able to consider that, given that they've only just had their land back.

So I've released houses in an unprecedented step and I've decided to go for a five-year housing plan. Now, that was quite complex. It involved the Northern Territory Government, the Northern Land Council, and the Commonwealth. Someone at the meeting stood up and said it's taken too long. And we acknowledged it had and we took responsibility for that.

Now look, I'm still waiting on Minister McCarthy's answer to a letter that I sent him in early February about this matter. I still wait with baited breath. There's times when we don't deliver services, a) well enough or in time. So we must acknowledge that, that was what was required and my officer acknowledged that and apologised as far as we could for the delay in the process. That was quite a reasonable thing for that particular officer to do at that time and I stand by it.

Question: Senator, what's the longest you've been stuck in traffic in Darwin, and is there nothing else in the Territory that you would love to spend \$30 million on fixing?

Nigel Scullion: Well I'd like another couple of new whitewood trees in my front yard. The cyclone took them away. I can say there's a whole list of things. There is no expenditure of money where you couldn't find a pool of people usefully to complain that you should have been better spent somewhere else or on them.

Question: But there are some projects worth spending the money on. How long have you been stuck in traffic in Darwin?

Nigel Scullion: Well, I don't spend a lot of time in the Darwin city centre. There are times, at particular times of the day, that it is hard to get hard to get in and out of the city, particular times of the day, as you would know if you're here. But this investment is not only about congestion.

This is a sophisticated solution to a complex set of presentations. We need this city to grow. If we get growth here, that means we're going to get jobs here. The jobs have to be over an entire base—so in hospitality, the restaurant trade, the increase in tourists.

So many people want to come to the Northern Territory. When they come to the Northern Territory, they want to come to this iconic place that is Darwin. So we need to be able to facilitate people coming in and out in the future. So it's not only meeting the challenges today. This investment is an investment, and not a cost, because it meets the challenges of the future.

Question: When you were going towards the Royal Commission, you suggested that we definitely need more rehabilitation programs which the Commission also recommended. You

suggested Mataranka Station could be used for one and that that could be something the Commonwealth could look at- I mean, are you just saying all that doesn't matter anymore?

Nigel Scullion: No, not at all. We're still in discussions with the Northern Territory Government.

Obviously fundamentally this has to be a partnership approach. Mataranka Station belongs to the Northern Territory Government. As is well known I made an offer to the Chief Minister at that time, and we've had ongoing discussions about similar but different locations. So those would include but are not exclusive to Gun Point Road, Mataranka Station, Juno Station in Tennant Creek, Love Creek- Love Creek Station out of Alice Springs. So they're the places we've been talking about and the notion is if we actually need to build a level of amenity, a level of amenity that actually allows children to rehabilitate, to do training, and often tragically as to actually be in remand. Many of these children have not been even been charged. They are simply in remand because the court has decided it's unsafe to release them on bail. So we need a level of amenity, so our offer is that if the Mataranka Station and similar places like that can be handed over to the Indigenous Land Corporation so it becomes part of the Indigenous estate, the deal was that the Commonwealth would then look at making investments so we could have some infrastructure there, provide a purpose-built level of amenity for juvenile detention.

Now, that offer is still on the table. We were having very positive discussions with the Northern Territory Government around that matter so it certainly hasn't been forgotten.

Question: Commercial barramundi fishermen say that their industry is in real strife at the moment, there's a lack of demand and they're getting really low prices. Have you heard those concerns and is that likely to be impacted more by a barramundi farm getting \$7 million of NAIF funding?

Nigel Scullion: Well, I think there's always been ups and downs in terms of the return in fisheries. One of the biggest impacts that was around in the time when I was a commercial fisherman was the sudden rise in the price of fuel, and that can suddenly marginalise a fishery when you have those as fixed costs and you have a fluctuation in price. But I also have been speaking to many people in the barramundi industry who are very optimistic about its future. Right at the moment, yes, we're getting some softness in prices but that's not because of a lack of demand for the product. The prices will get better as they have in the past and the fluctuations we're seeing now are no different from historical fluctuations that certainly I've seen for the last 20 years.

Question: When will we see the Cities Deal actually signed off? And the financial commitment?

Paul Fletcher: Well look, there are very constructive discussions underway between the Turnbull Government and the Northern Territory Government and the Darwin City Council. Now, City Deals can take some time to work through. For example, earlier this year we concluded the city deal for Western Sydney. Well, that followed more than 18 months of detailed work. We obviously want to work as quickly as we can. On the other hand, there

are a number of complex issues to work through. We're having good discussions and I'm confident we're making good progress but we'll take the time we need to take to do that.

Question: But how, I mean if everyone's all in agreeance, why aren't we just signed off?

Paul Fletcher: Well no, what we're doing is we are working through in detail what are the projects that would be included? What would be the contributions made to support those projects? From the Commonwealth Government, from the Northern Territory Government, from Darwin City Council and potentially from other stakeholders as well. So we're working through all that process. We'll take as long as we need to. Look, I would be very optimistic that we would make very good progress before the end of this year. That's certainly our objective but we'll take the time to get it right.

Question: The \$50 million Myilly Point Museum—that was one of the projects earmarked—has now been taken off the table. Has that affected this timeline?

Paul Fletcher: The process of identifying potential projects that could be included, identifying where funding and financing commitments may come. That's all part of the process. So it's a perfectly ordinary part of the process of developing a City Deal that we look at different possible projects and we screen them down ultimately to come up with what's the final range of projects and initiatives. I'm confident that we will get a very good range of projects and initiatives as part of the Darwin City Deal when it comes time to conclude it and announce it.

Question: But given that museum was something concrete that the Government had committed to as part of the city's deal and now it's no longer going ahead, doesn't that affect negotiations?

Paul Fletcher: It's nothing out of the ordinary at all in the process of negotiating a City Deal, and we go through exactly this process with every city where there's a negotiation and a development of a City Deal, that you look at a range of projects to be included and then you narrow those down to come up with a final list of projects and initiatives backed up by funding commitments and other support.

So we're going through a perfectly routine process. We obviously want to move forward as quickly as we can. At the same time it's important to take the time to get it right and the because of course what we want to do is have a City Deal that can then operate over quite a number of years.

Question: Is there a ballpark figure that you're willing to put out there that [indistinct]?

Paul Fletcher: We're still in the process of working through what the initiatives will be and what the commitments will be from all levels of government. When it's possible to say more, we will say more.

Question: And will the Barneson Boulevard funding be separate from that?

Paul Fletcher: Well Barneson Boulevard is a project which is going ahead in its own right. There's a clear funding commitment from the Turnbull Government of \$29.5 million. Obviously funding commitments from the Northern Territory Government and Darwin City Council as well. That project is going ahead. It makes very good sense. The point that the Deputy Chief Minister made which I strongly agree with is that it's part of a strategy to activate and energise the Darwin CBD and of course as we work through the City Deal process we are looking at other initiatives and projects that will also contribute to activating and energising the CBD. As Senator Scullion said, it's all about driving economic activity, driving liveability, and I think all three levels of government have a very strong commitment to do that.

Question: The report into the alleged rape of the two-year-old in Tennant Creek, one of your constituents, really shows that the Northern Territory's child protection system is more dysfunctional than ever. Is there anything that the Commonwealth Government is going to do about that?

Nigel Scullion: Oh look, I don't want to reflect at all on what happened at Tennant Creek, for all the normal reasons that it is in fact subject to a criminal investigation. But there's no doubt that the Children Commissioner's report was particularly damning and that there were so many referrals made over so long and that the right things were not done.

Without attempting to defend the Territory Government, you can't underestimate the complexity of the presentations. I knock on doors and I'm in these houses and I live in these communities almost, but I'm sure the Northern Territory Government—and I've already heard utterance from the Northern Territory Government—this is a very serious space. Colleen Gwynne's contribution to this has been a very important one and I think it should be a guide for us to be able to take action in the future. Now we've only just received the report. It's not a report that I have. I've seen a heavily redacted report, the same one that you got for very good reasons.

So I'll be working with the Northern Territory Government to ensure that we can just make a better system, and the balance that people try to find, the sensitivity in all of this, is we can't move people away from culture. We can't move people away from family. And we understand the principle of child placements, close to the family, as close to culture as possible. But the balance between making sure that you don't place them back as close to the perpetrator as possible is a very difficult challenge for government. And so I'll be working very closely with the Northern Territory Government to ensure that we can do what we can to ensure that when there are pleas for help, not only are they heard but in a timely fashion we can respond to them.

Now I have advice from what I call my "grannies group". There's some 650 ladies across Australia who assist me in understanding the minutiae about when you move a child to another family because the circumstances of where they are, they're just not- there may not be just enough capacity to provide for that child, all the way in the spectrum to being at risk. So it is a complex area but the advice that I'm getting is that we do need to provide some assistance for those people who are fostering. We have the grannies and the older people in the community. They're being asked time and time again I meet foster parents,

whether it's an informal fostering arrangement or a formal one, where they are just overwhelmed. They are overwhelmed. They don't know what more to do or where else- they don't want to say no. But when they are- really should be in retirement, they're having new families of five or six little children and they are just really overwhelmed with this.

So there are so many elements of this but I must congratulate the Children's Commissioner on a fantastic report. It's a no-holds-barred and it's about a particular issue. But I think we can not only learn in the Northern Territory about this, as a Federal Minister, I can tell you it's not a Territory issue, this is an Australian issue and see much of the same failings happening in every state and territory jurisdiction.

Question: I have a CDEP question, we've spoken about it here, why were changes to the remote working for the dole scheme necessary?

Nigel Scullion: Well there's a couple reasons. When we inherited this, there were 60 per cent of people had left CDEP and has ended up on passive welfare with the misery of mental health issues and all the other issues of sit down money that the community said we don't want.

Question: But the changes were ...

Nigel Scullion: No, no hang on. No, no, hear me out.

This is a historical matter and so we went from 7 per cent of activity, so the first thing we had to do is to get people actually engaged with the providers again. So this last set of reforms has done that.

We're now up to 74 per cent from 7 per cent. A cracker outcome. What we're now doing is dealing with demographics separately. We're dealing with people in one demographic when probably 50 per cent of the demographic has 75 per cent more work capacity than the others.

So the ones with the most work capacity will no longer be dealing with Centrelink, because dealing with Centrelink, some of the red tape in dealing with Centrelink, and the difficulties in a CDEP area of actually communicating in terms of whether it was a Telstra problem, whatever else it is, it's a very difficult challenge to be able to communicate with Centrelink. So those are the changes that the community said: these are the changes that you need to make. We've been working on these changes for nearly four years with community, with our parliamentary colleagues in Canberra. We're pleased to say that I think these changes are not only reflective of what the community wants because they've been co-designed but they're also going to make a significant improvement in how we run the program.