

EDITORIAL, March 27, 1990

A matter of timing

THE resignation of the Trade Development Zone Authority chairman, Mr Ray McHenry, was eminently predictable.

The only thing that was not predictable was the timing. Clearly, had it happened during the federal election campaign it would have harmed the chances of the CLP candidate for the House of Representatives, Mrs Helen Galton.

In a nutshell, the reason behind Mr McHenry's resignation is politics.

Mr McHenry had made the transition from being just a public servant to a highly politicised figure. As such he had the potential to cause problems for the Government, especially in the way he carried out his duties.

This is not denying his achievements and accomplishments. He has been the force behind the Trade Development Zone's formidable expansion.

His energy and his undoubted talents and negotiating skills brought several foreign, mainly Chinese, companies to Darwin.

Only last week he signed a deal that will bring as many as 15 new factories to the trade zone.

If all the projections are correct, they will employ about 6000 workers by the mid-1990s.

This means the zone will become the Territory's biggest employer outside Government itself.

Nor can anything be taken from Mr McHenry's sense of vision for the future of Darwin and the Territory — or his dedication to that vision.

But where he fell was in the administration of his portfolio, the day-to-day petty irritants that are so important in any managerial capacity.

It is here that he ran into problems.

Controversy

High-flying on behalf of a worthy cause is one thing.

To ignore or gloss over the job that goes with the flying, as Mr McHenry often gave the appearance of doing, is quite another.

The best example of this is the controversy that was allowed to flourish over allegations of award breaches by one of the zone's textile firms.

The situation should have been monitored far more closely, but it was not.

The case was typical of a style of administration that never really came to grips with a simple fact — the Trade Development Zone is a visionary proposal that needs a lot of paper shuffling to make it work.

Mr McHenry was very strong on the first but not on the second.

The Chief Minister, Mr Marshall Perron, has said there is nothing political in Mr McHenry's resignation.

However, the timing will convince many people that is not the case.

IEWS ON THE NEWS



Mr Perron



Mr Smith

Problems ahead in NT politics

By FRANK ALCORTA

THE NT Government has problems. If Saturday's House of Representative results were translated into a general Territory election, Labor would come close to winning.

This is not an assessment that will be readily accepted by some Labor strategists who claim the next Territory election is already as good as in the bag. There are no "ifs," "buts" or "mights" about it. The CLP has just lost the fifth consecutive election and by-election.

The ALP, they believe, is on a roller-coaster that will stop with Mr Terry Smith firmly in the top chair.

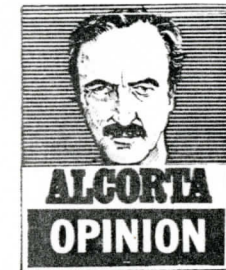
It is not an assessment that will be accepted by CLP strategists either.

They claim that the results do not indicate a rout and that, in any case, Territorians make clear distinctions between federal and local issues in elections.

Both sides are correct. Clearly if Mr Snowdon's vote was translated into a Territory election the CLP would have trouble hanging on to government.

It would win Braiting and Araluen in Alice Springs, Katherine, the new rural Palmerston seat, Leanyer, Nightcliff, Ludmilla, Stuart Park, and Port Darwin. It would also have a good chance of picking up Victoria River (purely on the strength of sitting member, Terry McCarthy), Jingili (where sitting member, Rick Setter, has also done a lot of work) and, with some luck on their side, one of the two seats carved out of Karama by the redistribution.

So the issue is not as clear-cut as Labor strategists believe it is. On Saturday's returns the CLP probably could count on nine reasonably safe



seats with a fairly good chance to pick up at least two more.

Labor can be reasonably assured of winning Barkly, Sanderson, Casuarina, Karama and Palmerston (Gray), and to retain all its existing seven seats.

It is a line-ball election therefore. Provided that Sadadeen MLA, Denis Collins, Koolpinyah MLA, Noel Padgham-Purich, and Flynn MLA, Enzo Fioreani, retain their seats the CLP would form government with a majority of one.

There are four imponderables that should be considered. The first is the most important. This time there was no NT National candidate to muddy the waters. There will be in the next general election. If the conservative vote is split some of the so-called safe CLP seats would suffer an inevitable drift of preferences to Labor perhaps assuring an ALP government next time around.

There will also be Green Independent candidates. The convener, Mr Bob Ellis, is

most unlikely to allocate preferences to the CLP (despite the party's new-found green faith). This, too, would favor Labor.

Third is the value of incumbency for sitting CLP members. It is easy to dismiss the party's chances at Karama, Casuarina or Sanderson on the basis of Saturday's vote. But it is not quite as easy to dismiss MLAs, Mick Palmer, Nick Dondas and Daryl Manzie.

Mr Palmer is in clear trouble at Karama, but if the redistribution gives him the large Vietnamese vote in his new constituency, his chances of winning again have to be rated as pretty good.

Mr Manzie will poll badly at Anula, but the rest of his electorate (particularly Northlakes) is sound CLP country. The man has a personal following that he has built since first elected in 1983.



MR Dondas won Casuarina in 1974. He retained it in 1977 against Labor's Dennis Bree by the barest of margins — 27 votes — and went on to win comfortably in 1980 and 1983. In 1987, Labor lawyer, John Reeves, gave him a terrible fright converting Casuarina into the Territory's most marginal seat. But this time the ALP pre-selection is Public Sector Union joint secretary, Mr Rod Ellis, in my view a far less formidable opponent than Mr Reeves. The durable Mr Dondas therefore has to be given at least even odds to retain Casuarina.

Finally there is the redistribution of electoral boundaries. The committee under the chairmanship of the former administrator, Mr Eric Johnston, will come up with a draft proposal in May. The final recommendations are likely to go to the Parliament in June. A lot depends on them. If the boundaries are radically altered the recommendations will favor Labor because the important incumbency factor will be diluted.

Other factors that may influence the final result here are timing, the August Budget and the national economic downturn.

Timing is all-important. Cabinet met today to discuss the election debacle. There was speculation the Industries and Development Minister, Mr Barry Coulter, would come under attack from some of his colleagues over his allegations about a conspiracy on the Trade Development Zone which backfired badly on the CLP. There was even the possibility of a Cabinet reshuffle.

Talk of a July election should be dismissed. If a reshuffle had gone ahead, the new ministers would have had to be given time to settle in the job. The issue then would be fear that the NT Government intended to hit Territorians for six in the August Budget and that was the real reason for the early election. Not on.

But an election between September and December is a real possibility although most CLP backbenchers still favor going as late as possible, meaning in March next year.

In my view that is not a real option because, in effect, the Territory is in an election mode already and the pressures for such an election will build up enormously in the coming weeks and months.

It will be almost impossible (and probably suicidal for the CLP) to delay a Territory-wide poll past December.

Let us face it, if the Hawke Government is returned as expected there is bound to be a backlash against Labor as the recession bites. It is a backlash that the CLP will want to use in the Territory.

Finally, the Budget which is bound to be the most difficult the NT Government has put together since self-government in 1978. There are no cash reserves, the scope for further borrowings is extremely limited, the electricity subsidy is coming to an end and housing funds are likely to be cut.

We live in interesting times.

WICKING'S VIEW

