

EDITORIAL, March 29, 1990

# Nationals in decline

**M**UCH as some NT Nationals would deny it, there is no doubt the party is in decline.

It is not possible to interpret the simultaneous resignation of the president, secretary and treasurer, almost the whole executive, any other way.

The excuse that has been put out for public consumption is that the party's constitution prevents people from seeking office after three terms.

But the final draft of the constitution was adopted in 1988. This means that, had they wanted, the three office-holders could have remained in place for another year — certainly until after the next general Territory election.

In the case of the secretary, Mrs Joan Small, there is a good case that can be made. She is leaving the Territory to a job in New South Wales. But in the case of the president, Mr Jim Petrich, and the treasurer, Mrs Margaret Eedle, the resignations can be explained only in the context of the NT Nationals' serious decline.

Polls conducted by both major parties before the federal election show that the party attracts negligible voter backing. The situation in the Territory parallels the States where the Nationals have suffered a large drop in support.

In a sense it is worse here because the NT Nationals were established by the former Queensland premier, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, and were from the beginning closely aligned with the now disgraced Queensland National Party. The local party therefore has an identity problem very difficult to overcome.

## Insulting

The parliamentary leader, Mr Ian Tuxworth, who often gives the impression one of his political purposes in life is to make life as difficult as possible for some of his former CLP colleagues, said yesterday that another president would be found soon who would do a job as good as or better than Mr Petrich.

Quite apart from the fact that this is a gratuitously insulting comment about Mr Petrich, it is doubtful that, in fact, the next person would do what Mr Tuxworth says.

Mr Petrich has been the NT Nationals' moderating force and, arguably, its best asset since 1986. It will be extremely difficult to replace him.

Party members may want to ask themselves precisely what is it they intend to achieve as a separate political force.

So far the NT Nationals have failed to come up with policies (except for some populist nonsense) that are appreciably different from the CLP's.

It is also pretty clear that beyond Mr Tuxworth, there is little to hold the party together.

As demonstrated in last week's federal election, there is no room for two conservative parties in Australia, much less in the Territory.