

EDITORIAL, April 7, 1988

Quality the key to good Govt

BARKLY MLA, Mr Ian Tuxworth, seems rather confused in his criticism of the Chief Minister, Mr Steve Hatton's, decision to expand Cabinet to nine.

The first decision Mr Tuxworth took when he became chief minister in 1984 was to appoint one extra minister for a full Cabinet of nine.

The extra minister, just to refresh Mr Tuxworth's memory, was Araluen MLA and former Attorney-General, Mr Jim Robertson, who became Special Statehood Minister.

Of course Mr Tuxworth would argue that in those heady days the governing Country Liberal Party held 19 seats in the Legislative Assembly while it has only 16 at present. There are therefore more chiefs than Indians in the present Parliament.

The argument is specious because the good administration of the Territory's public sector does not reside in the proportion of ministers to backbenchers, but in the composition and quality of the Cabinet.

It is time we realised it is important that the business of Government be taken seriously. If this means paying good performers more, then so be it. If it means we need more Cabinet members to get the job done well, then so be it.

The money we ultimately save, if these Cabinet members do their jobs properly, will far exceed the initial cost.

However, it does raise one important question that will have to be carefully analysed by both major political parties and by Territorians in general in the lead-up to the next Northern Territory election.

The question is what constitutes a workable Parliament.

With 25 seats in the balance it is only a matter of time before we have a Parliament of 13-12 and a Speaker to be provided by the governing party. The 1977 election for example was won by the CLP with just 40 per cent of the votes against 38 per cent for the ALP. Preferences gave the CLP 12 seats against six for the ALP and one Independent.

There have been three elections since then, in 1980, 1983 and 1986, when the CLP maintained the gap with Labor and then widened it.

But the Northern Territory electorate is in fact not very different from the Australian norm.

Imbalance

It follows that the imbalance that has existed here since 1980 will be redressed at some time, perhaps as early as the next election due in 1990/91.

The present numbers are already a major constraint for the governing party to nurture a bank of talent and for the Parliament to have an adequate committee system. A hung Parliament will make the existing difficulties even worse.

Despite the small size of Territory constituencies, therefore, it would be wise to consider an increase in the number of MLAs in the redistribution that must occur before the next election.

The alternative is to be governed by the Public Service. This may be good administration but it is not democracy. Public servants, with all their assumed virtues, are not answerable to the people. Politicians, with all their assumed limitations, are.

But let us make sure our Parliamentarians govern with a view to saving us money.