

EDITORIAL, September 11, 1987

Harris' breath of fresh air

A former education minister, Mr Tom Harris, gave a good reminder the CLP, for all its troubles, remains the party of ideas and open debate.

Coming out as he did with a few home truths, Mr Harris did a service not just to his own Government and party colleagues, but to all Territorians.

The speech he delivered to the Darwin CLP branch had the hallmarks of a long period of preparation. Mr Harris was aware of the consequences, but decided to take the risk and run with it. This is what our young democracy should be all about.

The CLP, a party that has served the Territory well since 1974, is under threat by the emerging NT Nationals and the Labor Party. There is no doubt the party faces hard times, made no easier by a perceived lack of direction by the Hatton Government.

But the CLP represents a unique combination of political forces and ideas that make it particularly well suited to the Northern Territory. There should be no room here for Queensland-style politics. That is what Mr Harris was saying. The message will be ignored by conservatives at their peril.

The controversy also served to highlight the differences between the CLP and the Labor Party. After the left-wing managed to hijack the ALP in the recent annual conference, we said the party would turn inwards into a secretive, sullen and authoritarian collection of irrelevant people. Sadly, we were correct.

Nothing that could remotely be identified as pertinent for Territorians has come out from the jaws of Labor since the conference. At least before, the previous party president, Mr John Reeves, and Senator Bob Collins managed to inject some fire and vibrancy to Territory debate. They are silent now, no doubt under orders by the new junta.

Yet the debate must go on because upon it depend the emergence of fresh ideas and opportunities.

Weaknesses

This is how Mr Harris' contribution must be interpreted — an honest attempt to bring into the open what he says are weaknesses and failings in the CLP. Solutions can be found only through this process.

The contrast between Mr Harris' refreshing approach and the secrecy that surrounds the inner Labor councils is stark. And so is the impact of new policies arising from open and free discussion.

CLP members clearly are not afraid of discussion and remain ready to open their doors to all messengers — even if they bring bad news. This certainly is not the case in the musty ALP corridors.

Far from doing harm, Mr Harris has done good. Encouragingly, the Chief Minister, Mr Steve Hatton, recognised this and said yesterday there would be changes in the style and substance of his administration. They will come none too soon.