

Right routed at party conference

FRANK ALCORTA examines the NT Labor Party conference

THE left wing yesterday consolidated its grip of the NT Labor Party.

Only two of the 14 positions in the administrative committee, the party's executive, went to the right and one of those, Senator Bob Collins', is not elective.

Equally only one position, that of vice president, fell to Senator Collins.

The presidency, secretary, assistant secretary, treasurer, and representatives to the national executive and national conference went to the left or their close allies in the centre left faction.

How did this happen and what does it mean?

There were 80 delegates who obtained their credentials to the annual conference yesterday morning.

On the best figures available, 14 belonged to the right wing faction, 20 to the centre left and 46 to the left.

Indicative of the demoralisation of the right is that two right wing unions, the Shop Assistants' Union and the Clerks' Union, worth eight votes between them, did not send representatives.

The rout was inevitable.

In fact, had the left wanted, it could have won all positions.

That it was prepared to compromise on a power-sharing arrangement with the centre left, and indeed with the right, is probably the most crucial factor at this conference.

It determined the outcome and, much more important, it helped shape a scenario that will inevitably bring Labor to power next decade.

For the key to any understanding of Labor politics in the Territory today is the growing maturity of the left.

Gone are the passionate debates on meaningless ideology.

They have been replaced by an intense commitment to win first the NT's House of Representatives seat and then the Territory election.

Correct

The ALP's national secretary, Bob Hogg, was probably correct when he drew parallels between the Victorian branch of the Labor Party in the 1970s and early 1980s and the NT branch.

Mr Hogg remarked that the Victorian ALP was "used to being in opposition."

"We enjoyed wallowing in the misery of perpetually being in opposition trying to solve esoteric problems around the world."

"We debated how to find peace in Ireland or who should govern Iraq."

"It was very comfortable, very warm and very irrelevant."

Not until 1982 did the Victorian ALP break the drought of 27 years in opposition.

The reason for the prolonged period in opposition, as Mr Hogg rightly said, is that the

party was not perceived as being ready to govern by a majority of Victorians.

The situation with the NT ALP has been remarkably similar.

There has been no reluctance on the part of Territorians to send Labor representatives to Canberra.

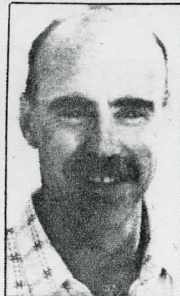
But they have shown extreme reluctance to translate their federal votes into support for the NT ALP in Territory elections.

But when observers look at the changing fortunes of Labor here they will be forced to concentrate on one key event and one key personality.

The event was the July 10, 1987 federal election.

The leading left winger, Warren Snowden, who had been given no chance to pick up the seat, won.

It electrified the left and it does not matter



□Mr Snowden



□Ms Gillespie



□Senator Bob Collins

Labor's left likes the taste of power

a fistful of beans that Mr Snowden won through a formidable public service backlash against the NT Government's attempts to cut conditions.

What matters is that the NT ALP's left was given a taste of power. They liked it.

Furthermore, a substantial body of opinion in that faction came to the conclusion that desirable social measures could not be achieved without first winning government.

That body of opinion included powerful figures such as:

- The departing president Col Dyer, whose presidency has been difficult but effective.

- Feminist and peace activist Margaret Gillespie.

- Trade unionist Peter Tullgren.

The combination of both, a taste of power

and a growing realisation that winning is important, has meant a dramatic shift to the middle political ground by the left.

It has meant, among other things, that regardless of appearances there are not insoluble philosophical differences with the right — only deep personal animosities.

Finally there has been Mr Labor Party himself, Senator Bob Collins, once prominent in the pantheon of left wing demons but yesterday in fact supported by the very faction that loved to hate him.

It is impossible to underestimate the contribution Senator Collins has made to sensible, rational debate within the NT ALP or to the slow implementation of pragmatic policies.

The left therefore is no longer the exasper-

ating and irrelevant petty irritant it was.

It is a mature faction willing to contribute positively to the economic, social and political development of the NT.

What about the right?

Yesterday they were despondent but they should not have been.

If what they wanted was bodies on seats they lost.

If on the other hand they wanted what they have always said was their goal — a more pragmatic party geared for victory at the polls — they won.

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