

CLP glee at Labor strife

Bell fails to get numbers

A PROMINENT Country Liberal Party member said it all when he heard MacDonnell MLA Neil Bell had been unsuccessful in his bid to topple Opposition Leader Terry Smith.

"Good news," the CLP ranking member said. "There was no challenge because Bell's head counting revealed the vote would have been tied at 3-3. In the event of a tie, Smith remains at the post.

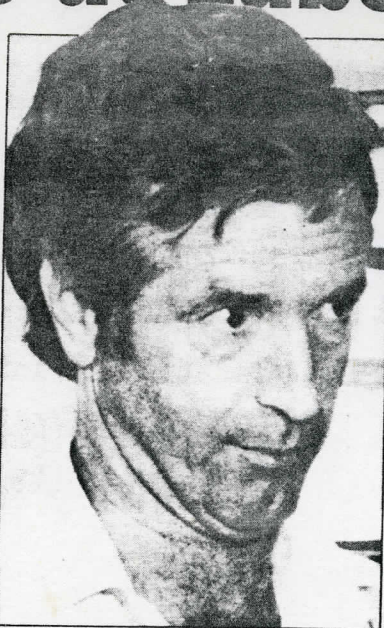
For Smith were deputy leader Brian Ede and retiring Nhulunbuy MLA Danny Leo. Against were Mr Bell, Arafura MLA Stanley Tipiloura, and Arnhem MLA Wesley Lanhupuy.

In the event the contest depended on one man, Leo, who Bell tried desperately to bring to his camp on Thursday evening over dinner at the Atrium. It was a futile attempt.

Leo, who will retire to his block in Queensland to enjoy his golden handshake immediately after the next election, had it in his hands to change the course of Territory politics last Friday. He decided against it.

A prominent right faction member described his actions as the "Leo theory of Labor politics." According to that theory, Leo feels the ALP in the Territory is on the skids and nothing but a complete wipeout will shake it out of its lethargy and put it in a position to win.

If so it is a silly theory. The fact is that the party attracts a consistent 35-40 per cent of the primary



□Mr Bell ... challenger



□Mr Smith ... leader

vote and almost half of the two-party preferred vote in Territory elections. It holds the NT's sole House of Representatives seat and one of the two Senate seats. Provided there is substantial reform and solid leadership there is no reason why it cannot win government here.

The meeting came after a letter asking Smith's resignation as leader signed by Bell, Tipiloura, Port Darwin ALP candidate Peter Cavenagh, Jingli candidate Fiona Stutchbury, Koolpinya candidate Peter Ivinson and, some 24 hours after the first draft, prominent right winger and candidate for Fannie Bay John Reeves.

It also came after a paper circulated among the branches by Bell. The paper outlined some of the problems the party faces in the Territory and proposed sensible solutions.

In effect, Bell's recommendations, if adopted, would push the NT branch of the ALP

on the road to pragmatism and would open the way for victory at the polls. It is a resounding rejection of the policies of the "inner glow" and a call for the adoption of mainstream philosophies and values.

Bell has the support of a substantial body of opinion in the party, particularly among candidates who perceive growing tiredness towards the CLP Government in the electorate.

They want to win and they know that a determined campaign centred on common sensical policies and good candidates would lift the ALP's electoral stocks preparing it for government in the 1990s.

But they believe what the polls say, that with Smith as leader there is

little or no hope of winning seats in Darwin and Alice Springs.

Hence Bell's almost continuous challenges and the resultant lack of stability. No doubt the challenges, or speculation about them, will go on.

What now? Well, the ALP has some problems. For a start Tipiloura and Lanhupuy could change sides or stand as independents next time around. Indeed Tipiloura is still in the Labor Party because Senator Bob Collins has worked hard to ensure that this is the case.

And Lanhupuy is facing a terrible dilemma. If Aboriginal Affairs Minister Gerry Hand gives the thumbs down to the breakaway East Arnhem Land Council

his continuing membership of the ALP could put his seat in danger. Tempers are running hot in his sprawling electorate, in fact too hot for comfort.

Nhulunbuy is also in danger. Leo will have held it for 10 years by the next election but, in the Territory, that is often a matter of the candidate's personal following rather than political allegiances. His going creates a vacuum which the CLP has a good chance to fill.

This means that if, as conventional wisdom has it, Labor cannot win urban seats with Smith as leader and could lose a few rural seats next time around there is a real possibility that the party will be consigned to the political wilderness for a decade or longer. Indeed it could even be replaced by the emerging NT Nationals as the formal opposition.

And if National leader Ian Tuxworth has proved more than a match for the Govern-

ment on his lonesome own, just think what he could do with the kind of logistical support Labor has as the official opposition. Researchers, secretarial staff, offices, computers and public relations people.

Tuxworth is used to managing that sort of team and would make a real fist of it. An iron fist.

It is not a healthy situation and there is no real sign ALP strategists are aware of the gathering storm.

Rather what seems to be happening is that instead of pulling together the factions are drawing further apart.

The ALP, at least to the impartial observer, is a party driven by passion and personal animosities as much as by ideology, reason and logic.

More is the pity because the Northern Territory needs a strong opposition that can be called to form government in the course of time.

At present no one in

his right mind could call the opposition strong and there are some doubts whether it can be called an opposition at all.

To make matters worse, the CLP is growing much stronger, not weaker. Unnoticed and unreported there has been a veritable revolution in the party machine.

Since the Young Turks took over in June last year the branches have been restructured and revitalised and membership has more than doubled.

The machine is solid while the parliamentary wing, ably led by Chief Minister Marshall Perron, has been able to avoid the damaging controversies of the recent past.

This is, therefore, the time when Labor should take a good hard look at itself, starting at the grassroots right through to the top.

Mr Bell's paper provides at least a starting point. If only it was translated into policies.

NT AFFAIRS

FRANK
ALCORTA



Polls show ALP can't win with Smith