



NT NEWS 3/4/90

# PS uneasy at jobs vacuum Top slot vacant



**T**HE top and middle ranks of the NT Public Service are not looking forward to the next few months.

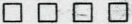
There are two factors contributing to a real sense of uncertainty in the upper levels of the NTPS.

One is the election into which, for the first time since 1974, the CLP goes as the underdog.

The other is a vacuum at the top.

On the first, there is genuine bewilderment in the Government's ranks at the CLP's poor electoral fortunes since the March 1987 Territory election.

Party strategists ask themselves why the CLP has lost five consecutive elections and by-elections and cannot come up with any hard and fast answers.



**I**N their view, the Government has been all things to all people.

In the area of social services it has probably done better than almost any State Government.

Territory schools are generally better appointed, have better facilities and more staff than schools in the States.

The same thing applies to health.

For example, waiting time for public hospital beds here is much lower than in the States.

Public housing is also much better than in the States.

Thousands of Territory home owners have received concessional loans from the Government.

Unemployment and inflation are consistently lower than the national average and job creation higher.

The quality of life, except for the occasional irritations of the weather, is very good in the Territory.

Darwin has never looked better and the same could be said of other Territory centres.

Any objective analysis would also have to come to the conclusion the CLP cares for the environment and its Conservation Commission is rightly rated as one of the best in the nation.

There is no significant corruption problem and no major scandal affecting politicians here.

So, why the unpopularity of the governing party?

The CLP parliamentary wing is often accused of "arrogance" and of suffering from a belief it has a divine right to rule.

Obviously that is the public perception but it is certainly not the truth.

My experience of CLP politicians is that, in fact, they are terribly nervous, confused and very conscious of a tag they feel they do not deserve.

Compared with politicians anywhere, this lot is remarkably "un-arrogant".

The answer to the CLP decline in popularity is probably to be found in the changing nature of the Territory population.

I suspect what has happened in the past five years or so is that thousands of small contractors, tradesmen, truckies and small businessmen have gone.

They have been at least partly replaced by newcomers who have been paradoxically attracted to the Territory by easier housing, welfare and social conditions here.

The former voted CLP, the latter Labor.

Added to this is that the most important voting segment of the Territory's population is public servants.

There are about 15 500 Territory public servants, about 5000 Federal Government employees, and, say, 1000 more employed by local government and municipal councils across the Territory.

They make up about 44 per cent of the total workforce and my guess is that a very large

proportion, probably most, support Labor.

Finally there is the solid Labor vote in Aboriginal communities.

There may well be plenty of rumbles against the Northern and Central Land Councils but anyone with experience in mobile polling knows nothing can beat the Labor network of teachers, health and welfare workers, and land council employees.

It is all about voting by numbers in just about every remote community.

What all this means is the CLP is pushing a big barrow uphill in the lead-up to the next election which must take place within 12 months and probably a lot earlier.

The one sector that can win or lose it for the party is the Public Service.

But here things look decidedly bad through no real fault of the Government which, it must be said in all fairness, has bent over backwards to ensure a happy NT PS.



**T**HE Government workforce enjoys salaries and conditions that are substantially higher than in the private sector.

But look at how things can go wrong for the CLP without trying.

The most powerful public servant in the Territory, Mr Alan Morris, is leaving at the end of June.

Mr Morris is the head of the Chief Minister's Department, chairman of the powerful Co-ordinating Committee, and secretary to Cabinet as well as a member of several important boards.

He is also the Chief Minister's principal political adviser.

Mr Morris is in Britain on some knighthood business at present and will not be back until May.

His replacement while on leave was keenly awaited be-

cause it could have been an indicator of who would be appointed permanently to the post — or at least until the Territory election is over.

But something curious has happened.

Mr Morris' second-in-command, Ms Margaret Lyons, is acting head of the department and acting chairman of the Co-ordinating Committee.

But the secretary to the Cabinet is the head of the Primary Industries Department, Mr Don Darben.

That means an immediate dilution of power precisely at a time when it was crucial that power, if only for the sake of consistency in public administration, should be maintained.

That is the No. 1 issue exercising the top ranks of the Public Service.

It is intimately related to the fact not one of them has been considered good enough to fill Mr Morris' shoes.

The appointment has been advertised nationally and is likely to go to an outsider.

Pity him/her and pity the Government for listening to Mr Morris (undoubtedly behind the push to exclude locals) when it was terribly important he should not have been listened to.

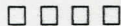
More about this in due course.

Enough to say uncertainty in the upper levels always ripples downwards and it is happening now in the NT PS.

Add now the fact a number of departmental heads are on the record as saying they intend to resign at the end of this year.

Mr Morris has already been mentioned.

The TDZ Authority chairman, Mr Ray McHenry, has gone.



**T**HOSE two are likely to be followed by Mr Darben and Transport and Works secretary, Mr Ian Gordon.

The jockeying among deputy heads is already quite pronounced; it adds to the uncertainty and therefore to latent anti-Government feelings.

Finally, there is the buffer of ministerial advisers and press secretaries between ministers and the Public Service.

The evidence says they have tended to create enormous animosity among many decent public servants.

But more about this topic later.

Enough to say at this stage that, for reasons largely outside the Government's control, the CLP is in real trouble.