



THE MENZIES WATERSHED

LIBERALISM, ANTI-COMMUNISM,
CONTINUITIES 1943-1954

EDITED BY ZACHARY GORMAN

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books are found and online.*

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THE LIBERALS UP NORTH

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An account of the Liberal Party up north is a challenging task given the party did not long endure as a separate entity. A Liberal Party associated with the Victorian Division emerged in 1966. It would last less than eight years before exiting NT politics, but not before overseeing with the then Country Party (NSW Division), the birth of the merged and enduring entity, the Northern Territory Country Liberal Party, in 1974.

In 1995 the CLP invited the late Associate Professor Alistair Heatley of NTU to research the CLP's history. The CLP did not commission the study and it was never intended as an official history; archives were made available; and party officials and elected members were encouraged to cooperate with Heatley in the preparation of his publication. Some financial assistance was forthcoming to assist with research. The result, *The Territory Party: The Northern Territory Country Liberal Party 1974-1998* published by Northern Territory University Press, was launched by Chief Minister Shane Stone MLA on 20 November 1998 at Parliament House Darwin.² Many of those participating in the launch are now deceased. Copyright of the Heatley publication is acknowledged and relied on extensively in what follows.

Writing in his introduction, Heatley observed 'In the scholarly literature on Territory politics, treatment of parties has largely been located within analyses of elections and institutions or within general works on the Territory polity. Although the development of parties before 1974 has been traced in works on the Legislative Council (Walker 1986 and Jaensch 1990) and in an early account of the Territory's political system (Heatley 1979), the coverage was

cursory and partial. There have been few substantial publications about the Territory's political parties post-1974 save for the early publications by Dean Jaensch, 1988 and 1985, and the publication by Jolly 1991 who examined the history of Territory Labor between 1974 and 1990.³ Additionally, former Deputy Chief Minister Barry Coulter AO wrote and delivered a paper at an Alice Springs branch meeting detailing the history of the Country Party in the years leading up to the formation of the CLP in 1974.

With such paucity of publications and primary material I apologise in advance for any inaccuracies and misdescriptions and most importantly the omission of names of those associated with the Liberal Party pre-CLP. Records have been misplaced and lost over the years.

The Liberal Party in the Northern Territory was a short-lived yet important chapter in our political development and history. There is no Liberal Party in the Northern Territory. The Country Liberal Party was created when both the Liberal and Country (now National) parties withdrew from the Territory and the Country Liberal Party was born in 1974. The CLP is not a division of the Liberals and Nationals; we attend annual conferences, council, management and executive committees as observers. When elected in federal elections, the House of Representatives members sit with the Liberals and the senators with the Nationals, although this is not mandated. The CLP is the fourth member of the Coalition, a fact often overlooked by commentators.

Notwithstanding CLP members have played key roles in our sister Coalition parties – members and senators (Calder, Tambling, Kilgariff, Dondas, Tollner, Griggs, Scullion and Price), ministers (Tambling and Scullion, the latter also held leadership roles in the Nationals Senate team), whip (Kilgariff), shadow minister (Jacinta Price, shadow minister for Indigenous affairs), party leadership (Stone, Liberal federal president during the six latter years of the Howard Government 1999-2004 and one of the few federal

life members as well as accorded same by LNP QLD and Victoria). Most importantly the CLP over successive federal elections has facilitated key campaign operatives (not members of the CLP), at various times dominating key roles in CHQ – Textor (of Crosby Textor fame), Conran, Murphy, Cowdy, Swinstead and Stone. The CLP has punched well above its weight and has been associated with several of the Coalition's greatest successes. Conran served on the personal staff of Howard and Morrison. He was later appointed as the federal cabinet secretary in the Morrison Government. The CLP Perron Government through expert treasury advice sought to assist Dr John Hewson on various matters associated with the 'Fight Back' package in 1993. At state level, the CLP Hatton Government assisted the incoming Greiner Government's 'transition to Government' in 1988. The Perron CLP Government assisted the incoming Kennett Government in formulating education and schools' policy in 1992. In 1996, the Stone CLP Government assisted the Tasmanian Rundle Government on various policy issues, albeit unsuccessful.

The merged Coalition entity styled the Northern Territory Country Liberal Party owes a great deal to the contemporary Liberal Party for its survival and ultimate revival. True to the saying 'success has many parents and failure is an orphan' it is worth reflecting on what was achieved by the new entity, the CLP, following the withdrawal of the Liberal and Country parties from the Territory. Dating from the first fully elected Legislative Assembly in 1974 the CLP won every Territory election for the rest of the century, ultimately defeated in 2001 with the fall of the Burke Government. In terms of highlights on 30 August 1997 the CLP were returned to office for the sixth time since self-government on a record vote and the eighth time since 1974 (the 1997 general election represented a high-water mark for the CLP receiving 54.7 per cent of the first preference vote, an increase of 2.8 per cent from the 1994 election result. Territory Labor's vote was down by 2.9 per cent to 38.5 per cent. In two-party preferred terms support for the CLP increased

1.6 per cent to 57.9 per cent). Post our defeat in 2002 we returned for a single term in 2012 to ultimately suffer a humiliating defeat in 2016 where the CLP were reduced to two members of the Assembly after a single term including the Chief Minister Adam Giles losing the seat of Braitling in Alice Springs. Our result in federal elections has been less spectacular as we are on an equal footing with Labor. At the time of writing Labor hold both Territory federal seats Solomon and Lingiari. The CLP and Labor have a senator each.

At a Territory level the NT Labor Party has dominated the last 20 years (save 2012-16), to a point where we who had invested in the CLP over decades pondered whether it was possible to retake the government benches ever again. In party forums, discussions turned on formally merging with either the Liberals or the Nationals. The Nationals' forerunner the Country Party (NSW Division) had played a pivotal role in conservative politics in the NT and can claim to have fostered and supported the CLP in the party's formation and early success.

In January 1941 Prime Minister Robert Menzies flew by Qantas Empire flying boat to Brisbane, Gladstone, Townsville and Darwin before heading to the Dutch East Indies. Given the isolation and remoteness of the NT, he would have found a mostly itinerate northern outpost of circa 5000 people, soon to be recoiling from the Japanese bombing of Darwin commenced in 1942 and continued until 1943 with an estimated 260 casualties. Darwin was a city with limited resources; a poorly equipped and demoralised military outpost. Whether the prime minister met with any like-minded political supporters during the visit I have not been able to ascertain. His main address was to an AIF unit, to whom he said specifically 'I am not here to talk politics', although he did touch on his upcoming meetings with Churchill.⁴ He noted in his diary that he was 'assured on every side that if not for unions Darwin would progress',⁵ suggesting he received at least some local political intel. In any event, the Liberal Party had not yet emerged on the national scene and the Menzies UAP Government was a minority destined for defeat.

The first Territory conservatives with a UAP/ Liberal disposition came from 'down south' and resided primarily in Darwin. The Country Party's strength was to be found in Central Australia. There was also the North Australia Party (NAP) established in the 1960s by the formerly independent member for Alice Springs Colonel Lionel Rose, 'to promote the economic, social and political development of northern Australia.'⁶ This enjoyed some initial success with the assistance of a campaign organiser from the NSW Division. But the simple reality of Territory politics was that whilst the states and the Commonwealth provided ample opportunities for passionate electoral contests, this was not the case in the Territory. Until the creation of the Legislative Council in 1947 the only contests going were for a single seat in the Commonwealth parliament (with no voting rights save on matters affecting the NT), Darwin municipality until 1930, and Advisory Councils between 1926 and 1931.

The Labor Party got an early foothold in the Territory stemming from trade unions around Darwin, and was contesting Town Council elections from 1915. It was not until 1922 that an NT Reform League emerged as an alternative to Labor who were riven by internal dissent and competing factions. The inauguration of a Legislative Council in 1957 and a municipal council in Darwin did not prompt the formation of a permanent conservative party. Labor continued to field candidates with moderate success while others preferred to be independents. The reality was that Darwin had a small and churning population, and due to poor communications, the locals were somewhat removed from national news and events notwithstanding a few local papers.

Heatley documents the brief history of the NAP as follows:

Jaensch has described the October 1965 Council general election as 'the genesis of a Northern Territory party system'. It was the first 'where a majority of candidates were party nominees, and the first election where Labor faced a party team'. The NAP fielded five contestants, three in

central Australia, one in the seat around Katherine and one in Darwin. Labor ran seven. After a fiery campaign on the hustings and in the media, where *The Northern Territory News* (NTN) in Darwin and the CA in Alice Springs vigorously opposed the NAP ... the new party gained but one seat; Greatorrex was elected in Stuart, the largely pastoral constituency in the south of the Territory. Rose lost his place narrowly to Labor. In Darwin, the NAP hopeful polled poorly. An interesting, albeit arguable, comment on the NAP was made by the NTN; it saw the party as a 'Liberal Party – front organisation'. As evidence, it pointed out that the organiser of the campaign had been provided by the NSW Liberals, that the NAP's top official in Alice Springs had attempted to form a local Liberal branch, that the resources expended on the election were large (and therefore by implication received from outside the Territory) and that the NAP had concentrated on attacking the ALP. It concluded that 'if the Liberal party wants to move in then this should be done openly. The party would receive, as such, considerable support from many sections of the community' (NTN, 21 October 1965). The NAP survived into early-1966 to contest two further elections. In a byelection for the seat based on Tennant Creek in February, it was unsuccessful but, in the same month, it achieved its best results in the election for the five community representatives on the Alice Springs Town Management Board. In a small turn-out (17 per cent), it won all positions, swamping the Labor team. One commentary referred to the NAP success as 'the greatest political reversal ever seen in The Centre' (*The Inland Review*, 2:5, December 1967, 18). Nonetheless, it soon faded away with its place as opposition to Labor being soon taken by the Country Party and the Liberals. Several of those who had been

connected to the NAP were later to become involved with the Country Party, particularly in Alice Springs.⁷

The death of the NAP left a political vacuum which would give birth to the NT Liberals:

Several earlier invitations had been made to the Liberal Party to establish a presence in the Territory and one candidate in a 1963 Darwin by-election had styled himself a 'Liberal' but the party only became active in 1966, and for similar reasons which had spurred the interest of the CP. A Darwin branch, which later became associated with the Victorian Division, was founded in late September (NTN, 28 September and oral history transcript of Harold Cooper, NT Archives). Like the CP, the Liberal Party had a small membership, largely drawn from the commercial and professional community. It did not stand a candidate in the 1966 federal poll, preferring instead to support Calder (Country Party). Until the lead-up to the 1968 Council election, there was little public political activity from the party.⁸

The leading figure of the Darwin branch was Norman Harold Cooper OBE, mayor of the city from 1959-66, a former soldier who had entered the stevedoring business and become an active member of the Chamber of Commerce.⁹ A humanitarian, Cooper had received interstate press attention for threatening to resign in opposition to a proposal to bar Indigenous Australians from using the municipal swimming pool,¹⁰ and backing two Malayan residents in a fight against their deportation.¹¹ He also led a successful campaign to stop the wreckage of the first Japanese aircraft shot down over Australia from being relocated from Darwin to Canberra.¹² The timing suggests that the first Liberal branch may have been founded partly in response to Cooper's defeat as mayor at the 1966 council elections.

Heatley concludes:

In August 1968 a second branch was created in Darwin and an executive structure established (NTN, 20 August and oral history transcripts of Tom Lawler and Ella Stack, NT Archives). The Liberal Party stood six candidates in the October 1968 election – five in Darwin-based seats and the other in Arnhem. Although it conducted a strong campaign and won nearly 30 per cent of the primary vote, none of its candidates was elected. Nor were endorsed Liberal candidates successful in two by-elections in Darwin in late 1969 and early-1970; they were won by former Liberal members running as independents. Rivalry over preselection was one factor in weakening the party. After the run of electoral disappointments, it ceased to operate as an organised body; in the 1971 Council elections, several erstwhile party officials, candidates and members again participated under an independent label. When it became clear in 1973 that the next election would be for a fully elected legislature, there were discussions among Liberal supporters about party revitalisation. But they were overtaken by the events which surrounded the formation of the CLP in mid-1974.¹³

The rest is now history. The minutes of the Liberal Party in Darwin 1966-74 have been lost but some names are remembered by family members and friends. They include Cooper, Alf Hooper (first president CLP 1974), Paul Everingham (subsequently first chief minister), Neville Skews, Albert Albany, Maizie Rainer, Rex Jettner, Tom Lawler, Ella Stack, (subsequently lord mayor of Darwin 1975-79), Ron Dickson, and Tony Watson-Brown. Other leading identities at the time were Calder, Letts, Vale, Kilgariff and Rex Jettner associated with the Country Party. This is not an exclusive list of Liberal and Country Party identities.

Menzies is not forgotten in the north. The Menzies School of Health Research, named for Sir Robert Menzies was established in

1985 by a CLP Government as a body corporate of the Northern Territory Government under the *Menzies Act 1985*. This Act was amended in 2004 to formalise the relationship with Charles Darwin University (CDU). Menzies is now a major partner of CDU and constitutes a school within the University's Institute of Advanced Studies. The school is one of Australia's leading medical research institutes dedicated to improving the health and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. They are also a leader in global and tropical health research into life-threatening diseases.

¹ The Honourable Shane L Stone AC KC is the current president of the Country Liberal Party. He was formerly chief minister of the Northern Territory (1995-9) and federal president of the Liberal Party (1999-2004).

² To see a photographic record of the launch see www.stonefamilyinaustralia.com.au search Shane Stone's archive for Alistair Heatley.

³ Heatley, *The Territory Party*, p. xi.

⁴ 'Prime Minister at Darwin', *The Age*, 4 February 1941, p. 6.

⁵ Menzies, *Dark and Hurrying Days*, p. 20.

⁶ 'New political party to develop north', *Canberra Times*, 12 August 1965, p. 9.

⁷ Heatley, *The Territory Party*, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹ Heatley, *A City Grows*, p. 129. There is photographic evidence suggesting that Cooper may have met and even sailed with Menzies during the latter's 1954 trip to Darwin.

¹⁰ 'Would resign if natives banned from pool', *Canberra Times*, 28 June 1960, p. 6.

¹¹ 'Malays', *The Bulletin*, 7 October 1961, p. 8.

¹² 'Save Our Zero', *The Bulletin*, 28 July 1962, p. 9.

¹³ Heatley, *The Territory Party*, p. 7.