

EDITORIAL, December 2, 1988

Just who is the Opposition?

THE last sittings of the Legislative Assembly for 1988 were almost totally dominated by the Government.

But for the Government mistake of attempting to stifle debate during the general business session on Wednesday, the Labor Opposition would have attracted hardly any attention.

Indeed it can now be said that if there is any noise emanating from the Opposition it will inevitably come from the Barkly MLA, Mr Ian Tuxworth.

This is not a healthy state of affairs. Good governments are invariably made by good oppositions that bring alternatives, propose policies and keep ministers on their toes through probing, intelligent questions.

Nothing like that, unfortunately, is happening in the Territory Parliament. Mr Tuxworth, as amply demonstrated by his virulent opposition to the free exchange of needles for drug addicts, can in no way be considered a constructive alternative. The measure is designed to help fight AIDS, probably the most dangerous scourge in the history of humanity. Anything that helps save lives, even those of drug addicts, must be given a fair try.

But Mr Tuxworth says the only thing that will help with AIDS or drugs is fear of death. The evidence says otherwise. History is full of examples of reformers, dictators, inquisitors and others who tried Mr Tuxworth's remedy and failed. Fear only generates more fear. It does not cure anything and, indeed, usually makes the problem worse.

As for the Labor Opposition there can be no question about their very clear commitment to do their best for the Territory and for the party. No one would argue against the six Labor MLAs on the grounds they are anything but honest and decent politicians trying hard.

Problem

Their big problem is that this is not enough. The ALP has considerable talent Territory-wide. It is difficult to understand why it has been unable so far to muster that talent to begin the long haul towards being considered an alternative government.

Instead it has squandered resources and energy on peripheral issues such as the role and status of women in the NT Public Service. A junior researcher could have told them women are much better represented in the Territory's executive ranks than in most other States.

The same thing applies to issues such as the recent housing package. The one question that should have been asked by Labor simply was not asked. The question is: What has happened to public housing in the Territory?

The ALP has also, quite incomprehensibly in our view, chosen to ignore the vast revolt by bush blacks against the Northern and Central Land Councils.

The people of the NT need a strong and effective Opposition if for no other reason than to keep the Government on its toes.