

# Perron poll shift more than ploy

By FRANK ALCORTA

**THE** Chief Minister, Mr Marshall Perron, is totally serious about his proposed move from Fannie Bay to Millner.

He wants to pit himself against the Opposition Leader, Mr Terry Smith, in the next Territory election which Mr Perron would like to delay until it is due in March but may not be able to because of intense party pressure.

Behind the move there are three things.

One is the awareness the election will be very tight. Obviously if he can knock off Mr Smith from Millner, it may make the difference between winning or losing government.

The second is Mr Perron's firm belief a Smith Government would not be good for the Northern Territory.

The belief may or may not be correct but there is no doubt Mr Perron holds it.

He says quite openly, in his opinion, a Smith-led Labor Government would set the Territory back a generation.

Finally, the move would allow the CLP president, Shane Stone, to throw his hat in the ring for Fannie Bay.

Mr Perron thinks highly of Mr Stone and knows many people in the party see him as a potential heir to the chief ministerial mantle.

With Mr Stone in the Legislative Assembly — almost certainly with a Cabinet posting — Mr Perron would feel less constrained to make personal decisions that will affect his political future.

The throne, as it were, would be in good hands.

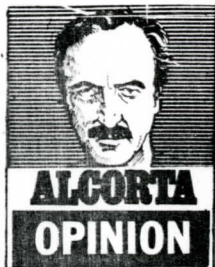
There are enormous risks in the proposed move.

Mr Smith won Millner in a by-election in 1982.

He survived the Labor debacle of December 1983 (which the CLP won 19-6) and went on to obtain 81.9 per cent of the primary vote in the March 1987 election.

The CLP obtained only 25.5 per cent while the NT Nationals received 12.9 per cent.

The swing to Mr Smith on a



two-party preferred basis was 13.2 per cent. The estimated swing to lose on the same basis is 15.3 per cent which most observers would conclude is a near impossibility.

The difference next time it that the redistribution has included in Millner part of the Ludmilla seat, at present comfortably held by Col Firmin for the CLP.

It is that part that may make Millner somewhat more vulnerable although I doubt it because the conservative votes will be balanced by the Labor votes in the Bagot Reserve.

A move into Millner therefore, certainly according to conventional wisdom, should spell political suicide for any aspiring CLP politician.



**T**HERE is no chance the present pre-selected CLP candidate, Simon Andropov, will win.

Against that is the widely held perception among conservatives (and some Labor members) that Mr Smith is a weak leader ready to be toppled.

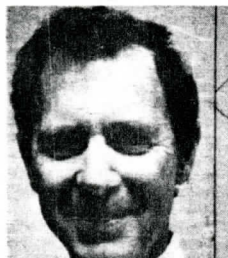
Polls conducted by both parties confirm the perception but they do not tell the story in Millner itself.

The story there is that Mr Smith has been a good constituent politician who has built a core of strong loyalties in the seat. Regardless of his image in the electorate at large, Millner appears to be rock solid Labor country through Mr Smith's work.

The big question mark for



Mr Smith



Mr Perron

CLP strategists and for Mr Perron himself is whether the Chief Minister's electoral popularity can be transferred to the specific Millner situation.

It is impossible to say although my guess is that it cannot.

Mr Perron may be putting his career on the line in an unwinnable seat.

Mr Stone, despite the political horizons opening up for him, is nervous at the possibility the party could lose its best asset.

He correctly regards Mr Perron as head and shoulders above his parliamentary colleagues in negotiating skills, control of the Cabinet agenda and leadership qualities.

With him gone, the CLP, even if it won the next election, would be headless.

Mr Stone is therefore urging Mr Perron not to move from Fannie Bay.

There is recognition in the CLP that the prospect of Mr Perron directly challenging Mr Smith at his bailiwick is fraught with dangers but also offers high rewards.

It is the ultimate gamble with the highest stakes in the Northern Territory. Winner takes all.

Mr Perron wants to do it, but the party — in reality the 66-member central council — may decide otherwise.

The council has overriding powers over pre-selection.

Even if Mr Perron were to succeed with the Millner pre-

selection committee he may have his candidacy thrown out by the council.

The proposed move also has a broader meaning.

It is that the CLP, after more than two years in the doldrums, is fighting back.

Faced with an unimpressive line-up of Labor candidates CLP strategists have come to the conclusion the next election can be won after all.

This was not the case even a couple of months ago.

The February Legislative Assembly catastrophe involving the Trade Development Zone left many in the CLP pondering the future of the party and preparing for a Labor victory.

But since then a series of events has changed the mood of defeatism raising hopes among party members that the CLP may yet win its sixth consecutive Territory election.



**T**HE events are the postponement of Labor's annual conference, widely seen as a cynical ploy to avoid debate on issues of importance to Territorians; the almost total absence of substantial Labor policies; the unprecedented attack on Mr Smith by Green convener, Bob Ellis; and the withdrawal from the Labor team of right-wing lawyer, John Reeves.

The significance of Mr Reeves' decision to withdraw his candidacy for Fannie Bay is that there is now little chance other solid candidates (with the possible exception of lawyer, Peter McQueen, and, perhaps, Colin MacDonald) will be pre-selected.

This leaves the Labor team, with a few rare exceptions, looking distinctly mediocre.

In the Territory's small constituencies, where incumbency plays such a big role, the ALP badly needed to field high-quality candidates.

By and large, this is not happening.

Mr Perron's possible challenge to Mr Smith must be seen in this context.

It is a bold proposal to take advantage of rising CLP confidence and engage the party in an all-out offensive.

In effect, Mr Perron is telling Territorians not to write the CLP out just yet.

The party may be down but it is not out, not by a long shot.

It may come to nothing, but even if it does, Mr Perron will have achieved his purpose which is to instill a little more backbone in the party.