15. The Northern Territory

Dean Jaensch

For 25 years after the first election for the Legislative Assembly in 1974, the Northern Territory's politics were dominated by a unique Country Liberal Party (CLP). The Labor Party could never lift its representation above one-third of the seats. In the 2001 election, however, patterns of party support, especially in the Darwin region, went into convulsions. Labor won its first election after a massive swing against the CLP in the Darwin region of almost 10 per cent. In the 2005 election, there was a further swing against the CLP, which was reduced to four seats out of twenty-five. In 2008, there was a landslide swing to the CLP that left Labor with the barest majority of 13 seats.

In House of Representative elections, the single elected member for the Territory received full voting rights in 1966, and the CLP dominated until Labor finally won the seat in 1983. For the next 15 years, the seat alternated between Labor and CLP, and Labor's Warren Snowdon held it from 1987 to 1996, and from 1998 to 2010. The redistribution of 2000 gave the Northern Territory two seats: Solomon was essentially the Darwin urban area, and Lingiari covered the rest of the Territory. Lingiari was a safe Labor seat from the beginning, with a majority of the Aboriginal population of the Territory. From its formation, it has been held by Warren Snowdon for Labor, and 2010 was likely to continue this, requiring a swing of more than 11 per cent to be lost.

The first election in Solomon in 2001 was won by the CLP, which retained the seat in 2004. In the 2007 election, CLP incumbent, David Tollner, led Labor on primary votes, but Greens preferences returned the seat to Labor with the narrowest margin in the nation of 0.2 per cent. The contest in 2010 was expected to be just as tight. A poll in Solomon revealed that 73 per cent of the voters believed 'at heart, I'm an environmentalist' (*Sunday Territorian*, 1 August 2010), and the demographics of the electorate showed 33 per cent under thirty-five years of age, and 32 per cent with an annual income of more than \$100 000. Such data suggested that Solomon was prime space for the Greens.

The contests in both seats were essentially CLP versus Labor. But the usual crop of minor parties and Independents intervened. One Independent for the Senate had a single policy: 'I am a passionate Territorian, dedicated to the Territory. I am committed to growing the Territory and protecting our way of life.' The One Nation nominee ran on a policy of stopping all immigration for two years. The Indigenous Independent candidate for Lingiari proposed that the Territory be divided in two, with Alice Springs and Darwin as the two capitals.

Labor and CLP campaign policies were essentially national, but local issues intervened. The ALP incumbent was forced to defend his party's promise that GP 'super clinics' were the future when CLP candidate, Natasha Griggs, revealed that the only one in the Territory, at Palmerston, was closed on weekends. She also won points over the issue of 395 Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) houses that Labor planned to demolish. Pointing out the serious shortage of housing in the Top End, she promised to retain the houses and offer them for private sale.

In content and style, CLP and Labor campaigns for Lingiari and Solomon are usually very different, but an internal dispute in the CLP threatened to wash over both electorates. The CLP candidate for Lingiari, Leo Abbott, an Aborigine, was revealed on 13 August to have breached a domestic violence order. On 14 August, Terry Mills, the CLP parliamentary leader, stating that he had not known about the order until it was published in the media, announced that he would move to de-select Abbott, although mobile polling had begun.

This prompted a serious internal dispute in the party. CLP Senator Nigel Scullion, former Member for Solomon, stated that the CLP had known about the matter, and that Abbott was an 'absolutely fantastic candidate' (*Northern Territory News*, 14 August 2010). Mills demanded that the de-selection proceed, arguing that 'domestic violence in any form is unacceptable, and retaining Mr Abbott would send the wrong message to the community' (*The Weekend Australian*, 14–15 August 2010). The CLP continued to rupture, with Solomon CLP candidate, Natasha Briggs, also arguing for de-selection. The CLP Management Committee refused to act. After a marathon meeting in which Mills argued for de-selection 'as a matter of principle', the CLP President stated that Abbott was 'one of the best Aboriginal people we have ever met' (*The Australian*, 16 August 2010).

Mills continued to argue that the Management Committee should support his position as leader of the party. The *Northern Territory News* (16 August 2010) agreed: 'the Management Committee...made up of faceless branch bosses...effectively told Mills to "go jump", humiliated Mr Mills, damaged the party's reputation and demonstrated who's boss—Senator Nigel Scullion.'

The dispute became more serious when one member of the Management Committee went public with the view that Mills was 'not the leader of the CLP: the Management Committee was', and Mills' proposal 'to dis-endorse was a low, mongrel act' (*Northern Territory News*, 17 August 2010). Two CLP Legislative Assembly members from Alice Springs electorates, including former parliamentary leader Jodeen Carney, stated that they would not campaign for Abbott, and would not vote for him. On election eve, Carney announced that she had 'quit the CLP' and the Assembly over the issue (*Northern Territory News*, 20 August 2010). Despite this internal brawl, the CLP won Solomon, with a two-party swing in its favour.

Table 15.1 Results and Swings, Solomon (percentage of votes)

Party	2007	2010	Swing	Two-party	2010 swing
ALP	41.9	36.1	-5.8	48.3	-1.9
CLP	46.8	46.4	-0.4	51.8	+1.9
Greens	9.1	13.3	+4.2		
One Nation	-	3.0	+3.0		
Other	2.3	1.3	-1.0		

In Lingiari, Labor's Warren Snowden suffered a two-party swing of 7.4 per cent against him, and he was forced to preferences for the first time.

Table 15.2 Results and Swings, Lingiari (percentage of votes)

Party	2007	2010	Swing	Two-party	2010 swing
ALP	54.0	41.1	-13.9	53.8	-7.4
CLP	34.7	34.3	-0.4	46.2	+7.4
Greens	6.9	12.6	+5.7		
Other	-	3.9	+3.9		
Ind.	4.4	9.2	+4.8		

The patterns of voting in Lingiari were interesting. This is a very socially and politically fragmented electorate. The towns of Alice Springs and Katherine have a long anti-Labor history. Labor has never won a seat in either since the first Territory election in 1974, and they are usually solidly CLP. On the other hand, the outback, with a majority of Aboriginal people, has been the heartland of Labor support for a long time—a trend most obvious in the people covered by mobile polling, the overwhelming proportion of whom are Aboriginal. In 2010, however, there were significant differences from these essentially stable patterns. Table 15.3 shows the two-party preferred vote for Labor in these regions for the four national elections from 2001 to 2010.

Table 15.3 Results in Three Regions, Labor Two-Party (per cent)

Region	2001	2004	2007	2010	Change 2007–10
Alice Springs	45	33	35	52	+17
Katherine	40	45	42	44	+2
Remote mobiles	72	79	88	60	-28

The Katherine region showed little change in 2010, but there were significant changes in both Alice Springs and the remote polling regions. The swing against the CLP in the usually safe region of Alice Springs was major. It cannot be established how much the massive change in the aggregate patterns of support in the remote Aboriginal regions was due to the CLP candidate being Indigenous. But again, the change is significant.

The Senate campaign, and the result, caused little excitement in the Territory. With only two Senate seats, and a quota of 33.3 per cent, the CLP and Labor would win one seat each.

Table 15.4 Senate Result, 2010

Party	Vote (%)	Quota	Seats
ALP	34.4 (−12.6)	1.03	1 (= 2004)
CLP	40.6 (+0.6)	1.22	1 (= 2004)
Greens	13.6 (+4.7)	0.41	-
Other	10.8 (+7.3)	0.34	-

There was a strong swing of primary votes against Labor of more than 12 per cent, and the party was close to being forced to preferences. There was virtually no change to the CLP vote. The Greens, the Sex Party (5.1 per cent) and the Shooters and Fishers Party (4.8 per cent) shared the benefit.