

A Short Report: The 2005 Northern Territory Election

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After the inauguration of the Legislative Assembly in the Northern Territory in 1974, the Country Liberal Party (CLP) was dominant for 26 years and seven elections. Labor recovered slightly from its disaster of the first election, when it won no seats, to plateau at about one-third of the votes and a similar proportion of the seats.

By the 1997 election, it seemed that Labor was destined to be the permanent opposition party. It consistently won a solid base of seats in the Outback, with strong support in most electorates dominated by Aboriginal communities. But it consistently failed to win seats where it mattered most — in the Alice Springs area, in Katherine, and especially in Darwin. The last included half of the Territory seats, and the CLP appeared to be entrenched.

The 2001 election was a surprise and a landslide. Labor achieved what most observers thought was impossible — it won a majority of seats and formed a government. New leader, Clare Martin, had overcome the factors which had kept Labor in opposition.

From 1974, the Labor party had suffered from a number of factors. There were no solid working class suburbs to provide a base. The population was very mobile, especially until 1978 when the transient Commonwealth public servants started to be replaced by NT residents. The race-based emphasis of the CLP campaigns in the urban areas played on Labor's link with the Aboriginal communities.

Above all, the CLP benefited from a powerful incumbency factor. Holding 17 of the 19 seats in 1974, with a clear majority of seats until 1997, and with miniscule electorate populations (still only an average of just over 4 000 by 2005), sitting

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members had a powerful advantage. It was a rare event where an incumbent was defeated. The 2001 election broke the mould.

The landslide of 2001 was also surprising because it followed seven successive elections in which Labor's vote was a relatively stable minority, with only very small shifts in Labor support over time. The 2001 election saw massive swings away from the CLP: 9.3 per cent over the Territory as a whole; and over 10 per cent in the crucial Darwin region where, for the first time ever, Labor won a majority of the 14 seats. The biggest anti-CLP swings occurred in the seven electorates constituting the Darwin northern suburbs, and Labor won all seven.

On the other hand, while the new Labor government had been elected on a landslide of votes and seats, it had a very fragile tenure. The Assembly contained the narrowest possible majority of 13 Labor seats of the 25, with the CLP holding 10, and two independents. After the size of the swings in 2001, the possibility was there that the northern suburbs especially could easily swing back again. The new Labor government could hope that the incumbency factor would protect its seats but, as 2001 showed, unless the government had performed well, this was no longer a guarantee.

The CLP had lost in 2001, and suffered massive swings, because it had become old, tired and arrogant. The CLP government had alienated its former heartland in the public service, and even business, once the strongest of the CLP's support base, was critical of the government. The situation was best summarised by Grant Tambling, who had lost pre-selection for the CLP at the federal election: 'loss of values; no new policies; loss of leadership; no depth of political "savvy"; and lack of interest in branch membership participation' (Peter Loveday et al, *Labor's Win*, Sydney, 2002, p. 70).

The Labor party won in 2001 because it had revitalised itself. It had elected a new leader, former ABC presenter, Clare Martin, and it transformed its policies and its image. Labor re-formed itself with policies and personalities which would be attractive in Darwin, especially in the northern suburbs, while carefully massaging the outback. *The Australian* described the 'new' Labor party: 'pro-development, free of cronyism, tough on crime but not with mandatory sentencing, has costed policies, is fresh, would govern more openly' (17 August 2001).

The CLP needed to take 2001 as a lesson, and transform itself. It did not, and its style and policies seemed to indicate that it still believed it had a right to rule the Territory. Dennis Burke, who had led the CLP to its massive defeat, resigned as leader. But, after a brief interregnum, the party restored him to the position. This decision emphasised the refusal of the CLP to take 2001 as a salutary lesson, and to revitalise itself. It didn't, and it suffered a second massive defeat, with even more massive swings in 2005.

Table 1: Northern Territory 2005 Election Summary

Enrolment	111 954
Voted	89 646
Formal	86 288
Informal	3 358

<i>Party</i>	<i>Candidates</i>	<i>Seats Won</i>	<i>Change</i>	<i>First Preference Votes</i>		
				N	%	Swing
Labor	25	19	+6	44 822	51.9	+11.3
CLP	25	4	-6	30 827	35.7	- 9.7
Green	11	0	0	3 594	4.2	+ 4.2
Other/Ind	13	2	0	7 054	8.1	- 5.8

The election reduced the CLP to just four seats in the Assembly of 25. Of these, three were in regions which Labor has always had difficulty — Alice Springs and Katherine. In the former, where Labor has never won a seat, and where race consistently plays a major role in politics, the CLP was reduced to two of the three seats. The third was retained by an independent who had lost CLP pre-selection in the run-up to the 2001 election.

Race also plays a role in Katherine, but so does the RAAF base, where Labor has a very low vote. The party's fourth seat, in the Palmerston area, is now its only Darwin representation. The CLP had also lost its foothold in the outback — for the first time Labor had won every outback seat. A second independent, in a very safe non-Labor seat in the Darwin rural area, was returned in 2005.

The swings against the CLP in the 2001 election were unprecedented. But they were repeated in 2005. The following table shows the regional swings from 1997 to 2005, and emphasises the extent to which the Territory moved savagely against the CLP.

The 2005 election was a virtual annihilation of the CLP. After a period of 26 years when the party was hegemonic, it had been all but wiped out in two successive elections. And with the incumbency factor now favouring Labor in 21 of the 25 seats, there is no alternative for the CLP — a radical re-building process, from the grass-roots up. In fact, the defeat was so severe that there seems little justification any more for the unique Country Liberal Party to continue. Absorption into the Liberal party seems inevitable.

Table 2: Swing, First Preference Votes, by Region, 1997–2005

<i>Region</i>		<i>1997 %</i>	<i>1997–2001 Swing</i>	<i>2001–2005 Swing</i>	<i>1997–2005 Swing</i>
NT	ALP	38.5	+ 2.1	+ 11.5	+ 13.6
	CLP	54.7	- 9.3	- 9.7	- 19.0
	Other	6.9	+ 7.2	- 1.8	+ 5.4
Darwin Northern Suburbs	ALP	41.1	+ 8.1	+ 10.9	+ 19.0
	CLP	53.1	- 10.0	- 13.4	- 23.4
	Other	5.8	+ 1.9	+ 2.5	+ 4.4
Darwin Other	ALP	26.9	+ 4.0	+ 11.8	+ 15.8
	CLP	67.1	- 13.8	- 12.0	- 25.8
	Other	6.1	+ 9.7	+ 0.2	+ 9.9
Alice Springs/ Katherine	ALP	31.2	- 2.4	+ 8.0	+ 5.6
	CLP	66.3	- 20.5	+ 4.4	- 16.1
	Other	2.4	+ 23.0	- 12.4	+ 10.6
Outback	ALP	44.2	+ 12.9	+ 7.9	+ 20.8
	CLP	44.7	- 4.4	- 14.2	- 18.6
	Other	11.1	- 8.5	+ 6.3	- 2.2



