

Hendo's a quiet bloke, but it looks like he'll win NT in a canter

Paul Toohey | *August 09, 2008*

THEY call him Hendo. If he seems hard to know, that's because there isn't much to know. He has led a subdued and faceless Government since he made sure Clare Martin got the boot last year. And that might be how the people of the Northern Territory like it.

There has been no public opinion polling conducted in the Territory for this election, but logic -- and the noticeable lack of disquiet in the electorate -- suggests Chief Minister Paul Henderson, whose Labor Party holds a 19-4 seat majority over the Country Liberal Party, will be returned to power today at a gentle canter.

Routine guesses are that Labor will lose three to five seats, leaving it with a healthy -- some lovers of democracy say too healthy -- majority of about 15 seats.

Inherently decent Opposition Leader Terry Mills has stumbled through the campaign and come out looking like a drunk at a midnight choir. While the CLP may pick up a few seats, word is that Mr Mills may be looking for a new job tomorrow.

Mr Henderson and Mr Mills offered nothing different. But as the Northern Territory News editorialised yesterday, the Territory had to ask itself which party had the best leadership team, and which was best-placed to govern a fragile economy.

"The answer to both questions is, as it was in 2005, Labor," the paper said.

Mr Henderson's re-election strategy has been predictable -- he will lock up more crims and employ more police.

He keeps talking about 4000 jobs and a \$50 billion income stream over the next 20 years when Japanese company Inpex brings gas onshore to Darwin -- although Inpex has not even said the project will come to Darwin.

Labor's first legislative act on taking power in 2001 was to repeal the mandatory sentencing laws for property theft, which had hurt Aborigines badly. Mr Henderson has promised to reintroduce mandatory sentencing, this time for violent offenders. This will also hurt Aborigines.

"What we're saying very clearly here is that if you commit a serious violent assault in the Northern Territory, you will go to jail, first time, no second chances," Mr Henderson said yesterday. He could not be drawn to use the term mandatory sentencing, perhaps because of the disgust it provokes in otherwise pro-Labor legal circles.

He has talked little of the federal intervention, except to advise that up to \$1 billion in federal and Territory funds would be spent in remote areas over the next term of his government.

While predicting a big lift out bush, he warned Aborigines to pull themselves into line with domestic violence. "Of course it happens in every society," Mr Henderson said. "It's not just confined to the indigenous community, but unfortunately, within the indigenous community, it's around four to five times more prevalent. That's a lot of tragedy in that community. It's got to stop."

Like Ms Martin, Mr Henderson likes to be photographed wearing hard hats on building sites and pointing off in the direction of the future.

Unlike Ms Martin, who quickly developed a reputation as a darling in southern states, partly for ending 27 years of CLP rule, partly because she was at the time the only woman leader of a state or territory, Mr Henderson appears to have no recognition factor in the south.

This does not seem to bother the Labor leader. His ego appears fully contained. "In terms of interstate, the Territory's my home," he said. "I've lived here 25 years and married a local girl. What my profile may be interstate I don't worry about."

Mr Henderson, 46, trained as a marine fitter and names his favourite book as a biography of Lech Walesa, the Gdansk shipyard striker who went on to lead Poland. At about the time Walesa was leading his strikes, in 1980, Hendo was working in the shipyards in England.

He says the joy of government is not in controlling people. "Since becoming a minister, holding senior portfolios, being able to work through the process to deliver outcomes is very rewarding," he said.

"It really is a buzz to look around and see you made something happen. I didn't go into politics to be a great crusade. I come from a trade background, and still pinch myself sometimes. Hopefully my time as chief minister has made a difference."