

QUEENSLAND

State Politics

The summer months are not normally times of great political or physical activity in Queensland. The summer of 1968 was in any event one of the most taxing on record. It nonetheless saw the perennial issue of three-cornered electoral contests develop an altogether new peak of intensity. The form it took was perhaps unexpected. The issue was obviously one likely to generate extreme tensions with the governing country party-liberal coalition. It might not have seemed so inevitable that it would generate similar pressures within the liberals themselves. The new dispute arose from the resignation of the country party premier Mr Nicklin, after a reign of over ten years. On 16 January, the state president of the liberal party, Dr Hartwig, announced that the liberals would not contest Mr Nicklin's former seat of Landsborough in the forthcoming by-election, but added that this decision was against his own expressed desire. Mr Charles Porter (Toowong), formerly general secretary of the liberal party, criticised the decision not to contest the Landsborough electorate as showing that the present administration of the liberal party was 'flabby, craven and lacking confidence in our purpose.' Mr Porter said that he intended to move a motion of no-confidence in the adoption of the report by the liberal party state executive.

The division of opinion within the party was emphasised on 6 February, when the Landsborough liberals themselves decided to defy the decision by their state executive, and to run a liberal candidate in their electorate. On 18 February the Landsborough liberal electoral committee announced that they would support Mr Nelson-Gracie as a candidate. Dr Hartwig now promised to support Mr Nelson-Gracie in his private capacity, since he could not do so as state president. However, the parliamentary leader of the liberal party, Mr Chalk, the state treasurer, said that he would support the official government candidate for Landsborough. This would, of course, be a country party member. Mr Chalk also accused Dr Hartwig of creating dissension within the liberal party and the state government itself. Dr Hartwig commented on this view by saying that it was politically dishonest and not in the best interests of the party to enlist members and then deny them the right to contest their own electorates. He asserted that the Landsborough liberals were sincerely trying to advance legitimate liberal interests.

What was happening was clearly nothing like as simple as a clear-cut dispute between the parliamentary and non-parliamentary sections of the party. On 19 February Mr John Murray, the chairman of the rural committee of the liberal party, and holder of the blue-ribbon seat of Clayfield, said that he would help the Landsborough liberals. Mr Porter also said that he would help if asked to do so. Both claimed that the liberal party state executive had no power to take disciplinary action against them. Meanwhile, the state president of the country party, Mr E. F. S. Roberts, described the issue as 'a row in the Liberal Party' which did not concern that party's coalition partners.

On 20 February the country party leadership nominated Mr Michael Ahern, the federal chairman of the young country party, as their candidate for Landsborough. Another liberal member, Mr Lickiss (Mt Coot-tha) then announced his decision to support Mr Nelson-Gracie. On 23 February Dr Hartwig walked out of a meeting of the liberal party state executive, accompanied by Mr Murray. Dr Hartwig then found himself suspended as state president by a special meeting of the liberal party state executive, called by the two vice-presidents. Twenty-three of the twenty-four party members attending apparently supported the suspension, but Dr Hartwig claimed that he could not accept the suspension because the meeting was itself unauthorised. The vice-president, Mr F. Robinson, replied that Dr Hartwig's attitude on the Landsborough issue had placed the party executive in an intolerable situation. He himself considered the actions of the Landsborough electoral committee to be completely unconstitutional, and denied that any previous party decision on three-cornered contests would be contravened if a liberal candidate were not put up to oppose Mr Ahern. For his part, Mr Murray said that he found it hard to believe that any group of liberals would try to direct parliamentary members of the party. And Mr Nelson-Gracie affirmed that he would ignore the decision of the state executive because its last meeting had not been authorised.

On 28 February the 'rebel' liberal candidate, Mr Nelson-Gracie, began his campaign. Mr Porter, Mr Murray and Mr Lickiss were in his audience. On the same night, Mr Chalk pledged his support for Mr Ahern, and claimed to be acting in the best interests of the parliamentary liberal party and the people of Queensland. A special meeting of the liberal party executive was called on 5 March by the vice-presidents. It decided to continue the suspension of Dr Hartwig until the state conference of the party in June. Dr Hartwig in turn refused to accept that the Landsborough liberal electoral committee was indeed acting unconstitutionally in endorsing a candidate against Mr Ahern. On the following day, Dr Hartwig left for Canberra in his capacity as Queensland representative on the federal executive of the liberal party.

The situation obviously bristled with anomalies. One interesting one was introduced by the campaign director of the ALP in Landsborough, who said that ALP preferences would go to Mr Nelson-Gracie. Mr Ahern nevertheless won the election. However, Mr Porter said that Mr Nelson-Gracie's performance could be 'viewed with satisfaction and pride'. This was apparently not the view of the country party state president, Mr Roberts, who commented that the decision of the liberal party to field candidates in Gold Coast seats 'could cause some friction' within the coalition.

Labor

Internecine strife within the ALP also continued its traditional course. At their annual meeting on 19 January delegates of the AWU decided to hold a plebiscite on whether or not they should disaffiliate from the ALP. This decision was said to be taken in consequence of actions of the ALP generally, and also on the grounds of its actions being against the best industrial interests of the AWU. Mr Eric Williams claimed that the activities of the Queensland trades and labor council in particular had not been favourable to good unionism in advising industries to break away from the AWU.

Nonetheless, Mr Williams himself suffered a decisive reverse at the state labor convention in February, when he in fact lost every ballot. The ALP state executive achieved the full 141 ballots possible. The AWU indeed failed for the third year running to win a place in any ballot against trades hall candidates. This failure to improve form was attributed by some delegates to a feeling of annoyance aroused by the disaffiliation threats. However, the triumphant vice-president of the Queensland central executive of the ALP, Mr Egerton, said that the ALP would continue to seek the fullest cooperation with the AWU in labor party affairs.

Miscellaneous

A policeman's lot had not become noticeably happier in Queensland. Two ways were suggested in which it might be improved. The first was by the president of the Queensland police union, Senior Sergeant B. Bright, who said that the shortage of police personnel had now become acute, and that the force needed another 400 men to cope with its present responsibilities. This view seemed to be supported by a statement by the minister in charge of police, Mr Bjelke-Petersen, who said that there had been some 6,000 unsolved cases of burglary and breaking and entry under investigation since the beginning of 1967.

The other suggested way of relieving the position of the police was put forward by the state convention of the young liberals at Rockhampton, which unanimously endorsed a motion by the new state president, to have the traffic act administered by the transport department, so that enforcement of its provisions would be taken out of the hands of the police. It was claimed that in New Zealand, for example, traffic authorities were concerned with guiding rather than regimenting motorists. However, the transport minister, Mr Knox, explained that the police department felt that it was the most efficient department to handle the enforcement of the traffic act.

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