

Marshall Perron turns in his badge

MARSHALL PERRON, a modest politician to the end, has always said he could happily quit life as Australia's longest-serving political leader and go fishing.

In announcing his departure yesterday, a clearly relaxed Mr Perron, 53, qualified that somewhat by saying he would have to do some sort of work in his retirement. And he said that would involve getting his hands greasy underneath a hotted-up car. Cars are a long-time passion of his.

"I couldn't not work, but I'll probably be working more with my hands than my head in future," Mr Perron said. "I've always been a frustrated mechanic. My older brother was a mechanic, you see, and my mother said, 'One pair of greasy overalls a week is enough — you should be the pen-pusher in this family'."

Mr Perron's first career in pen-pushing was a far cry from the political heights he would later achieve.

His long-term job as a tally clerk on Darwin's wharves, counting freight on and off ships, perhaps begins to explain his remarkably unassuming political style.

Mr Perron left the wharves for politics in 1974, just months before Cyclone Tracy would devastate Darwin, and his own home.

He had little formal education, having left school at 14. He had come from a broken family, his parents separating when he was aged just 3.

When he wandered into the partly elected and partly appointed Northern Territory Legislative Council in 1974 to see what politics was all about, he was far from an ambitious young man.

"I sat there and listened to the debate and thought: I could do that... I thought that was all there was to it, basically a debating society," Mr Perron recalled last year.

Mr Perron scraped into the newly

established and fully elected Northern Territory Legislative Assembly in 1974 by just six votes as the Member for Stuart Park, thus beginning an unbroken 21-year political career.

Although, while an employee, he had enjoyed union support to protect his job, Mr Perron quickly came to disdain the changes brought by the Whitlam Labor Government.

Mr Perron disliked federal Labor's intrusion into people's lives. That is still at his philosophical core; it is reflected most recently in his private Member's Bill to legalise euthanasia, to allow the individual a choice free of state constraints.

Mr Perron cited the Bill as the reason for standing down yesterday, removing any suggestion that his

The Northern Territory's
Chief Minister has
hung up a "gone
fishing" sign after 21
years in Parliament.
GORDON FEENEY reports.

Bill would be affected by his position as Leader.

He said that if it were eventually passed the legalising of euthanasia would be his greatest achievement, but if it failed he believed he had "advanced" the day when another Australian government would pass such a law.

Mr Perron has spent almost seven years in the top Northern Territory job, but has been known to remark "I'm still a tally clerk at heart".

Mr Perron has none of the brashness and larrikin spirit of the Northern Territory's first Chief Minister, and Mr Perron's first poli-

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minister, and Mr Perron's first poli-



Marshall Perron: "I've always been a frustrated mechanic."

tical tutor, Paul Everingham.

In fact, compared with the Northern Territory's image as a tough political landscape of knock 'em down, red-necked politicians, Mr Perron had a cautious, considered style of leadership, described by the Labor Opposition's Leader, Brian Ede, as "colourless".

However, one of his greatest strengths, notwithstanding his low-key style, has been his unassailable credentials as a "true territorialian", having spent almost all his life in the Top End.

His only personal show of flamboyance has been his enthusiasm for hot-rods, and he can occasionally be seen at weekends driving around Darwin in his black 1946

Ford Tudor, with its CHIEF number-plates. That love of cars translated into his strong personal backing for the ill-fated Cannonball Run car race on speed-limit-free roads between Darwin and Uluru, which left four dead in a horror smash 12 months ago.

It was another reflection of Mr Perron's philosophy of minimal state interference. Despite predic-

state interference. Despite predictions that the smash would spell political doom for Mr Perron, just two weeks later he won a landslide victory at last June's Northern Territory general election. The ruling Country Liberal Party increased its stranglehold on power from 14 to 17 seats out of the 25 seat Assembly, a victory attributed in no small part to Mr Perron's solid leadership.

The issue of race politics has never been far from the surface in Mr Perron's time as Chief Minister, and such was the case in the lead-up to last year's election.

Mr Perron opened his election campaign with talk of Labor's "frightening Aboriginal agenda", and the Opposition's intention to introduce legal "apartheid": one law for whites and one for blacks.

Venturing south to Sydney in July 1993, Mr Perron found himself in hot water after speaking of the "absolutely appalling" health standards of remote Aborigines who were "centuries behind us in their... aspirations". Mr Perron went on to say that some Aborigines shared bones with their dogs.

He was also in the national spotlight as a bitter opponent to the Federal Government's decision in early 1992 to block his Government's plan to build a flood-mitigation dam near Alice Springs.

The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Robert Tickner, intervened after an independent report had found that the dam would destroy deeply sacred sites. Mr Perron described the decision as yet another example of "the hobnail boot of Canberra on the Northern Territory's neck", and said the independent report read as though it had been written by the Central Land Council.

Mr Perron will leave politics a relatively wealthy man, probably a millionaire, due mainly to the successful development of a major Darwin tourist attraction, Doctor's Gully, by him and his wife, Cherry. The fish-feeding centre attracts hundreds of tourists every day.

Unlike Mr Everingham, who lives in Queensland, and other former chief ministers, Mr Perron says he will not duck the inevitable ongoing public spotlight by leaving Darwin.

He has lived almost all his life here despite being denied his territorialian birthright. He was born in Perth when his parents were evacuated before the Japanese bombing

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fern when his parents were evacuated before the Japanese bombing in 1942.

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