

Poll fears over NT road race criticism

By DAVID NASON

THE Public Health Association of Australia yesterday entered the Northern Territory election campaign with a scathing criticism of the Perron Government's endorsement of last week's death-marred Cannonball Run.

The PHA accused the Government of risking innocent lives and abdicating its public health responsibilities by supporting the event.

The criticism follows similar condemnation last week from the NT Road Safety Council and has heightened tensions about the potential fallout for Mr Perron's Country Liberal Party Government in this Saturday's election.

The PHA attack came as 17 teams from the NT electoral office yesterday went bush in light aircraft, helicopters and four-wheel drive vehicles to set up mobile polling booths on remote area Aboriginal communities, cattle stations and small townships.

Over the next week, mobiles will service more than 28 per cent of the Territory's 95,007 eligible voters.

Going into the election home straight, both sides predict a close contest, with the CLP fighting to protect its 14-9 margin in the 25-seat Parliament.

Yesterday Mr Perron and the Opposition Leader, Mr Ede, were laying low, ready for what is expected to be a fiery last week of campaigning with economic issues the main focus.

But the four deaths in the Cannonball Run continued to haunt Mr Perron, with the PHA saying the "hero status" conferred on the event was irresponsible and had reinforced a culture where "high speed driving was acceptable" in the Territory.

"A responsible government would never have allowed the run to go ahead," the PHA's

Northern Territory branch president Dr John Boffa said.

"The tragic deaths could just have easily included innocent road users with no connection to the race."

Doctor Boffa said excessive speed was a factor in more than 50 per cent of Territory road deaths during 1993 and he pointed to the Territory's road fatality rate - three times the national average.

"The Cannonball Run exposed the public to unnecessary risk and should never be run again," he said.

In a statement, Mr Perron said he respected Dr Boffa's right to state his view and said his government would decide about future Cannonball Runs in due course.

But he questioned Dr Boffa for his silence during the wide-ranging debate over alcohol abuse in the Territory which has seen the Government adopt tough policies.

"The majority of road accidents stem from alcohol abuse. This seems to be a point Dr Boffa has overlooked," Mr Perron said.

Mr Ede also released a statement saying a future ALP government would look at the future of the Cannonball Run after assessing police, coronial and road safety reports.

Mr Ede spent yesterday working over Labor's economic policies in preparation for a release of full costings tomorrow.

Mr Ede will have to counter CLP claims that Labor's election commitments will require extra revenue of \$721 million over the next four years.

Mr Ede has repeatedly resisted calls from the Government and media to produce costings for his policies, saying they would be provided in time for voters to make a proper judgment before polling day.

The Treasurer, Mr Coulter, has warned Mr Ede his costings will be subjected to "rigorous checks" by the Government.

Cannonball Run takes over debate

JUST before Chief Minister Perron prorogued parliament and set the Northern Territory election date as June 4, an Opposition frontbencher was discussing Labor's prospects with reporters in the press gallery.

"I wonder if we can persuade a couple of our people to sacrifice themselves on the Stuart Highway during the Cannonball Run," he mused.

It has proved to be an ominous call.

Last week's death of four men, two of them Territorians, during the controversial high-speed event has now emerged as the election's tantalising wild card.

The question is whether a rising tide of criticism from groups such as the NT Automobile Association and the Australian Public Health Association will inspire a backlash that costs votes for Mr Perron in Darwin's vital northern suburbs, where the election will be won and lost.

Mr Perron thinks not. On Friday night he told Cannonball Run competitors at their wind-up ball that Territorians were "100 per cent behind the event".

But with women identified by both sides as the major component of the swinging voter group, is that bravado accurate?

Already Mr Perron has faced considerable criticism over women's issues in the campaign, an area where the Opposition leader, Brian Ede, is perceived to be strong.

Whatever the answer, there is no doubt the CLP campaign planning was badly shaken when the red Ferrari of Japa-

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nese dentist Akahiro Kabe skidded out of control on the Stuart Highway last week.

The Cannonball Run was very much Mr Perron's personal project.

It was to be his major opportunity to grandstand on television during the election campaign as a go-ahead leader promoting the Territory to the world.

The images were to be glamour with a capital G — exotic cars, celebrities and money.

But what Mr Perron got instead was human tragedy and saturation media coverage that shows no signs of abating.

The political reality is that the circumstances have not harmed Mr Ede, who has shrewdly chosen not to offer any criticism of the Government's endorsement of the event.

Mr Ede has also benefited from the media focus being turned away from the lack of costings of any of his policies.

Had the Cannonball tragedy not arrived, there is no doubt this would have been the big story of the past week.

But it remains the Cannonball Run — and it means the economic debate, so far running in Mr Perron's favour, may continue to be relegated to the inside pages and the second break on TV.

As long as it stays that way, Labor has the chance of grabbing an unexpected victory.