

ASKIN'S FIRST YEAR IN OFFICE

By PATRICK NILON

WITH the first 12 months in office virtually behind it, the NSW Liberal-Country Party Government outwardly appears both satisfied and secure.

It has successfully fended off some half-hearted challenges from the ALP Opposition; statistically its legislative record is impressive, and the pressures developing seem far enough away to be faced another day.

Electoral, though, when the Askin Government goes to the polls in 1968, it will not be judged on its first 12 months but on what it does or does not do in the next two years.

It could well be that the pressures which now appear on the horizon will be decisive.

Statistically, the Government presents a picture of great activity and takes pride in the amount of legislation passed.

In its first two parliamentary sessions, the House sat on 66 days and passed 72 bills. In the previous three years under Labor, Parliament sat on 177 days and passed 163 bills.

Politically, however, these figures are meaningless, for while some of its legislation was marginally helpful to sections of the electorate, there was no outstanding measure certain to be favorably remembered two years hence.

The Liberal-Country Party Government was elected after 24 years of Labor rule with a pledge to revitalise the business of government which they fairly claimed had become old-fashioned and lethargic.

But Labor, while not forgetting or excusing its serious faults in the latter years of its rule, did create a

number of legislative milestones.

There is no evidence yet that the Liberal-CP Government is capable of acting on that scale.

This lack of dynamic leadership to the complex and demanding tasks of government has resulted in some disillusionment within Liberal Party branches, where members looked for quick and dramatic reforms.

DETERMINED

One senior Liberal said the other day, "The average person could not see much difference between the Liberal-CP Government and the old ALP regime.

"Unless they shake themselves up they would be no more than even money at the next elections."

While this would not be a general party view, its appearance after only 12 months is surprising.

The Government's chances at the next elections will be determined by its handling of four major issues—education, rents, transport and the Opera House.

After initially denying that there was any crisis in education, the minister, Mr C. B. Cutler, has virtually admitted it now.

Mr Cutler vigorously denies that there has been any cut in education spending, but the cold fact is that construction of some schools previously promised has been deferred.

The NSW Teachers' Federation estimates that 27 new high schools will be needed at the beginning of next year to cater for a surge in enrolments caused by the addition of an estimated 30,000 sixth-form students proceeding to the final

year of the Wyndham Scheme of secondary education.

The federation believes an extra \$50 million more than money already allocated is needed to overcome the accommodation problem between now and the beginning of 1967.

The Government can expect and will deserve harsh treatment from electors unless it goes a long way towards solving this problem.

Another area where the Government is vulnerable is in its handling of landlord and tenant legislation, an electoral issue particularly in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

In spite of an undertaking not to allow any general increase in rents for tenants in controlled premises, the Government has defined as "wealthy," tenants with an income of \$6000 a year, thus



MR DAVIS HUGHES . . . in trouble with the Opera House.

forcing many tenants to pay increased rents.

Now the Minister for Justice, Mr J. C. Maddison, is considering lowering the definition figure of "wealthy" to \$5000. Still he insists no general rent increases will be allowed.

Mr Maddison came under further fire recently for the Government's decision to remove the ceiling for insurance premiums charged for vehicles under hire purchase.

TRANSPORT

The insurance companies have confirmed that the Government's action will mean at least a 20 per cent rise in premiums.

In a remarkable statement attempting to justify the decision, Mr Maddison said in effect that the Government was faced with the position of sharply increasing premiums or allowing insurance companies to do so. The Government left it to the insurance companies.

In the transport field, the Government has given itself a formidable task.

It has pledged to modernise and streamline the passenger services and, at the same time, to complete the Eastern Suburbs Railway if the Commonwealth obliges with a special loan application.

If the Commonwealth does not agree to provide finance—and the chances are that it won't—Eastern Suburbs residents already cynical after 20 years of promises of a railway could impose an electoral retribution.

As well, railway fares and

charges will almost certainly have to be "adjusted." (This was the word chosen by the Government to cover a savage bus fare increase under the guise of decimal currency conversion).

Also, the Government has given itself the job of finishing the Opera House without Joern Utzon.

Despite the assurances by the Public Works Minister, Mr Davis Hughes, that the new panel of architects will finish the job satisfactorily and keep costs down, there is deep concern within the Government.

If the difficulties Mr Hughes experienced in drawing up the panel are any indication, the Government has given itself a major headache.

These are the problems that the Government has to face and overcome in the next two years if it is to stay in office.

Its trump card, however, could be the electoral redistribution which, as deputy Opposition Leader, Mr P. D. Hills, predicted weeks before the new boundaries were officially announced, should give the Liberal Party at least six more seats.

The outcry from the Country Party, which will lose its Casino seat, indicates that the role of Mr Davis Hughes, appointed by the party to watch its interests in the redistribution, was not very effective.

While the Country Party is angry at the loss of Casino, most other members of the party including its leaders, Mr Cutler, Mr W. A. Chaffey

(deputy), and Mr Hughes all fared well.

The Liberal Party sees the redistribution as correcting an "imbalance" created by the Labor Party.

In the May elections last year, the Liberal Party polled 6 per cent more than Labor in the Metropolitan area of Sydney but secured only 19 seats with 49.43 per cent of the votes.

The Labor Party, on the other hand, with 43.42 per cent of the vote, secured 28 seats.

While finance is the key to most of the Government's problems, the Liberal Party itself also apparently has a finance problem.

For the first time, branches represented at the Annual State Council of the party have been invited to make a \$4 contribution to the convention's costs.

The Annual Report of the NSW Liberal Party State Executive for 1965 sounded a note of urgency on finance. It said: "The inescapable fact is that the Liberal Party urgently needs more money — and considerably more.

"This vital gap in our resources must be sought primarily from individual donors. It follows, therefore, that our branches and conferences must in future accept a much wider responsibility for the overall finance raising of the party."

To a large extent, whether the Government's difficulties will be either lessened or compounded over the next two years will be determined by the ALP Opposition.

So far, apart from a handful of members, it has not been impressive. So, in one way the next two years will be a test of the Opposition as much as the Government.