Murdoch — two views from the academic gallery

by Alistair Heatley

Our redoubtable Chief Minister is becoming very adept at pulling rabbits out of his hat.

His announcement of Rupert Murdoch’s acceptance of the position of interim (and, hopefully, the first substantive) Chancellor of the projected University of the Northern Territory is testament to Everingham’s ability to produce the unexpected.

However much Murdoch may have been personally attracted to this bustling infant of the North, it is a tribute to Everingham’s powers of persuasion that he convinced such a well-known, dynamic, and influential figure to participate in an enterprise which is, to say the least, uncertain.

Still, Murdoch does not usually back losers and his association with the university project will undoubtedly give it a greater chance of success. If ever there was any doubt about the sincerity of the Government’s commitment to the university, then it should be dispelled by this appointment.

Although his influence can vary according to the personality and interests of the incumbent, in an established university a chancellor customarily fulfils largely formal ceremonial functions.

As an officer of a non-existent institution, Murdoch will be expected to play a much more positive role — to help sell the concept, to loosen the pursestrings of a Federal administration which is becoming notoriously miserly in its support of tertiary education, and to overcome academic opposition in the South.

With such a task, one wonders where he will find the time to manage his vast media empire and his transport interests!

As the 20th chancellor in Australia, K. R. Murdoch, M.A.(Oxon.) joins a select and illustrious group. Despite the contemporary dominance of Judges (11) and academics (57), there is ample precedent.

In fact, in the current group, there is already a newspaper publisher — Sir Theodore Bray at Griffith University. Thus, on the score of his education, his business interests, and his acknowledged reputation, his choice cannot be said to be unconventional. Yet, it is likely to be controversial.

Until recently, there was, however, fragility, a measure of bipartisan support for the Territory University (the Australian Democrats always excepted). But, as evidenced in the present Assembly sittings, party viewpoints have become increasingly divergent. Murdoch’s appointment will serve to widen the breach; to the ALP he is anathema, the ‘bete noire’ of Australian politics.

The influence of his newspaper chain has been seen, in Labor circles, as a major contributing reason for the lack of electoral success by the ALP since 1974. In the Territory, his flagship, The NT News, has been lambasted by local Labor politicians alleging bias and distortion.

Given Labor’s acute distaste of the man, his association with the university will be an additional element for disenchantment.

Despite the unfortunate political repercussions, the inclusion of Murdoch in the Territory’s negotiating team is an imaginative and bold step which should expedite the university’s establishment.

(Dr Heatley is lecturer in politics at Darwin Community College.)

by Frank Alcorta

Surprise is a very mild word to describe my reaction to Rupert Murdoch’s appointment to the Chancellorship of the NT University.

During the last weeks a few names have been floated in our academic community.

They have ranged from Sir Mark Oliphant to Professor Kramer and Sir Philip Baxter, all eminently well qualified academics who would have brought with them a much needed mantle of respectability to our brand-new educational venture.

Murdoch was never mentioned. He has not in the past been noted for his interest in academic affairs and, in any case, has always seemed too remote to worry about something like a university in the steamy north of Australia.

Three intriguing questions come to mind immediately. The first is, why Murdoch? The second is, why has he accepted the position? The third is, what kind of reception will the appointment have in the other 19 Australian universities?

The answer to the first question has to do, I think, with money.

So far there is little evidence that the Federal Government is enthusiastic about spending millions of dollars building and maintaining yet another university when there are two or three ailing institutions in the south whose fate is very much in doubt.

Murdoch’s great ability is in finances and this is certainly going to be needed to get the university here off the planning stage.

The answer to the second question is thoroughly compelling.

I shall have two guesses. One is that Murdoch, whatever the shade of his politics, is a man of undeniable vision. He has seen a great future in the Territory and wants to be associated with it in some significant form. The other reason may be that he, having achieved a superb financial empire, now wants the respectability of the academic gown. A kind of splendid menopausal twilight if you like.

The third question is not easy to answer. I suspect that there will be a few mild growls of scholarly rage at the appointment from some of the more staid, and declining, old universities.

But the growls are likely to be mingled with mute admiration at the coup. They know full well that one of the reasons for their decline into genteel poverty is that they have not had anyone quite like Murdoch at the top.

There are a number of ancillary issues that I do not have the room to expand but it is clear that with Murdoch and Eddle the Northern Territory is about to embark in a unique experiment which is risky, perilous, venturesome, and thoroughly exhilarating.

The appointment is controversial and will not be universally well received.

A predictable chorus of protest will be heard but, on this occasion, it should be ignored.

In our present stage of development what matters most is results and, in terms of the university, those are more likely to be achieved by Murdoch than by a more traditional, and largely symbolic, Chancellor.

(Mr Alcorta is lecturer in history at Darwin Community College.)