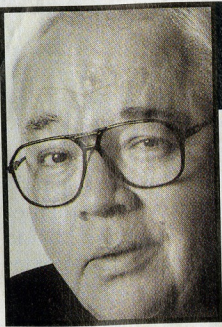


Fears of a new Stone Age

‘Critics cite the referendum defeat as an example of his lack of judgment, arrogance and authoritarianism.’



“Not everybody loves me,” Shane Stone warned

Tony Staley a few months ago. The two were discussing the possibility of Stone succeeding Staley as federal president of the Liberal Party. Now that the former Northern Territory chief minister looks like a shoo-in to win the post at the federal council of the party in July, the truth of those words is being demonstrated. While Prime Minister John Howard and various other Liberal heavies have been working hard to ensure that Stone is elected unopposed, there are members of the party who believe he is the wrong kind of person for such an important and sensitive job and are trying to derail his candidacy.

Central to their argument is a controversy dating back 10 years to the time when Stone was president of the NT Country Liberal Party. The CLP had pre-selected an Aboriginal businessman, Bob Liddle, as its candidate for the federal NT seat, but was having second thoughts about his fitness and electability. Some aspects of his matrimonial affairs and financial situation were causing concern. Stone was one of those expressing misgivings. When the media started to take an interest in Liddle’s financial affairs, a special meeting of the CLP’s central council was called and, after acrimonious debate, his endorsement was withdrawn.

Such things happen in politics. What made this case notable was that Stone, a solicitor, had for a brief time acted for Liddle in relation to his matrimonial problems – and, without authorisation, he took Liddle’s personal legal file along to the central council meeting. The file was placed on the front table with other files and papers. It was not there. The ethics committee of the NT Law Society later found that: “The presence of the file put Liddle under undue and unfair pressure.” The ethics committee concluded that Stone failed to give “undivided fidelity to his client’s interest”. It found Stone guilty of unprofessional conduct and professional misconduct and recommended a \$1000 fine. Stone appealed to the NT Supreme Court which knocked over the “professional misconduct” finding but said: “No reason has been demonstrated to cause the court to interfere with the findings that the plaintiff was guilty of unprofessional conduct in taking Mr Liddle’s file to the meeting.”

If this is how Stone behaved as president of a Territory-level party, his critics are asking, is it not a major risk to install him as the national head of the Liberal Party? “I’m not surprised it’s being raised,” Stone says philosophically. The episode has come back to haunt him several times. It was used to attack him, for example, after he became NT attorney general. On that occasion he stood aside while another minister, Daryl Manzie, was sworn in temporarily as attorney general to examine the issue. Manzie decided the matter had been properly concluded and constituted no impediment to Stone resuming

the attorney general portfolio. It flared up again a few years later when Stone appointed himself a Queen’s Counsel. In the Territory parliament, a Labor member asked Stone if he was aware his unprofessional conduct case was used “as an example of what not to do as a lawyer” in the NT university legal ethics course. Stone’s side of the Liddle case was set out in a letter he sent to CLP members in April 1993. He claimed Liddle had requested that a particular letter be made available to CLP central council delegates, and “rather than remove that letter from the file, I had simply taken the file”. At no time, he wrote, was there a breach of confidentiality.

Liberals opposed to Stone’s elevation to the top position point to other issues. One is his attitude to Aborigines, exemplified – they claim – by his notorious description of Northern Land Council chairman Galarrwuy Yunupingu as “a whingeing, whining, carping black”. Yunupingu branded him a “paternalistic redneck”, and even One Nation’s Darwin branch called Stone’s words “unacceptable”. (And yet, when he resigned as chief minister in February, the Tiwi Land

Council voted unanimously “to convey to you our appreciation and gratitude for your work”, and the president of the Nauiyu Nauiyu community council also wrote thanking him for what he had done for her people.)

Mistrust between Stone’s government and the NT’s Aborigines contributed heavily to the failure of the statehood referendum last year. The referendum defeat – of a proposition that, handled properly, should have been a lay-down misère – is being cited as another indication of Stone’s unsuitability for the Liberal federal presidency. It exposed, they say, a lack of political judgment, an arrogance, an authoritarian approach and a crash-through style – qualities unlikely to be advantageous in a job requiring a great deal of tact, subtlety and backroom diplomacy.

Stone backers, though, argue that, while the party used to give the job to “very charming chaps who were not in the political process in any serious way”, these days it needs a hands-on president with experience of the political cut and thrust. Also, they point out, Stone is likely to have appeal in rural and regional Australia. The

biggest thing Stone has going for him, however, given the prime minister’s wariness of an ambitious Peter Costello, is that he is a strong Howard supporter. As CLP president he stuck with Howard through the dark days of destabilisation by the Andrew Peacock forces. After Stone was given the shove as chief minister, it is Howard who seems to have initiated the push to make him Liberal president. Certainly – while he is also supported by Jeff Kennett and Western Australia’s Richard Court – Howard is Stone’s major backer. And NT sources believe Howard is unlikely to be worried by the Liddle case because he was aware of it from the beginning. Liddle, they say, contacted Howard at the time in an unsuccessful bid to get the federal Coalition to intervene in the pre-selection row. **LB**

