

Outsider: Northern Territory Chief Minister Shane Stone, main picture; John Howard and police ministers announcing gun control laws, below, with Stone front right
Main picture: Verity Chambers

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The NEW STONE AGE



Before Shane Stone became Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, he led government opposition to the euthanasia legislation. Now Stone, a practising Catholic, must safeguard its passage. Maria Ceresa profiles a leader with an ambition to match his dilemma

Parliament, then so be it," he has said. In private, his bravado dissipates, especially when he speaks of his late

liament intervention in the guise of a private member's Bill. Darwin and world-first legislation are a

for the seat of North East Province. A move to Melbourne saw him switch allegiance and join the Liberal Party, becoming president of the Surrey Hills branch. It was there that he met the brash young Kennett.

Stone first visited the Northern Territory as an associate to Sir Edward Woodward during the meat industry royal commission.

He quickly saw the political potential of the Territory. There was no way he could see himself in Opposition under the ALP government of John Cain for a decade and he moved to Alice Springs with Josephine in 1985, establishing the law firm Stone and Buckley.

Within a year, he was acting president of the Territory's conservative Country Liberal Party. Within three years he had won the seat of Port Darwin, and in 10 years he was the Chief Minister, a meteoric rise all the more remarkable in a place deeply suspicious of "southerners".

The major setback in his Territory career was when he was forced to resign as attorney-general in 1993 after an Aboriginal mining consultant and aspirant for the federal House of Representatives seat of the Northern Territory, Bob Liddle, lodged two charges with the Legal Practitioners

spoke in support of statehood for the Territory at a CLP conference. Stone confidently nominated the Prime Minister as a referee for this profile. Howard duly acceded, offering a herogram which praised Stone's fierce advocacy of the Territory and underlined his role in establishing vital links with Asia.

While the dollar benefits from relations are small on a national scale, the kudos has been considerable. And he isn't afraid to let the world know it. Photographs of Stone shaking hands with President Suharto, President Ramos of The Philippines and the Sultan of Brunei, to name a few, adorn the cabinets of the lobby outside his sumptuous office in Parliament House.

new-found national profile. Stone is happy to admit that he likes to be seen at the prime ministerial elbow during photo calls: "I am the head of the Government in the Northern Territory and I intend to be seen," he says.

But his unabashed lust for the limelight may cause him trouble back home. After just 18 months as Chief Minister, Stone is yet to lead the CLP to victory at an election and his autocratic style has prompted murmurs in his Cabinet and rumours of a possible challenge by long-term aspirant Barry Coulter, a euthanasia supporter and champion of the Alice Springs to Darwin railway, famed for drinking water from the Ranger Uranium Mine to prove it is safe.

A challenge at this stage is remote due to Stone's early hard work as party president, delivering the support of his backbench and putting loyal new faces in Cabinet, but there is disquiet among the old guard, used to winning elections after 18 years in power.

Expectations that Stone, urbane and with a legal education, would break from the CLP's cowboy style of politics — not afraid to trial US-style push polling or play the racist card — have faded.

Although professing



charming and ambition personified.

He is also an outsider, which is perhaps what the Territory needs to push its aspirations to become Australia's seventh State and guard the future of the world's first voluntary euthanasia legislation, the most divisive laws to pass any Australian Parliament.

For Stone, 45, the euthanasia law presents a distressing conundrum. He led the government opposition to the law — a child of the previous chief minister, Marshall Perron. As a practising Catholic he told the Northern Territory legislature during the sitting that finally passed the laws: "Euthanasia legislation can contain all the safeguards imaginable, but at the end of the day, the principle remains — one person kills another person."

While worldwide interest in the laws has fanned his desire for a national profile, he has struggled with his conscience and condemnation from the Vatican.

He insists his commitment to enforce the will of the Parliament is paramount and the Bill must be trialled. His leadership is not inextricably linked to euthanasia but a loss of face could fuel a dissatisfied minority in his government still harbouring leadership ambitions.

Stone's stance drew papal criticism in an editorial in the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, widely accepted to reflect the views of the Pope. Stone must have been shaken, but publicly at least, he took up the cudgels courageously.

"If I incur the wrath of the Vatican and the Pope as a Catholic because I take the view that, notwithstanding my opposition to euthanasia, I will enforce the will of

my Party stalwart and former mayor of Wodonga, died at 54 before he witnessed his son "achieve anything". It is a source of enduring bitterness to Stone.

He points out that unlike his father, however, he does not adhere to all of Catholic doctrine and is probably a poor example of his faith.

"Based on that, I would not have had an IVF baby," Stone says. Baby Madeleine, Stone's second child with lawyer wife Josephine, born courtesy of the Territory's in-vitro fertilisation program, was baptised at Darwin's St Mary's Cathedral this year by staunch euthanasia opponent Catholic Bishop of the Most Reverend Ted Collins. Bishop Collins has confined his opposition on euthanasia to public debate.

More overt pressure was exerted by the Catholic Church when a senior religious man whom Stone counts as a close friend from his early teaching days, the new Archbishop of Melbourne, George Pell, was dispatched to Darwin for a chat.

Stone did not waver in his belief that when a Parliament passes something, short of being ridiculous or absurd, there is an incumbent responsibility on the government to see if it works.

Critics of his turnaround say Stone was anointed Chief Minister by Perron under a pact to ensure the legislation became operational — an accusation both Stone and Perron deny. Stone argues that if a vote was held today, the Act would be carried.

This may be right, with Territory parliamentarians on the defensive, with the Northern Territory's right to pass life and death legislation subject to a High Court challenge and threatened by federal Par-

liamentary action in Wodonga, Victoria, where Stone spent his childhood. He remembers visits from the likes of Gough Whitlam, Neville Wran, Tom Uren, who shared a vision of regionalism for Victoria with his father.

Les Stone was a conservative politician, raised in the working-class suburbs of Melbourne in an era when the Victorian Labor Party was rife with anti-Catholic sentiment. He inspired Stone's intense interest in politics by involving his family in his political career.

His mother, Pam, who after her husband's death became the first woman mayor of Wodonga in 1985, also played an integral part in a political exposure Stone now imparts to his six-year-old son, Jack, who last month accompanied him on a camping trip to Kakadu National Park with Victorian Premier and guest of the Northern Territory Government, Jeff Kennett.

SSTONE'S association with Kennett goes back to Melbourne in the 1970s. Kennett recently quipped that Stone left town after he realised Kennett was to become his local member.

Stone was born in Bendigo, the eldest of three children. His early schooling was under the De La Salle Brothers, completing his secondary education at Wodonga High School. After a short stint at Duntroon Military College (he is still a navy reservist), Stone trained as a teacher, moving to education administration before attaining a law degree from the University of Melbourne in 1980.

His political career first faltered when, as a member of the National Party, aged 27, he was defeated in a preselection battle

his loss of preselection in 1989. Liddle, who still believes he was robbed of a federal seat, accused Stone, the then CLP president and a lawyer acting for him in a family law case, of divulging details from the matrimonial file.

A finding of professional misconduct was quashed by the Northern Territory Supreme Court presided over by Justice Brian Martin — the same judge who, as Chief Justice, last month was a member of the Full Bench that found the Northern Territory Government had the right to pass the euthanasia laws. Liddle made other complaints but the matter was settled out of court.

A spokesman from the Chief Minister's office confirms that a lesser finding of unprofessional conduct stands. Both men say the matter has been resolved. Stone feels he was unfairly singled out.

Liddle, who has put the matter behind him in the best interests of the CLP, says he knows Stone is a ruthless politician.

Ruthless but visionary, Stone's role as Australia's first minister for Asian relations led to relationships that won him accolades from the Prime Minister and saw him act as Howard's envoy to Indonesia's President Suharto, in March this year.

Stone's relationship with Howard dates back to 1988 when the Prime Minister



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The day he was sworn in as minister in 1990, Stone stated his ambition was to be the first premier of a newly created northern State, but now that statehood has become more likely, he dismisses his remark as a flippant comment.

In fact, the man who carefully charted his early political career denies he will move to federal Parliament. Initially, he blames the cool climate and then he says a move from being the boss of the Northern Territory Government, a jurisdiction no larger than Bondi in Sydney or Geelong in Melbourne, to Canberra would be too debilitating.

It's understandable, considering his role on the South-East Asian stage and his

issues than his predecessors, his relationship with one of the nation's most powerful leaders, chairman of the Northern Land Council, Galarrrwuy Yunupingu, deteriorated into a slanging match with Stone accusing Yunupingu of dividing black and white Australians.

Stone may be a keen gardener, a lover of classical music and collector of fine Japanese and Chinese ceramics but, above all, he is a pragmatist who knows the dangers of departing too far from the redneck, hard-drinking, pro-mining line.

Stone has become known as the Napoleonic of the Northern Territory — he stuck one hand into his lapel during his maiden speech, his wife is named Josephine, he is short and, most of all, he has an overweening ambition.

Stone will not martyr himself over the single issue of euthanasia. "It is a bit more complicated than going out and throwing yourself on the sword. There is a question of mutual trust between individual colleagues," he says.

"If in one, two, or three years' time it is all in shambles, if it doesn't work, if it has proved to be totally inadequate, then there will be new members of Parliament who are probably prepared to reassess the current position."

In the meantime, the Napoleonic Stone has many other battles to fight.