

Shane Stone, former NT Chief Minister

July 1999

REPORTER:

Mr Stone, welcome to Sunday.

SHANE STONE - FEDERAL PRESIDENT OF THE LIBERAL PARTY:

Thank you, Mr Oakes.

REPORTER:

Last time you appeared on this program ABC radio news referred to you as Sharon Stone. The Liberals should be so lucky, I suppose.

STONE:

They should be so lucky and so should I.

REPORTER:

You've ... you're actually a member of two separate political parties. You're federal president of the Liberal Party. You represent the Country Liberal Party, an independent organisation in the Northern Territory parliament. Where does your primary loyalty lie?

STONE:

Very much an independent party in the Territory parliament, Laurie, the Territory party. It has a very loose affiliation with both the Liberals and the Nationals. But I want to make three points: the first is that I'm on my way out. My seat is being pre-selected as we speak.

Secondly, I don't have any confusion in my mind, and I've now had the opportunity to talk these issues through with the Chief Minister, Denis Burke, and he does recognise that there are certain synergies in my appointment as the federal president and my continuing residence in Darwin and my association with the CLP.

REPORTER:

But Denis Burke did say, not long ago, he thought there was a contradiction in you representing two parties.

STONE:

Well, I understand his concern because it's very important that, particularly in the Territory that it's understood, the CLP is an independent party, always has been, but we've always had an excellent relationship with both the Liberal and the National parties. I mean ...

REPORTER:

But as federal president of the Liberal Party, shouldn't you now sit as a Liberal?

STONE:

Well, there are no Liberals in the ...

REPORTER:

But there would be if you accepted ...

STONE:

But I'm not about that, Laurie. I certainly don't have any confusion in my mind about where my responsibilities lie. I'm a former president of the CLP, a former head of government in the Northern Territory, and now very happily take on the mantle of federal president of the Liberal Party of Australia.

REPORTER:

But, you see ... you just send up the confusion. Here you are, you're the federal president of the Liberal Party. You're a member of the Territory parliament, and you've just said there are no Liberals in the Northern Territory.

STONE:

Well, there are not, Laurie, in the sense of a parliamentary wing, and it's worked very well for the Territory. You have other arrangements in other parts of Australia, but I certainly don't have any confusion in my mind. I don't believe that the public in the Northern Territory are confused.

They see it as a positive for the Territory and the way that we celebrated when Bob Collins became the first Territorian to be appointed a federal minister. I'm getting a similar reaction in the Territory.

REPORTER:

You were once also a member of the National Party, weren't you?

STONE:

A long, long way back, Laurie. I started in country Victoria and, in fact, it was the Country Party then, and you're talking almost twenty-five years ago, and when I moved to Melbourne, I moved my allegiance to the Liberals, for the simple reason that there were no Country Party branches in metropolitan Melbourne.

REPORTER:

So, do you think in your new role you can be a sort of bridge between the Coalition partners?

STONE:

Laurie, I think it's generally recognised that I bring a pretty unique perspective to conservative politics. I'm very pleased and honoured to be taking on the position of federal president of the Liberal Party, but I do understand the Country Party psychic [sic], if I could put it that way.

I understand the needs of people in remote rural Australia, regional Australia, very important that the rest of Australia has a clear focus on our fellow Australians who live in those parts of the country.

REPORTER:

Now, in the past, you've been a supporter of the merged party idea, haven't you, merging the two, the National Party and the Liberal Party? Do you still believe in that?

STONE:

I've always spoken very positively about what can be achieved if you have those merged interests. That certainly is not on my agenda as the federal president of the Liberal Party. That would need to be driven by the grass roots members of both organisations, and it's not something that you will ever see imposed by the hierarchy of either party, or it certainly shouldn't be.

REPORTER:

Okay. Now you're not exactly in the traditional mould of Liberal Party presidents, are you? You're not old money, upper crust, Protestant?

STONE:

Well, I've had that put to me on numerous occasions and I would have to say that I'm probably in the mould of the broader membership of the Liberal Party today, and it's as the Prime Minister, John Howard, describes it, the broad church of the Liberal Party of Australia.

And it's reflected in the election results that you see now, particularly at federal level, that the Liberal Party's been able to reach out to Australians from all walks of life. There certainly is no exclusion of the people that would fit your description that you initially started with but rather you've got a broader base today, and John Howard, myself, Lynton Crosby, the federal director, we all do share that background at some stage of state education, and we're proud of that.

REPORTER:

And would you call yourself a Catholic battler? Is that a fair summary?

STONE:

Oh, I wouldn't ... I don't know about the battler bit, Laurie. I've certainly done it hard in terms of getting myself through university, and paying off a mortgage, and doing

all the things that I think that ninety-nine per cent of Australian families go through, but I'm very optimistic about what can be achieved in this country, particularly if you put your head down and get on with it.

REPORTER:

Now you were sponsored for the job by John Howard. You're an old mate of Jeff Kennett's. Where does that put you in the war, if you like, between the Kennett forces and the Costello/Kroger forces?

STONE:

Well, I think, this is all grossly overstated in many ways, and whilst it's been noted in a number of newspaper articles that I don't come to the position of federal president with the baggage of any internal fighting that might have occurred in the past, having sat in COAG, having been a head of government, having worked cooperatively with all of my colleagues from the states, and with John Howard.

I've always found that at the end of the day, despite the tussle that might occur on a range of issues, that there is a consensus of view as to what's best for the Liberal Party, and that's the perspective that I'm coming to this job with.

REPORTER:

I mean, you do come with some baggage, don't you, from your record as Northern Territory Chief Minister. If I can just read what The Australian said in its editorial when you retired from that job.

They said, he saw the issues as development driven and the problems as those caused by Aborigines and Canberra bureaucrats. His solutions to the social questions were draconian - witness his compulsory prison terms for minor offences. Now, does that handicap you in the new job, that sort of image?

STONE:

Laurie, I'd have to say that I would wear that sort of an editorial as a badge of honour, in the sense that I am pro-development - I've never made any apologies about that and in my role as head of government, I certainly was very proactive on law and order issues.

But, having said that, I am not now in the policy arena. That's a matter for the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory. In the case of the federal arena, for the Prime Minister and his ministers.

REPORTER:

Well, what about your attitude to Aborigines? I mean, you're famous for calling Galarrwuy Yunupingu a whingeing, whining, carping black. Do you regret that and does it sum up Shane Stone?

STONE:

Well, it doesn't sum up Shane Stone, Laurie, and in fact, there was a very strong endorsement for me, when I retired as Chief Minister. And I recall a letter that was written by the Tiwi people, for example, saying that they greatly appreciated the efforts that I'd made on behalf of indigenous Australians and they passed a unanimous resolution from the Tiwi Land Council and I received that accolade from a number of Aboriginal communities.

There was an exchange of words between Galarrwuy and myself, I think he called me a good-for-nothing redneck. That's all part of the tussle, I guess, of politics in the Territory, but I've moved on from that.

REPORTER:

But you also opposed the transfer of Uluru to the traditional owners. You wanted fundamental changes to the Northern Territory Land Rights Act, because you said it hampered development. The mandatory sentencing laws are said to hit hardest at Aborigines in the Northern Territory. Are you the right person to be the president, with that background, at a time when we're going through this reconciliation process?

STONE:

Well, I certainly never opposed Uluru being handed to Aboriginal people. What I had sought to do was get a participation by the Territory government and the boards of management and, bearing in mind that we have over ninety national parks in the Northern Territory and many of them are jointly managed by Northern Territory Department of Conservation and also Aboriginal interest groups and their communities.

In terms of the mandatory sentencing, the law and order issues, Laurie, I'm not going to make any apologies about what I did. I brought down crime across most categories in the three years that I embraced mandatory sentencing and zero tolerance policing.

I believe that the ordinary person on the street has, quite frankly, had a gutful of people who break into their homes and steal their cars and vandalise their property. But again, having said that, it is always open to the Territory government of the day to take a different view. I am no longer in the position of commenting on policy. That's a matter for the parliamentarians.

REPORTER:

But you did have that, sort of, red-neck image. In fact, you said at one stage you didn't care if you were regarded as a red-neck down south. But now you're in this job, and we do have this reconciliation process going on, I mean, how do you approach that?

STONE:

Well, again, Laurie, my role is very much in the administrative wing of the party. I'm certainly not opposed to reconciliation and I'm on the public record as having said that. And I have worked very well with Aboriginal people.

I mean, look into my history, going right back to when I worked for Aboriginal Legal Aid services, I made my contribution. But I have had a view. I've put it very forcefully but as I said to Lois O'Donoghue, when I had dinner with her at Government House recently and we've enjoyed a fairly sparky relationship over time - but we agree to disagree on some issues and the same with the chairman of ATSIC. But at the end of the day, we're all Australians together.

REPORTER:

Now, a lot of the people who like to criticise you because of what they think's your attitude to Aborigines, think you're wonderful because you're a Republican ...

STONE:

(laughs)

REPORTER:

... will you be campaigning for the Yes case in the referendum?

STONE:

Look, it's almost schizophrenic, isn't it? That on some issues that you can be almost lionised, and on others demonised. But I'm a committed republican, the Liberal Party knew that, the Prime Minister knew that.

I'm also a direct elect supporter. But I have been absolutely devastated by the splits and the divisions that have occurred within the republic movement. You will find me on the polling booth, on the day, in Darwin, handing out the Yes card. But, other than that, there's probably very little that I can contribute further to the debate at this point in time.

REPORTER:

Now, as president, will you be a backroom boy - I mean ... I find it hard to see you just hiding in a backroom, or will you be outspoken?

STONE:

Well, Laurie, again I make the point that it's not my role as the president of the federal Liberal Party to be running around, commenting on government policy or arguing the toss in the public arena with the Prime Minister and his ministers. But what I will be doing is working very hard behind the scenes, particularly in terms of the prime ministership of John Howard, the man ...

REPORTER:

Well, I was going to ask you, as a final issue, I mean, how long do you think he's going to be there? Do you believe, for example, that he wants to outlast Malcolm Fraser's eight years?

STONE:

Well, Laurie, every politician sets themselves their own goals, but can I say this about John Howard and why I was prepared to make the commitment? And it is that in all the years that I've known him, I've always admired his tenacity and his commitment, particularly to the goals at hand.

But what you have at the present time is a Prime Minister who has the capacity to say yes. Who makes things happen, rather than try to find reasons why it can't happen. And that contrasts sharply with the federal Opposition at present who've developed a great capacity for saying no.

Who do not have the ability to find anything positive in what the Coalition government might do. And that's why I have that strong commitment to the government of John Howard, because they are doers and that is in stark contrast to the Opposition.

REPORTER:

Mr Stone, we thank you and wish you luck in the new job.

STONE:

Thank you, Mr Oakes.

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