

## Former Liberal chief Shane Stone speaks out over 'mean' memo given to John Howard

- by:LAURIE OAKES
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Former Liberal president Shane Stone (right) with Peter Costello and John Howard.

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**THIRTEEN years on, Shane Stone has at last told his side of the story behind the famous “mean and tricky” memo.**

The former federal president of the Liberal Party says he is “still seething” over the way the document leaked and the treatment he received as a result.

And he contradicts then prime minister John Howard’s version of how and why the embarrassing note came to exist. It was, Stone reveals, written at Howard’s request.

First, some history. In February 2001, the Coalition parties were all but wiped out by Labor in a Queensland state election.

There were clearly implications for the Howard government, so the following day — with, he says, the PM’s consent — Stone called Queensland’s federal Liberal MPs to a meeting to air their views on why the conservative vote had collapsed. He took notes, summarised the concerns in a memo and gave it to Howard.



The parliamentarians had not held back and neither did the party president. Liberal MPs believed the government was dysfunctional and out of touch, he wrote. It was seen by the community as mean and had been “too tricky” on a string of issues, which he named.

The MPs complained that Howard and treasurer Peter Costello were “not listening” and had antagonised the traditional Liberal base. The Coalition leadership had to be “dragged screaming” to fix their mistakes.

And there was much more. It was sensational stuff. Three months later the document leaked to me and the spaghetti hit the fan.

Stone, chief minister of the Northern Territory before the Liberal Party gig, maintained a dignified silence at the time, but now he has opened up in an online autobiography, *My Story*, found at [stonefamilyinaustralia.com.au](http://stonefamilyinaustralia.com.au) (<http://stonefamilyinaustralia.com.au>). He recalls the original phone call from me after the memo came into my hands: “The content of what he had stopped me in my tracks. I was gobsmacked. I felt ill.”

Stone was called to the PM’s office, where he was cross-examined by chief-of-staff Arthur Sinodinos and adviser Tony Nutt “on the supposition I had leaked the document”. He writes: “I left angry and upset. My integrity was on the line and not for one moment did I underestimate the firestorm about to erupt.”

Howard’s autobiography, *Lazarus Rising*, includes an implied criticism of Stone for committing such politically dangerous material to paper: “It was a colourful document. It would have made more sense if Shane had called on me with an oral debriefing.”

He adds: “To the best of my knowledge, there were only two copies. There was the one Shane Stone sent to me and, of course, the one which Shane himself retained.”

Stone’s version is different. While asserting that “if you want accuracy a note wins out over an oral report every time”, he says that putting the report in writing was Howard’s idea.

“I reported to John Howard the meeting and he requested I prepare a note, which I did.

“I subsequently handed my note in an envelope to the prime minister in Darwin at the Beaufort Hotel. He had a cursory read, put it back in the envelope and passed it to Tony Nutt who put it in what I assumed was the prime minister’s briefcase.

“I advised John he had the only copy. I did not keep a copy. I never had a copy.”

Costello, the focus of much of the criticism reported by Stone in the document, was particularly angry when it leaked. Stone reveals that, when Howard asked him some time later if he and the treasurer had buried the hatchet, he replied: “Not unless it’s buried between my eyes.”

Recalling bitterly how some Liberal parliamentarians tried to force his resignation, he says: “This was not some imaginary note with me off on a frolic of my own — it was the federal president of the Liberal Party responding to the membership’s concerns.

“Some commentators persisted with the view that my actions were damaging and amateurish. Clearly they didn’t understand the role of the federal president to speak up for the membership and to be a sounding board for the parliamentary leader. If I, of all people, couldn’t tell the prime minister what was amiss, who could? Obviously his Cabinet didn’t.”

AS it turned out, the most important thing about the memo was not that it leaked, but that it helped to save the government’s electoral bacon later that year. Even before the leak, unpopular policies were being changed and action taken to deal with the perception of meanness and trickiness.

There is a lesson for Tony Abbott here, given concern among some on the Coalition back bench that those around him are too compliant and his chief-of-staff, Peta Credlin, too protective. Prime ministers need to hear bad news and uncomfortable truths.

As for the source of the leak, Stone says it was not him or Howard. He has developed a theory, but “I remain unwilling to share that view at this time as I have one piece of the puzzle to go”.

**Laurie Oakes is political editor for the Nine Network**