

Top End tactician in grand tradition

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WHEN Paul Cowdy died aged 60 on a Royal Darwin Hospital operating table last week, the Northern Territory lost not only a passionate advocate but also a member of a unique Top End political cadre that has enjoyed exceptional influence in Canberra during the 11 years of the Howard Government's rule.

Cowdy, who will be buried in Darwin today, was a foundation member of this once tight-knit group that rose to prominence through the NT Country Liberal Party and cut its political teeth on the Aboriginal lands rights battles of the 1980s and 90s.

The group's unofficial leader is former Liberal Party president and NT chief minister Shane Stone, whose family friendship with John Howard goes back more than 30 years. But the other members are no less significant. They include Liberal Party pollster Mark Textor, Howard's cabinet secretary Peter Conran and long-time Territory political svengali Peter Murphy, an ex-soldier who shared a tent at army boot camp in the 60s with Howard press secretary Tony O'Leary.

Cowdy was a hard-drinking chain smoker in the grand Territory tradition. His first political job was as press secretary to PNG Prime Minister Michael Somare in the 1970s. He later became a speechwriter with few peers.

In the Liberal Party bunker during the 1996 election campaign, he was given the job of playing Paul Keating, a role that meant trying to guess the Labor PM's next moves and advising on how he was likely to react to various Coalition initiatives.

The England-born Cowdy was a teenager when he first arrived in Darwin with his psychiatrist father in 1966. After a short stint at the local meatworks, he started as a cadet journalist on The NT News under legendary left-wing editor Jim Bowditch. The paper's police reporter at the time was Murphy, who had left the army after serving in Malaysia during the Confrontasi. In the late 70s, Murphy quit journalism to work for the NT's first chief minister, Paul Everingham, and Cowdy joined him after returning from PNG in the early 80s.

Cowdy's speeches helped give Everingham a national profile and the legal issues they raised intrigued Conran, a Queensland lawyer who was introduced to Darwin in the early 80s when he worked on the NT Criminal Code. Soon afterwards, Conran left Australia to work as a prosecutor in Hong Kong, but he was back in Darwin before the decade was over as head of the NT Department of Law.

By mid-1988, when a palace coup made Marshall Perron chief minister, the ambitious Stone was also in the equation, having elbowed his way to CLP party president despite having arrived in the Territory just a few years earlier.

Around this time, Textor, a Darwin High School-educated statistics whizz kid, was recruited to Perron's personal staff from the NT Treasury to pursue his interest in opinion polling. When Everingham quit federal politics in 1987, Murphy and Cowdy also joined Perron's staff for two elections where race issues dominated.

The CLP won both in landslides and, taking over from Perron, Stone repeated the dose in the 1997 NT election where the dominant issue was the need to crack down on Aboriginal drunkenness and anti-social behaviour in Darwin. In all three of these elections, Stone, Textor, Conran (who quickly rose to be head of the Chief Minister's Department), Murphy and Cowdy played central roles.

So too did Gary Nairn, now Howard's Special Minister of State, who took over as CLP president when Stone entered the NT parliament, and Toby Ralph, an Adelaide PR man whose successful campaign advertising in the NT has made him a fixture in every Howard election campaign since 1996.

Conran moved to Perth in 1998 but after Stone became Liberal Party president in 1999, he was recommended to Howard and offered a senior ministerial adviser role in the PM's office. Today, as secretary to cabinet and head of the cabinet policy unit, he ranks with Textor as one of the most powerful figures in the Howard inner sanctum.

Stone, of course, maintains his close relations with Howard, as does Murphy with his old army buddy O'Leary. But since Labor took power in the NT in 2001, the CLP has lost its edge and is no longer producing the frontier political talents it once did.