

Liberals between Stone and a hard place

Centre Stage

Tony Walker

Shane Stone, the new federal president of the Liberal Party, would not talk about mandatory sentencing under any circumstances, *The Australian Financial Review* was advised by a Liberal Party spokeswoman.

Since this was not the point of an interview request, it was easy to accede to the condition. In the end, however, Stone was unavailable to talk about mandatory sentencing or anything else. Maybe he feels he has said enough.

In widely publicised remarks during the height of the mandatory sentencing controversy, Stone referred to malefactors in the Northern Territory as “grubs who break into . . . homes, steal cars and anything else that isn’t nailed down”.

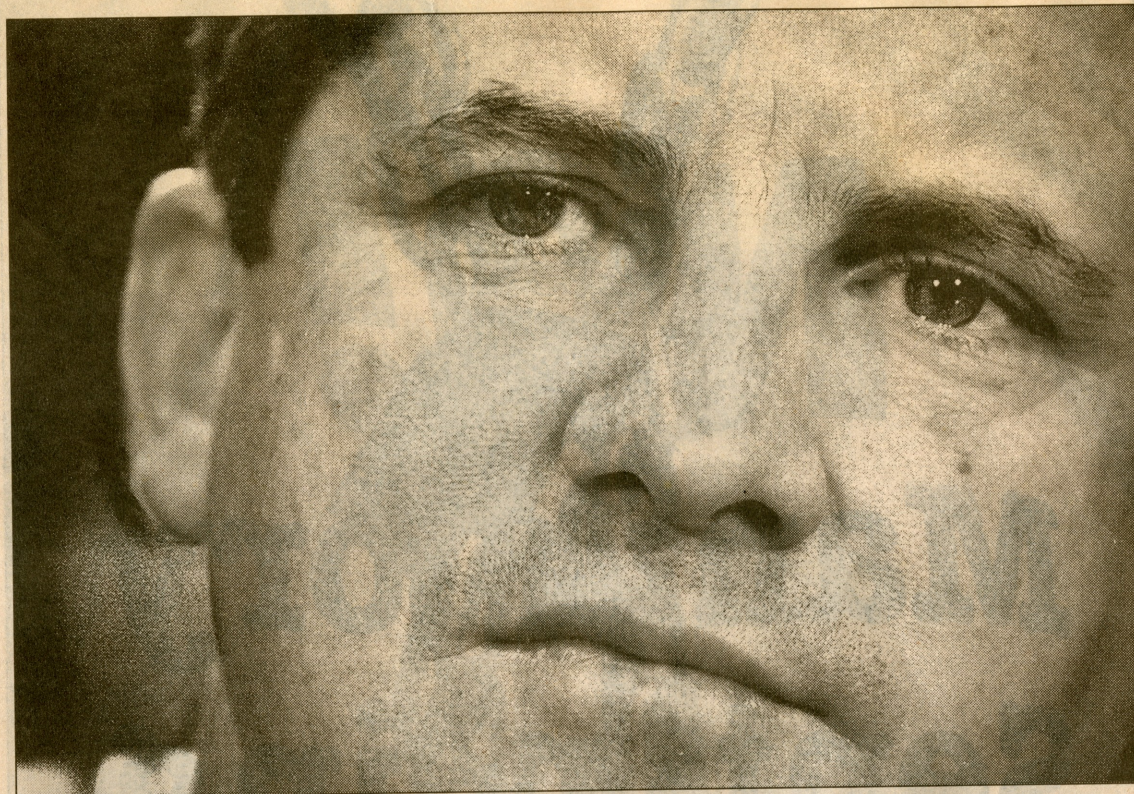
This was the man described by an Aboriginal leader in the NT on one celebrated occasion as “nothing but a paternalistic, redneck, no-good-for-nothing”. As NT Chief Minister, Stone had responded by referring to his critic as a “whingeing, whining, carping black”.

In the Deep North, they don’t mince words.

A reading of Stone’s “collected works” in the form of interviews and comment reveals a healthy command of the profane and bold disregard for the niceties of political discourse.

He referred to federal parliamentarians as “bastards and bitches” over their opposition to the territory’s euthanasia laws.

But you can bet that in staid Melbourne in the presence of the Liberal faithful over the next few days, Shane Stone QC (as Attorney-General, he made himself a Queen’s Counsel) will be on his best behaviour as master of ceremonies for a party convention



Shane Stone may show more regard for the niceties of political discourse at the Liberal convention.

Photo: JOHN DONEGAN

which is assuming considerable importance as a platform for John Howard’s re-election ambitions.

The Prime Minister plans to use the occasion to re-energise his party’s flagging electoral fortunes, by emphasising an inclusive social agenda in the lead-up to the next election. And the 49-year-old Stone is in no doubt about the importance of answering critics of a heartless economic rationalist government.

“It [the convention] will demonstrate the Liberal Party does have a social agenda . . . we do have this side to us, but we’re not always our own best advocates,” he told *The AFR*’s Lenore Taylor this week.

Some might observe that Stone,

the Wodonga High School product turned good ol’ Territorian boy, is hardly the best candidate to help promote a new caring image, but this probably undersells his abilities as a political operator.

For Stone has emerged as a key player in John Howard’s attempts both to keep a fractious party more or less in line — State Liberals are perhaps more riven by dissension across the country than at any time in the party’s history — and to ensure that the federal machine bolsters the leadership.

In this endeavour, Stone, from all accounts, combines the instincts of a streetfighter with organisational skills and a rough wit. In the new Liberal meritocracy

he is a member of the first trifecta of non-private-school-educated boys to head the party’s political and organisational wings: Howard; Lynton Crosby, the secretary; and Stone himself.

“When you consider the fact that someone of my humble origins — of a Housing Commission estate, the boy from Wodonga, State schools all the way — has risen to the position of president of the Liberal Party of Australia, it’s a working example, a real illustration, that John Howard is fair dinkum when he talks about the broad church of the Liberal Party and the way it reaches out to Australians,” he has said.

But this story of “lean-to to the

Lodge” is a bit ingenuous, since the Catholic Stone hardly comes from the deprived circumstances he describes. His father, Les, was mayor of Wodonga, as was his mother. He has an LLB from Melbourne University and a BA from the Australian National University. In *Who’s Who*, he lists his hobbies as gardening, diving and alpine skiing, which are hardly working-class pursuits.

Lured north in the early 1980s, Stone established a law practice in Alice Springs before moving to Darwin, where he entered the Legislative Assembly in 1990 and became Chief Minister in 1997, a post he held until 1999. In the process, he assumed an extraordinary range of responsibilities as Minister for just about everything, including Women’s Policy and NT Statehood.

If he has one huge disappointment in his political career it is his failure to convince his fellow Territorians to vote for statehood. In a crushing disappointment he saw his dream shattered in a referendum loss — 53 to 47 per cent — in 1998.

That defeat spelled the beginning of the end of his chief ministership and within a few months he was gone, saying: “If your heart’s not in it anymore and you’re not prepared to take on the fights, and you’re not giving it the commitment the job deserves, then it’s time to go.”

The restless Stone then looked south and secured the federal presidency, succeeding Tony Staley.

It is hard to imagine a greater contrast. Stone, short, round and combative; Staley, tall, avuncular and establishment. Winds of change are blowing through the party of Menzies, but Stone has some way to go to prove that he has what it takes to help keep the ship on course.