

Liberal unity is set in Stone

LIBERAL federal president Shane Stone had a blunt message for the Queensland division of his party when he addressed its annual convention at Brisbane's Carlton Crest Hotel at the weekend. If members were acting for factional, self-interested reasons they should walk away, he said — to applause from most delegates.

"The day you start doing it for yourself, it's time that you left."

It was a message which Stone obviously was determined to ensure was heard loud and clear, because he not only repeated it during his public address, he also delivered it in private to some of the more active factional operatives over the weekend.

Echoing state president Con Galtos's message that Liberals should stop whispering to the media, Stone said any differences members had should be kept within the forums of the party. Overall, his address — like those of Galtos, Prime Minister John Howard and state leader David Watson — was upbeat.

As he admitted, it was a marked contrast to the state of the Queensland Liberals 12 months ago when the factional warfare was at its height. At that time, Stone wondered why he had bothered attending.

The Queensland Liberals are looking more united than many thought possible a year ago. Central to this has been the emergence of Galtos as an independent and determined president.

First seen as a factional spear-carrier for former president Bob Carroll and former frontbencher Santo Santoro, Galtos soon proved hard to control.

He broke with his old allies over the trouble in the federal electorate of Ryan, where sitting member and Howard Defence Minister John Moore was placed under threat by the vaulting ambition of young lawyer Michael Johnson. The Prime Minister left Galtos and others in no doubt that dumping Moore was unconscionable when the Liberals gathered for their national convention in Melbourne in April.

Since then, the Carroll-Santoro forces have suffered a number of setbacks. They failed in a bid to depose Sunshine Coast MHR Alex Somlyay and were thwarted again when they wanted to time the Macpherson preselection to suit their candidate.

And former president Bob Tucker — an architect of the successful 1995 anti-Goss campaign that took the Coalition to the edge of victory (secured in Townsville six and a half months later) — is back on the state executive.

The old Carroll-Santoro firm looks divided and is losing its power. Former industrial relations commissioner Di Baldwin, backed by some influential allies of the once-dominant group, came last in the Senate preselection ballot, which was won by Townsville-based Ian Macdonald. Using his position as a sitting senator and Howard's Regional Services Minister, Macdonald is a tireless worker for the



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Liberals in non-metropolitan Queensland. He is never afraid to go into tiger country to promote the Liberal cause in districts where Labor or the Nationals have historically held sway.

In the coming federal election — in which marginal-seat-rich Queensland will be vital — the efforts of people like Macdonald might prove crucial, especially for his colleagues Peter Lindsay and Warren Entsch.

This makes the decision by Liberal convention delegates to put Macdonald at No 1 on the ticket smart politics. The Prime Minister left delegates in no doubt he wanted an extra effort from Queenslanders at the next poll, although his speech was a little bereft of positive message for why winning was worth it — the only policy area he nominated for further reform was defence.

The Liberal Party, at a state and federal level, will not be able to rely on negative, anti-Labor messages alone, despite the delight the electoral roting allegations provoke. They will need a forward agenda to tap the aspirations of middle Australia.

This is not to say that negative pitches will be unimportant when the poll comes around. Howard gave delegates a preview when he warned that Labor would undo many of his Government's achievements. "Don't believe what they say — remember what they did," he said of Labor. It was a theme repeated by Stone.

Just why Queensland is so important can be found with one look at the electoral pendulum. The state has 10 Liberal and National-held marginal seats and five of these have majorities of less than 1 percent.

If Queensland does not swing against the Government, Howard will be much closer to realising his dream of a difficult-to-attain third term. Moreover, the Liberals intend throwing everything at the outer metropolitan seat of Dickson — held by former-Democrat-turned-Labor-frontbencher Cheryl Kernot. As Galtos said, somewhat cryptically, to the weekend convention, Queensland will be expected to make up for what is expected to happen in other states.

That the Queensland Liberals appear as united and inclusive as they have been since 1995 is a good sign for a party which has serious problems in every other state. Whether the weekend's state convention does mark a turning point for the Queensland Liberals — and a signpost to state and federal poll victories — depends on the willingness of some key people to heed Stone's blunt message and put the party first.

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