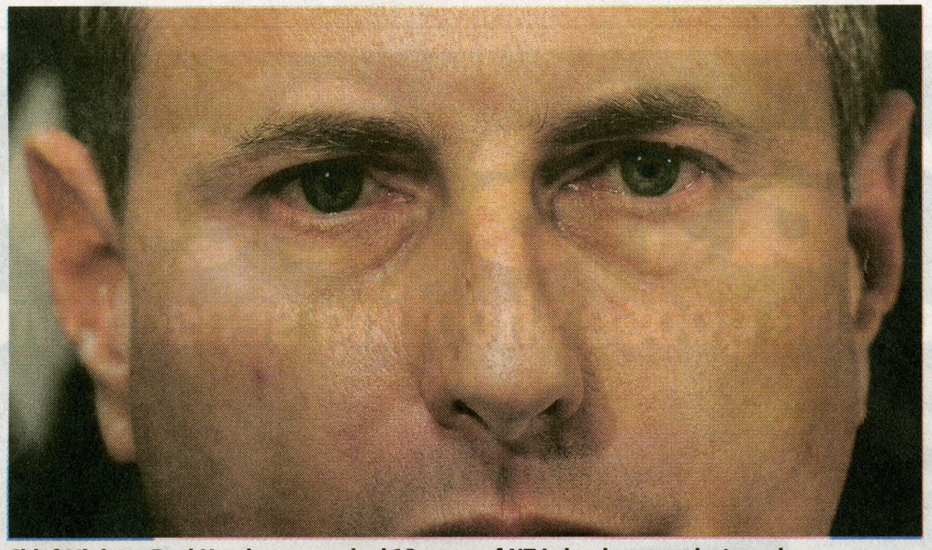
# Heart torn out of Territory

## Shane Stone

Former CLP chief minister

Chief Minister Paul Henderson marked 10 years of NT Labor in power last week

I HAVE been asked how I rate a decade of Labor Government in the NT.

Some might think that, predictably, I would give Labor a red card.

Not so, but getting there.

I am grateful that, without questioning, NT Labor kept much of the CLP economic legacy alive — the gas projects, railway, and support of the mining and tourism sectors to name some.

Sadly, the ALP dismantled the remainder of the mandatory sentencing laws. Otherwise it was business as usual except for a few tweaks.

That said, it's worth reflecting on an opportunity lost for a political party that languished in the wilderness for 27 years and when the time came just didn't seem to know what to do.

When Clare Martin and Labor unexpectedly defeated the CLP in 2001, on their own admission they even surprised themselves.

This was bad for the Territory because first they weren't ready and they allowed a vacuum quickly filled by senior public servants.

Territory Labor never has governed with the same authority exercised by the CLP. To paraphrase Paul Keating, they might have been in Government but they were not in power.

Then Secretary of the Department of Chief Minister Paul Tyrrell and his inner circle seized the moment and never looked back. I believed that, in their first term, Labor might be tentative, given the narrow margin, but might flag important reform they had talked of for years.

Not so, they became managers of the status quo, guided safely by Department heads and southern ALP staffers sent north to make sure they did not mess it up.

There was some tinkering and predictable changes — Freedom of Information legislation in 2003, pool fencing, rapid expansion of the public sector and attempts to mimic southern Labor social policies.

This timidity was surprising. No conviction politics was allowed.

Labor concentrated on such CLP projects as the gas and railway, attempting to make them their own.

They enthusiastically embraced the waterfront project originally launched by Marshal Perron. Sadly, they disengaged from Asia but did nothing as an alternative.

In the 2004 federal election, NT Labor fell short in Solomon — that should have told them something.

The name of the game, however, was to get re-elected in the NT and so they did on June 8, 2005, with a thumping 19/4 victory.

Territorians were not in love with Labor but they were determined to make sure the CLP got the message. The old saying that Oppositions do not win, Governments lose, was apt.

They had not done much but Labor did not deserve to lose.

The electorate did the CLP a big favour — the last of CLP mediocrity was swept away.

Political humiliation gave rise to renewed hunger to win and my party finally got the message.

In CLP circles up until 2005, the 2001 defeat had been an unintended mistake.

There is an upside to the Labor victory, the crafting of the CLP's return to government.

In 2005, I thought: "Now we will see what Territory Labor is all about."

It's a big majority with an overwhelming mandate.

I waited, and waited and nothing happened.

The economy grew, prosperity abounded and population increased. It was though the NT was on auto pilot so why change anything? A do-nothing Government was and remains the order of the day. At this juncture, the true believers were starting to question the bona fides of NT Labor and disenchantment was simmering. Two major distractions derailed Labor that term — Bob Collins and *The Little Children are Sacred Report*, culminating in the Commonwealth intervention.

The handling of the latter was bungled largely on the advice of bureaucrats.

Clare Martin should have followed her instincts.

Further, she should have stridently stood up against the Intervention on federal terms. Instead her response was muddled.

Never underestimate the impact of the Collins allegations dating from June 2004 that subsequently overshadowed the big victory. This man had been their spiritual leader for decades. They hung on his every word and craved his counsel.

Let's be frank, I and many in the CLP were distressed by what we learnt and I am not of their persuasion.

The fact is he had been an iconic Territorian and, as one Labor member told me, it was as though their heart had been ripped out.

Collins committed suicide in September 2007 on the cusp of his Darwin court appearance after three years of distracting speculation.

Then followed the debacle as to whether he was to be accorded a state funeral.

Wrong-footed over Collins together with the bungling of the *Little Children are Sacred Report* underscored impotence in government.

It was as though the Howard Government just cast the elected Martin Government to one side.

To make matters worse the Rudd then Gillard governments chose the Intervention over NT Labor.

It was as though NT Labor was in charge of nothing. Talk of statehood rings hollow in such circumstances.

In November 2007, the CLP lost the federal seat of Solomon by a mere 196 votes.

This seat was slated as the most winnable in Australia but the CLP hung on initially. This put the frighteners on NT Labor.

The federal election result tipped the scales on Clare Martin as panic set in. ALP insiders set about crafting the story that she was the real problem and the ALP brand was damaged. That's not what CLP and Liberal polling was saying. I remember the headline "Clare you have to go".

She resigned within the week of Rudd's victory. She didn't "have to go" but she did and NT Labor was set on the path of electoral defeat narrowly avoided in 2008 but most likely in 2012.

The Inpex election was a shocker; opportunistic, tactically bereft and when taken together with an electoral redistribution where Labor had taken its eye off the ball the recipe for defeat was ripe.

It's worse this term than the first, a do-nothing Government hamstrung by a chook farmer who's loving every moment of it at our expense.

Law and order issues are rampant. Territorians don't believe Labor has a plan or agenda going forward save for Inpex which they are tired of hearing about; the construction sector is in crisis, health and affordable housing are top of mind and the emerging debt position of the NT is being openly talked about in a very nervous business sector.

For my part, being a Territorian has been debased by southern Labor policies destined to make us all the same. It's been full-on assault of what it is to be a Territorian.

It's not a red card but about there. NT Labor has become a nominal government at best. It exercises no power. That is bad for Territorians.

Much will turn on the state of the Treasury come the next election.

NT Labor might rue the day it walked consultant Percy Allen on to the steps of Parliament in 2001 to tell Territorians the inherited debt of $1.2 billion after 27 years of the CLP was a disgrace. What's the figure under Labor after 10 years and record GST revenues?

THEY SAID IT

"He was one of the last of the old-school journalists, who called things the way he saw them, whether it was PC or not

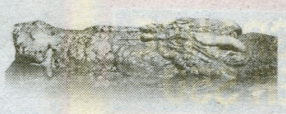
**ANDY TOULSON**
Former *NT News* reporter comments on the death of former *NT News* chief of staff Dave Nason (pictured)

"I think they should forget statehood and concentrate on the problems

**GERRY WOOD**
The Independent rates Labor's performance as a lacklustre 5.15 out of 10

"You really get the impression they don't care

**GAYE BROWN**
How the Darwin tax agent feels about Telstra after she lost hundreds of dollars in business when the telco failed to connect her phones



"If we can claim sportsmen who spend the first few seconds of their life in the NT, we can put the stamp on Cassius

**NIGEL PALMER**
The Crocosaurus Cove manager reckons the world's biggest croc Cassius is a Territorian, not a Queenslander

# Budgets and reform built the NT's future

Having Clare Martin as Chief Minister and initially, Treasurer, served a double purpose

Syd Stirling
Former Labor treasurer

THE excitement of the election win in August 2001 was quickly quietened by the discipline of government and the financially straitened circumstances we found ourselves in.

Expecting to be inheriting a balanced Budget we were extremely angered to find the Budget headed for around a $130 million deficit.

Times were tough for the community, construction had ground to a halt, people were leaving and we could not find enough money to pay for basic repairs and maintenance.

Having Clare Martin as Chief Minister and Treasurer served a double purpose. She had to learn the ropes of Treasury and in turn she exercised a fierce discipline on expenditure.

The major restructure of the Public Service and the November 2001 mini-budget became the first stepping stones to rebuilding the capacity of the NT Government.

In late 2002 I became Treasurer and the Chief Minister, myself and our CEOs Paul Tyrell and Jennifer Prince as Under Treasurer commenced work on the 2002-03 Budget.

A part of the process involved Minister and CEOs presenting overviews of their Budget bids to the committee of four: Clare, myself, Paul and Jennifer.

We had established that across the face of government we could allow for about $5 million of new expenditure, a pitifully small amount but an example of the extreme measures employed to keep the Government above the bottom line.

Ministers, CEOs and agencies had read the signs and whilst they always asked for more rather than less there was a pretty good understanding of the need for continued fiscal restraint.

But there is always one in the pack and it came in the form of a very well developed bid from one agency for $57 million of new expenditure.

Such moments are precious and I will always be impressed with the professionalism of all involved that the presentation proceeded smoothly despite the gross mismatch of the bid against available expenditure.

I think if I checked back on the figures, it is likely the agency involved entered the new financial year with an increase in expenditure to match CPI and no money for new initiatives.

Better still, the $57 million was never heard of again.

Early in 2003 the economy began to pick up again and revenue from Canberra began to increase.

Whilst Treasurers never like spending money, it was no longer necessary to drop the axe on every new initiative, and the Government entered a succession of surplus Budgets. A central plank in our election policy was to remove the CLP's mandatory sentencing laws for property crime, which had seen youths as young as 15 being sent to prison for lengthy sentences.

We ensured the removal of these laws became the first legislation to be introduced by Attorney-General Peter Toyne and passed by the Assembly under the new Labor Government.

During this first term the Martin Government introduced mandatory fencing for backyard pools.

Mired in controversy at the time, it is wonderful to reflect that no toddler has drowned in a backyard pool in the NT since those laws were passed.

When we came to Government there was no provision of secondary education to remote Indigenous communities.

That fact further underlined the achievements of Principal George Hewitson and his wife Robyn together with their staff at Kalkaringi in producing the first Indigenous students in a remote community to achieve their NTCE.

As bright and willing as those students were, it was a major breakthrough and accelerated the rollout of secondary education.

As a Government we continued to read signs that secondary education in the NT was falling behind the outcomes achieved in the rest of Australia.

The Ramsay review recommended the introduction of middle schooling for Years 7 to 9 and senior secondary for Years 10 to 12.

Whilst the planning was lengthy and the introduction controversial, recent results vindicate the change, with improved retention in senior numbers and increasing TER scores.

The middle schooling project also saw new schools built in remote areas and new buildings and additions to urban schools.

The 2005 election result produced a result remarkably similar to that achieved by the CLP in 1997 when the CLP was returned with 18 seats and Labor seven.

This time it was Labor with 19 reducing the CLP to just six.

Whilst it was a hearty endorsement from the electorate recognising the work of the first Labor Government and its achievements, it also further increased the expectations on the Government.

We oversaw the commencement of the Convention Centre growing up out of the heavily polluted industrial wasteland on our foreshore.

It is now a delightful part of Darwin to enjoy a meal on the waterfront.

The continuing great divide between remote Indigenous communities and urban areas of the NT in health, education, housing and employment opportunities continued to be a major worry.

For some years Ministers and the Chief Minister had continued to represent the magnitude of the problem to their Federal counterparts, including Prime Minister John Howard. Minister Jack Ah Kit had continued to increase the funding requests from the Federal Government for assistance with housing from $600 million to $800 million to $1 billion.

There was of course no response until Prime Minister Howard and Minister Brough chose to respond to the *Little Children Are Sacred Report* in the form of the Intervention.

It was a blatant attempt to win favour in the polls when nothing else was giving them a lift, as revealed by Alexander Downer in the days immediately after their election loss and it was very fitting that both of them should lose their seats at the 2007 election. The intervention had weighed heavily on Clare as Chief Minister and myself as Deputy. I had talked with her previously on the timing of our departure from NT politics and the Federal election loomed as an opportunity for us to hand over to a new leadership team which we did immediately after the 2007 Federal election.

The 2008 election produced a workable majority for the Henderson Government.

However, that majority was lost with the eventual departure from the Government of the Member for MacDonnell, Alison Anderson.

A curious person, with a background as a lone wolf, she either had no idea of how to work within a team and the discipline that teamwork demands, or no wish to be part of a team. I thought her particularly unsuited to meet the demands of carrying ministerial responsibility and said so at the time.

That the Henderson Government was able to survive this near fatal departure and continue today to provide stable government for the NT is a testament to the Chief Minister himself who has been able to cement a professional and trusting relationship with the Independent Member for Nelson Gerry Wood.

We can all see that a minority government is never easy but in any comparison on any benchmark with the Federal Government, it is the Henderson Government which is providing greater stability and leadership.