



7-8 Feb 98 Weekend Quest.

Guess who came to a compromise

By ROY ECCLESTON

AT the Jewel of India restaurant in Canberra on Thursday night, away from the growing antipathy between republicans inside the Constitutional Convention, some old mates but temporary adversaries sat down to try to rescue their struggling cause.

Shane Stone, 47-year-old Country Liberal Party Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, had been so impressed by a conciliatory speech by Neville Wran at the convention that afternoon, he invited the former NSW Labor premier to dinner.

As Mr Wran told *The Weekend Australian* yesterday: "I've always found dinners, lunches and the odd chardonnay quite powerful tools in the process of negotiation."

So it turned out. It just may turn out to be one of the turning points in the push for a republic.

Mr Wran, as one of the frontmen for the Australian Republican Movement, had made two key points in his speech: that politics was the art of the possible and that he was prepared to accept compromises to the ARM position.

Mr Stone is part of the other main republican faction, the Direct Presidential Election Group, which wants far more than the ARM position of election of a president by parliament.

Mr Stone saw a chance to breach the increasingly bitter division, so invited Mr Wran to dinner, with fellow ARM member Janet Holmes a Court and some non-aligned republicans.

It was exactly the response Mr Wran was seeking, especially given the accusations of arrogance and worse being directed by some republicans at ARM chairman Malcolm Turnbull.

Mr Wran said he had become concerned that there remained deep divisions almost halfway through the convention — and unless everyone was reminded of the main game "by next week it would be too late to shift".

"Neville was the first ARM frontbencher to open the door and say maybe there's another view," Mr Stone said. "And I took him at his word."

"We sat down and basically agreed this had to stop (the infighting between republican groups) and we needed to go



Mr Stone . . . 'get serious'

forward, otherwise we'd be divided and defeated."

Mr Stone took up the case for a new approach at the meeting of the Direct Presidential Election Group yesterday morning and by 9.30am was telling the media that the 30-odd very diverse members of the DPEG had decided to "get serious".

The group announced it was opening the doors to compromise, calling for input from other republicans and ruling out spoiling next week's vote on a preferred republican model.

By lunchtime Mr Stone and others from the group were meeting Mr Turnbull and others over possible models to more directly involve all voters.

The upshot is a much increased chance of a united front among a majority of republicans. Whether it's possible to produce a compromise model to please most of them remains to be seen.

Mr Stone also admits the DPEG is a diverse body, nowhere near as united as ARM. Whether it hangs together is questionable.

After all, some of his newfound colleagues are his erstwhile enemies. Mr Stone admits his critics would claim he runs the most conservative Government in Australia. Aboriginal activist Pat O'Shane told him she couldn't believe she was sitting on the same platform.

Mr Stone thinks John Howard might yet move behind a republic model at a referendum. Just what the public is asked to vote on, though, is still anyone's guess.