

EDITORIAL, March 31, 1999

Stand-off on Stone

OPPORTUNITY often presents itself just once — and seldom does the chance arise again.

In the case of a testimonial dinner for former chief minister Shane Stone last week, his replacement Denis Burke faced such an opportunity — but for curious reasons he chose not to take it.

Only one member of Mr Burke's Cabinet showed up at the dinner attended by 450 of the Territory's most influential business people.

But the snub did not end there, the CLP executive also stayed away, including president Suzanne Cavanagh, whom Mr Stone singled out for praise in his speech.

Mr Burke's minders said the Chief Minister had a prior engagement.

But had Mr Burke and his ministers been able to join the crowd they would have found themselves in interesting company.

Northern Territory business — big and small — was represented. So too were some of the CLP's biggest donors.

Former chief ministers Marshall Perron and Paul Everingham saw fit to attend as well.

Some of the heavyweights of Australian industry, such as Shell Australia, Thiess and Nabalco, also made the effort.

It could be argued that Mr Stone's value to these companies is now somewhat diminished since he left Cabinet — but nevertheless they chose to attend.

Feelings

The setting provided the ideal forum in which Mr Burke and Mr Stone could have showed there were no hard feelings.

It would have been an ideal place in which a baton change of sorts could have taken place, if not for the sake of business, at least for a show of CLP unity.

Instead, the great divide remains.

It is peculiar that a rift has developed considering that Mr Burke reportedly had little or no role in the overthrow.

In reality, there was much more for him and the CLP machine to gain than lose had they not been quite so conspicuously absent.

Despite an apparent veneer of solidarity, the tension behind the scenes is quite palpable.

All this would matter little if Mr Stone was going to quietly exit the public stage.

But this is most unlikely — he is widely tipped to take over as president of the national Liberal Party, and this will involve a continued working relationship with Mr Burke and Mrs Cavanagh.

For observers of Territory politics, the stand-off between the personalities will make for interesting times ahead.