

LATELINE

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TV PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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Libs in dire straits, conference told

Liberal delegates gathering at the party's national conference in Adelaide have been told that their party is in dire straits.

Compere: Tony Jones

Reporter: Craig McMurtrie

TONY JONES: Liberal delegates gathering at the party's national conference in Adelaide have been told that their party is in dire straits.

Party president Shane Stone says the continuing failure to win State elections has left it with scarce resources.

Observers in Adelaide are also watching for any sign of lingering tension between Peter Costello and John Howard, as Craig McMurtrie reports.

CRAIG McMURTRIE: The disappointed Federal Treasurer is grinning and bearing it in Adelaide.

PETER COSTELLO: Great to see you, fellas, great to be here.

CRAIG McMURTRIE: As the Liberal faithful gather to celebrate their one success story -- the longevity of the Howard Government -- it falls to the PM's heir-apparent to introduce Mr Howard before his keynote speech on Sunday.

PETER COSTELLO, TREASURER: We should all be tolerant.

We should love each other.

CRAIG McMURTRIE: This morning he was greeted as the greatest prime minister ever at a Liberal Party women's forum.

Mr Howard saying his government hasn't forgotten about paid maternity leave.

JOHN HOWARD, PM: It is still very much on the table, as far as the Government is concerned.

Any idea that we are opposed in principle to paid maternity leave is wrong.

CRAIG McMURTRIE: But if the party leaders thought this was a time for triumphalism, they were in for a shock when the full conference began.

SHANE STONE, LIBERAL PARTY PRESIDENT: These are dark days for us, at a State and Territory level.

CRAIG McMURTRIE: President Shane Stone highlighting the poor performance of State Liberals, saying the failure to win any State poll had cost the party talented MPs, staff and volunteers, leaving it with scarce resources.

SHANE STONE: There are almost 1 million people across Australia who are

prepared to vote for John Howard and the Federal Coalition but do not vote for us at a State or Territory level.

And we've had the demoralising experience of successive kicks in the teeth, which have taken its toll on many, in particular, our dedicated, hardworking volunteer membership.

CRAIG McMURTRIE: It's not the first time Shane Stone has delivered a wake-up call to his party.

Before the 2001 election he warned that the Government was looking mean, tricky and out of touch.

The Liberal Treasurer chimed in, warning that the party's traditional funding base -- corporate Australia -- is either losing interest, or giving money to both sides of politics.

MALCOLM TURNBULL, LIBERAL PARTY TREASURER: If this trend continues, obviously, there comes a point where even with the best leaders, with the best policies, in a close election it will make the difference.

John Brogden in the State election in NSW recently was outspent 4.5 times to 1 on television.

CRAIG McMURTRIE: Tomorrow the PM will make his pitch to business leaders at a conference breakfast.