

# Oz govt rocked by infighting

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Canberra - Australia's conservative government was rocked on Wednesday by a leaked internal memo, which accused leaders, particularly heir apparent Treasurer Peter Costello, of being mean, tricky and out-of-touch with voters.

The blunt personal note from Liberal Party President Shane Stone to Prime Minister John Howard, published by The Bulletin news magazine, deals another blow to the already battered coalition government ahead of an expected year-end election.

Howard's five-year-old Liberal/National coalition trails opposition Labour by 12.5 points with the support of only 32 percent of voters, according to an opinion poll released on Wednesday, ahead of an expected November or December ballot.

Stone's letter was presented to the prime minister in February after a meeting of Liberal members of parliament from Queensland state.

"Our leadership is not listening," Stone said in the letter, adding that members were particularly unhappy with the attitude of Costello and Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson, who leads the coalition's junior partner, the National Party.

"However, for you (prime minister), there is guilt by association. After all, you're in charge," Stone said.

Costello is widely seen as the most likely successor to Howard, who has said he would retire mid-way through his next term of office if the coalition is re-elected this year. Costello would likely also assume leadership if the election is lost.

Stone said the government had come to be seen as "mean" and members felt party meetings had become a waste of time.

"There is a belief that you and Costello fob people off... (There was) a very clear view in the room that we, you (prime minister) and Costello in particular, have gone out of our way to antagonise our traditional support base," Stone wrote.

## Government aghast

While the prime minister's office declined to comment on the memo, Costello said he wanted an explanation.

"I think all people that are associated with the Liberal Party will be aghast," he told reporters in Washington.

"Obviously I'll expect (Stone's) explanation to deal with all of these matters and I'll expect that I'll get it when I get back to Australia," Costello said.

Stone, hand-picked by Howard to run the party, said it was a disgrace that the memo had been leaked, but it had simply been a truthful assessment of a key party meeting.

"It was a personal note, and it wasn't to be sanitised, it was to accurately reflect what people had to

say," Stone said in an interview with Australian Broadcasting Corp radio.

"I would understand why the treasurer would be cranky...about the way in which this has come to light," he added.

In any case, Stone said, the memo's criticism was no longer valid because the government had proven it was now listening to voters by reversing a series of unpopular tax policies.

"I would say that if you had this meeting today, (with) the very same people in the room, that they would acknowledge that John Howard, his Treasurer Peter Costello, have responded, they have acted," Stone said.

- Reuters