

# Little Big Chief

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Shane Stone came, saw and conquered the Northern Territory. Now his sights are on Asia. Janet Hawley meets a small-time politician with a big vision.

The site is by a flawless tropical blue sea at the Top End of Australia; the time is seductive late afternoon when yachts sail across the lowering sun, and crocodiles slither unseen. The building, a wildly incongruous, neo-desert-oil-sheik white fortress, is the scandal-birthed, \$117 million, two-year-old Parliament House for the Northern Territory's 25 MPs, who sit 33 days annually. The host is Shane Stone, 46, the new-look Chief Minister, who intends to transform Australia's Last Frontier from its image of rednecks, racists and cowboys into one of robust sophisticates and professionals, then lead the Territory into Statehood in 2001, becoming its first Premier. The grand reception to woo the NT's Asian neighbours, provides an apt stage to witness this ambitious, maverick Melbourne lawyer who travelled north, and ponder the Shane Stone enigma.

A boyish-faced, broadly grinning, short, strong, stocky dynamo, Stone wears a gold-embossed Brunei shirt, and looks like the potentate of some imaginary mini kingdom, as a vivid flotilla of guests arrives wearing batik, ikat, pineapple fibre, silk and Sumba cloth formal attire. "Selamat datang!" "Governor!" Stone's voice booms exuberantly, clasping dark bejewelled hands with the familiarity of old friends, which many now are.

The Darwin Symphony Orchestra play in shirt sleeves, and 1,000 Asian guests, politicians, ambassadors, business people from Sabah, Sarawak, Brunei, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Laos, Vietnam, mingle with 800 Darwin business identities.

The ambience is soon buzzing as skilled traders, networkers, facilitators, fixers and doubtless finger burners, engage in the ritual courting and mating dances of deal making.

The 1,800 are participating in Darwin's annual Expo, a six-day giant bazaar variously offering Top End solar energy devices and side tipping trucks, to Lombok pots and Malaysian furniture.

"So Outback Australia is wooing Outback Asia?" I remark to Stone. "Yeah - we're all desperates up here so we understand each other," Stone quips, in one of his loose-lipped, ocker-voiced, often wickedly funny asides he finds irresistible to make, before putting on his best media voice and delivering a more statesmanlike response: "We have to forget about trying to sway southern Australia, which sees Territorians as larrikin pioneers filled with false hopes and impossible dreams. We're getting on with our own act up here, looking north to our own region in Asia. We've studied

Singapore's success, and people now don't want to deal with Singapore, because it takes too big a slice.

"We're not trying to interface with the Asian highfliers, like Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore - Sydney and Melbourne can have them. We're focussing on the East ASEAN growth area, the Philippines through to Indonesia, where we can realistically develop a good marketplace.

"We intend to make Darwin the new Singapore of the South, the new trade facilitators of this region, a leader in business, communications, culture and tourism." To reinforce this focus, Stone and all his ministers have wall-sized regional maps in their offices, showing the Northern Territory and Asian countries to the north, and blank space below.

The reception ends, and Stone and his lawyer wife Josie, who holds a senior position with the NT Legal Aid Commission, lead 100 guests upstairs to a private banquet. Philip Flood, Australia's astute former ambassador to Indonesia and now head of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, is among them. As Stone swaps dinner anecdotes with the representative of the Sultan of Brunei, Flood reflects: "Shane is punching way above his weight division ... I mean, the NT with a population of 180,000 people is trying to penetrate a specific Asian market of 30 million people ... but he's doing remarkably well, full marks to him, and may he keep going."

Late that night, Shane and Josie Stone farewell the dinner stragglers. Britain's ambassador to the European Union pauses on the balcony above the cavernous Great Hall, announcing his desire to sing. Stone calls for silence, the ambassador opens his mouth, but his voice falters.

"He needs the trick of the nurse turning on the tap to help him pee - Shane should summon back the Darwin Symphony Orchestra," someone suggests, and amid tired laughter all depart, assuring Stone it has been a most successful night. Josie Stone stands tall beside her husband, nodding and smiling elegantly: "Shane is very good at this."

For a chief minister representing a population the size of two Sydney municipalities, Stone has cut a remarkable figure on the national and international stage. The newly elected Prime Minister Howard used his mate "Stoney" to deliver a message to Stone's friend, President Suharto. When Madame Suharto died, Howard requested Stone attend the funeral to represent Australia; Stone was the only European invited into the service. During Expo, Darwin was teeming with interstate and international media, interviewing Stone on the Territory's stand on euthanasia, gun control, Statehood, the arts, trade with Asia.

"Suddenly we're relevant and everyone wants us. Not only are we relevant - we're leading the debate," Stone remarks proudly.

Shane Stone might have a name like a Hollywood lonesome cowboy, but it only adds to the enigmatic charisma of this Victorian working-class boy, who became a fast moving middle-class Melbourne lawyer, and galloped onwards and upwards.

Dissatisfied with law, Stone deliberately chose the NT to launch himself into a political career, figuring it would be easier to fast-track his way to the top, up Top, than down south. Stone's lawyer mate, former chief minister Paul Everingham, often advised him (Stone impersonates Everingham's nasal drawl): "Son, don't waste your time in Melbourne, you can be king up here!"

When Stone was appointed Chief Minister in May 1995, after Marshall Perron retired, the media ran profiles with a grab bag of descriptions still being repeated: Stone was portrayed as a sophisticated, silvertail Melbourne lawyer who came late into politics and trapezed to the top in The Top; always wears a suit; an aficionado of classical music; owns a major collection of Asian art and Australian landscapes; speaks fluent Indonesian; long experienced in Asia; sometimes bumptious and arrogant. Stone, the slick outsider, broke the mould of previous chief ministers and ministers, who were mostly vintage Territory - slow-speaking, self-made men of limited education, sophistication and interests.

When I went to see Stone in the tropical White House, parliament may not have been sitting, but the Chief Minister's suite was leaping with people and ringing mobile phones. Display cabinets in the waiting area overflowed with photographs of Stone meeting Asian Heads of State.

It was a typical Darwin winter's day, 32 degrees C, and I arrived sweltering in a suit, figuring I'd better wear one if he did. Stone appears, tieless in an unbuttoned shirt, and rumpled navy blue trousers. The first image knocked over. He says hello, and the vowels are anything but silvertail.

Friends and enemies watching Stone's progress all cite two characteristics: "a short man with all the short man's complexes," and "nakedly ambitious".

The short man with the compensating loud voice and engaging personality, says: "What's wrong with admitting you want a career as a politician, and moving locations to get the best opportunities, in the same way people move to get the best jobs? And why not aim to be the best politician, so you can really achieve something?"

"The terrific aspect to the NT, is you know you can make a difference; whereas I remain unconvinced a politician can really make a difference in Canberra."

As Stone sinks into his large leather chair, rolling through his life, it's clear he has been trained in politics since he was in nappies - so much for the late start. Born in Bendigo, he grew up in Albury-Wodonga, eldest child of Les and Pam Stone of Irish Catholic heritage, both embroiled in politics and public life. "Dad was a school teacher who became last shire president of Wodonga then first mayor of Wodonga in the changeover, and after he died, my mother became mayor of Wodonga. Dad was among the architects of the Albury-Wodonga decentralisation plan, and worked closely with Gough Whitlam, Tom Uren, Dick Hamer and Neville Wran.

"From my earliest memory, it was politics in our kitchen, Gough, Howard, Uren, Ian Sinclair, Doug Anthony, sitting around our table, so I know 'em all. Dad was a powerbroker for the Victorian Country Party.

"We lived on a housing commission estate, I went to St Patrick's Christian Brothers parish school, then Wodonga High - nothing flash. Dad's electoral base had a huge ethnic community."

Stone went to Duntroon, but left during his first year. "Duntroon didn't live up to my expectations, and I wasn't going to hang around. There wasn't much soldiering going on; it seemed more about cocktail party circuits, and I wasn't comfortable.

"So I went home, and Dad, who'd bitterly opposed me going to Duntroon, said: 'Right, you've tried it your way and failed, now you'll do what I want and become a teacher.' I trained to be a primary teacher, taught for five years, then my father had a brief illness and in three months was dead with cancer. He was 54, I was 24.

"My whole life changed. Up till then I'd been fairly slack, lots of parties, no real direction, then the realisation hit - crikey, people die! I took stock and decided to do something useful with my life. One of my burning regrets is my father never saw me achieve anything in life. I was probably a great disappointment to him when he died."

A friend had told me a key to the Stone psychology was his need to prove himself to his late father, who'd given him a tough time, telling Shane he'd never amount to anything.

Stone: "Yes, basically that's true. My father was a hard taskmaster, but that was his way of driving people. My mother tells me I am too harsh on Dad, my memory is too selective ... but it's this thing of men and their fathers ... we talked to each other only with great difficulty, and I didn't get close to him until it was too bloody late. He died in my arms.

"I keep a large portrait of him in my office, and we look at each other, and I talk to him sometimes. Whenever I've done anything particularly successful, I look over my shoulder and think - well, where are you now Dad?"

Stone enrolled in arts/law at the ANU, and fell for Josie Novak, first year law student, daughter of Yugoslavian refugees who'd settled in Wagga. "We married in 1977, Josie was 18, I was 28. Then I was appointed deputy warden of International House at Melbourne Uni, so we lived there while we finished our degrees at Melbourne University, and I made terrific international contacts.

"I joined the Victorian Bar, we had a nice Edwardian home in Camberwell and were a nice middle-class couple.

"When I turned 33, I remember standing on the corner of Lonsdale and Bourke streets, and thinking to myself - if this is it, then I'm in a lot of trouble ... I'd been in the NT as associate to Sir Edward Woodward conducting the Royal Commission into the meat industry, then again working for Aboriginal Legal Aid, and saw it was a fabulous place of opportunities.

"I've always been very focused on politics wherever I am, because I like it; I'd got to know the local member Jeff Kennett well, was president of the Surrey Hills branch of the Liberal Party, tried for preselection once, missed, considered trying again, but my heart wasn't in it in Victoria.

"I told Josie we should get out of Melbourne and do other things. In 1985, we moved to Alice Springs, opened a law firm; I threw myself into the life and politics of the town, saw opportunities I was happy to grab, became Country Liberal Party [CLP] vice-president, then president. In 1989 we moved to Darwin, I was preselected in 1990, elected member for Port Darwin in 1990, made a minister on day one, and in 1995 became Chief Minister.

"Those who say my rise was fast and furious overlook the fact I've been in politics since I could crawl, then 25 years as a party apparatchik, a volunteer doing it for nothing."

The CLP, a unique NT political party, which dominates the Territory like a one-party State, spurning the weak Labor opposition, needs some explaining. Stone: "It's not Liberal, not National, not Country, not even affiliated, and not a coalition. It is a wholly separate political party, a funny mixture, with people from strong Liberal, Labor and National party backgrounds.

"It's a well-established fact that people who vote Labor down south, come to the Territory and switch to vote CLP, because it's seen as the real Territory party. "The CLP suits me, because I've always been unabashed about taking the best ideas in politics, no matter where they come from. I have friends, colleagues and mentors from all sides."

The CLP has held power in the NT since self-government began in 1978. A CLP tactic at elections is to tweak the racist nerve, claiming Labor will give everything away to the Aborigines. Labor-held seats are mainly in strongly Aboriginal areas. The "them and us" nerve is also tweaked, claiming the NT Labor party is run by Canberra outsiders.

The chief minister of the NT today is virtually a State premier. He is in charge of all NT functions, health, courts, police and so on, and though the Commonwealth has a power of veto, it has never been exercised - although the threat has hovered during the euthanasia debate. The NT's small population is spread over 1.4 million sq km, so the CM must be abreast of the pastoral, mining and tourism industries, Aboriginal affairs, and also bread-and-butter issues such as roadworks in the six months of the dry season, before the monsoonal wet. Because of the informal nature of the NT, and the tradition that the CM's and all ministers' home phone numbers are in the telephone book, he is more accessible. The CM also has frequent liaisons with the military, as some 6,000 Australian defence personnel are stationed near Darwin, and defence planners from the US and Asia make regular visits.

Stone set new aspirations and sought to gain a higher, more relevant profile for the NT. "It was time for the Territory to reinvent itself. It is true the NT is a rugged,

blokesy, irreverent, adventurous place, and we should celebrate that difference. You wouldn't have what we've got here today, if it wasn't for the cowboy element, because southern modes and rules wouldn't have worked up here."

The NT's foray into Asia had been initiated well pre-Stone, but "I basically re-wrote the Asian policy for this Government. I sat in on briefings where people said we've been doing it this way for the past 10 years, and I'd say, hang on, and give a different perspective. There are many tricky situations in Asia, you must invest a large amount of time, and expect many deals to fall over."

Destroying another image, Stone answers: "I only took my first trip to Asia in 1988, at age 38 - and that was the first time I left Australia. I went on a scuba diving trip to the Indonesian island of Flores with Marshall Perron. He was chief minister and I was party president. Marshall is an expert diver and has the metabolism of a snake. I need weights on me, because fat floats!" He pats his girth and blushes.

"I didn't go again till I was elected and made minister for education, and Australia had a big education program throughout the Indonesian islands, then I was made Australia's first minister for Asian relations, and I was up there all the time."

He's not fluent in Indonesian. "I speak enough to get by. I made an effort to learn so I could speak to Suharto in Indonesian the first time I met him."

It's evident Stone is as much a self-made man as many vintage Territorians, a quick learner, and a born salesman, whether as barrister or politician. Perhaps that is why he has fitted in so well. As for the blow-in charge, Stone says that makes him normal, "because the majority of people in the NT have been here for seven to nine years. It's a very transient population; 15 per cent of the population turns over every five years, and the average age is 27."

Stone exudes self-confidence at first, but by our third interview is showing signs of self-doubt. He is friendly, but wary, analysing everything you say or do. When I return to his office the next day, Stone announces, "Let's get out of here," and his driver takes us to Stone's home in the nearby garden suburb of Larrakeyah, then departs to buy pizzas for lunch.

Chez Stone, the silvertail-Melbourne-lawyer-sophisticate, art/classical-music-connoisseur image is KO'd. In fairness, he had never claimed this image himself. No stunning example of tropical architecture, more an average two-storey home plus pool, with a pleasant garden of palms and well-placed tall ceramic water pots, but awkwardly placed Balinese statues, which Stone proudly explains is all his own green-fingered work.

Inside we surprise Stone's visiting mother-in-law, hair in curlers and bare feet, nursing the Stone's baby daughter.

I'm keen to see his art collection, and we start with his landscapes. I can only see two, calendar-style Streetons, which he explains are by a local Wodonga artist. The Asian pieces prove more an enthusiastic gathering of souvenirs, than an expert's

meticulous collection. "I like collecting things in my travels, ceramics, cloisonne, jade, woodcarvings. I probably have a lot of junk as well as the good stuff. I buy the bloody things because I like them," Stone declares. As for his musical taste, when Stone, former NT minister for the arts, says he likes "the classics", on questioning it turns out to be, "the classic old crooners, like Perry Como, Al Martino, Sinatra. I enjoy the DSO playing pop-style classics, or anything else because

I'm proud of them, but I'm not technical in classical music. "I'm a great believer in everyone having access to all the arts to enjoy them as they wish. The arts are a fantastic form of glue to help multi-racial societies blend together."

We sit in the family room, with three big pizzas and two open bottles of wine. "Right, tuck in," commands Stone.

As Stone's broad face laughs readily under his wavy hair, he reminds me of Kim Beazley, the amiable tubby, cuddly bear body type, with the shirt always half falling out of the trousers.

"I like Beazley," Stone declares, mouth full of pizza. "Good bloke. Never irons his shirts, d'you notice that? He got married a second time, and I said, why did you bother, she's not ironin' your shirts either!" He roars with mirth. "I like Kennett too - boy is he on a roll, what an operator! He's coming up here, and we're going bush together. I'm bringing a number of premiers up north to show 'em what we're doing, and get their support.

"Kennett's an aberration and he knows it. He wouldn't fit in in a normal environment. Kennett would be a great success up here! Carr wouldn't - I can tell you that. My real hero is Sinkers - Ian Sinclair is one of the most formidable politicians I've ever known. The other person I admire is Gareth Evans."

Was Evans miffed that Stone too was strutting the world stage? Hands and mouth full of pizza, Stone guffaws: "I wasn't struttin' the world stage, I was just hangin' around the neighbourhood."

I query Stone, that while he's having the full-on love affair with Asia, he doesn't appear to be doing likewise with Aborigines? Indeed Tracker Tilmouth, director of the Central Land Council, in one of his shoot-from-the-hip quotes, remarks: "Shane Stone only seems to like blacks with slanty eyes. He's not interested in visiting Aboriginal communities - we refer to any visits as 'reported sightings'."

Stone and Galarrwuy Yunupingu, chairman of the Northern Land Council (NLC), have engaged in some famous slanging matches on NT radio. What is Stone's problem with Yunupingu? Is it an ego clash between two shrewd politicians? Stone, pauses: "Look - Galarrwuy thinks he's in charge - and I know I am! It's just a question of chiefs fightin' it out.

"The NLC is not runnin' the Territory, and the sooner they face up to that, the better! Aborigines are 25 per cent of the NT population, and own 51 per cent of the land, and that's enough.

"I get on exceptionally well with many Aborigines, and have my blues with others.

"Basically I reciprocate in the way people respond to me. When I became Chief Minister, I made a real effort to visit all Aboriginal organisations, Land Councils, regional councils, ATSIC, legal aid, medical services - and I was rebuffed by all of them with a demeaning, begrudging, curmudgeonly attitude. So you think, why am I bothering?

"I'm sick of being lectured by people in the Aboriginal industry that you are guilty for all the injustices of the past, and you owe them. You reach a point where you've had a gutful.

"I haven't given up on them, but I admit it's a struggle.

"Whereas the Asians take a totally different view. They don't heap scorn on you, but respond positively, and try hard to make something of their lives.

"It is a tricky situation here with such a large multiracial population. Many Asian or European refugees, like my mother-in-law, had their homes and countries stolen from them and were left with nothing, and naturally there is resentment when Aborigines get special treatment."

I put it to Stone that thoughtful Territorians had stressed to me that Stone and the CLP are not racists, but they do have one fundamental problem. They agree Aborigines do have a special relationship with the land, and are entitled to land, but have an almighty problem with the notion that Aborigines do not want to develop their land, because development is the CLP ethos. Indeed, it irritates the bejesus out of them.

Stone's eyes roll heavenwards: "Irritate? That's an understatement! I'm pleased people can see I am not a racist, because I'm not. But some parts of the NT Aboriginal Land Rights Act are totally unworkable. We have two regimes of law up here. Pastoral properties cannot veto mine exploration, or compulsory government acquisition of their land for essential government services, like roads, power substations, schools. Aborigines can.

"Even when traditional owners do want developments, the paternalistic process of approvals required by their own Land Councils and their advisers, slows things down to a ludicrous degree. These differences don't encourage reconciliation, but push people further apart.

"The irony is I was Associate to Sir Edward Woodward, regarded as one of the fathers of land rights, and even he would say when they introduced this legislation, the expectation was perhaps 12 per cent of the NT would be affected. The reality is 51 per cent."

While the chiefs may brawl in NT - and often it's not black-white issues at the core, but rather powerful political bodies brawling - staff at other levels in government and Aboriginal organisations communicate regularly.

If the NT is granted Statehood in 2001, Stone and the CLP want two "thorns in our side" removed: "We want patriation of the NT Aboriginal Land Rights Act, so the NT, not the Feds, administers the Act, allowing us to introduce changes.

"We find it unacceptable that our two major National Parks, Uluru and Kakadu, are run by joint management committees of the traditional owners and the Federal Government. They should be run by joint management committees of the traditional owners and the NT Parks and Wildlife Service.

"We also want the long-promised Alice Springs to Darwin railway built, which will now cost \$1 billion."

Aboriginal leaders are demanding more consultations on the implications of Statehood, and a referendum, to be passed not only by a majority of Territorians, but also by a majority of NT Aborigines. On the NT Land Rights Act and Uluru/Kakadu, there remains strong feeling among Aboriginal leaders that indigenous matters are safest left in Federal hands, "where the conscience of Australia is watching them." In tactical terms, the NLC's Yunupingu has long believed it is easier to bring international pressure when Aboriginal issues are seen as a Federal, rather than State government responsibility.

Stone: "I don't think the Aborigines will necessarily be negative to all our proposals. Obviously we don't want to upset them, we want them onside. We all live here together."

Today Darwin's streets are a relaxed multi-racial mix of Swedish, Japanese and American backpackers, laid-back hippies in Balinese pants, jackeroos, pastoralists and Aboriginal families cruising along in four-wheel-drive vehicles covered in real dirt.

Darwin's one local newspaper, The Northern Territory News, is a relic of bygone tabloids - selling on a formula of crocodiles, crime, tits and bums, yet in mall cafes, people read philosophy books over cappuccinos.

As NT historian Peter Forrest observes: "The Territory is the most complex, diverse, idiosyncratic and seductive place, with the most amazing range of people, from anthropologists and space scientists, to crocodile catchers. Our big problem is the lack of real debate in the NT, because we have no effective opposition articulating any counterpoint vision or ideas.

"Another basic problem in a place with a small population and the CLP permeating everything, is the incestuous way things inevitably run. Numerous people in the NT are either public servants (or their friends or family are) or are dependent upon them for their livelihood, gaining contracts and work. This leads to much self-interest and mates' networks, and it is very easy to get effectively blacklisted. It's all part of the challenge of living here."

The other challenge is to work out what drives Shane Stone?

Stone professes no great social idealism, and is essentially pragmatic, stating "a politician shouldn't fight fights he cannot win".

He denies the Federal ambitions others claim he harbours, saying, "I don't think I would succeed anywhere else, because I wouldn't fit into the conservative parameters expected of me."

He says politics pays peanuts, but he is on a steep learning curve that will prepare him well for life after politics, if he becomes too disillusioned or decides politics is too hard on his family life.

He is besotted with his baby daughter, Madeleine. "We got her on the IVF program. I didn't realise it was against Catholic beliefs until it was all over, anyway the bishop baptised her, so she's okay. "The whole bloody town knew I was on the IVF. I'll never forget it. I'm at the hospital and I've been sent off with me jar and I've come back into the waiting area with me jar in a brown paper bag, and the sister calls out, 'Oh Chief Minister!', and the whole room looks up, and then it's on the front page of the newspaper. Bloody embarrassing!"

As believable or corny as it might sound, colleagues say it is still the father-son phenomenon that is driving Stone, till 2001 anyway. Stone senior was last shire president and first mayor of re-born, revitalised Wodonga, and Stone junior wants to top this, and be the last chief minister and first premier of the re-born, revitalised Northern Territory.

Then Shane Stone can look with satisfaction at that photograph in his office, and say, "Where are you now Dad?"

After that, like a true maverick, the future stays wild.

