

# Reconsidering Northern Territory Chief Ministers

**David Carment**

**November 2013**

Largely due to the Northern Territory's small population and parliament and its isolation from the rest of Australia, Chief Ministers have been crucial to its development. During the period in which I lived in the Territory and closely studied its politics between 1981 and 2006 six men and one woman held the position. All but Labor's Clare Martin belonged to the Country Liberal Party (CLP). As is not unusual in the Territory, I met and formed personal impressions about all of them. The recent publication of Clare Martin and Mickey Dewar's edited collection *Speak for Yourself: Eight Chief Ministers Reflect on Northern Territory Self-Government* led me to think again about these individuals. *Speak for Yourself* is an impressive achievement. One editor is a former Chief Minister and the other a distinguished Territory historian. The book has a chapter for each Chief Minister, sections that provide valuable contextual analysis and information, and extensive endnotes. The chapters on Chief Ministers are the edited versions of interviews with all holders of the office until Paul Henderson except Shane Stone, who provided a written text. There is no Australian state for which such a publication would be possible. The Chief Ministers' recollections differ greatly and are, not surprisingly, sometimes self-serving and misleading but these characteristics only add to their value. What is unsaid is often as important as what is said. Given the paucity of other published first hand accounts from former Chief

Ministers and the patchy biographical material on them, *Speak for Yourself* is an essential source for Northern Territory political history, complementing earlier studies by authors such as Alistair Heatley, Dean Jaensch and myself and more recent work from Ted Dunstan, Mickey Dewar and Robyn Smith.

With the benefit of greater hindsight than I possessed when residing in the Territory and the insights that *Speak for Yourself* provides, today I want to briefly reflect on and reassess the roles of the Chief Ministers I observed closely until 2006. I do this first by quickly reviewing each of their careers, pointing to both achievements and failures. Second, I make some more general comparative observations about them. Adopting John Wanna and Paul Williams's approach in their edited 2005 book *Yes, Premier*, to which I contributed the chapter on Clare Martin, my comments throughout the paper focus on the Chief Ministers' roles as election campaigners, decision makers, policy brokers and crisis managers. I hope that other historians and political scientists can both pursue further and challenge my preliminary analysis. There is, in particular, considerable scope for a substantial scholarly study of all Territory Chief Ministers and the social, political and economic contexts in which they operated similar to David Clune and Ken Turner's excellent 2006 edited book *The Premiers of New South Wales*.

The Territory's first Chief Minister, Paul Everingham, a former lawyer, was still in office when I came to Darwin in 1981. From the time he was appointed to the position in 1978, he quickly asserted his authority. He won respect, although not always admiration, for his energy, understanding of key issues and forthright approach. He remained in power until he resigned to enter federal politics in 1984. He had no

hesitation in ensuring that the bureaucracy was clearly subordinate to his government. Among the more noteworthy features of his Chief Ministership were claims for functional equivalence with the states, increased economic links with Southeast Asia, moves to broaden the Territory's economic base through the encouragement of industries such as tourism, and measures to increase and stabilise the population. Through intergovernmental conflict with the Commonwealth Everingham enhanced the CLP's partisan standing and fostered notions of Northern Territory difference from other parts of Australia. He successfully fought elections in 1980 and 1983. In the latter contest the CLP belligerently opposed the proposed Commonwealth hand back of Uluru and Kata Tjuta to their traditional Aboriginal owners and won 19 out of 25 Legislative Assembly seats. He was frequently outspoken and populist and he deliberately adopted a folksy image. His opponents were critical of what they described as his 'Canberra bashing' and, for the most part, he had poor relationships with Aboriginal organisations.

Everingham's successor was Ian Tuxworth, a former miner, field assistant and businessman. Deteriorating relations on a range of matters, most notably over Aboriginal land rights, between his government and the Commonwealth, marked his time in office. Many of his policies, though, were not contentious and some, like the construction of a gas pipeline from Central Australia to Darwin and the generous funding of community groups, attracted widespread popular support. His downfall in 1986 followed allegations about his misuse of travel allowances. He was forced to resign as leader following strong pressure on him to do so by members of the CLP's organisation.

Stephen (Steve) Hatton was sworn in as Chief Minister in Tuxworth's place. Prior to being elected to parliament, he was an industrial and personnel officer and the executive director of an employers' organisation. While consensual and liberal, his quite limited parliamentary and ministerial experience ultimately proved a liability. He successfully thwarted the newly formed National Party in the Northern Territory in an early election held in 1987 but there was a large slump in the CLP's primary vote. His administration dealt with significant reductions in Commonwealth funding, which meant that it had to increase charges and taxes as well as reducing public service costs. By late 1987 Hatton was losing support within his party. It came as little surprise when he was forced to step down in 1988.

Marshall Perron was originally a clerk and small business manager. On taking over from Hatton, he rapidly established harmony within the CLP but initially stumbled as an economic manager in areas such as the administration of the Darwin Trade Development Zone. Even so, the CLP won further Legislative Assembly victories in 1989 and 1994. Perron continued as Chief Minister until 1995. Unlike his two predecessors, he was never under challenge, retaining his colleagues' strong support. Although not personally confrontational, he was assertive in the defence of the Northern Territory in his dealings with the Commonwealth. His major preoccupations included reducing government costs, dealing with debt problems and handling government investments. He attempted without much success to demonstrate that key provisions of Commonwealth Aboriginal land rights legislation were no longer required and he strongly criticised the Commonwealth's native title legislation. In early 1995 Perron introduced a very controversial private member's Bill that would allow for euthanasia in carefully defined circumstances. He also announced his

retirement as Chief Minister and from the Legislative Assembly to take effect immediately after the final parliamentary vote on the Bill, which was narrowly passed before being later disallowed by the federal parliament.

Shane Stone was a former lawyer. After succeeding Perron as Chief Minister he adopted a leadership style that his supporters praised as self-confident and forceful and his critics decried as arrogant. He was particularly articulate in arguing for statehood and economic progress, including the completion of a Darwin to Alice Springs railway, as well as attempting to define a clearer sense of Northern Territory identity. Unlike his three predecessors, he dealt with a non-Labor Commonwealth government that was quite sympathetic to CLP policies. Although leading his party to a convincing electoral victory in 1997, he was forced to resign in 1999 following dissatisfaction within the CLP and the wider community regarding his alleged personal responsibility for the defeat of the 1998 referendum proposal on Northern Territory statehood.

Stone's successor, Denis Burke had been an army officer. As Chief Minister he grappled with criticisms of the Northern Territory's mandatory sentencing legislation, growing tensions between his government and the judiciary, a flagging economy and finalisation of arrangements for the Darwin to Alice Springs railway. He also faced a revived Labor opposition under Clare Martin. During the 2001 election campaign he was unable to combat the widespread belief that right wing hardliners had become more influential in the CLP, to persuade a sufficient number of electors that the CLP could once again bring economic prosperity to the Territory and to match Martin's strong media skills. The result saw the CLP very narrowly defeated and, for the first

time in a Northern Territory Legislative Assembly election, an Australian Labor Party victory.

The last of the Chief Ministers that I consider today, Clare Martin, worked as an Australian Broadcasting Corporation announcer and journalist. She proved strong and decisive. In spite of some difficulties during her first term in office, which included the sacking of her Minister for Health and the need to amend very unpopular legislation on private swimming pool fences, she led her party to a landslide election victory in 2005 in which it increased its Legislative Assembly membership from 13 to 19 of the 25 seats. The anti social behaviour measures that she announced during the 2005 election campaign, however, attracted criticism, including from members of her own parliamentary party, as being directed against Aboriginal people. Martin used most of the sources of power available to her. These included not only the Chief Minister's position but also other ministerial portfolios, such as Tourism, that she held. She made key decisions affecting the shape and size of the public service. Special attention was given to job creation, infrastructure development, education and training, and the tourist industry. In early 2006 the Territory economy appeared much more robust than it was a few years earlier. While various ministers were regarded as hard working and effective, none approached Martin's prominence or looked like challenging her. Within two years, though, she resigned from office following the federal government's 2007 intervention in Territory Aboriginal communities and growing criticism of her within the Labor caucus.

There are numerous similarities between the Territory's Chief Ministers just discussed. Unlike the situation with many recent state premiers, they did not endure

lengthy stints in opposition or initial periods of minority government. Due to the long period of CLP predominance, only Martin even served as an opposition member. In common with numerous state premiers, however, the Chief Ministers frequently dissociated themselves from their immediate predecessors, even when they belonged to the same party. This led to tension between Everingham and Tuxworth after the latter became leader. Perron distanced himself from Hatton and Burke from Stone. All were pragmatic populists, claiming to have an insight into the wishes of ordinary voters. But this populism, especially from Everingham, Tuxworth, Perron and Stone, was criticised as prioritising the interests of urban non-Indigenous voters and paid less regard to those of Indigenous people outside the main urban centres. Only Everingham and Perron departed at times entirely of their own choosing. The others all left office following varying degrees of pressure from within their own parties. Burke was the sole Chief Minister in the period I deal with to lose an election although Paul Henderson did so much more recently.

As is evident from both *Speak for Yourself* and other sources, there were continuing issues with which all the Chief Ministers had to deal. One was the difficulty in a small parliament of finding talented ministers. Most of those appointed did not have administrative experience in large organisations. Neither had they served for long as backbenchers before being promoted to the ministry. Each minister also had to look after a much greater range of areas than in larger political systems. Even those with more impressive track records outside politics, such as Martin's first Health Minister Jane Agaard, sometimes struggled with the demands of their portfolios. Another key area was the need to strengthen the Territory's fragile economic base. Aside from constant pressure on the Commonwealth for greater financial support, different

strategies were employed here. Everingham and Perron attempted with only limited success to develop closer business links with Southeast Asia. Martin, following Prime Minister Bob Hawke's example, organised an economic summit shortly after she came to power. Economic well being, however, remained heavily dependent on Commonwealth largesse. The aspirations of the Territory's Indigenous people and their organisations were nearly always prominent. Early Chief Ministers like Everingham and Perron were often in dispute with Aboriginal land councils. Relations did, though, improve to some extent later. Hatton was keen to erase what he saw as the CLP's 'red neck' reputation in race relations. Burke significantly chose not to fight the 2001 election on issues such as land rights and native title. Martin had Aboriginal ministers in her cabinets and was keen to quickly resolve land claims and native title claims over Territory parks and reserves. She was, however, less able to cope with the Commonwealth's 2007 intervention. All Chief Ministers tried hard, often against considerable odds, to establish a strong sense of local identity. They pursued what Heatley first defined as 'Territorianism', which was forcefully presented and encompassed quite regular attacks on Commonwealth governments. 'Criticism of Canberra', Heatley writes, was 'traditional for Territory politicians' but for some Chief Ministers, including Perron in his opposition to Commonwealth Indigenous policies and Martin in her attempts to prevent the establishment of a Commonwealth nuclear waste facility in the Territory, proved counter-productive. With deliberate repetition Chief Ministers used the term 'Territorian' to describe people, however recently arrived or transient, who lived in the Territory but sometimes, at least by implication, excluded Aborigines or separately labelled them as 'Aboriginal Territorians'. Perron went so far in 1993 to assert that Aboriginal culture in the Territory was centuries behind that of its European inhabitants. Finally, there

were differing attitudes regarding statehood. Everingham, Hatton, Stone and Martin pushed for it energetically and enthusiastically while other Chief Ministers, despite difficulties they encountered that resulted from the Territory's constitutional status, saw it as a less important priority. The narrow failure of the 1998 statehood referendum was a setback that all subsequent efforts to revive the statehood cause were unable to overcome.

To conclude, it obviously needs to be noted that the Chief Ministers considered here were not for the most part nationally well known. While attracting much media attention within the Territory during their periods in power, they were what Wanna and Williams call 'parochial kings but cosmopolitan paupers'. Only one, Everingham, attempted the transition to federal parliamentary politics, where he was widely deemed a failure. Stone perhaps achieved the greatest national prominence, but only after leaving the Territory parliament, as federal President of the Liberal Party. When they did occasionally hit the national headlines, it was mainly for something very unusual like Perron's euthanasia legislation. The Chief Ministers I discuss appeared powerful to other Territory residents when in office but are now mostly little remembered even in the Territory itself. Yet, as I think *Speak for Yourself* persuasively shows, their views and actions mattered not just for the people they governed but also for the wider Australian population in key policy areas like Indigenous education and health, and the management of parks. Recent national political discussions about the need to encourage northern economic development are further evidence of this. There is, to return to my earlier remarks, much worthwhile research still to be done on the Territory's Chief Ministers on the matters I all too

briefly outlined today and others that I did not have the time to discuss. Thank you for listening to me.