

# THE STONE REVIEW — WHERE TO NEXT?

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# Introduction

A lot has already been said and written about the CLP's 2005 election defeat. In the wake of that election, Shane Stone QC was asked to conduct a "no-holds barred" inquiry into the causes of this malaise.

Shane Stone's Review has since been published. It makes for some interesting reading.

The Review clearly demonstrates that there are great opportunities for the CLP. Victory can be built from the ashes of defeat. However quick action is a key element in putting the CLP back on its feet.

This document aims to discuss how the Party might like to move towards implementing the Review's recommendations as quickly as possible. It is intended for any CLP member or fellow-traveller, though later in this paper emphasis is given to deliberations of Central Council / Annual Meeting and the Management Committee.

## About the Author

I am a student at Charles Darwin University. I am also known to many CLP members as the President of the University Liberal Club. In this role I am an interested outsider and friend of the CLP. While this means that I do not know in detail the recent history of the Party's internal discussions and debates, it does allow me to present an outsider's perspective. I have nothing to lose or gain by expressing any opinion about the CLP.

This paper borrows some concepts from software engineering and economics. I don't figure to be a professional in either of these topics, however I have studied both and I continue to study them as a hobby. However each of these topics give some enlightening approaches for responding to the Review.

# The Problem

The Review runs to 43 pages and contains 74 major recommendations. These recommendations cover a wide range of topics, from the name of the Party to the establishment of several new committees. Some recommendations require complex actions which will only pay off at some indeterminate point in the future. Other recommendations require no action at all.

The problem facing the CLP is making decisions on the body of recommendations. Specifically, given the limited resources of the Party and disagreement about its future direction:

- Which recommendations, if any, should be adopted? Which rejected?
- In which order should recommendations be adopted?
- How much resources should any given recommendation consume?

There are a few different ways one can approach the questions above.

### **The Planning Perspective - Analysis of Required Steps**

When looking at any given recommendation, this approach requires us to break down that recommendation into smaller and smaller parts until it becomes easier to act than to further analyse the recommendation.

So for instance the recommendation to not change the CLP's name<sup>1</sup> requires almost no analysis, and we can leave it be. On the other hand, the recommendation to appoint a full time State Director<sup>2</sup> requires us to decide what this person will do, to map out constitutional changes to support the position, allocate funding, draw up employment criteria, select modes of advertising, settle on interviewing process, etc etc. Each of these steps might represent substantial difficulties in themselves.

### **The Prioritisation Perspective - Analysis of Desirability**

Of course it is one thing to look at a recommendation as a list of things to do, but it is another thing to want to do it. Some of the recommendations are more attractive than others, but the question is: which?

### **The All-In Bunfight - Analysis by Interest and Habit**

The CLP is a political organisation, filled with political individuals. These individuals frequently disagree. Some have a vested interest in preserving this or that status quo or in enacting this or that change to the CLP's mode of operation.

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<sup>1</sup> Recommendation 73

<sup>2</sup> Recommendation 4

It's quite possible that the questions I listed above can quickly devolve into flags and rallying points for nothing less than a horrible and destructive fight. This would not be new to political parties in general or the CLP in particular.

While not everyone can agree to every recommendation, it strikes me that everyone can probably agree that this sort of infighting is directly unproductive. It prevents the core work of the Party, which is to recruit members, raise funds, preselect candidates and support those candidates at election time. Arguing about this or that constitutional kink does not serve core function.

## What Will the Solution Look Like?

However it remains that recommendations need to be accepted or rejected, that they need to be prioritised, that they need to be expanded on, and that all of this needs to happen quickly.

This paper is about proposing solutions to this conundrum. But first we must decide: what does our ideal solution look like? What qualities do we value and desire in any method or process for selecting and following recommendations?

Listed below are some qualities that I think are key to a successful process.

### **Impartiality**

As noted above, a lot of people have a more than passing interest in the direction of deliberation. Others may be suspicious of the motives of any approach, even if it is completely above board.

Therefore it is important that all participants can agree that a solution is impartial: that it does not give particular favour to one outcome by design.

### **Consensus-Building**

Any solution should be consensus-building. Anyone who's sat through "This Time For Sure" review meetings will know the dark side of the 80/20 rule - 80% of the time will be spent on heated argument about 20% of items under consideration.

Any proposed solution should encourage focus on points of agreement, not disagreement. The 80% most people are happy with needs to receive the most attention and time, the other 20% should probably be deferred for further consideration.

## **Prioritising**

Even where there is consensus, it will not be possible to do all things at once. There must be some way of deciding, even roughly, in what order recommendations should be implemented.

It's important to note that the need to prioritise cannot be allowed to violate the principles of impartiality and consensus-building. It's no good deciding on a list of priorities if people feel that it's rigged or if it's top heavy with unpopular items.

## **Simple for Ordinary Members**

If the process is too hard to follow, it won't be followed. A complicated plan for experts will be lost on ordinary CLP members, who have many other demands on their time and attention.

Therefore any solution must be as simple as possible, consistent with other qualities above.

## **... But with a Flexible Level of Detail**

Somebody needs to carry out the recommendations. That person or persons needs to be able to take the general directions from the solution process and do detailed work with it.

Therefore some allowance needs to be made for especially interested persons to make a more detailed assessment later in the process.

# A Process Candidate

So now we have a list of desirable qualities. Now I would like to describe a candidate which I think meets these requirements.

Essentially the process falls into two steps. The first step is to build consensus and prioritise recommendations by approval voting. The second step is to perform closer prioritisation by cost-benefits analysis.

## **Step One: Approval Voting for Recommendations**

Approval voting is very simple. Voters are given a list of options, and they tick any options they approve. They may choose not to tick some or any of the options.

### Sample Ballot

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<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Recommendation 1
<input type="checkbox"/>	Recommendation 2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Recommendation 3
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Recommendation 4
<input type="checkbox"/>	Recommendation 5
<input type="checkbox"/>	Recommendation 6

In the approval voting method, no emphasis is placed on priority. Boxes are not numbered. Neither does the absence of approval imply anything specific - you may have disapproved, felt unsure or simply been disinterested. It won't be counted in any case.

After voters have marked the options they approve, all the ballots are collected. Approvals for each option are tallied, and from these tallies it is possible to rank the approval level of any given option.

The reason I recommend approval voting over other methods (such as traditional meeting year-or-nay votes, simple plurality votes, preferential / instant runoff voting or even more exotic methods such as the Condorcet Method) is that it is the best

for building consensus<sup>3</sup>. Disagreement is put to one side: the emphasis is finding what issues voters agree about. They might not be controversial and therefore might not attract much attention, nevertheless they might be widely agreed upon. Where on the other hand a matter might almost evenly divide the voters and thus sow discord, under an approval vote such a thing will simply have a middle ranking and not attract trouble.

In other words, in our current scenario, other methods of voting require options to be pitted against each other during the vote. This increases tension, strife and the likelihood that people will trade horses to advance their own particular interest or cause.

The other reason I recommend approval voting is that it is extremely simple. No complicated rules are required. The voting method is easy to grasp, easy to count and easy to verify. Most of all it's quick and requires little effort for voters. Any system requiring voters to vote in order of preference (such as Condorcet or instant runoff) will quickly run afoul of the fact that there are 74 options to vote for. I doubt that anyone has the time or mental stamina to exhaustively rank 74 options, which means that only matters of great interest would be voted on. The astute reader sees that this brings back to a kind of approval voting.

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<sup>3</sup> There are dozens of ways to take and count a vote. Mathematicians can show that no one way is absolutely superior in all scenarios: there are ways to create anomalies in any voting system. The trick is to pick the right method for the job, based on the desired qualities of the vote.

I expect that the time to perform the approval vote is at Central Council or the Annual Meeting. Delegates would present their approval votes over the list of 74 recommendations. Once all votes have been collected, it will be possible to generate a list of approval tallies in no more than an hour or two.

The ranking of these tallies provides a guide to consensus. Central Council can use the tallies to prioritise those recommendations which will cause the least infighting.

## Step Two: Cost Benefits Analysis

Once items have been prioritised by consensus, the next step is to moderate that list by weighing the costs of each recommendation against its expected benefit.

For many, none of this is new. The idea of using cost-benefit tables as an aid to decision making stretches back into the dim distant history of business books. However it must remain emphasised that our leading goal is consensus, to which any cost benefits approach must bend.

### The Costs-Benefits Table

Included on the next page is a simple example of a Costs-Benefits table. I have chosen a series of random recommendation numbers; nothing is implied by their selection.

RECOMMENDATION	COST	BENEFIT
R72	9	2
R12	3	5
R34	5	3
R27	5	9

The measure of costs and benefits is not detailed at this stage. Instead our aim is to get quick and ready estimates of difficulty and effect in a generic, easily calculated measure. "Cost" and "Benefit" may include financial considerations, time taken, complexity, likelihood of success, political impact and so on.

The reason we aim at a simple method is that we will average them out later. No one person has the ability to run the detailed numbers on all proposals, so we aim for a consensus view of costs and benefits.

This exercise can be dealt with by either Management Committee, the Central Conference, or indeed any combination of the two. Even the branches could be involved.

To keep things manageable, this process should only be used on small groups of recommendations. Those 10 recommendations found to have the highest degree of consensus during approval voting would be considered and dealt with first. Only then would the next batch of 10, then the next 10, and so on, until all the recommendations have been dealt with (or not, as more contentious items rise to the top).

During this process it may be found that some items on which there is much consensus are difficult to carry out and unlikely to make much impact. In these cases it may be wise to put those items aside. In any case, a batch of recommendations can be dealt with by implementing them or putting them aside, as the case may be.

## **Potential Problems**

The main problems are twofold: the first is that costs and benefits at this level are formed of opinion, not testable detail. The second is that the process is less impartial. Let's deal with each problem in turn.

Different people will see different aspects of problems and opportunities. Where one member sees a pot of gold, another sees a legal minefield. Where one member can think of political opportunities, another might think that there are few votes in a proposal. The goal at this stage is to seek the aggregate understanding of the group. Experience and economics suggest that short of establishing a trading market in recommendations, the next best way to uncover group knowledge is by an exercise in comparing scores.

So the first problem is solved by redefining it not as a problem, but as a desirable quality of the approach.

The second problem is more troublesome. The proposal is to take the average (the mean) of collected costs and benefits for recommendations under consideration. A person who wished to tip the balance against a given recommendation might put the cost as 10 and benefits as 1 in an attempt to skew the mean. In a small sample group this is problematic, and overall this problem can undermine the perceived impartiality of the system.

There are a number of refinements which curtail this problem. Firstly, all assessments of costs and benefits will be public. While the approval vote is a secret ballot, during the costs-benefits round anyone will be allowed to see anyone else's assessments. This can bring attention to any individual whose assessments are dominated by 1s and 10s.

The second refinement is to require unusually high or low scores to be accompanied by a rationale. It may be perfectly reasonable to give some items 1:10, and it would be useful to know the reasons for that score. This refinement could be based on assessment scores - any score of 1, 2, 9 or 10 needs explanation - though this approach may discourage people from giving extreme scores. Furthermore, those trying to undermine the process could simply set their scores to 3:7 and achieve some of the same effect.

Instead, outlying scores should be asked to give rationale once averages have been calculated. The most extreme assessments in either direction, relative to the average result, would be queried. So if, for example, Recommendation 9 has an averaged Costs score of 2 and Joe Bloggs gives it a 10, it might be reasonable to ask Joe why he has given that unusually high score.

People may wish to adjust their scores when asked for a rationale. They may wish instead to adjust their score as an alternative to giving a rationale. This would be a useful way of allowing people to change their minds without losing face, so it should form part of the process.

## Levels of Detail

It may be desired that the process is more detailed. So, for example, it may be felt that costs and benefits should be considered more like so:

RECOMMENDATION	POLITICAL COST	FINANCIAL COST	AVERAGED COST
R22	4	2	3
R33	6	6	6
R56	2	3	2.5

At this stage, it should be noted, the process becomes more and more complex. There is probably some value in Management Committee doing detailed breakdowns of costs and benefits as an aid to decision making; whether this level of detail would scale to run smoothly for a Central Conference or to branches is questionable. Nevertheless the process retains the option to go down the detailed path when the time comes to do so.

# Conclusion

I do not wish to give the impression that my approach is the solution to all of the CLP's problems. It is not. The road ahead of the Country Liberal Party is a long and arduous one. Barring the discovery of Clare Martin in bed with a naked economic crisis sometime in 2007-08, the CLP will be fighting an uphill battle to expand its position in the NT Legislative Assembly, let alone form Government.

However I believe that infighting or lack of prompt action will doom the CLP to wander like Moses in the desert for a period of time that will cease to be proverbial and simply become horrible. No political party thrives when it is out of Government and out of contention for Government for more than a few terms. Recovery becomes less about the party and more about dumb luck. Hardly a thrilling prospect.

The CLP is uniquely positioned to defy the history books, to defy the naysayers, to break out of the traditional opposition rut. Much has already been done, but much is left to do. I hope that in some small way, this paper will help the process of doing what *must* be done.