

STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

J.D. SOMERVILLE ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Full transcript of
an interview with:

George Lewkowicz

Conducted on:

18 April 2019

Interviewer:

Allison Murchie

Transcribed by:

Deborah Gard

For:

The **Don Dunstan Foundation**
20th Anniversary Oral History Project

1999–2019 celebrating 20 years of action for a fairer world



DON DUNSTAN FOUNDATION 20th Anniversary **ORAL HISTORY** PROJECT

NOTES TO THE TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was created, proofread and donated by Deborah Gard, SA State Library volunteer. A second proofreading was undertaken by Rosemary Purcell, accredited editor. It also has been read by the interviewee, George Lewkowicz. It conforms to the Somerville Collection's policies for transcription which are explained below.

Readers of this oral history transcript should bear in mind that it is a record of the spoken word and reflects the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The State Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the interview, nor for the views expressed therein. As with any historical source, these are for the reader to judge.

It is the Somerville Collection's policy to produce a transcript that is, so far as possible, a verbatim transcript that preserves the interviewee's manner of speaking and the conversational style of the interview. Certain conventions of transcription have been applied (ie. the omission of meaningless noises, false starts and a percentage of the interviewee's crutch words). Where the interviewee has had the opportunity to read the transcript, their suggested alterations have been incorporated in the text (see below). On the whole, the document can be regarded as a raw transcript.

Abbreviations: The interviewee's alterations may be identified by their initials in insertions in the transcript.

Punctuation: Square brackets [] indicate material in the transcript that does not occur on the original tape recording. This material includes words, phrases or sentences which the interviewee has inserted to clarify or correct meaning. These additions are not necessarily differentiated from insertions by the interviewer or by the transcriber, which are either minor (a linking word for clarification) or clearly editorial. Relatively insignificant word substitutions or additions by the interviewee, as well as minor deletions of words or phrases, are often addressed in the interest of readability. Extensive additional material supplied by the interviewee (or transcriber) is placed in footnotes at the bottom of the relevant page rather than in square brackets within the text.

A series of dots, indicates an untranscribable word or phrase.

A dash, – indicates a pause or a digression as occurs in informal conversation.

Sentences that were left unfinished in the normal manner of conversation are shown ending in three dashes, - - -

Spelling: Wherever possible the spelling of proper names and unusual terms has been verified. A parenthesised question mark (?) indicates a word that has not been possible to verify to date.

Typeface: The interviewer's questions are shown in **bold print**.

Discrepancies between transcript and tape: This proofread transcript represents the authoritative version of this oral history interview. Researchers using the original tape recording of the interview are cautioned to check the transcript for corrections, additions or deletions which have been made by the interviewer or interviewee but which will not occur on the tape (see the punctuation section above). Minor discrepancies of grammar and sentence structure made in the interest of readability can be ignored but significant changes such as deletion of information or correction of fact should be, respectively, duplicated or acknowledged when the tape recorded version of this interview is used for broadcast or any other form of audio publication.

This is Allison Murchie interviewing George Lewkowicz at the State Library on 18th April 2019. This is an interview for the 20th anniversary of the Don Dunstan Foundation and we are doing a series of oral histories to celebrate that. Thank you very much George for agreeing to participate as one of the key interviews in this process. First off, can I have your full name?

Yes, George Stanley – I pronounce it ‘Levkovitch’. L-E-V, the Ws are V in Polish and the sound of the CZs are CH, so if you’re in Poland it’s ‘Levkovitch’. I just thought I’d get that on the record.

Please do, because I was a little worried about the correct pronunciation!

That’s all right.

And your date of birth.

It’s 27th October 1948.

As you said, you were born in Poland.

No, I was born in Germany actually.

Born in Germany of Polish parents – is that right?

No, that’s a bit complicated as well.

Let’s spend a few minutes explaining that story and how you got to Australia.

I was born, as I found out much later when we found some records in the Australian Archives, a DP or a displaced person. That was because my mother who I thought was from Czechoslovakian background and, if you refine that a bit more, Slovakian. I found out later that she was from a German-speaking family whose ancestors had gone to what was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Czechoslovakia, and nurtured and looked after the forests in that part of Czechoslovakia at the time. It is now actually in Ukraine, that area, up in the Carpathian Mountains. Her father was a forester as well so the family line sort of continued in that area. Her maiden name was Dacer (D-A-C-E-R), which is a bit of an unusual Austrian name and pretty hard to pick up in some of the histories but somebody had done a big review of all the people in this area of various German-speaking villages. I showed this list of people to my mother and she said, ‘That’s my auntie; that’s my cousin,’ that’s so and so, and so and so. That sort of proved that she was from Austrian background so I guess I could say I’m half Austrian. My father was from near a city called Łwów at the time (L-W-O-W) with a Polish stroke on the L but its pronounced ‘L’voov’ and it’s now Lviv, now in Ukraine. Both of the

places, my mother and then my father from Polish background on my father's side, is now in Ukraine so when we look at my origins it's a bit of a mix of everything.

I was born in a place called Murnau – that's spelt M-U-R-N-A-U – which was a small town where my mother ended up after she'd gone out of her village because the Russian Army was coming, and being of German-speaking background her mother told her to get out. She ended up in Murnau as a cleaner and cook in what is called the Hotel Post (P-O-S-T). My father was told to get out by his father when he was 16-years-old because he'd been peddling in illicit alcohol, I think, and the Russian Army was coming so my father went into, I think it was France and then ended up in Germany in a concentration camp. When the American Army was coming my father was transported out of the concentration camp, which was near the French and German border, to I think it was Dachau concentration camp. Then they got saved and released by the American Army and he ended up in Murnau as well. That's where my mother and father met and I was born, but we were all displaced people at the time.

The UN organisation, I forget what it was called, but the refugee based organisation supported and helped all these various displaced people – Poles, I don't know about Germans, Slovaks and all sorts of others, to find another country if they didn't want to go back to their original country. My parents decided they wouldn't go back to what was now Ukraine. They had various choices – my godfather went to the United States and he was my parents' best friend, and my godfather's wife went too. I guess they would have been thinking of that but the first opportunity that came up was Australia. I think they went down to around Naples in Italy and the boat, the *General Hahn* – it was a sort of troopship carrier – was the ship they came out to Australia on. They initially, I think, landed in Melbourne and then were transported to Bonegilla, which was the big migration site. This was the end of January/early February and very hot. They might have been acclimatised a bit in Italy - - -

Still a bit of an extreme change!

Yes, they probably found it a bit of a shock. They spoke no English; fortunately there were some friends still there around them. They ended up going to Gawler, which is about 50 kilometres out of Adelaide. I think, initially, my mother was split from my father because part of the deal of coming out was these workers - - -

That was quite common, families were split.

Yes, particularly the males were told they had to go and work somewhere. Some ended up north with the railways but my father I think ended up in Kelvinator. He used to, initially, stay at Smithfield migrant camp and sometimes ride his bike down to Adelaide.

Kelvinator was down - - -

Down around Keswick. He was a refrigerator sort of mechanic type of person initially. After that he worked in foundries and various other places.

That's probably one of the most interesting answers I've ever had to tell me where you came from. That's a fascinating story, and probably not an unusual one for someone born at the time you were. I don't have the time, unfortunately, to go through all of your childhood and working history but that sets the scene very well for someone working for someone like Don who had such a multicultural attitude to life, and particularly people from Europe.

Yes.

To cut a long story short, you became a career public servant. Is that right?

That's correct.

When did you join the public service?

1970.

The year before I started and became a career public servant in '71, but not quite as an impressive career as yours. Did you have any ambition for yourself joining the public service? What were you looking for there?

I did an Economics degree at the University of Adelaide and the public service at the time was in a bit of what I called transition. There was the old guard – very black-suited and a bit rigid but they were looking for graduates because apart from the professional graduates like architects and engineers they didn't have that many – I'll call them generalist graduates, although economics was seen as a bit of a specialty.

But it was a turning point in the public service, wasn't it?

It was a turning point and they were looking for graduates. My first department was the Engineering and Water Supply Department. I wasn't the first; the year or two before there had been some graduates employed but they were looking for people to come in and do some analysis on pricing of water and just looking at how things were going.

So a graduate with a fairly substantial skill level that they could bring straight into project work really.

Well, to bring in, train up and get an appreciation of how the public service works although, initially, it seemed they didn't really have a plan for graduates, which was a bit of a complaint a number of us had. I think the year before me they'd had some program of initiating people and explaining how things worked but when I got there it was pretty disorganised. Initially,

for about three or four months I was mainly doing pretty basic administrative type work, wondering where I'd be going. Obviously, having had a university degree I was looking for something more brain challenging, so I guess that was my ambition initially.

How long did you stay with the E & WS?

About five or six months. Why I moved – Don Dunstan was a minister in the late '60s and then he became Premier, I think it was 1968 [1967] and then he lost his premiership when Steele Hall became the Premier with, I think it was called the LCL at the time – the Liberal and Country League. I won't go into the details on that.

Yes, that's well-recorded. What I'm interested in is getting to working with Don.

Don wanted some policy capacity at the Premier's Department level. Before that the Premier's Department was mainly a sort of administrative type of body with some publicity people and things like that.

It was a small department, wasn't it?

Yes, quite small. I think – we'll call him the permanent head, they were called then – John White wasn't a big policy thinker - - -

John was the permanent head?

He was the permanent head at the time, in 1970, but when Don got in he wanted this capacity and what was set up was a policy secretariat. The nominal head of that was Bob Bakewell who was a bit of a mover and shaker around the place. I won't go into his history – that's probably recorded as well. Then there were three – I'll call them policy people, or vacancies established. One was the principal project officer. There was a project officer and then there was a research officer. I saw this advertised in the public service and applied and got a position as the research officer in the Policy Secretariat. That looked quite interesting. Don was obviously a well-known figure, and it sounded - - -

Were you political yourself at that time?

I'll go back a bit.

At uni you were involved.

Yes, when I was at uni I was in the Labor Club and we got various speakers in, including Don, so I had come across Don there. Obviously, he was in the news a lot so we all knew about him. We had various views about his views. At the time, it was '66 through to '70, there was a big revolutionary ferment in student circles and some of us at the time thought Don

was a bit too Fabian-like and not as radical as he might have been. I'll come back to some of those things later on. I wasn't a member of the Labor Party. I actually went to a meeting once and all they talked about was how to organise a barbecue. What I thought at the time, being a public servant, I wouldn't join the party officially.

Would you have considered yourself a leftie?

I think probably at the time a more pragmatic leftist rather than running around wanting to tip everything upside down, and obviously being in the public service you had to come up with things that would work!

Well, you can have as wild an idea as you like, but it's got to be something that's going to get through.

That's right.

What was your role in that policy unit?

Being the most junior person, I'd call it sort of semi-administrative and a bit of research and some policy work. I'll just talk briefly about my first two projects: one was to be secretary of the committee on rural machinery cooperatives. That was a policy worked up by Brian Chatterton who was Minister of Agriculture at the time. That was to go around being secretary of a committee chaired by a senior officer, Peter Barrow, from the Agriculture Department, and representatives from the stock owners, I think, and the Farmers and Graziers – a chap called Grant Andrews was on it as well. We went around the state and other states just talking to farmers and seeing if they were interested in joining together to jointly purchase expensive rural machinery and use that machinery to improve the efficiency of their operations.

The other one – the Labor Government at the time had promised to build a third university at Gawler, north of the city. My job was to come up with a draft of the Cabinet submission, seeing if it was feasible to do that. One of the things I had to do was to try and get some population projections to see how many young people would be potentially coming through, particularly related to that northern area.

Was it seen as more of an agricultural university because of the location, or a normal one?

Yes, a normal one. There was Roseworthy Agricultural College up that way so that was the agricultural one. I spoke to various people including ones in the Education Department and the Bureau of Statistics. The bureau was a significant source of information on all sorts of things but I found that the statistics weren't that well developed and we really had to come

up with some guesses about population projections. In the end the decision was that there wasn't enough positive information to suggest there ought to be a university up there. Over the years there was a sort of intermediary place. The Board of Advanced Education on the teaching development side, they located a college of advanced education at Salisbury so that might have taken a bit of heat off the northern areas, plus the South Australian Institute of Technology set up a campus at The Levels near Mawson Lakes, so that catered a bit for the northern areas.

That probably effectively covered it.

Yes.

Being new as a project officer, were you given a free hand to just go and visit those people and do your own sort of research?

Pretty well, because it was all pretty new.

There were no computers to google an answer, so it was doing the hard yards.

Yes, there was no internet. There was the South Australian Year Book giving statistics or if you wanted more up-to-date information, the Bureau of Statistics. There had been various research or policy units set up in the Education Department, and I think it was Community Welfare, so - - -

All of those skills that you had at university were now being put to use in how to research, come up with submissions and this sort of stuff, so you were finally getting to use your brain and your skill level.

Yes, I can't say I was the best of writers at the time. People like Bill Voyzey – he was the head of the secretariat and he was very good at writing and he was a significant mentor to me.

Were you starting to feel comfortable that you'd got into the right area of work?

I was. It was pretty challenging because there were all sorts of policies to follow through.

If we just look at the list of achievements of Don – he and the Cabinet come up with the ideas and then you've got to do the research. It's a simplified version but is that how it worked?

Yes, there were certainly the policy statements and they were quite significant ones and covered a lot of areas. They were always a backdrop – what was the party getting at when they were making these policy statements? This is at election time. Before that, there was the party platform as well and they sometimes gave hints as to directions. Our job was to look at it pretty independently and see whether whatever the statements were saying were feasible, particularly in terms of the practical side and then of course the financial side. We had a

pretty close relationship with the Treasury and, to some extent, with the Public Service Board.

It is important for people to recognise that you were public servants and you were independent. You weren't employed by the ALP as party hacks or whatever. I think some people don't necessarily appreciate that, particularly in those days, things did change but the public service was truly independent and did all of that research, got the advice correct.

Well, whether the advice was correct or not - - -

Well, the best you were able to do, and then would that go to Cabinet for approval or discussion?

It varied. The process developed over a number of years that initially we'd get this request from the Premier, and that might have flowed from a minister to the Premier to us, or someone like Bob Bakewell who was in the Public Service Board at the time but was the main link between the Premier and the policy secretariat via Bill Voyzey. He would say he'd spoken to the Premier about something. We need to get whatever it was moving and can you people have a look at it either individually or as a little team? Although we were only three people we [could be] part of a committee which might be made up of public servants or consultants or other people around, like industrial people, union people, or whoever. The point about independence and what people thought I could come back to later on if you remind me, but Don wanted this unit which wasn't tied to any particular department and he wanted direct access to it. It's fair to say that some of the ministers saw this as being useful but at other times they saw it as being interference – this policy unit and then later on a bigger policy division. You know, what do they know about our area? So there was a bit of conflict later on.

Had they been threatened?

Yes, they were threatened. There were a number of projects – there was a big one on the hazards of the nuclear fuel cycle and there were significant disagreements between the policy division and the Department of Mines when that came up later on in the 1970s. About halfway through the '70s Don set up a Cabinet comment process – that is, departments would put up their Cabinet submissions cleared by their ministers. The Policy Division at the time would be asked to comment on it and those comments would go directly to the Premier. He'd be in Cabinet and he'd have his briefing – quite short briefings about questions to ask or comments to make, and he would make them from what we understand. Sometimes the ministers would accept them and at other times they thought, where did this come from and what do these people know? – we are the department, or the minister, and we didn't really like that.

But it was often said, what Don wanted Don got.

Pretty well, yes.

But he got it by consensus usually, didn't he?

Yes, that was the whole thing.

Did you ever meet him early on in your role there?

Not so early, being the junior officer I didn't go to the face-to-face meetings that much but there were two big projects: one on industrial democracy - - -

That was a big passion of his.

Yes, that's right, and I was the secretary of a committee on industrial democracy – Worker Participation in Management it was called – for the private sector, and also secretary for the same topic for the public sector. I remember going to a briefing with him with Bill Voyzey and just explaining or being available to answer questions about how the whole project was going. Similarly, there was a big project on land prices where the price of land for development was going up significantly. This would have been about 1973 or 1974 and I was asked to look at the idea of a land betterment tax. I won't go into the details on that but that led to a wider set of ideas about land commissions and whatever else. In the end, the Premier set up a committee, which I was a member of, to look at the whole area of how do we stabilise – I think it was called the Land Prices Stabilisation Committee. As part of that exercise I went to a meeting with Don and some people explaining what we were doing and our proposed solutions to all this area.

What did you think of him?

The trouble is what I thought of him at the time is sort of totally overblown, I guess, by what I've known about him since.

We'll move through that, but those initial meetings that you went to and any interaction you had with him - - -

He was seen as a bit of an icon, a super-human sort of figure who could pick up just about any topic and talk about it and quickly pick up the main threads of whatever issues were being talked about. As we can see from the legislative program over the years, there was any number of those. We were on the 10th floor and the Premier and the staff were on the 11th.

State Admin.

Yes, the State Admin Centre. The Premier's suite and all that was seen as a bit of a Camelot! Our thought was that we were lucky to be working in this exciting area and he was the leader of that exciting area. He was open to ideas. He didn't really want to hear why things couldn't be done. He wanted us to look at how things might be done although every now and again we'd say, this is getting a bit out of hand or it just won't work, and that was our job.

Well, that was the independent advice, wasn't it?

That's right. When you looked at Don, he was very good looking, he dressed well – sometimes flamboyantly. He had this gaggle of advisors around him looking at economics, looking at how he might be best presented – very good speech writers in Tony Baker and after a while, Mike Rann, and before that, John Mitchell. I forget – there might have been some other people – and very tuned-in executive assistants like Peter Ward and later on, Bruce Guerin. I think between those two was Rob Dempsey. So yes, we were in awe of him and we did our best to work as quickly as we could and come up with various Cabinet submissions on all sorts of areas. Also, I guess we used his authority in the whole area of making comments, working with people saying - - -

And that opened doors for you.

That opened doors.

Like, I'm here for Don.

Well, for the Premier. The area was quite informal as well – we'd call him Premier but, at the same time, if you met him outside that formal office situation you'd call him Don, or whatever. I also knew him through his family that I'd met when I was at university. His first wife, Gretel Dunstan, was an Economics tutor of mine.

OK, that's a pretty good family connection.

I'd sort of known him outside the public service sphere.

This is something that a lot of people wouldn't know – talk to me about the man that's not politics, that's married to Gretel, and his children who lived at Norwood. Tell me about that man.

There were two phases – very hard to talk to in private unless he was very interested – apart from the political side which I think he wanted to get away from in non-public service political circumstances. Unless you knew about his interests it was very hard to get through to him to really bring something up.

Don Hopgood once told me when I asked him about the person, he said, ‘Ask him about his children and he won’t shut up!’ He adored his children and that was a way in. Prior to that his comment was that he was very hard to know socially. That’s exactly what you’ve said.

Yes, if you knew – once I was talking to him and he was talking about music and he mentioned a famous pianist, Rudolf Serkin, and I wasn’t really into that area at the time. I know about Rudolf Serkin now but if I’d known about that person we would have had a chat about music but, as I said, unless you are into that. Also once I was in Melbourne and I knew his daughter, Bronwen, and we were in his five-star suite up in one of the hotels in Melbourne [Southern Cross]. He was getting dressed up in his dark suit and Judith Pugh was there helping him get dressed. I won’t go into Judith Pugh and her history with him because that’s been recorded as well. Again, he was very good looking and he was going out somewhere to meet people, so I met him in private there. Interestingly, in about 1990 I was talking to him at a Labor Party function. He had retired as Premier so he wasn’t in politics anymore although he was still helping out – I think it was Greg Crafter around Norwood. I had just been appointed as the director of the Aboriginal Cultural Institute because that had got into all sorts of financial problems.

Sorry, what was the name of it?

The National Aboriginal Cultural Institute, or Tandanya it’s called now. I was at this function and Don, as people who know his history, had been very involved with Aboriginal people from way back. This was in about 1990 and he was keen to talk to me about how to work with Aboriginal people and he just kept talking, talking, talking. So if there was a common interest and something he could help me on, or help other people on, he would be very keen to talk. In a way, it was hard to get away from him!

Once he started!

Once he started, yes. I was mulling over how I was going to approach this quite difficult area at the time. So it just depended on circumstances and his particular interests. I know that when he was at the university he was in the Labour Studies area, he would go in and people told me he was very sociable. He would cook a cake and bring that in and they would enjoy that. He was very interested in cooking. He set up Don’s Table at Norwood so he was being very sociable there. I guess it depended on his role at the time as well. I know now that every now and again he’d just want to switch off because there were things going on in his head about - - -

How did he switch off?

From what I understand, he loved music, playing the piano – he'd switch off that way. He'd switch off through his cooking. He'd get people around and cook for them and have his dinner parties and other parties. Often, from what I've heard, he'd be in Cabinet meetings and look as though he'd gone to sleep, but he was actually – his eyes were closed and he'd surprise people by being able to summarise what they'd been saying and come up with a solution as to how to follow through whatever topic it was, given all these many Cabinet submissions that would be going through the Cabinet. Also, from what I understand, he'd read late into the night, found it hard to sleep. He'd get migraines and have to wear dark glasses, so every now and again he'd just switch out of things.

Did you stay in awe of him?

Yes, I did, right through. I worked in the Premier's Department from 1970 – one of the first people there in the policy area – right to when he resigned as Premier in 1978 or 1979 [February 1979] through ill-health.

Were you aware of how ill he was?

Not really, no.

I think he kept that very private.

Yes. He went over to Europe and he picked up a bad cold there but he'd also been suffering from migraines and when his second wife died, Adele Koh, that hit him pretty badly, and there were other issues that had come up as well. People, I think, were starting – not getting tired but just wondering where he would be going next although, depending on who you talk to, they have points to make that there would have been another program of new things coming up in the late '70s.

If he'd been well there would have been.

If he'd been well, yes.

It's one of those what-ifs, but I'm sure if his health had held out there would have been another agenda of change. One of the comments that was made – I grew up through his being Premier and thinking that's just the way things were, not having lived through the Playford era or being too young to understand it. I just accepted that everything he did was normal politics but he was actually incredibly brave with a lot of what he was putting up, because Adelaide was a very conservative city and, particularly, the state was very conservative. He was challenging people with this legislation. I've spoken to Peter Duncan about it, when he was Attorney-General. He said it was not easy to get that through and I think that's another side of just how committed he was to South Australia to make it a better place. You must have felt that very strongly, being part of that

process to get that legislation through because it was your advice – not you personally, but the unit’s advice that was leading to that legislation.

Yes, some things needed legislation, other things didn’t. One of our roles was to provide the advice and then others would pick it up from other departments depending on the area. Then with the legislation itself another person, or more than one person, would instruct the parliamentary counsel who drafted legislation.

I guess what I’m getting at is that early advice could almost make or break. You would say, yes, go ahead, here’s what you need to know or this is why it won’t work. I never actually thought about the political image, to be quite honest, I thought about ministries and a minister will come up with an idea and it goes through Cabinet and off it goes to legislation. I hadn’t seriously considered it until I actually looked at your interview, and that role was incredibly substantial.

It was, yes.

What were some of the highlights of that Dunstan legislation period, whether you played a role in it or not, but what do you think were some of the key legislative reforms that went through?

Probably the Homosexual Law Reform was a significant social one. I won’t go into details on that. We probably didn’t do a lot there – it would have come out of Peter Duncan’s area, although we might have said this looks feasible or not, so I won’t comment on any detail there. There was a big royal commission into the non-medical use of drugs which sort of opened up the area of drug law reform. There was the women’s advisors area, the support for non-discrimination. That was on gender but also a lot of other areas, including Aboriginal and people from non-English speaking background. The area of industrial democracy sort of rose and fell but as a concept I think a lot of the ideas in that project and follow-up from – I think it was called the Worker Participation Unit and then the Unit for Industrial Democracy – were picked up in later things happening, say, in the public service where - - -

Also a lot of the unions really picked up on industrial democracy. Even though that unit unfortunately did fail there were some key people in there that did a lot of good work, and it did flow down so that it’s common practice now. So again, he triggered it even though it may not have lasted as long as he would have liked.

Yes, there was a whole work quality movement, mainly driven through the Japanese experience. A lot of the companies picked that up that we ought to get the ideas of our workers a lot more than we have been. For example, formal structures may or may not have been set up, and in the public service in selection processes they were opened up a lot to involve staff representatives which didn’t happen in the old days. Before I joined the public

service there was the whole thing about seniority – you sort of proceeded up the chain. That whole thing was opened up and Don also set up a committee of enquiry into the public service which came up with ideas of rationalising numbers. I think it was 52 departments at the time but also a number of other areas including getting more Aboriginal people into the public service, more women in senior roles, more people from non-English speaking background. There were any number of social things – the whole community welfare area got modernised, I'll call it, through Len King who was the Attorney-General. There was Ian Cox who was the head of that department – a very open-minded sort of person who improved the way people who were not doing too well in society were to be supported instead of being kicked aside or being seen as huge problems, although that is still an area that we've got issues on – the homeless, for example.

What was Don's role with homelessness? He was obviously aware of it. Did he try to have any policy areas on that?

Not that I know of. There was this area of people sort of hanging around and police moving them on. Don stopped that. I know that he changed the law on – I forget what the formal stuff is.

It was like lingering, no. I know what you mean, I can't think of the phrase.

It will come to me later on, so there was that sort of thing.

That's become one of the big issues of the Don Dunstan Foundation, the work they are doing on homelessness.

Yes, it's a difficult area. There was a whole area of consumer law reform as well. Don would speak to people around his electorate and others. These issues would come up such as, I bought a car and it didn't work, what are my rights if something goes wrong with buying a house or some other sort of large thing?

There weren't any.

No, there weren't really. He, I think with Peter Duncan, got a lot of that changed. I won't call it a big reform, but initially the issue of mining of uranium was something that he wanted looked at. I think he had an open mind. I don't know what the real story was there, whether he was going to change his mind at the end or not but he asked us to have a look at that. We did a pretty extensive report.

What did you come up with?

We said there were a lot of issues and uncertainties, to a lesser extent in the mining itself, but the hazards after that – the waste and then in the down the stream issues there's the

uranium being used, then making nuclear power, what about the dangers of nuclear power sites, what about the danger of people getting enriched uranium or plutonium, so what are the ethical issues about mining this? We wipe our hands when it goes overseas but what about what happens to it overseas? Then the whole area of, can waste be safely stored? From what I understand there's still no solution on that many years later on since the late 1970s.

It was a couple of years ago when we had that review and it still came up with we can't be sure. All we see is bad examples overseas.

That's right. Later on the Liberal Government came in and changed all that with the support of Norm Foster, I think it was. That issue got put off the agenda to some extent, although people still don't like the idea of uranium mining. Then, as you say, there is the issue of waste and the debate about if we had nuclear power what sort of power stations do we have? There's debate, obviously, about the safety of those.

Yes, it's cheap but at what cost? That is still a very solid argument that continues to this day.

It's nominally cleaner; whether it's cheaper is debatable as well, given what they call the decommissioning costs on these sites. So nominally, it might come up as cheaper but when you say, OK storage and cleaning up the sites after the life of these stations, nobody has really sorted that out properly yet either. Our advice was that there were a lot of questions, and Don took that, but he wanted to make sure. He would talk to people who had been experienced in this area overseas. His team, including Bruce Guerin, went over there. They talked to people, came back, and there was a bit of a push I think from the Department of Mines and Hugh Hudson, who was I think the minister at the time, to open up the debate and get uranium mining approved but in the end it was decided not to follow through on that.

I've got a couple of questions from your own interview. You said that there was a group called 'the gang', which was Virgo, Corcoran, Wright, King and Hudson. Do you want to comment on that?

Well, Don wasn't from the Union Movement and the people who were really the links and also the people, from what I understand – in the Cabinet and outside if Don had an idea, some people might have thought it was impractical or going a bit too far given, as you said, the conservative nature of the South Australian community. People like Virgo and – who was the other one? – Jack Wright might have come later on, but certainly Virgo was the big presence with the unions. Des Corcoran, he later on became the Premier after Don's resignation and he got rid of a few things like the industrial democracy area - - -

That was one of the first things he did. He had been opposed all the time and he got rid of that very, very quickly.

Yes, whether he had been spoken to by people from the private sector or not, I don't know but - - -

He just never supported it.

He never supported it but he was the loyal Deputy even if he didn't particularly agree with Don's ideas. He was also the strongman in the Cabinet. Hugh Hudson was Minister of Education so that was a pretty big portfolio. The other big portfolio was Health but that didn't seem to feature as a sort of a ministerial strength. I don't know why, and they kept putting people in who weren't really any of the top players in the ministry. Hudson was from an economics background, very intelligent. He, I guess – not that I was in the Cabinet or even sitting there - - -

But you were close to what was happening.

Yes, I was sort of close to what was happening, and he'd be the guy who would challenge some of Don's ideas from the intellectual side, but in the end they would have seen Don – he was the Premier, he was popular and they would trust his judgement even though some of the ideas might have seemed a bit out there, and would probably convince some of the other members of the Cabinet who may or may not have agreed with Don [initially]. Who was another person there?

Len King.

Yes, Len King was a brilliant lawyer and Don was a lawyer as well. Len was promised the ministry as soon as he got into the parliament.

He was pretty well head-hunted for it, wasn't he?

Yes, pretty well head-hunted and then later on became Chief Justice. He was given the follow through of a lot of the legal things on the social side. He was also Minister of Community Welfare, Attorney-General, and would have been a very good sounding board for the Cabinet and for Don on whether things were legally possible or not. I don't know that he was one of the big movers and shakers in terms of the Geoff Virgos and the Corcorans but he would have been seen as a big solid intellectual.

When we look back at the time of Don and that Cabinet, he had some very good players. Not mentioning names, but current politicians have nowhere the intelligence and the integrity of that group. I think at the moment politicians rate down the bottom of the ladder with car salesmen and the like! In those

days politicians were right up the top – they were people of respect and not just respect but they recruited mainly men, but started to recruit women of substance who were intellectually strong with a strong social agenda. I often interview political people and I just say, what happened? There is no easy answer but it's very disappointing. Even the Liberal governments of the time, they had strong players – a different agenda but as a general thing were quite loyal to their premiers – Liberals perhaps less so at the time. The ALP, even if they disagreed, and you said it there, they respected Don's judgement to get it right.

Yes, these people we've just been talking about, they had significant experience in the world. They had been around, they had good contacts, a lot of expertise in their particular areas or had a feel for how things worked and how to get things through. The public service more broadly I guess initially took a bit of time to come on board but after a while they could see things were moving in a particular direction.

And it did start to move in the right direction and then again, later on, perhaps more so with Liberal governments, it wasn't necessarily independent because premiers were picking department heads who would follow their agenda. They became CEOs rather than public servants and that was part of the downfall as well. There are still many, many good public servants but you couldn't guarantee that independence of thought that you got back then. Is that how you would see it?

Pretty well. Certainly when Don came in there were a number of department heads who wanted to see how things would go, like the Under-Treasurer. There was a chap called Gilbert Seaman – he had been one of Tom Playford's key advisors. He had a limited number: Alec Ramsay, Gilbert Seaman – I forget some of the others but – John White too, who was head of the Premier's Department. Tom Playford had these people who would really advise him how to do things, although obviously Tom Playford had a pretty good idea himself, given his experience - - -

I think he knew how to get things done after all the time he was there.

Street Smarts and things like that. There was a chief secretary, a chap called Bill Isbel. At the time I think he was called the Under-Secretary. He was quite a significant player when Don came in as well. So Don had had to work out how to work with these people and, to some extent, around them, and get this other advice. Hence, the Policy Secretariat came up and then gradually people changed, of course, as some of these key players retired.

Also, he started to recruit a lot more young people, and they did sort out the graduates. It was a good career – you spent how many years in the public sector?

I spent 39 years in various departments.

Was working in the policy unit one of the highlights?

That was probably the biggest highlight. I had two: one was working right through that area although after a while you wanted to get in – we're giving all this advice, and whatever, but when that submission has gone through the Cabinet and gets handed over to somebody else to follow through, some of us working in that policy area thought maybe we just ought to go and move into some of these other areas and see how our advice is picked up and maybe even influence some of the implementation. Implementation is quite a significant subset of how things need to work. So we could give our advice but then that had to be followed through in the public service proper or out in the wider community.

The other big area I was involved with was in the mid-'80s. When John Bannon was Premier I was part of the big review of public service management and that was for about three or four years. That was quite an interesting and challenging time as well, looking at how public services worked and how we might improve them. To some extent you can blame me and Bruce Guerin and a limited numbers of others for opening up the public service to wider competition and moving the idea of permanent heads to chief executive officers on limited term contracts, and you can debate whether that was a good or bad thing.

There are winners and losers in all change but it was due for change.

To some point, except that there is now a big debate as to all this managerialist stuff – metrics and key performance indicators and things like that, which can lead people astray on how things ought to work.

One last question: did you join the ALP?

I did eventually. The interesting story there is that when Don retired Des Corcoran came in. He went to an early election. He got defeated for various reasons. A new government - - -

I think it's called ego, isn't it? – or maybe - - -

No, I wouldn't say that. I think he wanted confirmation. He didn't want to be somebody who had just taken over.

He just went a bit too early, didn't he?

He went too early and had a lot of bad luck, plus his health wasn't that good. People could see, is our premier really going to be able to do the work he should be doing? When the new government came in the policy division was disbanded. About 15 people, including myself were, I'll call it distributed or exiled all around the public service. Some left the public service and went somewhere else. So I thought, I hadn't joined the Labor Party because I wanted to

be seen as being independent. I thought, well I'm getting exiled because of a political decision so, blow it, I'll join the Labor Party! It's not that it's public but I know what my link is but after that it didn't really matter whether I was in the Labor Party or not, I'd still work – you know, what's the best way to do whatever it was?

Yes, it doesn't impact on how you do your job but, politically, it was appropriate for you to join.

I don't know about appropriate but I thought, what's the point of being out of it - - -

And the unit that you were in no longer existed.

That's right.

We'll stop there for today and we'll pick it up at another time. Thank you.