

# IPAA Don Dunstan Oration

December 6, 2023.

Hilton Hotel Adelaide  
Hon Mike Rann

## **Don Dunstan: Inspiration for Environmental Justice, Then and Now**

Lord Mayor and Dunstan Foundation Chair, Dr Jane Lomax-Smith; Dunstan Foundation Director Kate Baldock; Erma Ranieri, IPAA Chair and Commissioner for Public Sector Employment; Distinguished guests.

Working with Don Dunstan was one of the great privileges of my life and was transformational for my own political future which I had anticipated would take place in New Zealand. I had come to Adelaide as a young Kiwi current affairs journalist and former student protest leader. At the University of Auckland, where I was studying for a Masters, I took a course in Australian politics where I actually chose the “Dunstan Experiment” as an essay subject. In early 1977 I moved to South Australia to work in Dunstan’s Industrial Democracy Unit and later that year, aged 24, applied for the role as his chief Press Secretary and speech writer. My job interview was held in the same Parliament House office where I would later work with John Bannon and then myself occupy for almost ten years.

I remember that interview well. Don, dressed in a white safari suit, was most welcoming but half way through the interview we were interrupted by the arrival of Gough Whitlam, much to Don’s surprise and my shock. At one stage Don popped out for a radio interview. Gough turned to me, asking: “Who the hell are you?” I explained my background and that I was applying for a job with Mr Dunstan. His response was classic Whitlam: “You’re wasting your time here. Go East young man. Come to Sydney”. Years later, when I was Premier, Gough changed his story to claim credit saying: “I convinced a reluctant Don Dunstan to hire him”.

I got the job and was soon plunged into a dramatic period in Don’s life: his dismissal of the Police Commissioner and subsequent Royal Commission; debates over Aboriginal Land Rights; controversy over industrial democracy; fights at Premiers’ Conference with Malcolm Fraser over funding for the states; the tragic illness and death of Don’s young wife Adele Koh; a book being written that would make allegations about Don’s private life; a trip to Europe focused on the nuclear fuel cycle and then, of course, that sad morning when a very sick Premier, wearing shorty pyjamas and gripping a walking stick, announced his resignation at Cavalry Hospital.

Much has been written about Don’s leadership in electoral and law reform, human rights, equal opportunity; his pioneering commitment to Aboriginal advancement and

multiculturalism, consumer protection and the arts. But there's been little focus on his role in environmental causes. That's a shame because his achievements were substantial.

In the late 1960s Dunstan introduced innovative urban planning laws and championed legislation to protect the Hills Face Zone, Adelaide's beautiful green "curtain" from overdevelopment, ensuring that it didn't become a continuous housing estate from Gawler to Sellicks Beach while at the same time preventing the further spread of quarries that had long scarred the Hills Face, and insisting on their rehabilitation.

Some months after the 1970 election Don appointed Glen Broomhill as Minister for Conservation, the first such Ministry in Australia. The following year the Department of Environment and Conservation was created.

In 1972 the Dunstan Government passed its landmark National Parks and Wildlife legislation that for more than 50 years has been critical to conservation, wildlife and habitat protection. As a result, there are now 358 different parks and reserves which cover 21.6% of South Australia's massive land area. The Bannon government followed with a series of environmental initiatives including its controversial and nationally leading Native Vegetation Act.

I was pleased that my government committed to doubling the area of land under wilderness protection, including a big slice of the Nullarbor, and moved to prevent mining in a beautiful area of the Flinders Ranges by establishing the Arkaroola Protection Area.

Also, in 1972 the Dunstan Government passed coastal protection legislation to protect our shoreline from damage, erosion, pollution and misuse and through its new Coastal Protection Board undertake restoration work. Again, we later built upon Don's leadership by establishing a network of 19 marine parks to protect habitats and fish breeding grounds.

Very importantly the Dunstan Government passed Container Deposit legislation that came into force in 1977, the first of its kind in the world. For almost fifty years it has ensured that South Australia is the most litter free state, with the cleanest beaches, parks and roadsides, spawning the most advanced recycling culture in Australia and rewarding countless charities and clubs with a source of income. It should be remembered that this measure faced the fiercest opposition from the beverage industry, brewers, bottlers and retailers. I saw this reprised when decades later we widened the scope of the scheme and increased the return on containers from 5 to 10 cents and also banned the use of non-renewable plastic bags. Like Don I was accused of potentially destroying jobs and damaging retailers even though none of this occurred. These measures are now seen as common sense but it has taken more than forty-five years for Dunstan's container deposit scheme to be adopted by other states and territories.

For me the significance of Don Dunstan today is not for us to look back to the 70s with nostalgic, misty eyes but to explore his ongoing legacy. Don would not have wanted us to turn back the clock to an era of crimplene safari suits and avocado and

prawn cocktails. For me Don's legacy is his insistent message for us to look forward, not back.

I was at an event some years ago where a speaker described Don as a statesman not a partisan politician obsessed with opinion polls. Don was a statesman but he was very partisan. He couldn't abide the entitled self-interest of arch conservatives who occupied what he called the "Troglodyte Cave" of South Australian politics and who after dinner, followed by cheese and port, tottered across North Terrace from the Adelaide Club that Don despised to the Legislative Council to thwart reform. Dunstan, a St Peter's boy regarded as a class traitor, was a fighter, albeit an elegant pugilist, who knew that to achieve real change you needed to be in power, in government. Ironically, he was one of the first politicians in Australia to use opinion polls, not to tell him what his policies should be but to help him more effectively argue and explain his case. He told me that to really embed important reforms you have to be elected, re-elected and re-elected again. He was a progressive pragmatist. He knew that good leaders have to lead but they also have to stay in touch with those they led.

Don was approached to consider being Federal Leader of the ALP after Whitlam's dismissal and defeats. He ruled that out because he believed that a state like South Australia was ideally suited to be a test bed for new ideas, a laboratory for reform. He felt he could have the greatest influence nationally by leading a state that would be a template for progressive policies proven to be effective here in Australia. By the end of the 70s he still wasn't finished in crafting his model of social democracy where citizens would have a more effective say in the decisions affecting their lives.

Indeed, on the plane journey home from our uranium mission to Europe in January 1979, just a week or two before he resigned, Don told me about the initiatives he had in mind for the rest of the year and beyond, telling me he had one more election to win.

Don's notion of South Australia being a model for reform is where he most influenced me. After I was elected Premier, I was keen to explore innovative social inclusion policies and to embrace a renewable energy future. At that time, we had the Howard Government which for years prevented the issue of climate change being placed on the agenda of COAG and which frustrated any attempts to get a national emissions trading scheme up and running.

I had solar powered my house in Norwood but there couldn't have been many of us because South Australia had close to zero renewable energy when I was sworn in as Premier in March 2002. We relied instead on electricity generated by dirty brown coal and from gas. Given the peril that global warming would pose for a hot dry State like ours, plus our great potential for solar and wind power, I wanted South Australia to be an exemplar. So, advised by Tim Flannery and several of our Thinkers in Residence, I announced that I wanted South Australia to become a national and international leader in renewable energy with ambitious targets embedded in our new State Strategic Plan. These policies were described by conservatives locally and by those then in power in Canberra as "disastrous" for our economy. Opponents of renewable energy were, of course, backed by vested interests, which included huge donors to Coalition parties. As Don Dunstan taught us; reform is hard and in

order to get things done in politics you have to be persistent and explain what you are doing in order to secure support.

We ran our policy push like a campaign, starting out by installing arrays of solar panels on the roofs of high profile public buildings such as the Museum, Art Gallery, Parliament House, Adelaide Airport, and on a large number of schools, where students could monitor how much solar power they were generating. Out at the Wayville Showgrounds we installed enough solar capacity on one new pavilion for it to qualify as a nationally registered power station. We also aggressively pursued investment in wind energy.

At that stage there was a Federally mandated target for power companies to produce 20% of their energy from renewables by 2020. It was a pretty soft target but energy companies were seeing their plans for wind farms blocked by the courts or by councils in the eastern states. So, we made it much easier for energy companies to secure planning permissions for their wind farms if they chose South Australia. For some years this meant that our state, with less than 8% of Australia's population, secured more than 60% of national investment in wind farms. It was the same grid and for energy companies it didn't matter where the wind turbines were built. Our first mover advantage over the other states meant we secured billions of dollars of investment in rural areas of South Australia, with farmers paid for allowing turbines to be erected on their land.

We passed our Climate Change and Greenhouse Gas Reduction legislation, the first in Australia and became the first jurisdiction in the world to set interim targets for the percentage of our power coming from renewables. We were also the first state in Australia to legislate for a feed-in tariff which rewarded householders for generating electricity into the grid from solar panels on the roofs of their homes. Again, this secured billions of investment and one in three South Australian homes have embraced solar energy.

We did other things like planting three million trees to cool and green our city; requiring new homes to have solar hot water systems and plumbed rainwater tanks and insisting that buildings leased by our government had the highest energy efficiency ratings.

To ensure grid stability and avoid blackouts on days and nights when the sun isn't shining and the wind isn't blowing my successor Jay Weatherill ensured the building of what was then the world's biggest battery and I congratulate Premier Peter Malinauskas and his Energy Minister Tom Koutsantonis for their commitment to build a giant hydrogen plant in Whyalla that will include electrolyzers, green hydrogen storage and base load, emissions free power to supplement wind and solar.

So what was the result of all this effort to make our State a leader in renewables. Well, in addition to billions in new investment South Australia now produces more than 70% of its power from renewables. In 2021 we met 100% of our operational electricity demand from renewables on 180 days. By 2025/2026 the Australian Energy Market Regulator forecasts we should be 85% renewable. By 2030 we will reach 100%. We are now acknowledged internationally as a clear world leader in renewable energy. Don Dunstan taught us that South Australia could be a leader

and a template for others in Australia and around the world. And we are.

Internationally there have been significant advances in the march towards an emissions free future. Clean energy investment is now outstripping investment in fossil fuels. President Biden's Inflation Reduction Act has made a huge difference and the US, China and EU are now investing hundreds of billions in green technologies, renewables and energy security. Emissions in the US and Europe are starting to trend downwards.

However, progress is simply not occurring fast enough. The clock is ticking on whether our world will be overwhelmed by the impact of catastrophic climate change. Despite years of warnings by scientists; despite all the promises of world leaders and internationally agreed carbon reduction targets, we are currently losing the battle against unsustainable climate change. It is becoming increasingly unlikely that we will achieve our goal of limiting temperature rise to 1.5 C degrees, the level above which scientists warn that the impacts of the climate crisis will rapidly become catastrophic and irreversible. Without a massively bigger and faster effort we are currently heading for a 3-degree rise, a death sentence for many in the most vulnerable countries.

Unfortunately, our window of opportunity to avoid the worst is closing. Total emissions are continuing to rise, our oceans are still becoming warmer and more acidic, and sea levels have risen faster this past hundred years than in any preceding century in the past 3000 years. Our weather is becoming much more volatile and what were once described as "one in a hundred-year events" are now occurring with increasing regularity. Month after month, year after year we are seeing previous temperature records broken.

Prolonged droughts are causing deadly famines in countries such as Ethiopia and Somalia with the UN's World Food Programme warning that up to 20 million people could starve in the Horn of Africa as a result. Latin America is also facing the serious consequences of water shortages with Chile experiencing three consecutive years of drought. This year we've seen ferocious bushfires causing devastation in Canada, the US and Southern Europe. The world has been shocked by tragic floods in countries as diverse as Pakistan, Greece and in successive years in Australia and by the increasing regularity of hurricanes and other extreme weather events. Australia, already hit by bushfires in recent months, is again bracing for a perilous, hot dry summer. Meanwhile glaciers and arctic ice are receding at a record pace. Close to home the sea ice that packs the ocean around Antarctica hit record lows this past winter. Rising seas are not only an existential danger for small island states but for larger nations such as Bangladesh which have low lying coastal zones. A total of 900 million people are now living with this threat.

We are in dangerous territory. The human and economic cost, already massive, will get much worse. Failure to achieve the world's agreed goal of Net Zero emissions by 2050 would pose extraordinary extra threats to our economies, be devastating for food production and would exacerbate poverty, famine and refugee crises as well as pandemics, conflict and natural disasters. As the Secretary General of the United Nations has said: "We are on the highway to climate hell with our foot still on the accelerator" adding: "Humanity is waging war on nature. Nature always strikes back

and is already doing so with growing force and fury". Just over a week ago UN climate chief Simon Stiell warned that no country could think of itself as immune from catastrophe, saying "We are used to talking about protecting people on the far-flung frontiers. We are now at the point where we are all on the frontline of disaster. Yet most governments are still strolling when they need to be sprinting".

Around the world people's real-life experience of climate change is now matching and reinforcing the stark warnings of the scientists. Because of this climate deniers have lost any credibility but, like the tobacco industry decades ago, they have switched from denial to delaying tactics. Fossil fuel companies hyping the benefits of gas, as if it's a newly discovered climate solution, remind me of the tobacco industry's embrace of vaping. It's all hot air. The era of cheap fossil fuels is now well and truly over and the smart money from business is flowing into sustainable products while smart governments are investing in a net zero future not subsidising sunset fossil fuel industries that will worsen our problems.

The UN Climate talks-COP 28- currently underway in the oil rich United Arab Emirates- are crucially important for our world. This conference is being held at the halfway point between the Paris Agreement and the critical 2030 interim emission targets. So, these talks are about taking stock, measuring progress and then making sure we redouble our efforts to meet those targets.

I am by nature an optimist but I'm not holding my breath given that last year's COP in Egypt was a huge disappointment where the ambition dial barely moved forward from the more successful Glasgow COP the year before. I am also sure that right now there are horses of fossil fuel lobbyists corralling delegates in Dubai to frustrate progress by pressing for further delays. We have seen in Australia how fossil fuel companies have bought influence. Around the world polluters have shown that while all politicians will say they cannot be bought, there are certainly those who can be rented.

I'm convinced that if Don Dunstan was still with us the issue of climate justice would have lured him back into the ring. Last year's COP in Egypt was supposed to be about assisting poorer nations most threatened by climate change. It's true that commitments were made at COP 27 by rich nations to establish a fund to help developing nations recover from the "loss and damage" caused to the Global South by the Global North. Various western leaders described this as a "historic" measure advancing climate justice for those nations most vulnerable to global warming even though they did the least to cause the looming crisis. But no money was committed at COP 27 for this fund and developing nations who desperately need support to adapt and build resilience against climate related disasters are justifiably suspicious. They fear they will again be at the back of the queue on climate justice just as they were in the roll out of vaccines during the Covid pandemic.

Unfortunately, a number of governments previously regarded as leaders, including the UK, are now backing away from their own key climate commitments and timelines and approving new fossil fuel exploration while, at the same time, cutting back on development aid.

So getting back to our central theme, can the Dunstan inspiration influence how we

tackle issues such as climate change and climate justice. Well, again for me, the answer is yes. I am the Chair of the Climate Group, a non-government organisation headquartered in London which works with nearly 200 sub national governments on every continent; US states like California, Maryland and New York, Canadian Provinces, Mexican and South American states; states and regions across the EU; provinces in China and Korea, states in India and Australia and some jurisdictions such as Kwa Zulu Natal, in Africa. Collectively our members cover half of the world's GDP. The South Australian example of local leadership as a template and a goad for more ambitious policies at the national level is frequently used as an example. And like South Australia many of our member states have embraced climate action often in the face of a policy vacuum nationally, or worse... the active opposition of their national governments, as was the case under Trump in the US, Bolsonaro in Brazil and under Coalition governments here in Australia.

The Climate Group is all about driving greater ambition with faster results. We encourage active collaboration and accountability. So, we work with our member states and regions to lift their climate ambitions, advance their decarbonisation targets and help them achieve and exceed those targets. I am delighted, for instance, that one of our members, Wales, is investigating whether it can bring forward its 2050 net zero target by 15 years.

Our membership also includes hundreds of the world's biggest corporations. We require them to commit to their operations becoming 100% renewable. Our corporate members know that green credentials are good for business and in turn we hold them to account. We don't tolerate greenwash. So, our mission is all about accelerating climate action by working with companies to increase their renewable energy use and procurement and switch their vehicle fleets to electric. We are also taking on some of the hard challenges by working with companies in their development of green steel, green concrete, greener buildings and infrastructure. I'm proud that our members have cut their emissions by 380 million metric tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>, more than all the greenhouse gas emissions of California in 2020.

So, what do I think would be motivating Don Dunstan right now, had he lived as long as his friend Gough Whitlam. Given his passions, some predictions are easy. Locally I'm sure he would have stood alongside Jane Lomax Smith and Lucy Hood in defence of our Adelaide Parklands. Nationally, he would have been on the front line in support of the Voice Referendum. He would have been deeply ashamed about the way Australia voted but proud that the Malinauskas government has legislated for a South Australian Voice. He would have advocated in behalf of refugees and against indefinite off-shore and on-shore detention. I'm certain he would have been appalled by the punitive governments of Prime Ministers Abbott and Morrison and even more so by the poisonous negativism of Peter Dutton. And he would have rightly denounced approving new coal exploration and mining licences as vandalising our future.

Internationally I can imagine Don Dunstan, born on a Pacific island, and as a former national president of the Freedom from Hunger Campaign and national chairman of Community Aid Abroad, campaigning for climate justice for the poorest, least powerful and most vulnerable communities in the world. Fighting injustice was always his strongest motivation.

So how can we honour Don's legacy and respond to his inspiration? Every time we vote to widen opportunity; every time we stand up for an ideal whether it is popular or not; or work or donate for a good cause; every time we push privileged self-interest aside for others less fortunate, we can salute Don Dunstan and his legacy. Our task is not to replay the Dunstan era in different times and circumstances but to build on the foundations he constructed.

Hon Mike Rann AC CNZM, 44th Premier of South Australia