Rex JORY

This is George Lewkowicz for the Don Dunstan Foundation interviewing Mr Rex Jory, who worked for *The News* and for Premier David Tonkin, who succeeded Premier Des Corcoran in the late 1970s. The date today is the 8th December 2009 and the location of the interview is at the Don Dunstan Foundation offices.

Now, Rex, thanks very much for doing this interview for the Don Dunstan Oral History Project. Can you just talk a bit about yourself so people listening to the interview or reading the transcript have an idea of who you are?

Morning, George. Nice to be here. You're testing my memory, of course. I was born at Henley Beach in 1944, I went to the Henley Beach Primary School and to Prince Alfred College. My father died when I was four, so we did it hard: my mother brought myself and my brother up, but my father went to Prince Alfred College and it was one of those things that she was determined to do. I left school in about 1960 and I joined *The News* as a copyboy doing the general fetch-and-carry things that office boys did in those days. I became a cadet journalist in 1961, I spent a year in our Melbourne bureau; in 1965 I resigned and went overseas to London, I spent three years in the UK and Europe working mainly with the BBC;[1] I spent a year in South Africa, I wanted to have a look at apartheid when it was at its peak – one of the life-changing experiences of my life – and in fact I got arrested when I got to South Africa because I'd told the South African Embassy that I was going down and I was arrested and deported the day I arrived, but I managed to talk my way through that and I stayed for a year, but I worked as a forklift truck driver; came to Adelaide again in 1969 and rejoined *The News*, and it was the following year that Labor won the March '70 election and Tony Baker was the political writer at the time and he resigned to work with Len King and I became the political writer. And I did that for six or seven years, and of course they were the Dunstan years – well, two-thirds of Don's term in office.

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[1] BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation.

My job was unique in that every morning at about seven o'clock I rang him at home and it was absolutely carte blanche, I could ask him any question I wanted to, and so I had an almost-daily relationship with Don at that stage.

In 1978 I was posted to Canberra as a correspondent for all the News Limited afternoon papers, all of which have now closed. In I think about 1981 I left Canberra, I joined the staff of David Tonkin and masterminded his defeat in 1983, I think it was. (laughter) I returned to journalism in '84, I returned to journalism at *The Advertiser* in '84; *The News* then poached me and made me Associate Editor in '85; I was made Editor of the *Sunday Mail* '85–'86 and, when News Limited bought *The Advertiser* was transferred back to *The Advertiser* when it became a News Limited paper, I first wrote politics and I became Deputy Editor and eventually I became a regular columnist with *The Advertiser* and the *Sunday Mail*; and I pulled the plug in retirement last year.

In 1990 I won a Jefferson Scholarship in the United States, which was a great experience. I also wrote the leaders for *The Advertiser* for perhaps four or five years and I still am doing some work: I'm writing a column and commissioned work that they ask me to do. I'm a member of the Independent Gambling Authority, a former Chairman of SA Great, a former member of the National Press Council, and I'm still a board member – for what it's worth – of the SA Press Club. And that's a snapshot only, George.

Pretty busy.

There are many more things in there somewhere, but that's for you to tease out, maybe.

Thanks very much for that. Certainly you'd get some big insights on politics and Premiers and comparisons and contrasts. Just before we ask you about Don Dunstan, can you recall what South Australia was like in the late '60s and then into the early '70s?

The disadvantage I have with that question is that of course I was away for a period in that time. I remember my mother writing to me and saying that Tom Playford had

retired – well, like everybody, Tom Playford was an institution in your life, he was the only Premier I'd ever remembered until that time – and that a man called Steele Hall, whom she bracketed with the name '(Tin Shed)', had been appointed the Liberal Leader. That was in the period when Frank Walsh, of course, was Premier. And I wasn't here for the '67 election which Hall – '67 or '68? –

'68, yes.

– '68 election which Hall won, but of course from Dunstan who took over from Walsh in '67. So I came back in '69. Hall was Premier. Don was Leader of the Opposition, but a very rowdy one, high-profile politician in those days.

But to your question: it was really the end, wasn't it, of the Golden Era, the wool era if you like; and also Australia had gone into manufacturing, which South Australia had done. So there was a fairly good economy still going at the end of the 1960s but it was in decline in that manufacturing and wool had both lose their gloss. The big foundries in Adelaide were starting to grind down. And I think probably the great period of the '50s and early '60s had gone, but Adelaide was still, from my memory, run out of the Liberal Club, out of the Adelaide Club and out of the Adelaide Town Hall. The Liberal Party Upper House Members certainly had a lot of close association with the Adelaide Club – and I think all of that's gone now, but in those days it was very important.

Also there were the big companies like Elders and Dalgety's and Goldsbrough's and Bank of Adelaide and *The Advertiser* itself, but many, many more, which had their boards and their home management in Adelaide. So there was a lot of influential people because it was an isolated regional economy; it wasn't even part of the national economy in the sense that communications were very limited – air travel, for example, even telephones: to make a call you had to ring somebody who'd put you through to the number – so we were an isolated community, a self-standing economic community. Oddly enough, I think that Dunstan played a big part in changing that and nationalising – I don't mean that in the economic sense – but making Adelaide and South Australia part of the broader nation, and that was the

first time we'd opened those curtains, if you like. But we were still a very insular community, a very conservative community – not necessarily politically, but in the sense that it wasn't a community that borrowed and spent, it was a community that saved and spent; you wouldn't buy a four-bedroom house, you'd buy a three-bedroom house, because we're all a little bit conservative in the ways we lived. The way we dressed, the way we behaved – drinking till six o'clock, no gambling, you can't put these toys in the hands of ordinary people –

That's right.

– all those sorts of things, it was a very conservative community. Not everyone had cars – in fact, cars were a luxury in those days for many people. Certainly when I was at primary school only one person in my class, Peter Norman, was the only person who had a car – Peter Norman his name was, though that's not relevant. But we lived in fairly tough times in the early '50s. So Adelaide was a conservative, well-rounded sort of insular community.

And the migrants were coming in postwar, the British migrants.

Well, that was interesting, wasn't it? Again, we've all experienced – well, you experienced it first hand because you *were* one, I understand – but at school we were a white, British community, pretty much, and even the people that came to primary school from Macedonia and Bulgaria and one or two from England as well – I don't know that we had too many Italians; yes, we probably did, we had Italians and Greeks as well – they were regarded as unusual, and of course as for a black person that was unprecedented, there were just no such people living in Adelaide and if you saw one in the street as a child you'd turn your head. So it was a very different community to the one we've got now. Better or worse, I'm not prepared to say.

Okay.

I probably think worse.

Whether this was early in the piece or later, did you ever get invited to places like the Adelaide Club and hear what people were talking about Don Dunstan?

That came later. Well, it came in the early '70s. I was caught up as a political writer with the breakdown of the old LCL[2] and by then Don was Premier and the old LCL members – people like Ren DeGaris, a name you'd know; Tony Messner – they were old family Liberal Party members and they could not communicate with the media anywhere near as well as Dunstan did, so they couldn't get their message, which was *status quo*, they could not get that message through. So I was invited to I think it was called the Liberal Club, which was right next to the Adelaide Club, I suspect. I was invited once to a lunch at the Adelaide Club but, once again, it was a bit like playing away in soccer: I was not in my comfort zone at all. It was intimidating because of the rules, regulations, the way people dressed, spoke to each other, everybody knew each other in this club atmosphere; you were an outsider and you knew it.

There was another club, I think it might have been in Bentham Street – no, it may not be Bentham Street; it's the street that runs through from Hindley Street to Currie Street where there's two or three restaurants, Rigoni's and so on.

Leigh Street?

Leigh Street. On the corner of Leigh Street and Grenfell Street there was some form of a club there and I was also invited *there* by the same type of people, who tried desperately to get their message through. But of course their message was *status quo* and 'Isn't this grand', and 'We don't want this change'. Change was inevitable and it was something that Dunstan foresaw, which these people resisted. I'm not saying they were bad people, that's not a criticism at all; it was just the way – to your earlier question – it was the way Adelaide was run in those days, out of clubs and it wasn't transparent, really. There was some sort of backroom arrangement that that conservative Adelaide had to itself.

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[2] LCL – Liberal Country League.

Yes. I was leading up to the question of do you think – well, Steele Hall was in the same demographic of Don, his background was probably – well, Don went to Saint's, I don't know where Steele Hall went, but – – –.

I think he went to something like Owen[?] High School or something, I'm not sure. I think he was a government school-educated person and not tertiary, I don't believe.

But he was smart, presentable, good-looking. But what did you pick up, when you came back, as the differences? Don's ability to tune into what was going on and come up with policies that were innovative, radical, but accepted to a point – and some weren't – and then Steele Hall couldn't?

Obviously, Hall was selected by the Liberal Party because he had a similar image to Dunstan. That really was the mistake they made. They tried to put one against the other. But in that period Don was the real reformer and Steele was the appealing face of a party that didn't want to reform. Now, Steele was a very presentable man, a very personable fellow; in fact, I still see him a bit – he's eighty-one, I believe – I see him occasionally, but still very fit and full of information and a point of view. But his reforms were always reined in by the people behind him and of course that's what led to the split.

It's interesting, isn't it, that the parallel today is Rudd is seen as a young, reforming Prime Minister and the Liberals again put a moderate in Turnbull against him; when they put a radical right-winger like Abbott against him there seems to be a clear difference which people rather like; and perhaps, just as a reflection, the Liberals made a mistake by going for a moderate when an Abbott radical right-winger might have shown the difference and given people a clear choice. But that's something for history, isn't it, that's all gone.

Dunstan I met in opposition in 1969 in the corner office in Parliament House. Gerry Crease was there. I can remember feeling very uncomfortable, mainly because of Gerry. Gerry had too much to say. When I said no, I wouldn't have a drink – not that I'm a wowser; I'm a drinker – but I said I didn't want a drink and Gerry sort of ridiculed me to a point where Don had to shut him up.

Really?

And it was Gerry who made me feel slightly uncomfortable. Don did his best to try to put me at ease. I wasn't writing politics, Tony was still the political writer in those days, but I somehow went across to meet him. And that was a strained meeting but that was because of Gerry.

That's a pity.

Oh, no, it was just Gerry was like that, wasn't he?

Yes.

And it was interesting that I did meet Gerry and his demise wasn't much after that, which was pretty sad. I didn't know him at all and previous people like Mark Day would have worked with Gerry Crease, I suppose. But that was the first meeting I had with him.

You had to be impressed with Dunstan at the first meeting, you had to. He filled the room.

That was you and him and Gerry, just the three of you.

Yes. It was rather like there was the elephant sitting behind the desk and the chimpanzee making all the noise in the corner. (laughter) I don't say that in a derogatory way, but that was Gerry as I understood it, he had a personality a bit like that, and so I didn't have much more to do with him. But from then on, in 1970, March '70, I remember Tony Baker coming in and saying, 'I've resigned. If I were you, the minute I walk out I would assume my desk and you will assume the job'.

Position, yes.

And in effect that's what happened and I took over as political writer and I was able to – it was a real privilege. I used to ring Steele and Don each morning. They believed, I'm sure, that in those days *The News* set the agenda for the day, the media agenda for the day; so there were some prearranged questions, sometimes even a press release would have been dropped in to my letterbox late at night, Tony would ring me and say, 'You'd better ask Don about this in the morning', and that was

beautiful, I mean I'd just come to work with all the words there and Don would elaborate. Other times, I'd ask him a question and whatever it was – and he was always full and frank and open and almost – – –.

So there wasn't spin?

Well, you put a penny in and you got what you wanted. You just put a penny in and he was – I'm not going to say he was 'Dial-A-Quote'; he was very forthcoming. It was the end of an era where politicians were accessible. I think probably the next five years, and then after that – even though Don had instituted a press secretariat, media monitoring and other things, he himself was still very accessible and very frank and open. For example, I would go on country trips, let's say to Port Pirie or the Riverland, with Dunstan as a journalist –

In the same car, yes.

– and I'd sit in the back of the car and Tony or someone would sit in the front, or Don would sit in the front and Tony and I would sit in the back. And who was it, Bronte Firman was his driver?

Yes.

Bronte would drive. And in fact there was one – please stop me if I'm just – – –.

No, it's fine. Go ahead.

We drove to Port Pirie once and the car broke down, and it was a slight embarrassment, and we went into a railway town on the way up, the name of which – or it might have just been a siding. And Don went in and said, 'I'm the Premier and we want a car'. And there was much rushing around but they produced a car. I don't know whether it was the foreman's car or whoever's it was. And Tony got in and drove and Don sat next to him and I sat in the back, and Bronte was left to deal with the car, the broken-down car. And we hadn't gone more than ten minutes and Don said, 'Stop the car. You're going too slow'. And Don got in and drove, and I think he'd probably be the third-worst driver I've ever driven with, and I can't name the

other two; but he was hopeless. (laughter) He went through intersections – he went very fast, but I was fairly certain I was going to die.

Oh, no!

Driving wasn't his forte, I suggest. But what a remarkable experience, to be able to look back 35 years and be driven by the Premier up through the country. And of course throughout those trips the conversation was open and frank – jokes, laughter, he'd talk about his private life and what he'd done and all those things. It was very, very transparent politics. They were exciting times. And of course I made my reputation then because I had two Dial-A-Quotes in Don and Steele, who just created stories all the time. And then when the Liberal Party split came, of course, that was – – –.

But Don was fortunate in his first term, in the first three years, in that he inherited one or two things: the Festival Centre plans had been drawn up in the current site. Now, he embellished those plans – I say 'he'; his Government embellished those plans and added a Playhouse and one or two other things – but that was in train. The Festival of Arts was already in train and probably that was a Liberal-generated thing and they thought, 'Oh, we'll put money into it', and so on. These fell beautifully into his area of interest and he was able to use them as vehicles to promote South Australia. And then, of course, there was the LCL split, which just destroyed the Opposition. There was no possibility in 1973 that Labor was going to lose.

What was interesting – and I need to be careful here – but it was clear to me, it *became* clear to me, that the Labor Party was not fully-supportive of Dunstan. There were elements within the Labor Party who saw him as a vote winner and an election winner and a very persuasive carrier of the message, either to the public or to the Federal Government or anywhere else, so he was an absolute electoral asset; but there were people behind his back who clearly didn't like him.

From what side, the conservative side or the more radical?

No, from the, if you like, the union side.

Right, yes.

I don't know that Don had many friends in his Cabinet – which was a magnificent Cabinet, and that was an asset to him: Corcoran, Virgo, Hudson, King, you know all those names –

Yes.

– but I can remember having a conversation with Geoff Virgo in which he was very critical of Dunstan.

Oh, really? What was it about, do you know?

It was about the agenda for, if you like, worker protection –

Oh, yes – participation.

– well, all that. But Geoff said a remarkable thing, and I've never repeated this story until this minute. He said to me he would like to see – I'm not saying this was Don Dunstan's policy, so don't mistake the two – that *he* would like to see hardware stores close down so that all work had to be done by union members, all handyman work had to be done by union members. Now, this was a very radical thought. It must have been discussed by somebody, it wouldn't have been his thought alone. But that was the sort of atmosphere that we were in.

From the union side.

And people like John Scott – John Scott was from the Metal Workers[3] or – – –.

I think so, yes.

I don't know.

I always get that mixed up with the Missos.[4]

Yes, I think it might have been Metal Workers in those days, but I'm not sure.

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[3] Amalgamated Metal Workers' and Shipwrights' Union.

[4] 'Missos' = Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union.

AMWU – – –.

Well, there were some amalgamations after that. But he, John Scott – and I don't know whether he's still alive and still around –

I'm not sure. I've got him on my list to try and track down, but it's a bit hard.

– okay – but he pushed the agenda very hard for workers' rights; and of course Peter Duncan emerged in that period as doing much the same. And I think things like worker participation – was that Phil Bentley?

Well, there was a guy called Lyndon Prowse –

Yes.

– who was the first head of the Unit for the Quality of Work Life, and then Bentley took over when Prowse left.

I remember Prowse, yes. But I think Don's vision of worker participation and the ultimate design of it were two different things and really he lost control of that agenda at the Convention and people took it away and one-third workers and one-third unions and one-third stakeholders. And I think that was one of the things which frightened investment away from South Australia. It was unfortunate that a mild policy of communication at board level turned into something far more radical. Don embraced it, but of course he had no choice, it was foisted on him. Again, that's not a criticism; it's just an observation. But I think that did have some influence in driving investment away from South Australia: it was not a friendly climate, when you look at Queensland, for example, at the same time, when taxes were being reduced and so on.

Anything went, yes.

But that's just a side issue, it's just an observation. I'm not quite sure what the first question was now – – –.

Don't worry. I'm just curious whether Don, when you were talking with him, he dropped any major sort of stories? Not the seven o'clock ones, the prepared ones, so much, but in the car or informal sort of discussions.

Well, I'm sure he did. It was all about asking the question. And if, for example, something happened in Tasmania, some innovation was brought in, and you said, 'I see that there's a new tax in Tasmania on car tyres. Would you consider bringing it in here?' And there was a sort of excise they put on tyres, I think, they were able to under the Constitution in some way. And of course he would say, 'Yes, I'll look at it'. Well, there it is. That's just one example.

I remember a hotel tax was a controversy.

Yes, bed tax.

Tasmania put it in – a bed tax, yes.

Bed tax, that's right.

Then we tried it here and it got thrown out.

But there were hundreds of examples, too long ago now, where you would just ask a question like that and instead of saying, 'Look, that's something that I'd have to take to Cabinet' or 'I'd have to talk to my colleagues about, not Don; he'd come out and say, 'Yes, I see that's – and that's something we'll be looking at', and, 'Well, what sort of rate would you charge?' And off you'd go. You'd only want five sentences from him to be able to embellish it into a story telling what's happened in Tasmania and why it's constitutionally accessible and so on. And he knew that. He knew very well that every time he said something it would be reported – and this was his power, of course, that his word was reported. I mean we can look at the funny things like the tidal wave and so on; well, he saw that, privately, as hilarious. And I talked to him about it and I in fact went down there and saw it happen, and we were all laughing and he was saying, 'You've got to buy a boat'. Well, the next day he privately said, 'God, what a gullible lot they all are'. But again, it wasn't malicious.

I think Dunstan had a genuine, a *genuine*, affection for the people of South Australia, if you like, a *genuine* affection. I think he saw himself as part of all that and I think it's one of his strengths, that he felt he could communicate with everybody. Didn't matter whether it was the Adelaide Club or out at Elizabeth; he

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could communicate with everyone. And I saw him – I got into trouble, I might tell you – in a pub in Port Pirie once. It was a curious pub, it had a sloping floor, as I remember it. And the local branch got into him over some issue or other – it might have been inspired by someone in Adelaide, I don't know, but they got into him – and there was a row in which he had to defend himself. But it was over the bar, you know. There we were, drinking – I was there, and we were drinking beer. Anyway, I wrote the story about it and he absolutely went berserk the next day –

About your story?

– and screamed me, absolutely *screamed* at me. That wasn't the only time. But I think he had a temper based more on what he would perceive as injustice rather than anything, and he may have seen that as unjust that I was there out of privilege and therefore this was off-limits. Well, that's an argument.

Did you ever say, 'Listen, you're wrong on this', and he'd still defend himself?

He was a hard man to tell he was wrong because he always had logic in his arguments. Ren DeGaris tried to tell him he was wrong on parliamentary reform, but Dunstan, he had the intellectual argument, he had the facts and figures, and I suppose – and we may get to this question – but if you wanted to say what were his greatest achievements, the reform of the parliamentary system, which was grossly, grossly wrong, so heavily-weighted: two votes in the country was worth one in the metropolitan area. It was clearly an injustice, and for him to fight that against a very, very clever conservative attack or counterattack with a hostile Upper House was a great achievement, it was a major achievement. And, of course, in fighting it, it was wedge politics with the Liberal Party, or the LCL as it was in those days, and just split the Liberals. And that was a spin-off result rather than the core result. The core result, in his mind, was the belief that there was an injustice in the parliamentary system; and there was.

Did you follow that closely?

Yes, I was involved in it and DeGaris, of course, was involved in it up to his wrists, and he was the chief negotiator. But Ren couldn't tell his story. And they couldn't get their story across that there were not as many injustices as were probably sold by Dunstan. But he sold the case better than the conservatives, and of course people like Steele Hall and Robin Millhouse believed that there was an injustice and were able in the end to break down party resistance and get it through. It was a remarkable period.

Did you see that as LCL suicide, or what – apart from Steele Hall and Robin Millhouse, just the principle of it – – –?

Yes, there were others, weren't there? There were others like Murray Hill and I think David Tonkin was probably of the soft side there. John Carnie was a man who came from the West Coast or somewhere. Martin Cameron, too, was another one.

Yes, I remember Martin.

But there were some reasonable moderates within the Liberal Party, but the hard core were violently opposed to it and, as I said, there are parallels with Abbott in the current environment. A lot of deals in those days *were* done across the road, I'm sure the business community said, 'We don't want to lose control of the Parliament', if you like, which they'd had; the business community controlled that Parliament forever. But the result was fair, I think it turned out pretty well. I'm not sure that eight-year terms in the Upper House are desirable, but that's only tweaking the knobs. It's a different voting system, which probably makes for a different type of Upper House, and I think it's worked pretty well – not that I'm an Upper House advocate at all; I'd reform by abolition if it were me, but that's a different question.

Did you look at Dunstan and all the things he was getting through, notwithstanding some of the tricky bits on the conservative side and particularly in the Upper House and his own party in the unions, was there a pattern you saw in the way he sold his reforms, looking at it from a sort of media and presentation point of view?

Don used to say that if you believed you were right it was up to you to persuade the majority to your point of view. And so, on reforms of things like hotel hours, lottery

and gaming, those social areas – – –. They were on their way, I think lotteries started in ’67 with a lottery, which Tom said would be ‘fire in the hands of children’ or something, or whatever it was. But I mean just chook raffles in pubs, that sort of thing: these laws were changed – some by regulation, some by legislation – largely by his personality. It was he who sold them publicly. It was he who said, ‘We should have cafés on footpaths’, and of course in those days there was uproar about it: ‘You can’t have people eating outside!’ And now, of course –

‘Fumes everywhere’ – that’s right, yes.

– the ‘Athens of the South’, call it what you like, the Athens of the South is what’s there. So there were a whole range of reforms which came about through his personality as much as anything. And then there were things like Film Corporation; the dream of Monarto – I think Hugh Hudson had a lot to do with that; the land bank that came in.

Land Commission, yes.

There were a lot of pretty radical reforms which he had to sell himself, and he was a pretty good political salesman.

Yes.

But the attention of the other side was diverted right through and up to 1975 we still had the Liberal Movement, who were jumping up and down, and Robin Millhouse used to come into Parliament, ask one question and go home.

Really?

But he always made his point, and they were always noisy. But it was, in a sense, self-destructive rather than chasing the main game, which was winning elections.

What was the media’s role in these changes, that you can recall? Or your own experience there.

Well, the media played an enormous part in it because Don effectively promoted public debate through the media. (telephone rings, pause)

Are we going the right sort of way for you?

Yes, it's fine.

Yes, I think Dunstan used the public forum as a way of persuading people to his point of view. It wasn't always good. The petrochemical plant was one example of politics on the edge. I think in '73 or '75 he promised a petrochemical plant and Dow Chemical and so on and, when asked where was the proof of it, I think he sent Bob Bakewell to Japan in a great hurry to get a letter of intent because there were discussions about it but it was far short of being sealed. And Rex Connor, the Federal Minister, said, 'No, we want any energy projects to be run by Australians, not by overseas companies. We don't want the Japanese running our energy'. And so Don was promising one thing and Connor was slamming the door on his fingers with federal policy.

I guess there were others that didn't quite make it. We were always going to get an international hotel and that didn't happen in his period. It sounded good. We were always going to get an international airport and that didn't happen in his period. We were always going to get a reform of Victoria Square and that hasn't happened.

Still hasn't happened.

Still hasn't happened. (laughter) But I can remember models being dragged out with underground trains and all sorts of things just before elections, and it became a bit of a joke. But that was Dunstan using the media to campaign, and if he got away with it he got away with it.

I think at the top end of the media there was a sense of despair. By the 'top end' I mean the boardroom end of the media. 'Dunstan is in with a seven-seat majority in a 47-seat house. The Opposition is divided, so they're not going to win. So we're clearly, as a community, as a *business* community, going to have to live with this man and his policies on things like worker participation', even though they didn't like them. But I was never given any instructions to criticise or campaign against Dunstan or to question some of these things. I was given a very free hand, which

meant Dunstan was given a very free hand with me. I mean if he said it, I'd report it, and it would be reported. It wasn't until later, in the '78–'79 period, that the media turned on the Government, but by then Don was virtually out of it. So it was very late when the media played a role in his demise or the demise of the Labor Government. We were given – when I say 'we', any other reporters as well – were given no instructions and we were given no censorship suggestions at all. We were allowed to report openly.

Don used to come into the office sometimes, for lunches. I always felt in boardroom lunches with people like Ken May – and I suppose Kerry Sullivan was the Editor at one stage there and Peter Wylie and others – and I always felt that Don was uncomfortable at those lunches. And I used to go and sit at the end with a bell[?] hat on and answer the technical questions as far as the management were concerned – you know, how many seats and all those sorts; I'd just sit at the end of the table and I probably felt uncomfortable as well. I never felt Don was very comfortable on those [occasions].

Why?

It wasn't him. He was more comfortable in a one-on-one across a table –

I see.

– not in a boardroom situation with strangers.

When he's not the top dog, sort of thing.

Well, he was the top dog but he was the sort of target, and it would be awkward. You may have been in that position, but I never have and I never want to be. But I've seen it with Rupert, it's the same thing: the whole focus is on him; it doesn't matter who else wants to have a point of view, the whole focus is on him, everything is predicated on what he's going to say or what he thinks. And it was a bit the same with Dunstan. But there were skirmishes, there were little verbal stoushes at that level, and that's probably a good thing. But it was never hard, there was never open criticism or open hostility towards him by the media. Yet I suspect that people like

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Ron Boland didn't like – he was Managing Editor and Managing Director – I'm sure that Ron Boland, if he'd had his way, would have supported a conservative government. But there wasn't an alternative conservative government, it just wasn't there.

Not that time, yes.

And Bruce Eastick was a conservative but he was never a polished performer.

Mr Nice Guy.

Yes. And I think Don regarded him as a fairly ordinary politician and not a combative opponent at all, he was just a sort of nice guy, didn't want to offend. *But* he nearly won the '75 election. And I think, I *think* from memory – George, you'd know this better than me – but I think the 1967 primary vote for Labor was higher than any primary vote that Dunstan ever got.

'67, and when he lost it was pretty high. I've got some information I was tracking through with the – – –.

Yes, I think he probably got 55 per cent of the vote and lost.

Yes.

But '67 or '68, I'm not sure what year that was.

'68, yes.

Or maybe it was '65, when Walsh got in.

Well, they were getting in, but the thing about – I think maybe Dunstan got about 53 or 54 and they'd lost because of the gerrymander.

Yes. But I don't think their vote ever got that high again, in the primary vote. He wasn't – and I'm just rambling now – but he wasn't well-received in the country. There was very few country seats that Labor held. Reg Curran had one up in the Riverland; Des, of course; but there weren't many Labor seats in the country.

There was a Port Pirie stoush in the '75 election with Connelly.

That's right – with Ted Connelly, yes. Well, that was a remarkable experience, too, and of course it was Ted Connelly that kept him in government.

Yes, that's right, Speaker.

Once again, the conservatives were too slow. I'm not saying they could have got Connelly, but you offer him the deputy premiership or the speakership or something, who knows?

Yes, that's right.

And they missed out again with Rann. Too slow, too slow. And – can I jump around? I'm sorry.

Sure, yes. I just wanted to ask about the editorials. You said you were never under instructions, but the editorials had opinions, didn't they?

Yes, they did.

And they would say 'Vote Labor' or 'Vote Liberal' or whatever else.

Well, generally, the editorials in those days would preach caution about things like worker participation and other things. They would be a handbrake on where Don was going. But it was a futile protest because noone read the editorials except the Premier and the Editor.

So what's the relationship between – you're the political reporter and reporting things as you see it, and then the editorial is written by whom, and what's the relationship between that and yours?

Well, my experience in all papers that I've worked with – and I wrote editorials for *The News* and certainly for *The Advertiser*, really, for five or six years after Tony went into demise, Tony Baker; he wrote the editorials and then of course he eventually died, but he was very sick for years and I wrote the editorials; and it was simply a matter of sitting down with the Editor, and he might say, 'What do you think, what can we write about?' And I might have an idea. Or, on some rare occasions, I'd say, 'I've already written an editorial' – now, it may not be on politics, it might have been on football or anything else – but mostly he would say, 'I want an

editorial today about water. The State Government's stuffing it up, they haven't done enough', or, 'The State Government's doing a good job', whatever. But then he would give you a direction.

So that was an opinion piece, you'd call it.

Yes, but it was *his* opinion and he had to sign off on it, effectively.

Yes, sure.

So I would then assess what he was saying, what the Editor was saying, and go and write an editorial on that basis, and the Editor would then have obviously the right to change. And they were changed, make no mistake about it. Sometimes they were toned down, sometimes they were ramped up, sometimes there were more facts and figures put in or facts and figures taken out, whatever. But the editorial has always been the broad, general opinion of the editor, because whether or not it was even his idea he would have to say, 'Yes, I agree with that'. And I would have to sort of guess sometimes what he was thinking because the briefing would be pretty shallow.

So that would have been the case way back then, when I guess a guy called John Miles wrote the editorials, and they would have been at variance often with Dunstan and his message. But Dunstan understood that. He was rounded enough to understand that a conservative-managed newspaper is going to have a contrary view. But that didn't bother him, because he had the message at the front of the paper, 'We're bringing a petrochemical plant'. The editorial might have said, 'Where's the proof?' But the headlines are what was important.

What was the relationship with *The Advertiser*? Because they were seen as the conservative, and I was talking to Mark Day and he said 'the paper of record', and I was just trying to work out what that meant.

See, Don played *The Advertiser* for suckers, in that he would give me a story in the morning and dear old Eric Franklin was the political writer –

ABC.

– no, he was the political writer for *The Advertiser* in those days; Rhys Clark was the ABC journalist. Rhys was a wonderful journalist. Eric had no courage, Eric would simply report what was given to him in shorthand and he was very careful. We were a bit more aggressive and we'd be prepared to take risks, I guess. But Don would give me the outline of a story in the morning. Now, I'd only have half an hour to write it, and so you'd dash it off saying – just one example that comes to mind: I said to Don one day, 'Like Canberra, should Monarto have a lake?' Well, I'm sure the thought had never crossed his bloody mind. (laughter) But he said, 'Yes, it should, and we should have sailing ships and restaurants and – – –.'

Chinese junks, yes.

The whole thing. And off he went. You could almost hear his mind saying, 'That's a good idea, we could do this', and he was almost thinking out loud.

Yes, amazing.

And so I wrote the story – because the Monarto story was out, but it had no plan or no form – and so I just asked this left-field question and he eulogised about the need for the city to be built on a lake. Well, of course, it was only a throwaway line. And *The Advertiser* would be left to pick up the paper and say, 'Oh, shit', and then they would have to build on the story and give it form, but they would also run the story the next day. So really he got two bites of the cherry.

Yes, interesting.

He got the throwaway four pars of quotes in *The News*, which gave us enough for a story, and then *The Advertiser* would do all the research and get other people to look at it and engineers to say, 'Yes, a lake's possible' or 'not possible' or some bloody thing, and they would do the background; but the story would appear again that Monarto is going to have a lake. So, in effect, because the *'Tiser* in those days was a paper of record, they would have to report it. And Tony Baker and Peter Ward and Dunstan himself knew that, so why not give it to us? And we had meetings with Eric

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Franklin and other *'Tiser* executives, John Scales and Des Colquhoun – sorry I'm giving you all these names –

That's all right.

– in Dunstan's office, and I was there, and they would say, 'It's not fair that *The News* gets all these stories'. And Don would say, 'Well – – –.' But he knew what he was doing, he knew what he was doing. And so for a day or two he'd hand a story to the *'Tiser* and it would all disappear again and then we'd go back to the old pattern and then there'd be another attempt. And, at one stage, Don brought in an idea of having sandwiches and a drink in his office at five o'clock so the *'Tiser* could have access to him, and I turned up for those as well – and I'm not sure that I was allowed to or meant to, but no one said anything.

Just regularly.

Yes. But they didn't last, they didn't last, it wasn't a good idea. But, look, Don was accessible to the *'Tiser*, they could have done it the same way, they could have asked him questions at five o'clock at night.

Did you get a sense he was running most things and not so much his staff, they'd respond to him, or was it them coming up with ideas and he would pick them up, in some of these stories? I mean sure, he had the other press secretaries doing things for other ministers too – – –.

No. They generated a lot themselves, Peter and Tony generated a lot. There were others there, I can't remember who now, and there were other press secretaries like John Templeton was another.

Yes, he came in.

But they generated ideas themselves. But it was good crash-or-crash-through politics, too. The Rundle Mall was an example where we think it's a good idea; the retailers, conservative Adelaide said, 'No, leave it alone, don't touch'.

Yes, let the cars keep going through.

And in the end Corcoran said, 'Well, stuff you. We're going to do it, anyway'. And Don would have been fully behind that, of course, Corcoran couldn't – he was a strong man in himself, Corcoran – and they just laid the bloody bricks and booted the cars out, and what we've got now is probably old-fashioned but at that time, hell, it was radical.

And if parliamentary democracy was one of Dunstan's great achievements the other was surely to lift the profile of Adelaide and South Australia nationally, and he did it with things like that – with the Film Corporation, with opening a mall down the main street; with the arts – all of which were very well-received and probably, sadly, have been neglected by successive governments, and I think the current government is as guilty as Olson and Brown of that. The money's not there, of course; I guess we're still feeling the final trickle of the State Bank problems. But I think it's sad that the Adelaide Festival, which Dunstan really picked up and ran with – it was a natural vehicle for him to go with – the Adelaide Festival and all that that attracted and all that that brought, the intelligentsia that it brought to Adelaide, you know, there was an intellectual flow into Adelaide at the university level and at the artistic level which has never been paralleled, and it gave Adelaide a profile around Australia. It was the place to be. And by 1980 that had all been destroyed, one way or another.

I might come back to some of that later –

Sure, sure.

– because I'm interested in when you were with David Tonkin, some of the comparisons and contrasts.

Yes.

But I'll come back to that one. The television media, where did they sit in all of this, from your recollection?

Well, Don was one of the first, I mean he was a bit of a thespian, he saw himself as a bit of an actor, and of course he could perform on television very, very adroitly. He was very skilled at either the doorstop interview – which weren't very common in

those days, they had very old technology so it wasn't all that common; it was more a studio arrangement, a press conference in a room rather than the on-the-shoulder, at-the-door thing, the cameras were just too big, it had to be stand-ups all the time – or even in studios, he used to go in and sort of do meet-the-press and those sorts of things, or even debates. He was a very good performer in front of the camera. And that again brought him into people's lounge rooms as a credible human being and, in contrast, Bruce Eastick didn't look good. Bruce couldn't project the story but Dunstan could project it, he made you believe it. You almost said, 'Yes, let's do that, I want that to happen'. So he used television very skilfully.

And how did you see the relationship he had with the media? You know, there's the famous Jana Wendt incident where I think he had a bit stoush with her. She was interstate –

A national figure, yes.

– a national figure.

Generally, I think – and we're all to blame for this – I think we were probably manipulated. But that's not a criticism of Dunstan, that is a criticism of the media, that we didn't take it up to him, because – you know, it's a bit like feeding the chooks, as Joh said – if you've got what you want, why do you then persist by shouting at him and criticising him? The story's there and so why argue with it?

Where did the feature writers come in? I'm curious. Because people like Bruce Guerin initially and *The Advertiser*, they'd concentrate on a story and follow it through in more depth.

Yes, they would concentrate on the bigger issues, Stewart Cockburn and those sorts of people.

Yes, that's right.

And they would be more critical, more rounded, because they had the time. The press conference with all this heavy gear that the television people had to carry around made them have a press conference at the Premier's office, then they've got to pack it all up and go down to Parliament House to see the Opposition Leader.

Well, Don was no fool. If he wanted to say something important he'd have it at three o'clock and it would be too bloody hard to go down there. So often he used those performances for his own benefit, and why wouldn't he? That still happens today, there's nothing new in it. In fact, the modern media was really the product of Dunstan and then Whitlam. Whitlam picked it all up and it's just reformed and refined itself over the years until we have doorstops outside churches and at the door of Parliament House. But you can control all that. You're doing it because you want to do it but you're almost walking as you're doing it and then, 'That's all', and off you walk. And they all did it: Malcolm Fraser used to do it, he'd make the media stand for an hour in the cold and get out of his car and give you 30 seconds – but he'd say what he wanted to say. And, really, Dunstan started all that. Playford was really talking to shorthand writers from newspapers, and even radio wasn't sophisticated in those days.

And we didn't have instant radio, either. It was almost the six o'clock bulletin at night on the ABC was the sort of radio bulletin, you know, the midday and the eight a.m., but they weren't every half-and-hour on every station. News bulletins now, the demand is there all the time: 'Give us something new, give us something new.'

That's right, yes.

He gave new, twice a day he gave something new and everyone won a prize.

As you said when you talked a bit about yourself at the start of the interview, you worked for David Tonkin when he became Premier, so when Dunstan was there you were sort of looking as an informed outsider, if you like –

An *ill*-informed outsider.

– yes, an ill-informed – – –.

(laughter) An ill-informed outsider.

When you were in the Premier's office is the key press, was that the press?

I was on an advisory staff.

Advisory, right, yes.

I was in Canberra at the time and we decided that Canberra was going to kill me and was putting strains – you know, some years I would be away for over four months overseas or interstate or on an election campaign. It put terrible strain on the household and on me personally, and you either want to be a Laurie Oakes and do it for 35 years or you don't. So we decided we'd come back to Adelaide and David, whom I knew, only out of politics, offered me a job and we tossed it round and said, 'Oh, well, we'll do it'. And it was only then that I found out what I didn't know about politics.

Really? What was that?

Well, how decisions were made, how the Cabinet system really worked.

I see.

How the boss had to change people's minds to get things through Cabinet. All that sort of stuff. How the public service was dragged into line and all those things.

Deal with lobbyists as well – – –.

Yes, all those pressure groups and so on. So you saw a different side of it from inside. I remember Tony Eggleton – was that his name, Tony Eggleton? –

Yes, the Liberal Party Secretary.

– I went and saw him and I told him that I was thinking of going to work for David and he said, 'I'd advise you to take it because the job will be as good as a university degree'. He said, 'You'll learn more about politics working inside government than you will working with the media', and so that was enlightening. As I said earlier, myself and James Kempton, I think his name was –

Kimpton, I think.

– Kimpton, yes – and Richard Yeeles perhaps and one or two others, we masterminded David's defeat (laughter) to John.

I like that: whoops!

And so that was a brief experience, couple of years. But I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it, and it did give me a much greater insight into how the whole thing works. I maintained good relations with John Bannon in that period and I eventually went back to writing politics, and John had no objection to that and in fact we get on very well. I had a farewell dinner when I retired and the Managing Director said, 'Who do you want to invite?' And John came.

But that was an interesting period. David got things done. He may have inherited some ideas, and started things like the casino. I know Don mentioned the casino but didn't ever do anything about it. He didn't want poker machines and he found you couldn't have a casino without poker machines and it was seen as wrong to have poker machines. He saw it as politically, publicly, unacceptable. How things change.

Yes, that's right. One of the reasons I was asking you about that was the role of state governments and what they can really do, particularly around the economy, when you've got international and the national law.

I think really it was that period when we started, the late '60s, was the end of Federation as we knew it. Australia began in the '70s to become a nation rather than a collective of states, isolated economies if you like. And when it became a nation – and that pushed through with Whitlam and Fraser, I guess, but the world economy was starting to intrude – the role of the states diminished because they weren't relevant anymore because you had to think as a country; you couldn't think as six countries with someone running defence and a couple of other things. And we're seeing that demise going on with discussion about hospitals and education and so on. So Don was probably the last of the Premiers, along with Henry Bolte and Askin and Joh and Court, I guess, a little bit later, but they were the last of the influential Premiers. Premiers today – and perhaps I'll be smacked for saying this – but Premiers today, rather more than in the '60s, '70s, really dance to the tune of Canberra. The influence in Canberra is so strong now. The money's in Canberra,

the taxing powers all rest now with Canberra, and the states have very limited power to make decisions which are much more than public transport and collecting your rubbish bins. So I think the demise of state governments was inevitable and there was always that – I think it was Whitlam's – plan of having two levels of government, not three. Whether that was said with tongue in cheek or not I don't know, but it seems to me to have a great deal of merit; but it'll never happen.

You mentioned when you were with David Tonkin you and your colleagues were involved in his demise, and I guess one of the things there is the political campaigning. Were there pointers you picked up from Dunstan's style and method that you transferred or built on?

I think I probably brought more back from Canberra than I did from Dunstan. Dunstan's blueprint was already there in how the media was run. The difficulty with David was that it was a government that sat on its hands too long. It needed to be too careful. It was the reverse of Dunstan, who would at the flash of a question give you an answer. It was always, 'We'll refer that back to Cabinet', and then Cabinet would discuss it; and of course [as] with any party they had divisions, there were the conservatives and the progressives, and the conservatives would say, 'Ooh, you've got to be careful, you've got to be careful'. For example, we were in Parliament House one day and David said, 'Come with me, I want to show you something'. And we walked down to the railway station and we walked into the great hall in the railway station and he said, 'This is where we're going to have a casino'. But he didn't ever announce it. The plans were in place, but he was too conservative to just say, 'We're going to have a casino and it's going to be at the railway station'. He had to dot all the i's and cross all the t's and it was left too late. And so when John came in John was able to pick it up and say, 'Well, you beauty!' But every government has that, every government has that, I mean that's not – – –.

Interesting.

But I think David was a little bit conservative in many ways. The Hilton Hotel was still being built and John was able to open it. Well, good luck to him. David tried to get some credit for it, but in the end it was all too slow again.

'Bad luck, you lost.'

Yes. But those things happen. Every transitional government –

Yes, that's right.

– gets the advantages of some of the things that others had done. I think that David could have been a little bit more aggressive and taken a few more risks. But that's the style of the man and the style of his government, and sometimes that got frustrating. Sometimes it got frustrating.

Interesting. Well, I've covered a lot of territory with you and you've provided a lot of information, Rex. Is there anything you think I've missed out that you had from your notes?

The thing is that you warned me that we were going to talk about things that I wasn't going to know I was going to talk about. (laughter) And can I touch on two things?

Sure, yes.

Land rights. I think either by his own decision or pressure from within Don went too far with land rights. He believed in it but effectively he gave away 10 or 12 per cent of the State, which has in many senses been locked away from mineral development since then. It's starting to change now, but it did set the mining industry back when Western Australia and Queensland picked up the benefit. South Australia had a lot in the Far North-West that was locked away.

And also successive governments, not only his, made the gesture but then didn't pick up the health and social issues which were partly the result, they were partly there anyway. It was something that Don felt very passionate about but I think he felt helpless about because it was such an expensive thing. And when Whitlam came in he thought at last something was going to be done, yet here we are in 2009 and it

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hasn't been done. I think that was both a mistake to go as far as he went and one of Dunstan's bitter disappointments, that he wasn't able to do more.

The other issue was uranium. I think Don was held hostage on uranium. He I won't say was an advocate of uranium until the mid-'70s but he certainly had no objection to it, and within his party he was pushed to the three mine policy, really into a scare campaign which today is still the legacy, people still don't trust uranium because of what came out of South Australia in 1977. And I think Peter Duncan probably twisted the tail of the Government in those days and Don had no choice but to go along with it because that was the Party's view. I don't think it was his view and I think, while he sold the argument well, I don't think in the early '70s he had any objection to uranium at all and perhaps if he was Premier today he would be encouraging it. It's interesting that Mike Rann was one of those who was a strong opponent – I think he may have even headed up the opposition group as a lay person, he wasn't in politics then – it's interesting that Mike is now embracing it, albeit with a great deal of reluctance; but that's another legacy that perhaps the Party in those days went too far.

Can I say one more thing? I'm sorry, George.

Sure, yes – no, no, go ahead.

When Don came into office in 1967, that is to head the party, the Labor Party was not in good shape and he and others – Geoff Virgo, David Combe later, and with the influence of Whitlam – really restructured the Labor Party in South Australia. He or they. In that period, the Labor Party was a very unionised, introverted party that was still smarting from the split and everything else, and Don pulled the Party forward in terms of history. I was at the first open Labor Party Convention; David Combe was then Secretary and the press was allowed in, which caused enormous angst, and for the first Convention I had to submit everything to David about what I was writing, but that just fell away. But it became a much more transparent group than Alan Reid's sort of 'faceless men', and Don modernised the Party. He was the driving

force, and he had people like Virgo and there were one or two others – oh, Mick Young, of course.

Mick Young and Jim Toohey.

Jim Toohey was the other one I was going to say. But Mick, of course, was another driving force behind that. But Don allowed that to happen and encouraged it to happen and I think the Party owes – it might have happened anyway, and I'm not saying it wouldn't have, but it's he who does it, he who has the vision to do it and the courage to reform it. He pulled the Party into the new century, if you like. I think that was very important. It had a lot to do with – even today, the Labor Party today, but it had a lot to do with the Labor Party's success in the 1970s.

I've talked too much, I know, and I'm sorry.

No, it's been great. Thanks very much for that, Rex. Good.

END OF INTERVIEW