This is George Lewkowicz for the Don Dunstan History Project interviewing Mr Chris Sumner, who was a politician in the 1970s and a minister later on in the Bannon Governments. The date today is 11th June 2008 and the location of the interview is Chesser House in Grenfell Street, Floor 10.

Chris, thanks very much for doing this interview for the Don Dunstan Foundation History Project. Can you just talk a bit about yourself, a brief bio and how you got interested in politics?

Well, I was born in Melbourne but had a South Australian background and family. Spent a good bit of time in the country, went to Manoora Primary School, Nuriootpa High School, Adelaide High School, then to the University of Adelaide and did a law degree and an arts degree. Practised as a lawyer, went overseas a bit, went to the University for Foreigners at Perugia for eight months in 1974. Got involved in politics through university and contested the seat of Boothby in 1969, the federal election; the state seat of Torrens in 1973; and was then preselected on the sixth position on the Legislative Council ticket for the 1975 election, election 12th July 1975, which was the ‘railways’ election and the first election where there was full, universal suffrage for the Legislative Council. So I was elected on 12th July 1975, had four years on the back bench and when Don Dunstan resigned and the Corcoran Government came in I was made Attorney-General and some other portfolios, then had three years as Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council from ’79–82 and then eleven years with the Bannon and Arnold Governments until I retired – well, till we were defeated in the December 1993 election, ‘State Bank’ election; I retired in October 1994 and have since been working on the National Native Title Tribunal as a member and now Deputy President.

Good. You were at university in the early 1960s. What was the atmosphere like in student politics then, and how did that lead you into your interest in the Labor Party?

Well, the political activity on the campus was quite high at that time – certainly not as high or as active as it was post-1965, after the Vietnam War [began], when of
course it became much more radicalised, but there were a lot of political activities in the early '60s. The Labor Club was becoming more active at that time with young people like David Combe and John Bannon and Gordon Bilney and others. Prior to that I don’t think the Labor Club had been particularly active, but it did get active in the early '60s, and of course Don was one of its mentors and a regular contributor to debates. He was asked to give speeches and the like. But that’s actually not where I first came in contact with Don Dunstan; the first contact, interestingly enough – and was only really a technical one – was when I was at Payneham Primary School and he was the local member in about 1954, and I have a distinct recollection of him opening the fête, one of those traditional school fêtes where they sold everything under the sun – cakes cooked at home and brought along day-old chicks that were for sale that the kids insisted on buying and the poor, benighted parents had to then (laughs) take them home and try and keep them alive. But that was my first contact with Don Dunstan or my first recollection of him; but then subsequently it was through the university days, through the Labor Club and then the Labor Party.

Although I was from a conservative background generally, the university experience, which was both law and politics, led me to the Labor Party. And to some extent the sorts of things that Don Dunstan was espousing at the time – he and a few others – in the area of electoral justice, the White Australia Policy, justice for Aboriginal people, those sorts of human rights issues, were at the forefront and in those days, apart from some small-L liberals, the Liberals tended to be fairly conservative about those things – oh, and South Africa, of course; generally the conservatives supported the apartheid regime – whereas Don was at the forefront of those agitating about all those issues, and there did seem to be, certainly around electoral reform, to young people like me, a considerable injustice in the way that electoral laws were set up. So there were those sorts of ideas; plus, in my own case, a visit to India as part of a student delegation in 1963 and the sort of disparities of wealth that you saw in places like that brought home the concerns about equality and economic systems which produced such devastating poverty.
Was there any sort of factional issues at that time that was the left and the Fabian socialists, were they having a discussion about reforms and gradualist versus radical and things like that?

Well, there were always those sorts of debates at the academic, intellectual level, I suppose. And I think there might have been another club at one stage, a Socialist Club. But when I got involved in the early ’60s it had become very mainstream, it had become a Labor Club. I think there was a Socialist Club before that, in the 1950s; others would be able to tell you more about it. But I think the Labor Club actually only got going in the early ’60s, but it was basically to be a mainstream, Labor Club on campus. And within that group they were recovering the general spectrum from left Labor through to – well, probably not right Labor; I think these days the Labor Party (laughs) has sort of got an element, a very substantial element, in it that probably wasn’t in it in the early ’60s in the Labor Club spectrum.

There wasn’t any big impact of the split like in Victoria?

Well, certainly I wasn’t involved in any of that from a family perspective or an historical perspective, so to me I got involved in the Labor Party for the reasons I’ve mentioned and the Labor Club initially at university, which I said at that time was pretty mainstream and, while there were certainly people who were more left than others they were all within the broad spectrum of the Labor Party. Some were Cairns supporters and others were Whitlam-type supporters. But the Labor Party and the Labor Club – in fact, I think it might have even been called the ALP Club to emphasise that’s what it was – it was a mainstream Labor Party. It wasn’t an instrument of the Labor Party, it was certainly independent and did from time to time have arguments with head office about who they should invite. I think John Bannon tells the story that he invited Gough Whitlam when Gough was on the nose at one stage and got ticked off by the Party office. But of course we weren’t in any way directly affiliated with the Labor Party; it was just an ALP Club or a Labor Club. Very much mainstream, there to support Labor ideals, but not to be – it wasn’t dictated to by Party office or by the hierarchy of the Labor Party.
And Frank Walsh was the Leader of the Opposition around that time. Where did he sit? Like Don Dunstan you mentioned was coming to the universities: was Don seen as the leader in effect rather than in name, or – – –?

Oh, I don’t know that you can put it in those terms. Certainly Don was seen as the leading light and the most articulate person in the Labor Party in the early ’60s, before the ’65 election when a whole lot of new people came in. I mean Don was a lawyer, he was a university graduate, he had a natural affinity with the sorts of things that the Labor Club or ALP Club was trying to do at the time and he was supportive of it and a regular visitor to it and spoke on campus on a good number of occasions during that time.

But not Frank.

I can’t remember whether Frank Walsh ever came down, I honestly can’t remember. I don’t have any recollection of him coming down so he probably didn’t.

And what impressed you about Don? You mentioned his ideas, his reform ideas, but was there anything else?

Well, his ideas, which I’ve mentioned – and they were broader than that, of course – but also his capacity to express them. He was a good speaker and he could put his ideas into a very coherent sort of philosophical or principled position, and he had that capacity. And I think he was very firm about what his principles were and he had a coherent political position, which was the underpinning of what he went on and was able to do, and he was able to articulate that. So those civil liberties sort of positions or what I might call both liberty and equality-type things, because of the inequality that was seen in the sorts of areas I’ve mentioned. He was also very active, of course, in the anti-censorship area so it was the liberty aspect of it; but he was also concerned with workers’ rights which were given effect to when Labor came in, in ’65 and again in 1970 through upgraded workers’ compensation, upgraded trade union rights and those sorts of things. So it was a broad spectrum of Labor positions that he was involved in or that he espoused, although some of them, of course, such as the White Australia Policy, weren’t necessarily mainstream Labor – or opposition
to the White Australia Policy – weren’t mainstream Labor positions at the time; in fact, the Labor Party supported the White Australia Policy for many years. But Don was part of that group that way back, from when he got into politics, was agitating for change in that area. He was very strong early on, of course, in the promotion of Aboriginal rights and equality. But obviously he was impressive. He had ideas that I think appealed to people in the early ’60s as a means of reforming society. But there was a feeling of – at least, feelings that influenced me – of injustice about the electoral laws, the status of Aboriginal people, internationally the apartheid issue, and he was able to articulate views about that and lock people into his position in relation to them.

I think they were all ideas whose time had come, and quite clearly it wasn’t just the Labor Party or Don Dunstan within the Labor Party that was pushing them, there were elements within the Liberal Party as well, small-L liberals who were concerned about apartheid, concerned about censorship, opposed to White Australia, who were pressing for Aboriginal reform; but Don was right at the forefront of all that, and I think moved the Labor Party on those issues more quickly than the small-L liberals in the conservative party were able to move them. I mean they did eventually move on some of these things, but they did it more grudgingly, particularly on electoral reform and some of those other issues.

Yes, and they had their own split.

Well, they did, yes.

Later on.

Yes, that’s right.

Do you recall any debate about where democratic socialism actually – did that form any sort of framework?

Well, I can’t recall specific debates but there was that sort of democratic socialist versus social democrat type debate.

Yes, and the role of government, for example.
Yes. Well, I mean at that stage government was seen as – whether you were a
democratic socialist or called yourself that or a social democrat, the government was
obviously seen as something that could be a force for good and could involve itself in
managing the economy much more, of course, than what it does now and engaged in
public enterprise and the like. But since the early 1980s that’s basically all old-hat.
In 1965 Labor got in with support for establishing the SGIC, State Government
Insurance Commission, and a number of other public enterprises, so yes, public
enterprise was definitely seen as a way that could produce a fairer society. But the
debate between whether you’re a democratic socialist or a social democrat was a bit
phoney, I think, because in a sense there was only really a spectrum that you can
move within, given the views of the Australian public, and essentially what Labor
was going to do was what was going to be acceptable to the people, was a sort of
social democratic approach to things; there wasn’t going to be heavy nationalisation
of the means of production, giving effect to the socialist objective and all that. I
mean it remained there as a bit of an iconic statement but in practical terms what
Labor was able to do was essentially social democratic sort of reforms, I think. But
that wasn’t to say there wasn’t plenty of debate about it, and of course that debate got
heightened in the late ’60s when the Vietnam War came on and there was much more
radical approach to politics and more Marxist, hard-line views took precedence on-
campus, at least amongst the students and of course some academics as well. But,
interestingly enough, in the early ’60s, which was the main time – I left full-time at
the end of 1965 – it was all relatively mainstream, the student politics during that
period, and it became much less mainstream and became more radicalised towards
the end – well, later in the ’60s and the early ’70s when I’d moved on.

You mentioned you ran for a federal seat and then a state seat and then you got
into the Legislative Council. How did that work through? Was the Labor Party
deliberately recruiting young professional people like yourself?

Oh, yes – well, I think that’s right, and Dunstan played a very strong part in that in
trying to get younger professional people into the Party and to broaden the spectrum
of people who were running for seats. He himself, in running for Norwood, was a
prime example. There are stories, you could go back, as to how he won the preselection for that, that he did beat a trade unionist apparently for it – I’m not sure whether you’ve picked this up; you’d need to go back, perhaps to Clyde Cameron and people like that who would have told you the stories. Did you interview Clyde Cameron?

We did; but whether we got that one I’d have to double-check.

Yes, I don’t know. Anyhow, there was a story about that, as to how he won it. But once he got in, because Don was always very concerned to make sure there was a real balance in the Party between the Catholic right, there was a socialist left, whatever they might be called now, but also that in order to win government the appeal of the Party was broadened to professional people and younger people, and gradually he – along with the support of people like Cameron and Jim Toohey, who were the powerbrokers behind the scenes – did get people in who were of that kind. And Cameron himself, of course, was very much of that ilk: he promoted young, talented people. And I’m sure Toohey wanted to do that as well. But Dunstan was very much a part of that in ’65 he recruited Hugh Hudson and Gil Langley and Molly Byrne, who was a woman and not a trade union official, as I remember it, but a local person from out in the Tea Tree Gully area. All those people won their seats and got Labor in, in ’65. So Don was, yes, very much a part of trying to ensure that the Labor Party broadened its appeal and its base and the people that could be attracted to it, but at the same time he was very supportive of the principles of the trade union movement as well. So he wasn’t trying to shift the Party in any sort of radical way away from the trade union movement, he was very solidly behind the trade union movement, he saw it as the base of the Labor Party, but he was obviously trying to broaden its base for a number of reasons. Society was changing – it’s changed much more now, there are less trade unions or signed-up trade unionists now than there were then – and he was reflecting what was going on in society generally. But through all that he was still a very solid supporter of the trade union movement, so he wasn’t trying to – nowhere could it be suggested Don was trying to distance the
Labor Party from the trade union movement at all, he saw it as of the rock-solid base of the Party.

**So when you got into the Legislative Council, what list of things did you have on your agenda or under instructions, if I might put it that way?**

Oh, I don’t know that I was under any instructions particularly. I mean, the agendas, you can have a look at my maiden speech, which I tried to get a copy of but I haven’t got at the moment, if you want to have a look at the sorts of things I was interested in. But one area that Don asked me to take on was being the parliamentary liaison person with ethnic minority communities, and that was I assume because I’d spent eight months in Italy in the year before I was elected in 1974 and spoke Italian reasonably well. So when I got back and got elected and elected in July ’75 Don asked if I would act as the Labor Party contact point with ethnic minority communities on behalf of the Labor Party and on behalf of the parliamentary Party and on behalf of him. So I spent a lot of time in that period going to functions that he was often at or else I’d represent him at them. I mean I was involved in a number of other issues, in legal-type issues, issues about reform of the Legislative Council; but the one thing that was specifically Dunstan-related was that he asked me to perform that role, which I did, and then subsequently became Minister of Ethnic Affairs in the Corcoran Government and later in the Bannon Governments.

**And what did you actually do in that role apart from going to functions? Did you pick up some of the social issues?**

Yes, sure, I did quite a bit of the platform and policy work: need for interpreters; teaching of community languages in schools; EBI was a big initiative at that time.

**Radio station, yes.**

Yes, Ethnic Broadcasters Incorporated, which was supported by the Government financially. It got going as a community radio station but it was very much supported by Dunstan, and I was involved in developing policy and advocating for that, for support for EBI. And a number of other areas in the ethnic affairs area. So it wasn’t just a matter of going to functions, although that was one of the things he
asked me to do – which is important, and it’s quite busy; Don was very assiduous about his attendance and he would go to many of them because, as you know from his electorate, his contacts with particularly people of Greek and Italian extraction in the Norwood electorate go back a long way and he maintained his contacts with those people. He would go to their functions regularly and was very, very sympathetic to the view that people who came from other lands to Australia were entitled to have their cultures and languages respected as part of the broader Australian community. And he developed, in a reasonably simple set of words, what that philosophy meant, and it was not separatist but it was also not assimilationist. The word that was coined was ‘integrationist’, in that people would be integrated into the Australian community, accepting the broad Australian values, and at the same time – and in particular, values of parliamentary democracy, human rights, *et cetera* – but within that context they’re entitled to an expression of their own ethnicity and language. And it was never articulated at that time in a very comprehensive way, but there were the Grassby papers and Whitlam generally supported principles of multiculturalism. Don fitted in very easily with that position and in South Australia was one of the leaders of those views. And I obviously, given the role I’d been given, participated very closely in all of that.

Later, of course, multiculturalism developed through the Galbally Report, which the Fraser Government set up, and Professor Zubrzycki, who was chair of the Fraser Government’s Ethnic Affairs Commission or whatever they called it at the time, and then it gradually developed. And there were a number of inquiries interstate – I forget the one in New South Wales, but a very large one in New South Wales dealt with the whole spectrum of multicultural and ethnic affairs which they moved on. And in the late ’80s Hawke did the agenda for multiculturalism, so it got a more formalised sort of position as time went by. But the essential elements of what we are now saying Don was articulating back in the early ’70s.

**Who did you link up with in the public service?** There was the Ethnic Affairs Branch and maybe some activity in the Department for Community Welfare and,
for all I know, others; were you a conduit, if you like, between Don and the public service in that way?

Bureaucratically it wasn’t a large group at that time. The Liberals actually established the Ethnic Affairs Commission in 1980 and I think Murray Hill was responsible for that; but previously we had done it with whatever it was called, the Ethnic Affairs Branch in the Premier’s Department. I had contact with them regularly but I didn’t have any direct ministerial responsibility for them at that stage. But there was regular contact with them. The Ethnic Affairs Branch was established in the Premier’s Department after the 1975 election; I think it grew into that after a period of time and that initially, it was Don running ethnic affairs issues with his existing staff and with me out there liaising with people – in the first two or three years, at least. Then support for ethnic affairs was provided for in the bureaucracy and there was the Ethnic Affairs Branch established under Alex Gardini and people like that. And then that moved on to a commission which the Liberals established and which we kept in place in the 1980s.

So when you got into the Legislative Council what were your impressions of it and specifically how it operated in its relationship with the lower house, the House of Assembly?

Well, by the time I got in there it was the first election of the full franchise, so I really can’t comment on what it was like prior to that; others would have to comment about how obstructive or otherwise it was. I think the figures show that, at least after the reforms, which gave full adult franchise and the proportional representation system, – they get eleven elected every other House of Assembly election – the figures I think show that the Council wasn’t all that obstructive, most bills did get through in some form or other. Of course governments made a lot of it when it suited them about how obstructive it was, but in fact – I don’t have the figures immediately to hand, but the research I’ve seen on it shows that in fact, at least from that period when I got in, the obstruction was not as great as some people made out. But certainly up until 1975 on electoral reform it was very obstructive: the Liberals did not want a change to either the House of Assembly franchise – or not the
franchise but the voting system, the so-called ‘Playmander’, the disproportionate numbers in the country electorates as compared to the city electorates – they didn’t want to change that and they fought it, as they did the changes to the Legislative Council and bringing full adult franchise to the Legislative Council and the PR system. But I think the extent of Legislative Council obstruction is probably a bit exaggerated by people, and it was at the time. It was good politics to be able to say, ‘We can’t do what we want because of the Legislative Council holding us up’. But I think after 1975, particularly, the levels of obstruction were probably much lower than what some people said they were, and I’ve seen some statistics about it, which I could provide that as time went on it became less and less obstructive. And of course if you say you’re going to have to have two houses of parliament to run South Australia, and there’s an argument about that, there’s also an argument about whether you need sixty-nine politicians to run a small state like South Australia with 1.5 million people. But if you decide you do have to have sixty-nine politicians, and if you decide that two houses is the way to go, then in fact the Legislative Council now is actually set up in a reasonable way because of the proportional representation, the voting system. It actually allows minorities to get a bit of a say. Digressing: personally, I think they should take away the power to block supply and take away the power to permanently defeat legislation; just have a delaying period.

Like the House of Lords, yes.

That’s right. That’s what they should do in the upper house but keep the current electoral system – that is, if you’re going to continue to have an upper house. But the current electoral system actually is more democratic in one sense than the current system they have for the House of Assembly because it is a PR system and minority parties can get a say, and I think that’s good because, provided they can’t continually hold the government to ransom over issues, the fact that they’ve got a platform has to be good for the general concept of democracy. I think the Council worked reasonably well even if it was obstructing on some issues, there’s no doubt about that.
Can you remember what those were?

Well, historically, the ones that immediately come to mind are the electoral reform measures. But after 1975 I’m sure there were plenty of them, I’d need to just jog my memory a little bit on them. And we had, of course, even when I was there in the 1980s, a large number of conferences of both houses to resolve particular issues; but often they weren’t – well, they were important, but they weren’t totally dismissing or opposing all the legislation. It was often about particular clauses and details of the legislation that they would jack up on. And of course they would often say, well, this was helping the legislative process, and in some cases it was. I’ve got absolutely no doubt that in some cases ideas in the Legislative Council, changes in the Legislative Council, did lead to better legislation.

And was it seen as the guardian for the Establishment at this time, because there’s this whole issue about the Establishment disliking Don as a traitor and all that sort of thing. Did that come through at all?

Not in my experience. That might have been a view earlier on, but by the time I got there, as I say, there were six of us elected in 1975 and there were still people like Ren DeGaris there, but he wasn’t an Establishment figure. Don Laidlaw was elected the same time as I was, but he was a very reasonable sort of middle-of-the-road person, I don’t think he would have had personal animosity towards people like Dunstan. If you go back ten years before that I suspect what you’re saying is probably right, because the upper house was much more conservative at that time, they were being confronted by someone who I suppose they thought might have been one of theirs – bit of a silvertail, went to Saint’s and all the rest – but now jumped ship and joined the other team and who was actually confronting them on issues that they didn’t want to be confronted about, like electoral reform. But by the time I got there I think that was really not a feeling that was around to any great extent (at least in Parliament). And the Liberals that were in there, some of them wouldn’t have liked Dunstan particularly but I think others of them found him at least acceptable at a persona level. I mean, as I understand it, he and Playford got on reasonably well:
Playford used to drive him home after sittings and things like that. So I suspect amongst the parliamentarians themselves it was a bit of a mixed bag. Some I think probably respected what he was trying to do from the Liberal side; others, there’s no doubt some of the very conservative backwoodsmen that were in the Legislative Council – some of them were still there – yes, would have disliked Dunstan intensely, but I don’t think that was the general view. Well, it wouldn’t have been universal, put it that way. People like Murray Hill were there, and he was a small-L liberal and in fact on a number of the issues, including electoral reform, that Dunstan put up he supported him – and homosexual law reform, that sort of thing; and people like Martin Cameron, the whole Liberal Movement group that broke away in the upper house for a while there, they were all – at least on those sorts of small-L liberal issues – they were on-side with Dunstan.

**So just a bit of a tester on this one: can you recall what the reaction was when Salisbury got sacked, the Police Commissioner?**

Well, I was actually going to mention that. You asked the question of whether there were any mistakes: well, I think politically that was a mistake.

**Oh, really?**

Oh, yes. Well, the rot set in after that, however justified it was. But politically, yes, the Establishment really came out and I think people who disliked Dunstan really were able to get behind a cause, big-time.

**Right. And that got manifested in the upper house?**

I’d need to go back and have a bit of a check. I don’t remember any particular incidents in the upper house over that issue; and of course Don wasn’t there so to some extent if the person themself’s not there so the level of antagonism you don’t actually see to the same extent. But personally I can’t remember any instance of attacks on Dunstan of a personal nature over that in the Legislative Council, but there’s no doubt it mobilised the, for want of a better word, the Establishment, it mobilised those people who didn’t like Dunstan in a big way, there’s no doubt about
that. I think it’s also true that during Dunstan’s time in the ’70s that he couldn’t have won if he didn’t actually also attract a reasonable chunk of Liberal-voting people and indeed Liberal supporters in the community generally who would have perhaps continued to vote Liberal but who would have had some respect for him. If he hadn’t been able to get that level of support then he couldn’t have done what he did and he couldn’t have stayed in power for the time that he did. But you’re right, he did polarise people and there were definitely people who had an intense dislike for him, and I think the Salisbury sacking did give them the pretext to mobilise and they did, and they got a lot of support, and I think it really did put an enormous amount of pressure on the government that was unnecessary. And particularly – Don wasn’t to know this – but there were then going to be the revelations that he knew about the files all along and the Peter Ward accusations, et cetera, which became extraordinarily messy. And I think there was an alternative: they could have suspended Salisbury and had some kind of inquiry into what was going on.

A little inquiry.

But I think it was the sacking that was the thing that stirred people up. And then, of course, all the conspiracy theories in the world emerged, some of which ended up in Stewart Cockburn’s book on the Salisbury Affair and all mixed up with all the pornography debate and Harold Salisbury was a great campaigner against pornography and Don was a supporter, and all these sorts of conspiracy theories and underlying theories started to get vented if not in the public arena at least on the rumour mill around town.

I think it was good in one sense for Labor Party people because it was the elected government standing up to a police commissioner who’d basically lied to the government: that’s what he did, and that’s where of course the argument gets quite extraordinary. Here are all these conservatives supporting Salisbury, who had lied to the government, that’s what he’d done. Now, normally you would expect (laughter) people to come in behind the government in support of people, whoever they are – police commissioners or heads of public servants or army generals – not lying to the
elected government; but the whole thing got twisted around in the circumstances and it did turn out, I think, to be a major political negative for the government. And whether they could have done it another way, I don’t know. We didn’t have any involvement; we were just told in caucus.

What was the feeling when you were told?

Well, normally in those sorts of things the caucus was very supportive of what the government was trying to do, there wasn’t any major objection. And of course you might remember that The Advertiser in the initial editorialising and publicity about it supported us.

Till somebody got onto them.

Well, it was only subsequently, when the groundswell of opposition took off, that they changed tune and then of course the government had no choice but to have the royal commission, et cetera, which vindicated the government, basically. But there was another way of doing it, and Roma Mitchell actually recognised that in her decision: said that he could have been suspended. And perhaps politically that might have been the way to go, although I don’t think there was any easy way out of it, quite frankly.

I think what probably upset people was the summary nature of it. You know, you’re there one minute and you’re gone the next and you’re given no real chance to explain yourself or defend yourself. I suppose looking at the natural justice aspects of it, from the point of view of the general community, they would say he was treated unfairly, that’s why I think there was the groundswell. If he’d been suspended and some other mechanism found for him to put his case, then perhaps it mightn’t have been as bad for the government as it turned out to be.

Did you get a sense Don had sort of lost his stride then?

Not really, no. No. I think he did subsequently, yes, but that was – I’m just trying to remember what year that was now. It was after the ’77 election, I think, so it must have been ’78.
'78, yes.

Well, by that time he’d been at the forefront of pushing Labor ideas and the forefront of South Australian politics since he was elected in 1950-whenever it was, ’2 or ’3. So he’d had twenty-odd years of being right up-front and working incredibly hard during that period, so I suppose some would say, well, subsequently then he did run out of steam.

Yes. Big decisions on uranium coming up, too.

Yes, and resigned in early 1979. But I think probably that Salisbury thing did take a bit of a toll, because by that time it was all mixed up with this other business about his personal life, some of the stuff we’ve seen more recently about Ceruto and the play that’s currently on at the moment, and then turned into McEwen and Ryan’s book, It’s grossly improper. Those sorts of things were starting to bubble around, not necessarily publicly, but on the rumour mill, I think. Probably all that didn’t help, and then of course Adele’s death, it all came to a close.

All got to him.

But I think you can’t deny that he had been right at the forefront for well over twenty years of every critical debate, pushing his ideas, working hard; and even without any of this other stuff that’d be tough enough. You’re seeing people around state politics at the moment dropping off – after six years as Premier they decide they’ve had enough. But Don got to be Premier in 1968 for the short period, but before that he’d had thirteen years of really slugging it out in opposition and being, I suppose, in a sense, not the de facto leader but certainly a very prominent opponent of the government and articulate opponent of the government of the day. And then of course he had his three years as Attorney-General, two and a half years, before he became Premier, which was again a frenetic period of activity. So anyone, I think, after twenty years of that sort of level of intense activity would have been starting to feel the pressure, I think.

Yes. Did you see him perform in parliament?
Oh, I went in there, but obviously I wasn’t there; I was in the upper house. But yes, I saw him from time to time.

**And what did you think?**

Oh, Dunstan was a very good performer. As I said before, he had the capacity to articulate his ideas, there’s no question about it, and he was great in that sense. And he always had that solid philosophical foundation, he knew where he was coming from and knew what he was there for, and that’s always, I think – it’s great to have that foundation because it means you’re not sort of slipping and sliding all over the bloody shop when you try and put a position in parliament. And he was good, had his ideas – – –. Which didn’t mean he wasn’t a pragmatist, I mean you have to be a pragmatist if you’re a democratically-elected politician to some extent, but he did have his principles in mind, he was good at articulating them, and of course he was very, very good also on technical aspects as well. So the broad principles, but on technical aspects as well.

Without being able to remember any particular case, I heard him speak many times and he was always very good. A couple of times, actually – I did see him (laughs) go on a couple of times when he was poorly-prepared and he didn’t impress. And after he got out of parliament he was sometimes invited to functions and people expected him to give a really good, solid speech, and again one particular case – I think it might have been the QCs’ dinner – and really it was just substandard. Well, he hadn’t prepared, I don’t think.

**Researchers hadn’t helped him.**

Well, he didn’t have any, he was doing it himself. But I think he just probably scribbled a couple of notes on the back of a – – –. But, look, for the main, when he was in his heyday, when he was up firing, which was for the most part, when I was in parliament, yes, he was excellent.

**What about some of his more way-out ideas?** There was industrial democracy and he set up also the Royal Commission into Drugs and there was alternative
lifestyles. What was the feeling of the party when he lobbed in these sorts of things?

I think Don could get what he [wanted] – within reason; I mean he couldn’t get everything he wanted; but within reason the Party was prepared to support Don on his sort of agenda for the arts and the sorts of things that you mentioned, because he was winning; but he was also not ignoring, as I said before, the trade union Labor Party base, so it was a coalition. I mean I think the Royal Commission on Drugs was probably an idea whose time had come and was okay. Industrial democracy was around about the place at the time, it wasn’t totally out of left field. It’s completely old-hat now, although some of those industrial democracy principles are still now practised to some extent in good management. I can’t remember much about the (laughs) alternative lifestyles.

So as a caucus member, generally speaking you could reflect that Don’s ideas and his arguments were pretty well-accepted, there wasn’t any huge debates?

They were, but compared to what I hear today, both within the Labor Party and generally at State Councils and Conference and within caucus where there’s no debate about anything, from what I can gather, or very little – at least, no policy debate – there was policy debate in those days. The State Conference or State Convention would last for three days over the Queen’s Birthday weekend, and although preselections were generally done by a reasonably small cabal of people, in which Don would have been involved, at least at the State level, with respect to policy issues there were some really dinky-di debates. One I remember was over (laughs) whether barmaids should be permitted to be employed, which sounds a bit bizarre these days but it was a massive debate, and there were many occasions where Don had to get up at the State Convention and defend a policy position and win a policy position. Now, I don’t think he was ever defeated on a major issue, but he had to get up there and he had to fight. In caucus, if Don thought there was a really
serious opposition to something, he would not crunch it; he would refer it off and get
people to talk about it and see if they could come back with an agreed position. And
I think if – I can’t think of any particular examples – if he thought he couldn’t push
it, he wouldn’t, he’d back off.

But generally, as a general proposition, he was able to get the sorts of things he
wanted through. Funding for the arts, for instance: part of the problem in the 1980s
was that our funding for the arts compared with the rest of Australia was just totally
out of kilter so it always got commented on by the Grants Commission, ‘You’re
funding arts out of all proportion to your revenue base’, and what anyone else was
going around Australia. Well, Don was responsible for that and of course the
Bannon Government, John Bannon in particular as both Minister for the Arts and
Treasurer, felt some obligation to bring it back to a more reasonable level, which
may or may not have been a mistake. But Don’s passion for the arts was indulged, if
you like, people didn’t object to it. And it promoted South Australia in a way that
was very positive, there’s no question about it. So in answer to the proposition,
generally he could get his way in caucus but I do know that he didn’t always get his
way and if there was an issue where it looked as though there were some serious
concerns expressed he wouldn’t crunch the numbers – immediately, anyhow; he’d
try and reach some kind of deal over it.

And just broadening that, a lot of people have observed how courageous he was,
maybe in comparison with politicians these days, that is if he had an idea he’d get
out and front and try and sell it, and did sell it in a lot of cases.

Yes.

Have you got any observations on that?

I think that’s generally right. But I think they were also ideas – not in every case –
but they were also ideas whose time had come. And if you look at New South Wales
and Victoria and South Australia, I’m sure Don was at the forefront of a lot of these
issues like anti-censorship, electoral reform, _et cetera_, liberalisation of drinking laws,
but a lot of those things were also happening in the other states to some extent. Well,
the states in the South-Eastern corner of Australia; I mean, Queensland was a bit different and Western Australia was a bit different. But really, what was happening in urban Australia – you know, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide – were ideas whose time had come, to some extent. Now, Don was out there in the forefront in putting them. Some of them weren’t immediately popular, but in a lot of cases I think they were ideas that had been – society was changing and they were ideas whose time had, if not come, was on the way to coming; and you do see similar changes in Victoria and New South Wales. Rupert Hamer, for instance, was a small-L liberal quite strong in the anti-censorship position, as people like Don Chipp were in the 1970s. So there were people around in the small-L liberal side of the Liberal party also had – not all of Dunstan’s ideas, but some of those liberal ideas that they were espousing. But yes, for all that, it just puts it into a bit of context.

For all that, you can’t actually decry what Dunstan did. And I would put it more in the sort of things he was out there having a go at like electoral reform: he’s identified with that, but again it was an idea whose time had come, but it didn’t mean that it was easy to do; it was a damned hard slog. He’d been at it from 1952 or perhaps even before that when he was elected to parliament right through until the 1977 election was when eventually there was the full equality, proper equality, of seats in the House of Assembly and an independent Electoral Commission. So it took him over twenty years to actually get it finally achieved. Now, that was a very, very hard slog during all that time. There was massive opposition to it, despite the unfairness of the system, but because it was about power – the Liberals had to basically concede that they were going to give up power because the system was dodgy, and they weren’t prepared to do it. So he was at the forefront of that. But that was an idea that was really – and, as you know, after the 1968 election when Labor won fifty-two or fifty-three per cent of the vote and still lost government, I mean there was a massive public outcry about that, so in that way he did have the public on his side. But initially, of course, it was a matter of getting out there and fighting the fight. And White Australia Policy, all those things, weren’t immediately
popular – support for Aboriginal people – were not immediately popular; but yes, you can’t decry the fact that he did get out there and lead.

He was able, I think, as I said before, coming back to the previous debate, he did have his ideas sorted out, so he did know what he wanted to do and where he wanted to go. But he was also pragmatic and if something was not a goer he’d pull back. I remember the debate about ‘Ms’, you know, he introduced ‘Ms’ (laughter) without any consultation. Everyone went berserk, so he just dropped off and said, ‘Well, it’s optional. People can use it if they want to’. So he wasn’t silly about what he wanted to achieve.

I heard the ‘Ms’ was Adele Koh’s idea. Have you got any observations about his staff and the Premier’s Office and how that worked, how that helped him?

Not really. It was a pretty personal thing, it was personalised to a large extent. I didn’t have any difficulty with the dealings with most of them that were up there.

What about the public service? Later on you became a minister under the Corcoran Government and you had, it seemed, a very strong Premier’s Department at the time with other ministers making observations about the power of say the policy area and the advice it gave Don. Was there anything you had in mind when you became a minister?

No, I didn’t really see any issues about that. I mean I think generally, if your ideas were okay, rationally thought out, well-researched and in accordance more or less with party policy, you could usually convince people that that was the way you should go.

And before – well, Don still the Premier: did you have any observations on the operation of the cabinet? I know you weren’t a member, but you would have heard about it.

I suppose some of us in caucus would have thought that it should be operating a bit better than it was, but then again we were sort of the ‘young Turks’ in caucus at the time.

What sort of ways?
Oh, it’s a bit hard to say. One of the issues, as I understand it, was the conflict between Hugh Hudson and Geoff Virgo, which apparently got quite debilitating in the later years. They didn’t get on particularly well. (laughs)

**What was that for – – –?**

I don’t know what the origins of it are. I mean, I did see some continuing evidence of it when I was in the cabinet for the short four months of the Corcoran Government; but apparently it was a bit debilitating and Dunstan, I hear, didn’t intervene and sort it out often enough. He should have been a bit more directive about how they carried on. But again, I haven’t got any particular examples, it’s just on the grapevine sort of stuff.

**And the uranium issue was bouncing around: were you watching that at all? That’s the ‘Do we mine or don’t we?’ Roxby Downs.**

Well, yes, that came a bit later.

**Say ’78, ’79.**

Well, Don did the trip to Sweden and had trouble with Peter Duncan. But no decision had been made at that point. I’d made speeches about uranium mining, opposed to it, following the Fox Inquiry;¹ but I don’t remember any particular big policy debate about it. I do remember him giving Peter Duncan a monstrous ticking-off in caucus after Peter had made some adverse comments about what Don was doing when he was overseas on the uranium trip. Of course, it was after that he came back and basically that was it, so he resigned shortly after that. I forget the exact dates, but it was shortly after the trip that he did. But he was not happy, I know he was very unhappy with Peter Duncan’s public interventions at the time, while Dunstan was away.

**We were talking earlier about Don and his relationships with the multicultural – I’ll call it the non-English-speaking-background – community, particularly the**

¹ Ranger Uranium Environmental Inquiry, presided over by Mr Justice Fox, reporting in 1977.
Greeks and Italians but lots of others. How did he relate to them in practice? Was he comfortable with them? You get stories about Don being a very private person and finding it hard to relate to people, but on the other hand you get stories about him quite easily relating to people from all sorts of areas.

Well, I don’t think I can say much more than that. For a lot of us he wasn’t an easy person to talk to, it was usually all pretty serious. I suspect there were some people he knew better that he would relax more [with], but he didn’t relax easily, I don’t think, in company of even people like me who knew him reasonably well and saw him socially a little bit. But he wasn’t actually all that easy to talk to – perhaps, to some extent, because he was the prince and I was the courtier and he was the important person and I wasn’t, I don’t know. But no, it’s true, I think, and everyone – not everyone would say; a lot of people would say he wasn’t easy to talk to. But in that environment, with Greeks and Italians and other people of ethnic minority origins, he was very easygoing. When he hopped into the Greek dancing he was always – – –. And they loved him, they really did. So I usually found in those contexts that he was mixing pretty well and getting on well with people. The other thing is that whether he got on with people or not, whether he was getting on easily with people, didn’t really matter; he actually did the job. So if they came to him with a query or an electorate issue or something he was a consummate electorate politician and probably one of the first to start that real, detailed attention to constituents’ concerns. And the doorknocking, I think he was also one of the first politicians to do doorknocking in a big way, and take up constituents’ complaints. And of course it’s also said that he was one of the first to start using professional polling to help the process.

But there are stories about his helping people out in the electorate and particularly Italians and Greeks, many of whom were in the Norwood electorate. You might actually be interested in having a chat with Mario Feleppa – I don’t know whether you’ve actually done it –

Yes, sure. Not yet, no.
– but it would probably be worthwhile. He tells a story – because he was a migrant from Italy and he first lived in Norwood, and I’ll probably garble the story so you should try and see him for it – but next door to him there was a backyard or a bit of a paddock with horses in it and in the hot weather they were causing problems and stinking and flies and all the rest of it, and Mario had gone to the Council, spoken to the neighbour, not got any sense of out them. I mean, I assume they were being kept there against some by-law or another. And Mario was talking to a mate of his, an Italian fellow, and said, ‘What do I do?’ He said, ‘We’ll go and see Mr Dunstan’, you see. So he remembers going up to see Don in the George Street house, which was a large, relatively palatial place, and explains the story to Don, and Don says, ‘I’ll get it fixed’. And the next morning the horses were gone.

Really?

Now, it might be truncated, the story, and there might be more to it, but check with Mario, but it was like that. But that’s the sort of thing he would do. So he obviously got straight onto it. I assume the horse shouldn’t have been there. Got onto the Council and got the Council to move on it. And there are other stories like that that I’ve heard, like the electricity goes off or something or some constituent gets it cut-off: Don would be on the phone to the head of ETSA² or the local people and get it fixed. I don’t know what other people were doing in the early ’50s in terms of the servicing of electorates, but the stories about him are really quite legend. So whatever his personal relationships with them, whether he felt comfortable with them or got on easily with them, it didn’t actually affect the very professional way he went about dealing with their complaints, and that servicing of constituents was something that he did very, very well, and I think was probably one of the first to do it at the level that he did it.

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² ETSA – Electricity Trust of South Australia.
I also understand that when he’d be driven home from parliament sometimes that he’d get his driver just to drop him off for half an hour and he’d do half an hour doorknocking before getting home and having dinner.

Amazing, gosh.

You know, just do a street or half a street and then go on.

Just keep in touch.

Yes, just to keep in touch. And of course it was always quite a marginal seat, or should have been a marginal seat, but Don secured it for himself but he did it by that sort of work. So I think in that area he has to be given absolutely full marks.

Yes, incredible. We talked earlier about multicultural affairs or ethnic affairs at the time. Was there anything else you wanted to talk about in that area that we didn’t cover before? We’ve talked about the sorts of initiatives that came in.

He was very much at the forefront of it, he was able to express it in a simple way that resonated with people, I think.

Just looking at Don’s legacy overall, I guess earlier on we talked about the Salisbury Affair and that being seen as something he shouldn’t have done in the way he did. Was there anything else – we’ll talk about the positive side first up, but what do you sort of reflect on [as] his biggest legacy for South Australia and, for that matter, beyond South Australia?

Well, I suppose his major legacy in practical terms was the electoral reform, there’s no question about that. The more permanent legacy was getting people to be more tolerant, I suppose to be more liberal in many respects. Some of these things were going to happen anyhow, as I’ve already said, but there’s no doubt that on those key issues of electoral reform, support for Aboriginal causes and land rights, opposition to White Australian Policy.

Within South Australia you can’t also ignore and you must give emphasis to the arts, which I’ve mentioned, and his promotion of the arts, what he did in terms of giving South Australia a major profile in that area which, for whatever reason, has dissipated to a considerable extent if not entirely. Now, I suppose there you could
have a big debate about to what extent, if policy is just governed by one man’s enthusiasms or one person’s enthusiasms, is that a good way to bed policy down, because ultimately, when that person leaves, things can turn around. Well, I suppose that can happen in a whole range of areas of policy. But at that time, through his support for the arts, he gave South Australia a profile that it didn’t have previously, and I would think it’s probably disappointing that that profile has been lost to some extent, but I don’t think you could say it’s completely lost; there is still the Festival – it wasn’t his idea, of course, but it was promoted by him; but the opera company and all these things are still going. But it’d be fair to say that the arts, which I would think he would have liked to have seen as being a major achievement of his, has in fact not been carried forward as well as it could have been or some would say should have been.

And times change, so a lot of the things that he wanted to do, the prevailing philosophy changed. So SGIC\(^3\) went, all the government enterprises that we had went, so they no longer can be seen as a legacy because Keating and Hawke and the Liberals and Labor all round the place –

**Moved on.**

– all dumped on them. (laughter) So you can’t say that there was that sort of legacy left. But no, you have to say that in the area of the sorts of things that Don Dunstan Foundation stands for, that he put a view out there, a lot of that has become mainstream, accepted view of what should happen in a tolerant, multicultural society. He did have a big commitment, I think, to trying to achieve equality.

He gave a speech, actually – I think it was post the 1977 election – which I don’t have with me at the moment, it’s somewhere lost in my papers, but I’ll mention it just in case at some stage we can chase it up – where he gave a sort of vision, I think it was post the ’77 election, and he really had some very radical ideas in it. A government newspaper was one that just sticks in my mind, but there were a whole

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\(^3\) SGIC – State Government Insurance Commission.
bunch of others. But when you consider that was 1977 and within five years any thought of those sorts of ideas being given effect to were completely out the window, the whole political debate had changed – even federally – by 1983 and there’s a complete antagonism towards public enterprise as a means of doing things as opposed to doing things through the private sector. So in that sense that legacy, which I think he actually quite strongly believed in, was not there, didn’t last. But in other areas it did. And, as I say, it’s a mixed bag, but you can’t decry the sorts of things he did – and the government, of course. Education reforms, legal reforms, health, the Wright Report [?], the health re-jig. These things, of course, do go in fashions and (laughs) what’s good policy one decade becomes not the next. But his emphasis on providing a proper level of public service must still be there to some extent, whether it’s in education or health or transport. But probably he’ll be remembered for those social issues, I think. And you come back to the one thing, and that was a fair electoral system for South Australia.

**Good. Is there anything you wanted to say we haven’t covered?**

I remember an occasion – and this, I think, does actually define him to some extent, too – is a Liberal Party [member] at a constitutional convention – it was even in Hobart, I even remember where it was – who was obviously not a supporter, he was a Liberal so he wasn’t a supporter of Dunstan’s, didn’t vote for him anyhow, and he was from another state: he said, ‘The one thing you’d say about Dunstan is he’s a professional’. And I think in politics that’s probably true, with the reservation about the things that emerged later about his personal life, which I suspect would probably not be regarded as particularly professional these days and the whole business of Ceruto and the stuff that McEwen and Ryan brought up and allegations of the preference he gave to Ceruto and the restaurant and all that, which were blown up and were blown up in this play recently out of proportion, I think. That sort of thing was probably, in the overall scheme of things, fairly small beer, if it was regarded as improper to have done it. So I think to some extent he did let his personal relations impact, in the later years in particular, in a way that probably wasn’t desirable. But,
as I say, apart from that, I think this bloke saying that he was a professional was true, because he was a professional in the way he went about doing his job as a politician.

And I come back to what I said before: he had his ideas, they were pretty well-grounded, he was able to develop policies from those ideas, he was able to articulate them and he was able to implement them, and he was quite prepared when necessary to be pragmatic, compromise or not press something that he knew the public wouldn’t live with, but in all that he wasn’t completely unprincipled. He was principled, to start with, and then worked those principles through to the implementation of his ideas in a pragmatic way, and I think that’s probably what this bloke meant when he said he was a professional, in political terms; and, of course, implementing the polling and all the rest of it. So there, I think that was a fair comment.

But it did get a bit messy towards the end, there’s no doubt about that, and who knows what the reason for that was? Whether he got too close to some people that he shouldn’t have – I think Ceruto was almost certainly one of them. I think he was very loyal to his friends, to his close friends, and that perhaps in the Ceruto case was a failing as he went out of his way to help him more than he perhaps should have, because there was also the issue of that restaurant down opposite Theatre 62 – Hilton.

– where the government did something – I forget exactly what they did; there was some issue.

A lease, I think, issue.

Oh, it was the Highways Department gave a lease and there was some question about whether – – –. Was that Ceruto’s or was that someone else?

He was down there at one stage, I’m pretty sure.

Yes. Well, anyhow, there was a suggestion that the government had given whoever it was, Ceruto or whoever it was down there at that time – what was the name of that restaurant, do you know?
I forget.

Had given him preference.

I’ve got some vague recollection it’s the ‘Red’ something or other.

That’s right, yes. I remember Virgo saying – because he was responsible, I think he was the Highways – stuck in my mind, him saying, ‘Oh, well, when people ask you to do things you do it’, because he was being queried as to why it had actually happened. It was no big deal in the scheme of things, but it was probably a bit irregular, a bit abuse of influence, that these days would probably be looked at, given the much more heightened knowledge there is about all those things and concern; but again, even compared with some of the things you’re seeing going on today that are exposed, it was relatively small beer, I suspect, in the scheme of things. But it did get a bit messy, I think, at the end on some of these issues. Which was a pity. And, as I say, I think some of his friendships were obviously ill-advised. (laughter) But, through all that, you can’t take away what he did, and in particular, as I say, in that period from 1952 when he carried the Labor Party, I think, and the ideas that he put forward that I’ve mentioned and getting those things achieved by about 1977.

But probably by ’77 I think he had really run his race, and that’s as it turned out to be. Although I think he wanted – I mentioned that speech he gave in caucus – he wanted, I think, to reinvigorate and move on, but I suspect by then he was probably stuffed and I do think the Salisbury thing probably had more of an effect on him than people would like to think and, however justified it was, I still think it was a political mistake; although whether the alternative would have achieved a better result – that is, suspending and giving him some natural justice – I don’t know.

The other mistake, while we’re on the topic of mistakes, was probably the 1975 election, the railways election.

Oh, really?

Well, it was an early election and it was won, but only by one seat.

Sort of. The Ted Connelly one.
Ted Connelly, yes. So I suppose you could say, ‘Well, Labor won’, and I got into parliament that election, (laughs) and we were able to recapture it back – because of that win, we were able to pass the electoral reform legislation for the House of Assembly, establish the Commission and the equality of electorates, _et cetera_, and then have an early election in 1977 that recaptured some of the majority, so I suppose you could say the fact we won in ’75 meant it wasn’t a mistake; but it certainly looked like a mistake in the last few days and that’s well-documented, I’m sure, Dunstan’s appeal on television that night, which was masterful, out at the ABC⁴ studios. It wasn’t the Dunstan Government they were having a go at; it was (laughter) Whitlam the people were trying to get at. And he did save the day there, because I think a week out we were gone for all money.

And it was very funny, actually, because he started the election with publicity about all these trains clanging together and how a great deal this train thing was. All the ads were all prepared and trains coupling together and how wonderful it is for the state to have sold the railways, got the debt off our plates, _et cetera_, and then within about a week those ads were as irrelevant as you like, no-one was in the slightest bit interested, and they were all interested in what was happening in Canberra.

_Yes, ‘Don’t mention anything about Canberra’._

Whitlam and all the rest of it. And we were really in trouble until – well, we _were_ in trouble, and Don managed to pull it back. And one of the reasons I think also on that was because the Liberals had Bruce Eastick as the leader. I’m firmly of the view that if Hall had remained leader the Libs would have won that election, which also raises the question about how they fought against electoral reform to keep the unfairness in the electoral system. They fought it, fought it, fought it. And yet I think if Hall had remained as leader, even though they thought if they didn’t fight the electoral reform they’d never get back into government – this was the argument of Labor hegemony[?] for years and years – because Labor was getting fifty-three per cent of

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⁴ ABC – Australian Broadcasting Commission, later Corporation.
the vote, fifty-two per cent of the vote, ‘Oh, Liberals would never get back into power and why are we voluntarily giving up our chance to win by amending the electoral laws?’ This was no doubt their power argument as opposed to their principled argument – when the reality is that they would have won in 1975. So it would have taken them, even if they’d done the full electoral reform – and they had partially done it by 1975, it had been done in the late ’60s by the Hall Government, did a partial electoral reform, not the full thing – within five years they would have won. (laughs) So it just shows that if you stick with a principled position –

It would come around.

– things come around. And politics just changes so quickly. But of course the blue within the Liberal Party caused Hall to resign in about 1973 or whenever it was, and so they had Bruck Eastick.

Yes. Seen as a ‘nice guy, but – – –‘.

Yes. And they lost, the Libs lost. But they would, I’m firmly convinced, they would have won with Steele Hall. So why they fussed about wanting to hang on to a ridiculously unfair electoral system makes you wonder. Anyhow, there we go.

Yes. Well, thanks very much, Chris, that’s good.

END OF INTERVIEW.