This is George Lewkowicz for the Don Dunstan Foundation’s Don Dunstan Oral History Project interviewing Mr Rod Cameron, who was very influential in political polling as of – was it the 1960s or the ’70s?

I’m not that old, George: 1970s.

’Seventies, okay. The date today is the 8th September 2009 and the location is the Don Dunstan Foundation offices in Adelaide. The interview is being done using a speakerphone.

Rod, thanks very much for doing this interview for the Don Dunstan Oral History Project. Can you just talk a bit about yourself so people reading a transcript or listening to the interview just know who you are and some of your background?

Yes, George. It’s Rod Cameron. I’m the Chairman of ANOP Research Services. After completing an honours degree in psychology from Sydney University in 1971, I was one of the two founders of ANOP, the market research firm, and I took the company over myself in 1974.

One of Don Dunstan’s mentors, Mick Young, was instrumental in my involvement in Labor Party politics by inviting me to advise in the 1972 Whitlam election campaign, and thereafter for twenty years ANOP was the primary market research and strategy consultants for the Australian Labor Party in every state and federally. We retired from party politics in the early 1990s having advised and participated in more than fifty state and federal election campaigns.

Can you recall why Mick Young would have selected you or your company?

Mick was great mates with John Menadue, and Menadue was company secretary for News Limited, and in fact ANOP started as a News Limited creation – I started by being invited by the Murdoch organisation to help set up a market research firm for the News Limited Group. I knew Menadue and Menadue said, ‘Well, you’d better come and meet my mate, Mick Young’. And I did, and it all flowed from there. ANOP became an independent company, though, in 1974.
Good. Just so people have got an appreciation of what this sort of polling involves, what does that actually do in the 1970s? I assume there were different approaches, but just by way of a general description?

Well, political polling was very much in its infancy in the 1970s and ANOP pioneered a number of qualitative – that is focus groups, small focus groups in a room with seven, eight, nine people ......, qualitative that is – and also quantitative, that is the statistically-reliable, numerical polling. We pioneered a number of techniques in both qualitative and quantitative techniques. In particular for the first time in Australia we introduced marginal seats research and campaigning and swinging voter identification and targeting and communications. Indeed, George, South Australia was a pioneer state in terms of market research-based campaigns and political strategy. This was primarily because of Mick Young’s farsightedness and that of his successor, South Australian State Secretary David Combe.

David Combe, right. Thanks for that. And when did you get first to know Don Dunstan and how did that occur?

Well, Dunstan was much influenced himself also by Mick, and Dunstan was one of the first ALP leaders to embrace market research as an effective communications tool. But Dunstan – and it’s an important point – Dunstan never let polling dominate the policy formulation process; he struck a good balance between understanding the views and the prejudices of ordinary voters and developing sound policy in the state or national interest. I first met Dunstan in the early 1970s and I saw him regularly throughout that decade.

And when you met him and talked to him, not only first but later, what were your general impressions of him?

Well, I first met him in the lovely bluestone Parliament House on a hot, Adelaide summer’s day. He was wearing a safari suit, which was quite a radical statement for a Premier at the time. It was only Dunstan who would be able to make an item of such sartorial abomination look elegant. This was some years before his celebrated pink hotpants outfit, which unfortunately I didn’t experience firsthand.

And he didn’t poll you about that either, I guess.
I think he was too self assured to do that. At the first meeting, though, it was just we two and we discussed, from memory, a wide range of political and social matters, but in particular I recall his interest in my view as to how much social change the conservative Adelaide electorate would tolerate, and I formed the view pretty quickly that he used my answer not in any way as a limit to his ambitions but as a yardstick which he would aim well and truly to exceed. I first heard the description of Adelaide as ‘the Athens of the South’, one of Dunstan’s favourites, at this first meeting and it seemed to encapsulate in a phrase Dunstan’s longer-term goal of changing staid Adelaide into a vibrant cosmopolitan city.

**Interesting. And in those sort of discussions did he talk to you about his own thoughts about how he got change?**

He very much was a crash-or-crash-through merchant. Although he wanted to know the views of the electorate, he didn’t care about ignoring them. He knew that with a strong leader and with a strong program and when people knew where he stood he would be able to override people’s conservatism. In fact, my impressions of Dunstan were immediately a mixture of respect and admiration. Even though I was only in my mid-twenties and it was early in my career, I’d already met and worked for Labor leaders and wannabe leaders whose first impressions on me were not at all like that of Dunstan. Dunstan was clearly a leader: eloquent, I think, without being overly-bombastic, and he had a touch of the theatrical which was often to be put to very good use. I was impressed, George, by his usually quiet authority and his wide interest in what Paul Keating was later to define as ‘the big picture’. Above all, I was intrigued by his ambiguous sexuality and amazed at how different from the archetypal white-bread political leader Dunstan was. He was a unique political leader and he remains so. After the demise of Whitlam in 1975, Labor was on the nose in most of Australia and it was only Neville Wran who challenged Dunstan for the title of most authoritative Labor figure.

**And when you did the polling – this was in 1975 – was that the first time?**

We began serious but limited political research for the South Australian Branch prior to the 1973 State election. Research was usually commissioned and conducted through the party
office, so after Mick Young and David Combe had gone to Canberra, party secretaries in the mid-1970s were more solid administrative types rather than creative campaign directors and they relied to a large extent on Dunstan and his staff. I recall Dunstan’s staffers Peter Ward and Tony Baker and others being heavily-involved in research discussions. And of course Dunstan himself would sometimes contact me directly with questions or as a sounding-board for decisions.

And did he talk about political polling as such as a general approach at all or was it just mainly specific things he was interested in, whatever the election was happening about?

Well, his interests were many and varied, and most of our conversations about South Australian politics were often wide-ranging with all sorts of allusions to larger events, both nationally and internationally.

In 1975 it was a very interesting time, George. In fact, around 1974 things were pretty rosy for the Dunstan Government. He had a very sound team. I think there was Hugh Hudson and Geoff Virgo and Des Corcoran and others, but come 1975 the South Australian Dunstan Government was increasingly being mired in the disintegration of the Federal Whitlam Government and, for the first time in an Australian state election the research got serious, and for the first time a detailed program of market research was organised. This consisted of focus group research among swinging voters – quite revolutionary in the time – and detailed marginal seat surveying. Weekly surveys - we couldn’t do it much more frequently than weekly because telephone ownership was still only 70 something per cent so you had to often knock on doors as well as use the telephone, so weekly surveys were conducted, partly by personal interviews and partly by telephone, and they were held in the six weeks or so leading up to the 1975 State election in July, I think, in that year.

And how did the polling you did impact on the – I’ll call it ‘the denial’ – Dunstan’s denial of the Whitlam Government, given, as you said, the disintegration of the Whitlam Government? What was being actually tested through that polling about all of that, if anything?

Well, the focus groups started to turn against the Dunstan Government about two weeks before the election date. Whilst voters were largely satisfied with the Dunstan
Government, they wanted to express outrage at Brand Labor, which was increasingly being seen through the prism of the poor perceptions of the Whitlam Federal Government. South Australian voters were responding very negatively to the shenanigans of Jim Cairns and Juni Morosi –

Yes.

– names that you’ll remember, George – and to the widely-held perceptions of financial and economic incompetence of the Whitlam Government. The last quantitative survey, the numerical survey, six days before the election, confirmed these findings and a sharp swing away from Dunstan Labor was registered. Some was going to the LCL, as it was then – the Liberal Country League – and some to the forerunner of the Australian Democrats, the Liberal Movement. But the major part was being parked in an unusually high level of undecideds. We interpreted the results as suggesting that Labor was probably going to be defeated since the anti-Whitlam headlines weren’t likely to go away in the last days of the campaign, so we advised a radical attempt to put some distance between the Dunstan and the Whitlam Governments. This was a highly controversial and radical suggestion at the time, because there were just three days before the electronic media blackout, to reach a half-converted group of swinging voters. The party office was very concerned about this strategy and Dunstan himself was initially reluctant to dump on the Whitlam Government. The weekend before the election I had several meetings with party officials, with Dunstan and with his staff, the ever-present shadow of Mick Young was also there, and he understood the situation. He suggested, with Dunstan’s approval I brief Hugh Hudson on the situation. He was one of Dunstan’s trusted lieutenants! Hudson came on board and, by Monday morning of the election week, Dunstan was convinced. A script was hastily written by myself and Peter Ward, Dunstan’s staffer; Dunstan finessed it further. A thirty-second radio ad and a straight-to-camera TV commercial were quickly prepared and went to air with heavy frequency in the last two days of the campaign before the blackout. The ad featured a grave-looking Dunstan saying his government was being smeared and South Australia was not to blame for Canberra’s mistakes. He said, ‘Your vote on Saturday is a vote for South Australia. Not Canberra, not Australia; South Australia’. Of course, only
Dunstan could have made such an ad and he made a much better job of it than I just did. He did it in one take and his considerable thespian talents led to the success of the ad, I’m quite convinced that this turned the campaign around and led to Dunstan’s eventual victory, even if it ruffled a number of feathers in Canberra and elsewhere. Federal Labor negatives remained in the South Australian media spotlight all that week and, without Dunstan’s powerful piece of communication – which itself became a media story, continuing over the blackout period – I’ve little doubt that Labor would have struggled to win in 1975.

Right, interesting. And do you know whether it was cleared with Gough at all, Gough Whitlam?

Yes, I know it was mentioned to him, and he hit the roof.

Oh, really? But he had to live with it, obviously.

It didn’t improve my relations [with him].

Interesting. Now, from what I’m gathering from what you’ve described in the series of questions, Don was either the first or one of the first politicians to use political polling. Is that correct, or were there other people doing it as well?

Dunstan was the first state leader to use market research so extensively and to act on its results. But he used it selectively: not to influence policy formulation, but rather in communication – in other words, how to sell particular messages and what aspects to play up and how to defuse negatives. There were no shades of grey here for Dunstan, as there have been for other, less authoritative leaders; market research came after, not before, policy development.

And from what you’re saying about his ability to translate that information not only into policy but presentation of it to the public, to the electorate, was pretty important as well, would you have seen him as – I think you’re saying he was pretty superior in that. How would you assess that?

Yes, he was. He was a master at mastering a brief; he was a master at getting the nuance just right. He was quite capable of performance and he was a great thespian as well, but he
always used these, in my view, to further the causes of the State’s interests rather than just being elected for election’s sake.

And I’m just wondering about the use of that and then feeding it back into policy as well. It’s often looked as going one way; but, coming back the other way, to actually then sell an implementation program, did the polling also help in that sort of thing, policy implementation?

It did. What it didn’t do was to – Dunstan never said, ‘Tell me what the views are here and then I’ll determine the policy’. He would say, ‘Here’s the policy, tell me how to sell it best, and if there’s any shaggy dogs attached to it how do we defuse these negatives?’ He never used it as a crutch to change unpopular decisions or to mould decisions in a populist way. And other leaders have not been like this; other leaders have tried to use market research to develop their ideology. Dunstan was never one of those.

And how did the polling stack up against other advice he might have been getting from nervous politicians or community people?

Well, I think he trusted us because he knew that I wouldn’t gild the lily and he knew that I wouldn’t try and use the polling to persuade him to change certain policy. He knew that I would work on his wavelength, that is to influence the communications, direct the communications rather than the actual policy.

But did you actually see him arguing with others about, ‘Well, here’s the polling and what it’s telling me and you’re telling me something else, and I’m coming on the side of the polling’, or whatever else?

Oh, yes. But only in the context that political leaders always do that. He would never say, ‘Polling says this, let’s change the policy’.

Okay, fine.

‘Polling should be used thus : just go out and sell it better’, or, ‘Let’s tweak the way we do this’, or, ‘Let’s tweak the message’, or, ‘Let’s try and emphasise something else’.

And after the 1975 election was your company used again in later campaigns, or yourself?
Yes, we continued working with and for Dunstan until his untimely departure, an event which propelled a lovely fellow and a great deputy, Des Corcoran, into the leadership. I think it became very clear very quickly that South Australian voters came quickly to the view that in Don Dunstan they had had a real leader and in Des Corcoran they had a good bloke but one out of his depth. We continued also to work for the South Australian Party all through the Bannon years and in every other state and federally until the early 1990s when we retired from party politics. We didn’t want to speak to another swinging voter by then George…

Okay. And, just winding this up a bit, presumably the experiences you’d had in SA sort of helped in your future polling techniques and the campaign strategies, is that a reasonable observation?

Yes, it did. The pioneering work in the Dunstan years helped ANOP refine its techniques and its capacity to advise. We used similar techniques a year later than the Dunstan 1975 triumph to help re-elect a Tasmanian Premier who might kindly be described as ‘very difficult’. And the techniques were further developed to help the ALP in the halcyon decade of the 1980s, when Labor ruled in most states and federally, and the techniques helped disunited and faction-dominated rabbles in Queensland and Victoria became electable.

Right, yes.

The key campaign message that ANOP learnt in the Dunstan Era was to give both qualitative and quantitative techniques equal weighting and to poll as late as possible before the election date, and if action is required then act quickly and decisively.

Interesting. We’ve covered the polling and those sorts of areas. Is there anything else you wanted to say about Don before we finish?

Well, I’ve worked with thirty – probably more – thirty to forty state and federal political leaders in Australia, and I think Dunstan would be one of my top three that I admire.
my admiration they have to be reasonably successful, but success is not the only criterion. I admire people who are able to convince an otherwise doubting electorate to go down a path that they wouldn’t have otherwise. In other words, I don’t think Whitlam was one of the greats; the electorate was heading in the direction in which Whitlam wanted them to go, anyway. Ditto Bob Hawke. Keating was one who was able to persuade an uninterested middle ground to adopt certain views and attitudes and outlooks that they weren’t going to do anyway. Dunstan was exactly the same. Dunstan was able to, by a process of rhetoric, leadership skills, his own charisma and his leadership credibility, he was able to convince a doubting electorate to accept both economic and social change in a way that would make his legacy a very longstanding one indeed.

Great. Well, thanks very much for that, Rod, that’s been most interesting.

Pleasure.

Good. All the best.

And to you.

END OF INTERVIEW