This is George Lewkowicz for the Don Dunstan Foundation Don Dunstan History Project interviewing the Honourable Professor Dr Barry Jones. Can we call you ‘Barry’ for the purposes of the interview?

Generally just answer to ‘You’, but go on.

Thanks. The date today is the 12th July 2010 and the location is the University of Melbourne in Melbourne. Dr Jones, thanks very much for doing this interview for the Don Dunstan Foundation.

We particularly wanted to talk to you about some of the historical links you had with Don Dunstan given you’d met him in 1954, and then some perspectives overall from your experience as a politician, not only as a federal one but earlier on as a State politician and just getting some views about Don as a national figure. I’d also like to ask later on about whether you were speaking to him and following him up when he was in Melbourne, working for the Victorian Tourism Commission.

But before we do that can you just talk a bit about yourself, just some broad backgrounding, so we’ve got an idea for the purposes of the interviews who you are – education, employment and then your political career?

Well, I was in the Victorian Parliament between 1972 and ’77 and then in the Commonwealth Parliament from 1977 to 1998 as the Member for Lalor, and my distinguished successor in the federal seat was – is – Julia Gillard, who I’m sure you’ve heard of. But, as I wrote in my autobiography, A Thinking Reed, and elsewhere, I was immensely interested in ideas, policy formulation and enlarging the political agenda. Currently, by contrast, the ideology, that’s to say the ideas, has essentially gone out of politics. Politics now offers the electorate a choice of two different management styles, with a high degree of policy convergence. All the emphasis is on managerialism. ‘My team’s better than your team, and I can win it’, and so on, rather than saying, ‘Look, my party offers a completely different kind of vision of society’.

Thirty years ago there were four, possibly five, figures in the Australian Labor Party, who were passionately concerned with ideas and articulated a different kind of vision about what Australia was and what it could be. The four most important
figures were Whitlam, Cairns, Murphy and Dunstan. A fifth who died prematurely was Sam Cohen, who was a Labor Senator from Victoria and who was Deputy Leader in the Senate. He was deeply interested in ideas. Unfortunately he dropped dead at an election meeting in Adelaide in 1969. One could add a sixth with Clyde Cameron. Clyde wrote at great length and detail and articulated his own view of the way the world was. And there were figures at the next level down: Neal Blewett is in that category; and John Button; and at a lower level again myself. All of us were articulating views and were identified with particular policies.

If you looked round the current scene in the Labor Party, you’d be really struggling to identify the equivalent today of those five, six or seven. It is true that Mark Latham had some interest in ideology and published extensively on his vision of the world. Lindsay Tanner: very thoughtful, published a lot. I was always surprised that for somebody, who was part of the left, his arguments were very cautious. He’s simply saying, ‘Well, if we’ve got a problem, this is how we might manage it’.

How you manage it, right. So there’s some method in what he’s looking at, rather than the idea itself.

Don Dunstan was a good example of somebody who had a passionate interest in the arts and their promotion. He was prepared to take risks. Whitlam was passionately interested in the arts. However, if we ask ‘Is the current Federal Minister for the Arts, Peter Garrett, interested in the arts?’ the answer is uncertain. ‘Has the new Prime Minister ever set foot in the Sydney Opera House?’ is a matter of some contention; there’s some doubt as to whether she’s ever actually been there. With Kevin Rudd, again, there is a real question mark as to what extent he had involvement in the arts.

But Don Dunstan was living the ideas.

Yes. That’s right and that exposure to the arts enlarged one’s range. I suspect that with many Labor people, they work very hard, but their reaction would be to say, ‘I haven’t got time to go to the opera’. That may also be coded language for saying, ‘I
wouldn’t have any interest in going, anyway’, but they can cover it by saying, ‘Oh! I’m so busy’.

Yet – appear at some sports events rather than the arts.

Yes, exactly.

More populist, I guess. Have you thought about what’s caused all of this? What I’m also interested in is back in the ’60s and early ’70s Dunstan was pushing – well, he was pushing a whole range of things.

He made his reputation by working on many issues and succeeded in many of them. He and I had a common cause because we were both passionately involved in the abolition of the death penalty. The death penalty was a very important issue, like Vietnam, in recruiting people to the Party. Jim Bacon, Premier of Tasmania and Steve Bracks, Premier of Victoria, are two examples of people who said that they joined the Labor Party because they were personally very disturbed by capital punishment. That’s not an issue that draws people into the Party currently because it’s not there anymore. Many people were attracted to individuals in the Party, who were trying to abolish the White Australia Policy. Once the White Australia Policy is abolished, it ceases to be an issue that drags people in. Many people were very passionately engaged in politics over the whole issue of conscription relative to the Vietnam War. Well, we don’t have conscription anymore.

Dunstan – but also Gorton, on the Liberal side of politics, believe it or not – and Whitlam established the idea of Commonwealth and/or State funding for the arts at a reasonably generous level. Once it happened, funding for the arts wasn’t such an issue anymore. People say, ‘We take that as being a bit of a given’.

Yes. Just on White Australia, did you ever see Don get up in the Federal Conference or in the Party?

Oh, yes. Sure.

What was his big messages and how was he coming across, just to get a feel for that sort of national push. And from your notes I’m not clear whether he was the spearhead or whether Gough Whitlam was, or there was a joint.....
I’d say Dunstan was the spearhead more than anyone else. He obviously was very passionate about the issue. But the problem was that there were some in the ALP who believed White Australia was largely about guaranteeing job security for ‘people like us.’

Right, yes.

I’m old enough to remember when furniture was stamped underneath with the words ‘Made by European labour only.’ Bringing in ‘coloureds’ was seen as being the thin end of the wedge and that it would destroy working conditions. But it was an ethical line that Don was pushing, getting rid of the concept of racial inequality. But older members said, ‘That’s all very well, but we don’t want to use abolition of White Australia to weaken the labour market, to destroy the protection that we’ve have’.

Did you ever ask him why he was pushing this, given how many people were against it and the sort of rationale you’re talking about now? You know, ‘Why are you sticking your neck out and what’s got into you?’ or anything like that?

I agreed with him completely. It seemed blindingly obvious that you had to take a principled view, although there were some people who could take an argument that was in a sense a fairly pragmatic one. He was very eloquent and persuasive. The White Australia Policy debate was one that cut across left–right boundaries. There were a number of people on the left, some of the hard men in trade unions, who had no sympathy for getting rid of White Australia but they’d indignantly have repudiated any suggestion that they weren’t left.

Yes, right. You were an MP in the Victorian Parliament 1972–1977.

Yes.

Were you observing at that time what was happening in South Australia with social reforms and, say, frustrated that things weren’t happening in Victoria at the time given the government that was in power? Or was it just Victorian society wasn’t prepared for the sort of changes Don was pushing and getting through his Parliament?
To some extent Victoria would have regarded itself as being socially somewhat more progressive, even under Bolte, than South Australia, which was seen as a special case.

In the current Australian Book Review: there are two good articles on Sir Keith Hancock, Professor of Modern History at Adelaide University. The article makes the point that South Australia had the attributes of a museum. Keith Hancock, remarked that some things hadn’t been moved in 20 years. There was a stultifying quality in South Australia. And, of course, it was associated with the gerrymander – see, we didn’t have a gerrymander in Victoria – and you had an extraordinary situation where Labor, despite its pretty uninspired leadership before Don, kept winning a majority of votes but couldn’t come within cooee of winning the election simply because the electoral system was so skewed. We had a big controversy about the death penalty, say, in Victoria but there were no hangings between 1951 and 1967, whereas there were a number of executions in South Australia in that period and of course the big controversy over the Rupert Max Stuart case –

Rupert Max Stuart, yes.

– and the trial of Rohan Rivett.

Yes, that’s right.

The trial of Frank Hardy in the Power Without Glory case in 1951 resulted in an acquittal and a political ‘show trial’ like the prosecution of Rohan Rivett would have been impossible in Victoria. South Australia was much more socially-conservative than Victoria.

So it was ripe for change for the right person and party.

Yes. Well, long overdue, yes.

Right, that’s interesting. The notes you sent me said you’d met Don in 1954.

Yes.

Can you remember that time and what you thought of him when you met him? Or you’d heard about him, presumably.
Oh, I knew quite a lot about him, and I remember the meeting very vividly. I was part of a Melbourne University interstate debating team. We’d gone to South Australia for intervarsity debates. I just ran into him in the street and we began talking. I suppose he was flattered to be recognised but also conscious that in South Australia while he had all this sort of star quality, he was likely to face difficulty with many colleagues in the State Parliament –

Yes, that’s right.

– because of his appearance, his speech, his upper-class manners, characteristics and all that stuff.

Yes – and he expressed frustration to you, or talked to you about his ideas?

Oh, yes, yes. But in a kind of half-joking way, really.

And did he make arrangements to catch up with you at any times? I think he’d come over to Victoria to campaign a bit or talk to the Party there.

I wouldn’t pretend that we were intimates, but I was probably one of those what you might describe as not in the inner circle but in the next circle.

Long before that brief period when he was living in Melbourne, I recall meeting him in Pellegrini’s in Bourke Street and we’d sometimes have lunch and talk about things. It would be an exaggeration to say that we had an intimate relationship, but I admired him very much.

And did he help you out in your campaigning over here at all, when you were running for politics in the early ’70s?

When I entered the State Parliament in ’72, it was fairly freakish and I was returned unopposed, so I didn’t need him. Later on, when I transferred to and succeeded Jim Cairns in Lalor, he didn’t need to campaign for me either.

In your work in the Parliament, what were your particular interests in some of the ideas and policies he would have been pushing in the Party then?

I was Shadow Minister for Social Welfare and Aboriginal Affairs. Then I had Transport and the Arts. There was a fair degree of overlap with his areas of interest.
Were you looking at what was happening in South Australia at all during that time, getting any ideas from what Don was doing?

Oh, yes. I thought he was very inspiring, and what I agreed with completely – was that the task of a leader is to lead. One of the things I find particularly deplorable at the moment is that many politicians are reluctant to lead and say, ‘If we’re going to work out what we’re going to do about asylum seekers, why don’t we get a focus group to sit down and tell us?’ I was interested to note that Paul the Octopus called the FIFA soccer cup correctly. I thought ‘There’s an inspiration for the New South Wales Right’. If they’re determining who they should have as an Australian Prime Minister, well, why not leave the choice to Paul the Octopus?

Or, even better, for the coming election.

Yes. Well, Paul can make the choice, and we follow it from there. But I hate all that failure to engage in issues. The whole issue of climate change is profoundly embarrassing because it is hard to find a politician who says, ‘Here’s what we ought to be doing’. What they’re saying is, ‘Oh, God, how can we find the formula that inflicts the least damage and won’t lose any votes here and won’t lose any votes there.’ Nobody says ‘Here’s a very important policy decision and you’ll be proud that you voted for us because – – –.’

Or if you’ve got something ‘How in the hell do we sell it?’

Exactly.

Like the ETS¹ –

Yes.

– because that was there and there was a deal on, but somehow it fell through because they hadn’t sold it properly.

And it was a bit of a dog of a scheme, that is the other problem.

¹ ETS – Emissions Trading Scheme.
Right, okay. But just thinking about Don Dunstan, what we're just trying to work through is the question I asked you earlier, was it just because the South Australian society was ready or was there something special about Don and the way he led or he was courageous?

South Australian society wasn't ready. The point was Dunstan was prepared to lead. He had a kind of star quality. It's obvious that many people didn't like him and reacted against him, but to me he was an extraordinarily important and very attractive figure.

And who was your Leader at the time and Leader of the Opposition in the '70s, was that John Cain or was there somebody before?

Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no. When I was in the State Parliament – no, it was the period that Clyde Holding was the Leader. I'd better be slightly circumspect. Clyde had a very good mind and good analytical skills, but Clyde had an odd situation where, although he had good ideas and he had some that were ideological, he was also fascinated by the way in which the big battalions of party politics, municipal machines and the factional heavies operated. If you talked to Clyde about the rorting of a preselection or the rorting of a Richmond City Council election, Clyde could be so funny about it all, but you could see that at one level he enjoyed it. He would say, 'God, you’d never guess what they did! They did the most – – –! Oh, God, that was – oh, you’d have died laughing!’ Somebody remarked to me that you could see the contradictions in Clyde’s face: that he’d say, ‘God, this is disgusting, but it is fun’. He was never able to take a kind of – either the high moral ground, he couldn’t have done that because he’d have felt particularly hypocritical if he had; but it meant that he was never really able to articulate with any kind of conviction because, if he’d started talking about cleaning up Victorian politics, after about five minutes he’d have said, ‘Oh, look, I can’t. Sorry, I just can’t do it’.

And were you MPs frustrated about that and looking over the border – – –?

Well, I was because I saw Dunstan as being somebody with terrific qualities. I thought Dunstan was marvellous.
Just on Aboriginal Affairs, you were the Shadow Minister.

Yes.

Was there anything that you were picking up from what happening and probably what had happened in South Australia, because there was that transition of State activity then to the Commonwealth when Whitlam came in –

Yes.

– but like Aboriginal rights, was that something being pushed over in Victoria at that time? Like in South Australia we had the Anangu-Pitjantjatjara lands being identified as being handed back to the Aboriginal people and the Aboriginal Lands Trust, for example, was set up as well to manage Aboriginal lands. Was that something being looked at here?

When I was Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the numbers of Aborigines in Victoria were pretty modest. I was particularly interested in the recognition and restoration of Aboriginal properties, to recognise the significance of their culture, to make sure that we did more things for promoting archaeological research in Victoria on Aboriginal things. I may have put an exaggerated emphasis on that rather than getting Aborigines off the grog or keeping them out of jail. I was very interested in recognising the culture.

Yes, interesting. Just I want to ask you about when Don came over as Chair of the Victorian Tourism Commission.

Yes.

Did you keep in touch with him then much?

Yes, somewhat. I would like to have been an intimate but I wasn’t really. I was at that second level. I saw him at book launches and if we caught up it’d only be briefly or we might meet for a cup of [coffee]. I always had that sense that he was pretty unhappy and I’d known about some of the traumas associated with the breaking up of the first marriage and then the death of his second wife, Adele Koh. Adele Koh wrote me an absolutely wonderful letter. I barely knew her, but she said some speech that I’d given had been a revelation to her and that it was a matter of
profound influence and she hoped that the three of us might get together and talk about these issues and so on, and then there was only quite a short period after that letter that she died – – –.

Did you ever think – like Don had been that star quality as a Premier, leader of a State, and then why didn’t they pick him up in South Australia and look after him better; he had to come over to Victoria to get some sort of senior position? And then he ran into various problems here, I’ll call them – you know, why hadn’t the Party looked after him better?

I was always puzzled as to why he didn’t make the transition to federal politics. It would have been a logical step. I know the story about how – you probably know the story about how Neal Blewett got the nomination for the seat of Bonython. It was because Dunstan and I think, Clyde Cameron as well, were determined to keep Hawke out. And so they were looking around for a quality candidate and so settled on Neal Blewett, who of course became a very distinguished minister. But it might just as well have been Don who made the transition.

And your experience in Federal Parliament, how do you think he would have gone there?

He’d have done very well. Somebody who wouldn’t have perhaps been all that enthusiastic about his being there might have been E.G. Whitlam –

That’s right, yes.

– because in a way they appealed to the same constituency.

Yes, that’s interesting. I interviewed Neal about two weeks ago and he told me just briefly the story you’ve just told me then. That was interesting, I didn’t know that. Because, you know, there was that talk about Don going federal and a great leader and he would have done well there, but then you’ve got the working in the background.

Just rounding up our discussion, what, broadly, is your assessment of Don Dunstan’s political life and Premiership? You’ve mentioned in your notes some national achievements and some of the State ones.

Well, I don’t think there’s ever been a State Premier with such a national impact. Neville Wran was obviously a very significant figure and who might well have
emerged as a national leader. It’s curious that in the 1984 Federal election, the ALP posters feature Bob Hawke, Lionel Bowen as the Deputy Leader, and Neville Wran. Wran was seen as having national significance. I’ve got great regard for Wran personally, but it’s not as if one could say, ‘Well, here are the half-dozen policy issues that Wran was identified with that were important both locally and nationally’.

Yes, interesting. And did you consider whether Don had made any big mistakes in his political career, things he might have regretted that he may have even talked to you about?

There’s a strong macho tradition in the Labor Party or elements of the Labor tradition. Don’s sexual ambiguity would have been a factor against him. I don’t believe this to be the truth, but some would say that there was more emphasis on style than on substance. But I think, if you look at his work – Aborigines, the arts, White Australia – but, more broadly, a more thoughtful, analytical methodology in policy formation and the whole business of his advocacy style, I think they were all very important.

Yes – and courage, I suppose, as well.

Yes.

One of the reasons I’m asking that is we’ve been trying to get a significant biographer interested in writing a biography of Don and the sort of messages we get from eastern states people is, ‘Well, who in the eastern states is really interested in Don Dunstan? He was that South Australian figure’. So I’m just wondering whether you’ve got any – well (1) views about that, and (2) given it’s 30 years or so since he was the leader of South Australia why that might be the case, and given most of the things you’ve said about his national influence?

Well, actually, I know that Sue Ebury could be seriously interested. See, she wrote the Weary Dunlop and the Ken Myer biographies. She’s thinking of a significant subject she could tackle. I didn’t actually suggest Don when she spoke recently, but as you’ve been talking I felt, well, maybe it’s the kind of subject that she would like to take on or could be persuaded to take on, because she writes very well.

Good. Because Neal’s doing the Australian dictionary of biography entry, 5,000-word piece.
Oh, good.

**So how do you spell Sue’s name, Ebury?**

Sue E-B-U-R-Y.– – –.

I’ll just pause this. (break in recording) Thanks very much for that reference, Dr Jones. Was there anything more you wanted to add for our interview before we sign off?

No.

Well, thanks very much for your time and recollections.

OK

It’s very detailed about a lot of years of the Labor Party and your links with Don Dunstan.

But it is so extraordinary that the Party now has really become a transactional party and that the famous New South Wales Right effects the philosophy of Graham Richardson – you know, ‘Whatever it takes’.

‘**Whatever it takes’, yes.**

And, you know, you look around and you do a deal. But it’s very hard to think of any kind of ideological issues that you could say they’re really passionately concerned about.

**Just in your time as Minister, what were some of their ideas and policies, but to actually get them to happen, what were the sort of, I guess, I’ll call them ‘lessons’ you might have learned from that?**

I strongly recommend you read my autobiography on that.

**OK, right. OK, fine – but just a brief summary on that, if you’ve got one? Obviously get good people in to be able to follow through.**

Well, look, my grave concern, in particular when I was Minister for Science, was really to try and bring about the transition from Australia being a materials-based economy to an information economy. I had a great difficulty with my colleagues about this. My argument was essentially that all the indications are that we’re
moving in the direction of an information revolution, that new industries were going to come up like biotechnology, with more employment in the services sector, and we had really to work out precisely how we assisted these things. And the problem with my colleagues is that they’d, somewhat reluctantly, adopted the idea that you moved away from a controlled interventionist market towards an open market. And their reaction was to say, “We’re no longer giving special treatment to the shoe industry or the textile industry and we ought to take the same attitude about biotechnology or information technology. If it’s going to happen it’ll happen because market forces dominate’. And then you’d have to say, ‘Well, in fact, in a whole number of areas – the motor industry’s one, and indeed IT when it comes along – you’re going to have total overseas control because you’ve got a complete lack of interest or a very low level of interest in promoting and encouraging new areas that relate the intellectual sector of Australia with the productive end’. Of the BRW Rich 200 list, of the 200 there’s only one, a Chinese Australian, Shi Zhengrong who’s made his money out of the development of a new technological form, solar panels.

Really? In Australia.

And this is the Chinese guy.

Right, overseas.

The Chinese guy who’s in solar panels.

Yes.

But it’s extraordinary, you see, that so many of the people have made their money out of retailing –

Mining, of course.

– or out of mining or out of conventional manufacturing – you know, bathroom fittings and so on.

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And John Button was Minister at that time and he was the industry policy man.

Yes.

So why wasn’t he interested in what was going on?

Well, another book that I’d strongly urge you to read would be Patrick Weller’s biography.

Of John, yes.

END OF INTERVIEW