This is an interview between myself, Mike Duigan, on behalf of the oral history project of the Dunstan Foundation, and John Cornwall, former Member of the South Australian Legislative Council and member of the South Australian Government. We have agreed on a series of questions and the protocol involved and I will now proceed to work through those and John has agreed to the questions as set out.

John, if we start with question one, tell us firstly how it was that your background, your family and your history led you to become, firstly, a member of the Party and then a candidate and then a member of the State Parliament for the ALP.

My politics were actually inherited. My father was a Depression survivor and he would always fight for the Party, physically if necessary. He was a big man. (laughs) But he was never active in the organisational sense. But I suppose the background of being a Catholic schoolboy, the social justice thing, came into that as well. So there was never any other course for me politically except the centre left, and that meant the ALP.

Where did you grow up, where was your father a member of the Party?

No, he was never a member of the Party.

Sorry; where did you grow up?

I grew up in Bendigo. I was a Bendigo boy, then boarding school at Xavier in Melbourne for three years and on to Queensland to do my veterinary science degree. There was no faculty in Melbourne at the time.

And when did you become a member of the South Australian Branch of the Labor Party?

When I was in Mount Gambier. I was in veterinary practice and it was about 1962, from memory. Ross Murrell was the local Secretary, a carpenter and a friend of mine, I used to have a drink with him at Jens Hotel. I can’t remember whether membership was five bob or ten bob. I joined the Party but didn’t take a very active interest until after the 1966 federal election, when Arthur Calwell was done over rather badly, screwing up Vietnam war debate. We’d had Menzies there for a long time – and then Holt, of course. That was the ‘All the way with LBJ’ election, and it almost looked as though we were in for one-party government in perpetuity. So at that stage I became active in the local sub-branch.
Was your interest then primarily in federal politics or did you still have an interest also in state politics?

Well, to be fair, when I became president of the sub-branch, I thought I’d gone about as far as I should go. Then Mick Young and David Combe appeared on the scene on an organising trip – Mick was the State Secretary at the time – and canvassed the idea that I might run for the federal seat of Barker, which was about the third-safest conservative seat in Australia at that time – Jim Forbes was the Member. It was on the understanding that if I did well and proved myself or showed my colours or whatever that the third spot on the Senate ticket might be a possibility. So to some extent it came out of the blue. But having considered it, I thought that this really could be a very attractive proposition.

How long were you actually involved in the veterinary profession prior to being bitten by this political bug?

Oh, I’d been in Mount Gambier since 1961 and this was in the late ’60s. It’s an incurable disease, of course, once you contract it.

You mentioned that Mick Young and – David Combe was it, you mentioned? –

Yes.

– were down doing a trip around Mount Gambier. Was it your view that these people represented, if you like, the machine operation of the State Branch?

I don’t know whether you’d call ‘the machine’ at that time a soft dictatorship or just a very sensible way to conduct things. It was very much a centralist approach, but in my experience it was a very practical way to conduct things.

So there was no right-wing/left-wing split or division in the Party, but you’ve already said that the history of growing up in your family was that you had this sort of left-of-centre view of social justice and equity. Is that the sort of same thing that kept you actively-involved through from ’66 onwards?

Yes – and remember that we’d been through the splits, the DLP, the whole thing. In that sense I suppose they were the ultimate in factions; but that main ‘grouper’ segment of the Party had gone and, unlike Victoria and Queensland, there hadn’t been a major split in the Party in South Australia. As Don Dunstan used to often say, ‘You need both wings to fly’.
So while there were differing views or positions, a left and a right, there were no entrenched factions. That came later.

So 1966 you stood against Jim Forbes in Barker, that was unsuccessful and history tells us that you never became a Senator for South Australia, so what was the next attempt at seeking parliamentary office for the ALP?

It was actually 1969. In 1968 John Gorton was threatening an early election and the proposition was that if I ran for Barker and proved that I had some ability and commitment that I may well be promoted or pushed for the third spot on the Senate ticket (as a ‘rural’ Senator) when the Senate election became due in 1970. In the event there was no early election in ’68 so, when they were preselecting for the 1970 Senate election I was already the preselected candidate for Barker and wasn’t eligible. Geoff McLaren, a poultry farmer from Murray Bridge, go the spot. I had to wait my turn for the SA Legislative Council, six years later.

So you never ran for a Lower House seat in the State Parliament; your next opportunity for public office as a parliamentarian for the Labor Party was for a vacancy in the Legislative Council.

Yes, that was in 1975. That was the first Legislative Council election that was conducted on the list system.

And in 1975 Dunstan was the Premier.

Yes, indeed. Don’s government had abolished the old Legislative Council system under which we had –

Districts.

– four districts which automatically went to the conservatives and one that went to Labor. 16 to 4.

So how long was it before you established a relationship with Dunstan as the Leader, or had you already established one with him prior to becoming a Member of the Council?

For a lot of us Don was inspirational – and it was a fascinating period. In 1968 the State Labor Government had been defeated despite gaining 54% of the vote and Don had
assumed leadership of the SA Parliamentary Party. Gough had taken the leadership of the Federal Party and in the 1969 federal election there’d been a big swing to Labor. They were looking very good for ’72. Don was the outstanding figure in South Australian politics and to the extent that anybody got to know Don well, I got to know him as an active Party member.

Was it considered that you’d be a sort of de facto member for the South–East, because there were no other Labor representatives for the area, were there, at the time?

Oh, there were until 1975. Allan Burdon held Mount Gambier from 1961 until 1975 and Des Corcoran was the Member for Millicent. There’d been the drama of the Des Corcoran one-vote re-run election that Des won in 1968 but there was then a redistribution and Des transferred to an Adelaide seat. So after I was elected in 1975 in a sense I became the South East locum. I’d travel to the South–East a lot during those early days.

So you become the host, if you like, for Dunstan and other ministers when they were doing their tours of the South–East?

Yes, the Premier in particular because Don was dead keen to win back Mount Gambier. He’d seen Mount Gambier as a model for social democracy, balanced regional development and quality of life. Fletcher Jones had been enticed to set up in Mount Gambier, for example; and you had a very good mix of the timber industry, primary production, commercial activity and the new cultural centre. It was one of Don’s soft spots.

Is there anything to which you can ascribe what you might call the ‘evaporation’ of the Labor vote in that South–East area from Mount Gambier up and through to Millicent?

Well, there were a number of reasons; but principally for Mt Gambier, of course, there was the redistribution. Under the old ‘Playmander’ the electorate of Mount Gambier was locked up in the boundaries of the city, a mill town and logically a Labor seat. Once they redistributed and took in a whole raft of the surrounding countryside, with farmers, graziers, fishermen and various other people with conservative inclinations, it was always gone for Labor. Millicent had been held against the odds as a family fiefdom, first by Jim Corcoran, then his son Des but the writing was on the wall there from 1968.
So the personal relationship that you developed with Don came about partly because you were his host in touring him around various parts of the South–East of the State and the electorates that had been lost. Did that develop into Don asking you to accompany him on other country tours and trips?

I was doing quite a lot of work in the Riverland at the time as well. Reg Curran in Chaffey, like Tom Casey and Gabe Bywaters, had been one of those ‘horses for courses’, local personalities in regional electorates pre-selected for their special local profiles. Historically, it was another soft spot because Chaffey, Millicent, Frome and Murray Bridge had been the keys to victory in 1965.

Do these visits, whether they were in the South–East or the Riverland or elsewhere, involve just visits to workplaces and perhaps sub-branches, or were there public meetings as well?

The old style public meetings were really only held during election campaigns. I can recall going to Victor Harbor with Don and Lance Barnard, for example, during the federal campaign in ’72 and to the South East with Bob Hawke the same year. But no, generally visits were organised, itineraries confirmed, there were people to meet. I used to do a lot of the preparatory work, working with Don’s personal staff. I was the contact person, whether it was for somebody from the timber industry, local councils or whatever.

Do you think that people were sort of more frightened or fascinated by Dunstan with this very articulated method of speaking and highly-intelligent sort of delivery of political messages?

There were two sides of the coin, I guess. There were the Dunstan fans, and I was in that club; but there were the people from the conservative side of politics who – mostly because of Don’s success, I suspect – hated Don with a passion. You may well recall that there were malicious allegations about Don’s parentage and all manner of things which were completely fabricated stories.

What I think I was asking was how do you think he came across, how did people sort of react to him, or were they just curious?

Well, it depended where you were operating. Don was no pub politician. He never appeared at ease in those situations, he was always just a little distant. Des Corcoran was
the pub politician. ‘How are you mate’ sounded very different coming from Don But people certainly warmed to him and were very impressed by his rhetorical skills, his intellect and his vision.

One of the principal issues in South Australian politics between the time you became a Member of the Legislative Council and the time that Dunstan resigned in 1979 was the issue of uranium, whether we had it, whether we ought to mine it, whether we ought to sell it, whether we ought to process it and so on. And can you talk a bit about the role that Dunstan played in the debate and the role that you played?

At the time, South Australia was becoming something of a rust-bucket state, the local economy was not doing well and there was this huge deposit of copper and uranium at Roxby Downs which its proponents were pushing as salvation for the State. At the other end of the spectrum there were the ‘candles-and-caves brigade’ who wouldn’t have anything to do with uranium or nuclear power under any circumstances. Politically it was very difficult, very divisive, and Don determined to try and find a way through it. This led him to that well-publicised tour during which he visited a number of countries in the Northern Hemisphere to find out at first hand what was happening with nuclear power.

Do you think the debate’s moved much since then?

While the anti-nuclear power, anti-uranium camp is still passionately committed in its opposition, overall there has been a softening of the opposition and to a significant extent that’s been caused by the climate change debate and global warming.

Not to mention the fact that we seem to have so much of the stuff.

(laughs) Well, that’s very true. And South Australia is apparently thriving on mining, so maybe the politics of pragmatism are alive and well. I don’t think there’s the same sort of passion that there was in the ’70s.

Perhaps I should have asked you, prior to that question, whether you were a member of the caucus when Dunstan did return from Europe and attempted to make a report to the Cabinet on what he’d found and what might be useful, practical and workable options for South Australia.

Yes, I can recall that very clearly. Don undertook a very strenuous tour, a fact-finding mission, and came back looking thoroughly exhausted, grey and totally debilitated. During
his absence Peter Duncan, who was one of the leaders of the anti-uranium mining, anti-nuclear power, group, had been actively organising against it. Don saw this as a perfidious breach of Cabinet solidarity, directly in opposition to the middle ground through which he was trying to steer the Party and the public. Don had been very loyal to Peter, a young and controversial Attorney-General, a reforming Attorney-General and in many ways a very successful one. But Peter was also very much inclined to play political games and, during Don’s absence, he had been organising the anti forces. I recall the first caucus meeting after Don returned very well. I was still on the backbench at the time.

The caucus meeting or the Cabinet meeting?

No, I was not in the Cabinet.

Oh, I beg your pardon, yes.

I had great aspirations but I hadn’t quite made it. Don reported to the full caucus in a quiet, considered manner, giving a detailed account of his travels, what he had found and what his views were. Then he turned his full fury on Peter and gave him an enormous dressing-down for his disloyalty, in front of the whole caucus.

And not long after that his health wouldn’t sustain him any longer.

Yes. He looked quite dreadful and, while it was a great shock when he announced that he was retiring, it was not a great surprise to a lot of us.

I think he retired, or had to for ill health, in about November of 1979, was it?

No, it must have been March.

Yes, because there was an election.

That’s right. 1977 was the last time that he led us to an election, and I remember very well Chris Sumner and I were sitting on the backbench waiting, patiently or impatiently, for Tom Casey and Don Banfield –

For elevation[?].
coming to the end of their careers, and we looked as though we would be their replacements from the Legislative Council. Neither of us, of course, ever got to serve in a Dunstan Cabinet. Don was gone by the time we got there in May, Des Corcoran was the Premier –

For a very short time.

– for a short time, yes. I grew accustomed very quickly to being a minister. I was enjoying it enormously and working extremely hard, and four or five months after I got the Environment and Lands portfolios we were over the cliff.

So for the second half of the 1970s uranium was pretty well at the forefront of debates, argument, discussion and so on, both within the Party and in caucus and in Cabinet. Then Dunstan was gone, then Corcoran became Premier, then he was defeated and Labor wasn’t back in until for another term in 1982.

’82.

And then you were in the Cabinet from ’82 through until ’88.

’88.

Now, in that period of the ’80s did uranium mining and the issues surrounding uranium mining, enrichment and sales and so on and waste disposal retain its importance as a political issue?

Oh, yes. It was a very big issue during the three years of the Tonkin Liberal Government, because they were gung-ho to go. They were selling it to the public as the salvation, the economic salvation, of South Australia – selling very, very upmarket – and we were still stuck with the very firm policy of the Party, which was anti-mining. It was becoming increasingly difficult because I think it was fair to say that the public, by and large, were seduced by this great find in the desert, how this was going to lead us into better times.

In your book, Just for the record, you talk about a ploy, described by the producers of the book as a ‘clever’ ploy, to move uranium mining legislation in through the back door. Would you like to elaborate on that in any way?

Well, Norm Foster and I were the representatives on the Upper House Select Committee. We were, of course were in Opposition and Norm had varying positions on it – he was
acting in an erratic way, hard to follow. Ultimately he couldn’t quite reconcile himself to the fact that, if he voted against the bill that was before the Upper House and it was lost (the Democrats of course were opposing it) that would do great damage to the electoral prospects of the Party. As a good party man, he was caught on the horns of a dilemma. I was finding it very difficult to deal with him. I don’t know whether it was a personal dislike of me or whether it was I he considered to be too ‘academic’ (in those days, anybody who’d had more than ten years of formal education was considered by some of the old guard in the Labor Party to be an ‘academic’). Tactically, if not entirely pure, it was seen to be important, to get the bill to go through but through the back door. And consequently, as Norm was going through the agonies, I guess, we provoked him every time he was speaking in the Council.

But the bill wasn’t the Government bill, was it?

It was the Government.

Sorry; it was the Liberal Government bill.

It was the Liberal Government bill.

Yes.

Yes. The Roxby Downs Indenture Bill. And of course if Norm defected and voted with the Government it would get up and that would relieve us of what was seen as a political incubus around our neck. So the taunts went on and ultimately Norm did cross the floor and voted with the Government. The rest is history. But it was, it was a very difficult time and I suppose, looking back on it, the ploy that we adopted was certainly cruel; it was also reasonably clever because playing the politics of pragmatism got us off the hook.

Well, it’s not just a matter of history, is it, because it’s a matter of the present and indeed the future, in the sense that the current Government has provided licences, indenture agreements, tax breaks and infrastructure support to half-a-dozen mining companies who are extracting uranium and at the same time extracting water from the Artesian Basin to do whatever they do with it? So would you agree that there’s more of a benign attitude on the part of a Labor Government to the use of this material?
I don’t think there’s much doubt about that. I mean if one looks at state governments around the country generally, in this day and age, they seem to be far more attracted to political success than to policy or ideology. It was Gough who said that ‘Only the impotent are pure’, but it’s a very different world.

Do you see a time when, you know, the next two stages might be taken: that is that there might be a value-added development of uranium so that we do the processing here and sell a product which is going to have, in fact, more value to the South Australian public; and, secondly, do you think there’s a time coming when we might be able to more sensibly address the issue of waste disposal? Because I see now that a number of formal federal leaders and some state leaders have said that we’ve got a moral responsibility to take back waste and reburry it. Have you got any views about those two possible future developments in the uranium debate?

There is certainly a fairly strong view internationally that it is one of the ‘solutions’, an alternative to burning fossil fuels, but on a purely cost basis I don’t think it’s got a great future unless the price of fossil generated power increases very considerably. I do think that since we are exporting and profiting from uranium sales then there is a moral responsibility to be involved in waste disposal. But it’s all a dilemma, to put it mildly.

Perhaps we can now move on to leadership style of Dunstan and what your recollections are of the way that he ran caucus, the way that he led debates over important issues and the way that he brought the Union Movement and the State Conventions along with him, and feel free to make comparisons with other leaders of that time or this time.

Don was a one-off, the like of which we haven’t seen since. Once he had thought a position through on a particular policy or a particular program, controversial or otherwise – particularly if it was controversial – he always had the political courage and the skill to put it on the agenda and to lead the public debate. He was not poll-driven, by and large, quite different from the way in which the parties operate in the twenty-first century, and he was very persuasive, very often with things that were quite controversial and to which there was initially considerable public adverse reaction or opposition. Don would continue to debate the issue and ultimately it would not only get up as a government initiative but there would be people who would come to the point of thinking it was not only a good idea but perhaps their idea in the first instance. So that made him unique, in my experience.
Was it charm, or was it oratory, or was it the preoccupation with policy over pragmatism?

Well, all three, I suppose. He was a very good orator. He was very persuasive, he had an excellent delivery – and a passion for his causes which tended to rub off on associates. A close colleague and friend always insisted that when Don got up in the morning he would dress, stand in front of a full-length mirror and decide who he was going to be on that particular day or at that particular time. He was an actor, a very good actor, and he used that to great effect. That was part of the skill. Charm, I’m not sure about the charm because I don’t know that anybody ever – and this has been said by many people who were much closer to Don than I, or should have been much closer to Don than I – that few people ever got really close to him. He kept himself at a distance. But in some sense you always thought that there was an aura. He certainly had the ability to keep the industrial wing of the movement onside and to travel with him. That was a rare skill.

He also had the good fortune, of course, to have a party which at that time was controlled, led, organised, by three or four of the heavyweights who were in some ways very benign in their approach but in other ways quite ruthless. There’s the story of Clyde Cameron deciding that Frank Walsh had to be replaced by Don in the run up to the 1968 state election and simply publicly announcing his retirement, thanking him for his services to the Party. Frank was less than amused but he was gone within three weeks. And they were always doing their forward planning, looking at the seats that were coming up, marginal seats, particularly, looking for the right candidate: ‘Where are we going to find the talent? In five years’ time this lot of ministers or this lot of senior spokesmen and women will have moved on, we need to look at where we’re going to be in five or ten years’ time.’ So there was a combination. Nothing succeeds like success, of course, and Don had been the principal architect of bringing the Party back into government from the wilderness in 1965. So he was owed an enormous debt by a lot of people and I suspect he wasn’t afraid to call in the IOUs.

A number of your colleagues, both in caucus and in Cabinet, have commented on Dunstan’s chairmanship role and style. Have you anything that you’d like to comment
on about that? Or the collegial style, if you like, rather than an argumentative or a belligerent or a – – –.

Well, he always had Cabinet solidarity, of course, so going into caucus he had a solid numbers base if he needed to persuade caucus to his ways. But yes, he would let the debate run – keeping a little order in the ring, obviously, but he let everybody feel that they’d been able to have their say as long as they weren’t too long winded about it – and it was collegial, yes. I was never in a Dunstan Cabinet, of course, so I don’t know how their meetings were conducted.

If we could now just move on to some of the issues that you were directly involved with as a minister: albeit that it was in a government led by John Bannon rather than by Don Dunstan, some of the issues were nonetheless those that Dunstan had moved up the agenda perhaps is the best way of saying it, moved up the political agenda. I think you were initially a Minister for the Environment, or was it Planning?

Environment and Lands in the Corcoran government in 1979. Planning was a separate portfolio and at that time Hugh Hudson was the Minister – a very senior minister. I’m not sure whether I was the most junior or whether Chris Sumner was, I think we were twelve and thirteen, I’m not sure in what order.

Was there any overflow effect, in terms of the influence upon you, of Dunstan’s legacy when you were in a position of being able to implement policy, or had the debate within the Party sort of moved on and the social environment had moved on?

Well, at that time – I was only in that Cabinet for five months.

Oh, of course.

We had that ill-fated September 1979 election.

The ‘follow-the-leader’ election.

Follow-the-leader indeed, and I have no fond memories of it, I have to say. Just when I was getting used to being a minister of the Crown we were suddenly over the cliff.

So you never again came into the Environment.

No.

For the remainder of the time were you in Health?
Very soon after we got into Opposition I was made Shadow Minister or spokesman for Health, and that became my passion very quickly.

And I think you mentioned, when we were preparing for this interview, that there was a significant methodological difference of approach between the ’70s and the ’80s, when it came to the Government’s role in the provision of health services.

Yes. Health in the ’70s was very much about building hospitals, providing services to the sick. We hadn’t at that stage moved into preventive health to the extent that we did after 1983 – health promotion, social health as an important part of social justice. I was a great fan – my admiration for Don Dunstan remains undiminished even thirty years later - and perhaps there was never enough time in his busy reform agenda. But while he was so innovative in so many other areas, health at the State level in the 1970s was not a lot more than the ‘essentials’, providing hospital beds, treating sick patients and delivering public health services in the ‘old’ sense, vaccinations, hygiene, infectious disease control.

So there had to be a paradigm shift, really, in terms of what was required by the community in the general area of health.

Yes. In the ’70s, during the Dunstan Governments, health was allocated to ministers from the Upper House and run, for practical purposes, by the health professionals – public health and hospitals. It became quite different, later.

But some of the programs that I understand that you either were involved in or indeed initiated were community health centres for Indigenous people up in the Lands, which would have struck a chord with Dunstan even though he might not have done them. So is that fair comment?

Oh, yes, very much so. I mean one of the great regrets of my life is that I was never in a Dunstan Cabinet, because we would have been able to sell these initiatives to Don very readily, Aboriginal community-controlled health services, women’s health centres, adolescent health programs, anti-smoking campaigns. And drug law reform which he was moving to when he established the Sackville Royal Commission and which I took up more than four years later.

I think you’re talking there about, what, Nganampa and Pika Wiya?
Nganampa, Pika Wiya. But also, of course, you might recall that one of my great battles was in drug law reform and it was based on the recommendations of the Royal Commission, the Sackville Royal Commission, that Don had established. I was in the Corcoran Cabinet by the time that we received Ron Sackville’s report recommending decriminalisation and diversional therapies, taking some of the problems outside the criminal law. These proposals were quite radical at the time. Des brought the report into Cabinet and dismissed it in about five minutes. ‘We won’t be wanting too much of that, will we? Let’s move on.’ And it wasn’t until we came back into government in 1982 –

**Without Des.**

- without Des, yes; that was the Bannon Government by then –

**Yes. It was put back on the table.**

- yes. Well, I put it back on the table.

**Okay. Now, there were also some other related matters in that health area, particularly the community health area, that perhaps could find their genesis in initiatives of Dunstan, including the areas of women’s health and general social health. Do you think there was some continuity there?**

I think so. There was quite a bit of unfinished business. Had Don been leading a Labor Government in South Australia for another two terms, a lot of those things I believe *would* have come to fruition and he could have been attracted to them. And I guess one really significant piece of unfinished business was industrial democracy, which was right at the top of the agenda towards the end of the Dunstan period.

**Was it at the top of yours?**

Well, I was a follower, I wasn’t a leader at that stage.

**But I mean there must be some people there, something in the order of three to five thousand workers in the health system, and industrial democracy must have been an issue with some of them.**

Well, there wasn’t a lot of democracy in the health system, if you look at the way it was structured. (laughs) When I inherited it, some of the tussles were with the entrenched
positions in the public sector unions in particular. I remember very clearly trying to amalgamate health and community welfare, health and community services, in a one-stop shop, it was a social health approach. But the – – –.

**I think you developed a new word for this.**

Oh, ‘coalescence’, yes. I’d rather not talk about coalescence (laughs); the word developed a rather bitter taste. But everybody, from the Miscellaneous Workers’ Union to the AMA were right into John Bannon’s office in a flash when we talked about amalgamating. Later on, of course, it became relatively common practice around the country; but at that time it was considered to be the end of civilisation as we knew it.

**Obviously, each minister has to develop a range of confidants, both on their personal staff and outside, and a range of contacts in the area that they’re responsible for to keep them up-to-date. Do you think Dunstan was able to attract the best and the brightest to assist him in his role?**

It’s an interesting paradox, really. Some of the heads of department at that time were outstanding and very much committed to the direction in which Don was taking the State. On the other hand, I think it’s fair to say that his judgment in selecting the personal staff in his office was sometimes – how should I put it? – he was not a particularly good judge.

**There was only one or two of them, though.**

Oh, yes. Certainly, certainly. (laugh) But, well, I had a bit of inside running there, actually, because John Templeton was his press secretary for some time prior to Mike Rann and Templeton was a good friend of mine. I got to know him very well, of course, on those various forays into the Riverland and the South–East. And in private he was quite dismissive about the ability, judgment or lack thereof of one or two of Don’s advisers.

**It’s often said that the other characteristic that Dunstan had probably as a leader was his ability to stretch over boundaries and across fences with people from industry, banking, commerce and so on in order to gauge their opinions on things and he treated them with respect and, if necessary, with anonymity. Were you aware of that style of behaviour?**

He was able, in a unique way, to form ‘informal coalitions’. While some of those coalitions had low profiles he had that ability to carry key people with him.
Is there anything you might describe as a disappointment or a failure of policy or a failure of achievement in that period which is often described as the ‘Dunstan Decade’? Whether it’s something we’ve already discussed or not.

Well, the great disappointment from my perspective is that he wasn’t around for a longer period. There were several reasons for this. We can’t dismiss the potential impact of that book that McEwen and Ryan eventually produced. It was full of salacious allegations which would have provided ammunition for his political enemies, although I think that was a storm which he could have weathered. You had a combination of things. You had Adele’s painful death from cancer; a long, harrowing period. Don nursed her through her through that terrible terminal illness. (break in recording)

You were saying Don also had some – I can’t say they’re major or minor, but he got a lot of headaches.

He was quite subject to migraine, severe headaches, and I know this first hand because I was always partial to a glass or two of red wine and Don had to be very, very sparing in his intake – much as he was a great promoter of the South Australian product.

So you didn’t prescribe him ephedrine or anything?

No. (laughs) But he wasn’t a great consumer because –

He couldn’t be.

– no, he’d been plagued by that problem for quite a few years.

Even wine without sulphur in it?

I didn’t get into the clinical detail.

Well, we’re nearly finished, John, and thank you for your time for this. He also relied on a lot of people, members of his caucus. I’ve been told by a number of the members of his caucus that he gave you a job and that was it: he never interfered, he never came along and wanted to know what you were doing; he relied on you to do it and if you wanted advice and came and asked him he’d give it to you but, by and large, he’d keep out of your way.

Yes – well, in my limited experience there, I would say the style was quite different from his successor, John Bannon. John had a small group of people on his personal staff who
would knock on ministerial doors on a fairly regular basis to deliver the message, as it were. But no – – –.

The most recent person I’ve spoken to was Ron Payne[?] on the phone, who, when he got Aboriginal Affairs I think it was, to help Don in it, he said, ‘He gave it to me and he expected me to do it, and I said, “What am I supposed to do?” He said, “You’re the Minister now, work it out”’.

Yes, different style. I mean you could compare his style with the current Prime Minister, for example, who works eighteen hours a day –

And doesn’t trust any of his .....

– to ensure – he has to be assured that he’s in total control of every portfolio.

Now, there were one or two people in that Cabinet who you had some contact with, both when you were a backbencher and also while you were a minister. I think we’ve mentioned Des Corcoran, not just as Deputy Premier but also as a South–East member, and Hugh Hudson: do you want to put on record any views you’ve got about their role in the Governments of the Dunstan Decade?

Well, I first got to meet Des when I was President of the Mount Gambier Sub-Branch and he was the Member for Millicent. We went through the fabled re-election in ’68, the detail of which has been recorded many, many times, so I won’t bore you with the detail. But Des became something of a patron of mine, actually, and in the latter stages of Don’s Government I guess Don and Des and Geoff Virgo were my principal supporters.

And Hugh Hudson?

Hugh Hudson. Well, I was a very junior minister and had Environment and Hugh was a very senior minister and he had Planning with John Mant as his Director-General. In those days the Departments were supposed to counter balance each other and for me that was quite a tussle and quite an experience. Hugh Hudson, as everybody agrees, had a formidable intellect and he was a very competent minister. One has to ask if he had got the succession after Don went, been appointed as the Premier as against Des, where we might have been; but that will remain unanswered forever.

It will.
And he was persistent. He was quite garrulous, of course. Hugh in full flight could talk under wet cement. And in Cabinet, if anybody was interrupting because he was going on for a bit – this is my limited experience in the Corcoran Cabinet – I can remember very clearly: ‘Let me finish. Let me finish.’ You mustn’t interrupt Hugh when he was in full flight. But I liked him.

I should check his tombstone to see if that’s his epitaph.

(laughs) True.

One final question, which is really out of a personal interest of mine more than anything else, and I’d be interested if you’ve got any observations on it. But my recollections are that, in the Dunstan government period, Dunstan Decade, most ministers had one, if any, personal staff; in the Bannon Government they had two; in the current Government every minister’s got about six. And it makes, in my experience and the experience of a lot of people I’ve talked to, getting through to the Minister – just on a personal basis, let alone on a policy or an administrative or a political or organisational basis – much, much more difficult, if not impossible. Have you noticed this sort of change in the way that – I suppose it’s governments generally, not just Labor Governments – are tending to run their operations?

The untouchables. I mean the unknowables. (laughs) If you go back far enough, of course, Tom Playford used to get in his FJ Holden and drive himself to work, or so legend has it. But yes – and for a very long time –

And he’d drive Des home.

– yes, true. (laughs) For a long time – when I was in the Cabinet, even – my phone number was listed in the Adelaide telephone directory and it was only when we were having some difficulty with a case at Community Welfare that we had to go to a silent number.

You mean in the Southern Vales, a women’s health centre in the southern districts?

No, no, no, it was prior to that. This man was unstable and he was threatening potentially physical violence, so the number was taken out of the book. But people used to ring me up at all sorts of hours on matters and I insisted that I had to be in touch. You can’t do this in a federal government, of course, a national government. But yes, I think the untouchables
and the unknowables and dealing through the media. And the selection of those staff members sometimes leaves things to be desired, particularly if you’re rewarding party hacks for loyalty rather than finding people – – –.

But you’re also isolating the ministers –

Oh, yes.

– from legitimate pressure groups.

Yes, yes.

Or professional groups.

And particularly at the State level I think that’s very much a backward step and rather foolish.

Well, I’ve got no more questions. Is there anything that I haven’t raised that you’d like to raise about Dunstan, the Dunstan legacy and whether the time made the man or the man made the time?

Well, a bit of both. I mean one thing that I came to regret, as we moved into the ’80s, was the loss of the spirit of generosity. In the late ’60s and into the ’70s there was a lot of community goodwill –

There was.

–then the economic rationalists moved in and social issues became much less important than The Economy. Everything’s The Economy. You need a buoyant economy that provides jobs and prosperity but there are a lot of social reforms that don’t cost anything and you can redistribute opportunity by reordering priorities. That doesn’t have to cost a fortune. If you look at priorities and you look at social reforms that could create a more cohesive, inclusive society, then I think the Party has lost its way to some extent. I can only hope with the Rudd Government that I’m proved to be wrong, I really do hope so, because there are a lot of very – – –.

Well, if you are you’ll get a fifteen-page letter telling you why.

(laughs) Yes, true. I look forward to it.
All right, John. Thank you very much for that. As I said, you’ll get a copy of the transcript and a pro forma letter enabling you to place whatever restrictions you’d like on the use and otherwise of the material.

Thank you, Mike. Good to talk to you.

END OF INTERVIEW