PART 1

This is George Lewkowicz for the Don Dunstan Foundation Don Dunstan History Project interviewing Mr Bruce Guerin. Bruce was a senior executive in the Premier’s Department and Don Dunstan’s executive assistant for some time, right up to the time, in particular, when Don Dunstan retired. The date today is the 15th February 2010 and the location is the Don Dunstan Foundation.

Bruce, thanks very much for doing this interview for the Foundation history project. Can you just talk a bit about yourself, just some of your early background in Adelaide and your education, and then how you moved into not so much the Premier’s Department but work through the media and some of your experiences in the United States as a Harkness Fellow?

Okay. Well, I’m an Adelaide boy born and almost bred; I think I actually began my life in the Barossa Valley. But my parents were both teachers and my early life was conditioned by that – for example, we lived in a school house in a public school down at Lockleys, in the days before any of that area had been made into the Adelaide Airport. And then after that my father was the headmaster, as they were called, at Ethelton first of all, which was interesting to me. He had a lot of involvement with, well, very different sort of people: he had much involvement with Aboriginal kids that had been brought down mainly from Alice Springs and so forth, and that gave me a pretty wide exposure.

My own schooling was at Unley Primary School all the way through and then Adelaide High School. That was partly conditioned by where we were living and partly by the fact both my parents had gone there and all my brothers had. I took my first degrees at Adelaide University and was supported through there with a State Government – they were called ‘Leaving Bursaries’ at that time – and that was significant for us. For example, one of my older brothers, who went on to become a doctor, passed his Leaving exam but didn’t get a bursary so he actually repeated the year until he could get that support. So it was quite significant for us in that way. After that time, I won some scholarships and was supported by a Commonwealth Scholarship, international scholarship, and was at Cambridge for a couple of years,
and I was essentially being – well, I was training myself up to be an academic and was actually offered a job as an academic and was about to accept it when I thought, ‘Fancy doing that all your life!’ (laughs) and started looking for ‘What can I do now?’

One of my great interests, apart from what I’d been particularly studying, was public affairs of various sorts and partly because of the intensity of that interest and partly because, ‘Well, I can give it a shot’, I decided to write to The Advertiser, no less, and tell them that they needed me to work for them and, to their surprise, they said yes. (laughter) They were very suspicious of me because I had a degree, which was very unusual; even worse, I had a degree from Cambridge, which had to be very much suspected. And so I was set to work on very demanding things like the vegetable prices and shipping movements for some time; but fairly rapidly I was given actually a very wide charter to follow partly my interests and partly what they wanted me to do.

So who were you relating to there in particular, what sort of editor or sub-editor, some of the people?

I arrived just after Lloyd Dumas’s retirement and, fortunately for me, it was a time when The Advertiser felt itself lacking leadership because they seemed to be looking for a short, bald man wearing glasses to be a replacement, and so there was a good deal more freedom than there had been before. Alan Williams was the Managing Editor; Des Colquhoun was something called the ‘Editorial Manager’, mainly thought up as a device to prevent him going somewhere because he’d been very successful as an attaché to the royal tour or something similar, and they created this job which he was uncertain about, didn’t know what it was, but eventually he became the Editor. And there were other people. There were longstanding staff writers - like Don Riddell, I suppose. Yes, it had been a fairly stable sort of staff situation.

So I did general news reporting and so forth but, fairly quickly, I was being asked to fill in on writing editorials or ‘leaders’, as they called them, and doing feature
writing – but I always mixed that up with reporting on news – and before very long I was almost determining what I would do. Like I was tending to raise issues and say ‘I want to write about this’ or ‘There’s such-and-such happening’, and so I was given my head for the most part.

**What sort of issues, can you remember those?**

Oh, very wide. (laughs)

**And you’d pick them up how: in conversation, or other media, or – – –?**

Well, you’d pick them up because they were either in the media or in the public view or they were ideas that were being debated elsewhere and they might be raised here. One thing like during the latter part of my time at Adelaide Uni and then later at Cambridge, some of the things I’d been studying were economics, and they were the days of literally the beginning of mathematical economics, I suppose - so the maths was pretty basic - and econometrics; so in England – this was in Harold Wilson’s time – he had the three K’s, Kaldor and so forth, as his advisers, and at Cambridge we had people like Kaldor and James Meade, who were working on the bases of a more quantitative economics. When I came back there was very little knowledge of that, so we tended to have an informal network of people who were interested – in the Reserve Bank, and there was an economist here that we might mention later on, and in organisations that were emerging like the Australian Industries Development Corporation; and those people had contact with business and so forth – and out of that I had a stint when I was basically Finance Editor as well. But most of the time I was writing on public affairs with a financial or economic bent, I suppose.

**That’s interesting. And, just to get it on the record, you were studying what, Classics at Adelaide Uni?**

Yes, I started off doing Classics and Philosophy.

**Philosophy, right.**

And I finished that here but was uncertain whether I wanted to go on with it. Like I’d won scholarships. And I was particularly interested in economics and Professor
Lydall particularly and Geoff Harcourt, who wasn’t yet a professor then but he was very helpful, they enabled me to basically do a couple of years of undergraduate economics in the gap between our academic year, like November, and starting up in England, which is September/October.

On reflection, just commenting on the Classics, it’s seen as a very sound Oxbridge-based recruitment grounding for entry into the higher echelons of the British Civil Service. On reflection – I don’t know if you’ve ever reflected on that, but when one thinks about that, it might have been a good training ground for your work later on in the public service.

You mean too I could speak the language of the UK Cabinet Office. (laughter) Well, it’s interesting. I must say I was extremely fortunate that, in the Classics Department in Adelaide, where there had been a relatively recent change in professor – John Trevaskis had come, he was actually from Cambridge – but he and his colleagues were not buried in the past and he and others taught Classics almost as an example of a whole range of different disciplines. So I came to terms with linguistics and sociology and anthropology, economics to some extent; the philosophical side of it, Trevaskis was a philosopher or a student of philosophy, but he put it in an ageless context, like it wasn’t ‘Become an expert in Plato or Aristotle’, it was, ‘Well, how did these people happen to tackle these issues which, centuries later, were tackled in a different way in a different society?’ So in a way it was a very broad introduction to a wide range of, well, essentially, humanities-type areas. And, while it looked bizarre to some people that I should go on and look at economics after that, in fact I’d been delving into economics to get a better understanding of some of the classical history and so forth.

And in Cambridge did they have a lot of political debates that you were linked up with? You read about those people like Blair and others – or even Bill Clinton, I think, given his Rhodes Scholarship and that – – –.

Well, I guess both those universities – there are others as well that do it – there is what you’re studying and there’s what you’re doing, and at both those there was the union, which is essentially a social but also a debating society, and at least every
week during term time there would be debates on significant issues, current issues. The great thing about Cambridge, and I think Oxford is much the same, was the calibre of the speakers that would be roped in, and roped in for a variety of reasons, but people thought worthwhile to come and talk. And I wasn’t one of the people who spent many, many hours a week obsessed on that because I saw it as a form of self-indulgent sport by many people, and just as, say, Clive James spent more time on the stage than he did studying during many of the term times, there were people there who were essentially seeing themselves as politicians of various sorts and that was how they were getting their grounding.

The reason why I’m asking that is did any of that influence your work in *The Advertiser* when you were particularly doing these more detailed examinations of what was going on politically and socially?

It’s an interesting way of looking at it. I guess my approach to *The Advertiser* originally and my overall outlook was more seeing *The Advertiser* as a way that I was earning a living while I pursued my interests. (laughs) They happened to coincide. So, for example while I was at Cambridge, one tremendous thing that was just being introduced then was you got free copies of newspapers, free copies of *The Economist* and all sorts of things like that, so it was very easy to plug into some of the best journalism of the time and also that context was much different from what we used to hear. Like in Australia, in South Australia – we’ll put it this way – because we didn’t have a lot of easy access to interstate publications so much – you had *The Bulletin*, I suppose – but we had *The Advertiser* and *The News* and that was about it. You get to England and you have this enormous exposure to extremely good writing and thinking and so forth. That’s what stimulated me.

**Depth, more in depth.**

Yes. So when I came back I was interested in keeping up with and pursuing issues that came from that sort of broad context.

**So we’re looking at the late ’60s here, aren’t we?**

Yes. I came back and started working here in late ’67.
'67, right. So it was the Walsh period and then Dunstan as he took over from Frank Walsh, and then Steele Hall. Do you recall any impressions and views that you had at the time about particularly the Walsh and the Dunstan Governments?

Well, it was an interesting re-entry, I could say, for a couple of reasons: one was I’d lived all my previous life under the paternal dictatorship of Tom Playford, who was much revered and respected but also regarded with a bit of humour as well within our family and in our sort of era: it was ‘Uncle Tom’ – not with any American overlays. But I can remember that, if people nicked something from a government department, like they were working there and they were taking a ruler or a pencil, they’d say, ‘A present from Uncle Tom’ or something like that.

I see, yes.

But all that era had changed while we were away and we’d changed to decimal currency, et cetera, et cetera, and I only witnessed the Walsh Administration at a distance.

To me it was very interesting coming back to see what happened with the Dunstan Government because he had been the local member for my father’s final school out at St Morris and I’d seen, even as a kid, Don working the electorate and met him several times. And, not through him necessarily but through my father having been working there, I met people like Norman Makin, who made a big impression on me, not because of any issues, just because of what sort of a person he was. And Steele Hall and Co. I only came across through journalism.

And do you remember anything about that period, like Don’s there with all his ideas and that? I don’t know how that sort of linked up with the interests you were following through and The Advertiser.

Well, to me probably the most striking thing was the franchise and the campaigns about that and there was a fair amount of marching and rallying and so forth, and I had a great deal of time for what he was doing. To some people it was heroic leadership, and others it was crash-through-or-crash, and some it was a ‘dirty communist plot’ or something, so there were quite divided opinions, but I admired
him for the way he enunciated principles and stuck to them and, although this might be with a bit of hindsight, the way he took a fairly strategic approach to it and persevered and persevered, which marked him out distinctly from Playford, who had never really worked on those themes at all. But there are other things that made a lot of sense to me, and this may be how he appealed to voters: for example, my experience of the Adelaide Hospital had been through visiting my older brother, who’d become a house surgeon, he’d graduated and was doing his hospital years, and being taken into those big old wards like Light and so forth – or ..... I think it was – and it really was what I would regard now as sort of pre-War, just a mass of iron beds, no space to walk between them. Pretty primitive type stuff. And Dunstan was talking about proper health care, he was talking about education that went beyond just what I’d been used to – there’s nothing wrong with the bluestone and brick buildings, but he had much more concept of education than just making sure there was a building for kids to go and have the standard education in, that sort of thing.

And what about – I call them ‘off-centre’ issues, like Aboriginal rights? From recollection he was one of the very early politicians who took that area very seriously and maybe even stuck his neck out on it when he didn’t really have to.

Yes. Well, I found him there – I didn’t see closely what he was doing there; but there were some areas where I was involved directly. For example, I was, fairly soon after I came back, doing work with the South Australian Museum on Aboriginal relics and their collections and so forth, and particularly with the anthropologist there and the curators like Bob Edwards was one, and I felt there was a positive context in which you could work to get things protected and preserved. Also my mother had been – or she and her family had lived down in the Strathalbyn and Milang area and had quite extensive contact with Aboriginal people. My father, in his early teaching days, had been up at Port Augusta and had again had contact there, and he used to come home from school when he was teaching at Ethelton or headmaster there talking about the boys – as far as I can recall, it was all boys - at the Aboriginal home down there, and it was something that I was particularly concerned about, like disadvantage for people and their lack of recognition. So in that context whatever he
was doing sounded good; but I wasn’t aware at those earlier stages of the land rights issues. He’d started up on some of those, like with Wave Hill and so forth, a good deal earlier; so coming back into that I was catching up with it rather than being directly involved in it.

Okay. Just before we get into your joining the Premier’s Department, you were in the United States working with the – I’m not sure what you’d call them; I’ll call them the ‘national government’, but the Congress, wasn’t it? – as a Harkness Fellow.

Yes.

What sort of work did you do there and was it one year?

That was two years.

Two years, right.

Well, I was given a Harkness Fellowship – this was in ’71/’72 – I guess at a time when I was wondering whether I would stay in Adelaide or stay with The Advertiser or whatever, and I had a young family and so forth, and somebody suggested to me that there was this very good award that might suit me. And I said, well, that sounded good, and they said, ‘Well, you’ve got’ – I think it was six days – ‘to write an application’.

Really? Oh, gosh.

Two of the people who were involved in that process, in the beginning part of the process, were Bob Bakewell and David Corbett from Flinders University, and so they aroused my interest. I was given the award in the end. That process itself gave me exposure to people like Coombs, he was very much involved in Aboriginal things at that stage.

H.C. Coombs, yes.

Yes. And of course he was interested in or had an incredible career in things that ended up as banking but it was also post-War reconstruction and administration and so forth. So I was actually given this award on the basis that I would be looking at
the education and development of journalists, because we were starting to see if something could be set up here that would be more than, ‘Go and make the coffee, kid, and buy me a sausage roll’ and sitting next to Nellie, and out of that came what’s now the UniSA media courses, eventually.

Once I’d been given the award, the people in America, the Commonwealth Fund, said, ‘We’ve been psychoanalysing you and we think we’ve got something that might be much more interesting’. No, they had a sense of humour. And they said, ‘You can do this, but you might get much more value personally out of working directly on governmental things’, and they said, ‘We can get you into the United States Senate or the House of Reps there, working as an intern’.

And I said, ‘Well, that sounds interesting. What does an intern do?’

And they said, ‘Well, sometimes they lick stamps and so forth’.

And I said, ‘Well, not interested’.

And they came back to me about a week later and said, ‘We’ve been talking to the American Political Science Association and they would like to make you a Congressional Fellow’.

So – this is on the basis of what they knew about me – I was made a Congressional Fellow, which gave me a higher level of access, and I was part of a group of about twenty people from all around America – I was probably the only foreigner in that group – and, apart from an induction program, we were given the opportunity and the tasks to find an office that would suit our interests and get ourselves incorporated. So that meant that I was able to find my own placement. I was interested in how politics worked in America, because I didn’t want to get directly involved in politics in Australia but there I could be involved in their process and still stay outside. I was looking for a large state or somebody from a large state so there’d be a wide range of issues, somebody who was enterprising and somebody who had no expertise where I did so that I would actually do the work rather than carry the coffee.

**This is what, research and writing policy?**
Well, the formal description is ‘Legislative Assistant’, but the office that I was in was a senatorial one, it was John Tunney, who was one of the Senators from California, who’d had quite a spectacular rise; but in his office there was a chief of staff and there were a couple of media people and so forth, but the rest of it was either administrative or subject-focused, and so on foreign affairs there was a guy who’d had a subsidiary role in the Democratic White House before and, you know, going through various issues on education or whatever and I identified that there was welfare, welfare economics, which were big issues; taxation; regional economic development; and a few other odds and sods. So I was there essentially as a full staff member, even though the money was provided by the Harkness Foundation. But that process meant that – well, given the state of Tunney’s knowledge and his interests, he had no other advice on any of those areas apart from what I could get together, and so you tended to work with people from other offices to share the load and, because the party structure is so much more limited there, actually, if you were thinking about putting up legislation, which is the prime method for action over there, you would have to get numbers. So there would be Democrats with similar views in the Senate would be one thing but also in the House; and then there would be, in this case, more liberal Republicans; so in those days people like Chuck Percy was one whose office you would deal with quite a lot, and you actually had to work up a coalition on each thing. And I guess this was a particularly important thing for me later because, after a lot of time, the literature now talks about people like this as ‘policy entrepreneurs’: they’re not necessarily people who have the power to decide but they do a lot of the interfacing and dealing and so forth. But it also gave me incredible access to really good people and opportunities.

And on reflection what sort of things or tips did you have following that about your own internal – I don’t know whether they were rules or things that you followed on that experience when you went into the State public sector?

Well, some of it just reinforced my upbringing, because my father, who was a respectful person in many ways, had various sayings like – you know, you’d say, ‘Gee, the Prime Minister’s important, isn’t he?’ or whatever, and we used to listen to
the Menzies election speeches on the radio and, oh, you know, it seems very remote. He said, ‘Just remember they still have to scratch themselves’ –

Yes, that’s right.

– or things like that, and “just take people as you meet them”. And that reinforced it to me. So, for example, in dealing with these issues you came across people who you could sit there and be impressed by or you could get some particular benefit out of it. So, for example, we were dealing with regional economic development and there were national hearings being held and so various state governors were coming into Washington for it, so Ronald Reagan turned up and Jimmy Carter and people like that; and I made a point, because I had the capacity to – they were there in the room and you’d have a coffee break – so I’d go up and talk to them. And they gave me, either intentionally or unintentionally, some interesting perspectives.

There was a big thing called ‘zero-based budgeting’ that came in at that time and it started in Georgia. And I was intrigued about this because it was terribly complex but intellectually wonderful. Each year you’d wipe the slate clean and start from the bottom and ask of everything ‘Do we need it?’, *et cetera, et cetera*. And so I asked Jimmy Carter – they all had shiny suits on – ‘What do you think about this?’ Which was a pretty stupid question.

He said, ‘Oh, it’s wonderful. This is the process – – –.’

And I said, ‘Well, I know all that; but what about you as a Governor: how much do you actually use this?’

And he looked at me and he said, ‘Have you seen, the report of the budget based on that?’

And I said, ‘Well, I’ve seen a copy; I haven’t looked at it’.

And he said, ‘It’s got 680 pages. I haven’t got time to read stuff like that’.

(laughter)

And just insights like that, it might have just been a 10-second snap, helped me to realise that policy is not top-down, necessarily, or it might be necessarily not, and there are a lot of other ways in which they were influenced.
And did you have links with the Office of Management and Budget at that time? I think it was Alice Rivlin.

Well, yes. But this was actually Nixon’s time.

Oh, Nixon, right.

To get that chronology right, the day I arrived in Washington it took two and a half hours to get in from the airport because of the ‘Evict Nixon from the White House’ march. And when I was working on things I was told or I found out I could get access to various people outside of the Congress. So Alice Rivlin, and actually Nancy Teeters, were two people in the Brookings Institution. Interestingly, at that stage they were respected by their peers but beyond that they were being dismissed for their work on social security. And Nancy Teeters particularly, I think it was, said she’d been to this meeting where nobody could answer her critique but they just dismissed her and said, ‘But you’re not an actuary, you wouldn’t understand it’. So she went off and in a year did two years of Actuarial Science or whatever and came back again and said, ‘I’m an actuary and you got that wrong as well’. (laughter) But Alice Rivlin and she are really powerful intellects, but also understanding the context. They were helpful; and people like Joe Pechman were there. Another person who helped me a great deal on economics and taxation was Charlie Schultz – he was the Democratic one, not the one who became Attorney-General! So again it was interesting to me as a foreigner to be able to get in there and hold my own, but also just trade. They had things that they could get for me, et cetera, et cetera, and I guess that formed up my technique of dealing with things later on.

Interesting, yes. So the Premier’s Department you joined – when was it? – in ’72 or ’3.

No, it was late in ’74.

Oh, really?

So I’d been back for a bit over a year.

And back at The Advertiser.
Yes, I went back there and was surveying the scene.

So how did you get to be interested, for a start, in the Premier’s Department. I think it was in the Policy Division, wasn’t it? There’d been a transition.

I think it was the Policy Secretariat still.

Still the Secretariat, right.

Yes. Well, I guess in the work that I did I was bumping into governmental things, but also was finding that people were contacting me. And, for example, Ramsay at the Housing Trust, I was talking to him about various development-type things, and sometimes this was to report, but I used to go and see him fairly regularly and, apart from anything else, he would tell me stories out of school and what was going on and explain things and as an off-the-record source he was excellent. Interestingly, he and Dunstan didn’t see eye-to-eye, but Ramsay’s version was that they basically agreed on everything except how to do things and it was a difference in style, which was interesting.

And in this context there’d been the review of public sector management set up under David Corbett’s chairmanship, and David contacted me at some stage, I guess you could say politely because he wanted to stir something up out of his report which was about to come out and it was about how incredibly inefficient the State Supply setup was, and partly it was, ‘Here are wonderful little one-liners: do you know that in State Supply to keep track of stock they’d line up wood screws on their head in groups of five and then count the groups to get the total’ (laughter) Et cetera. But some of it was much more general. And out of that I wrote something.

And then I was reminded very clearly that I didn’t know what happened in government because I got this irate call from somebody called Graham somebody – Graham Inns it turned out to be – and I had to call him back, and I called him back and he berated me for some time because I hadn’t spoken to him. And I said, ‘Well, who are you?’ And he told me he was the Chairman of the Public Service Board, and I can remember saying, ‘What is that?’ Like I didn’t know any of this existed. And he was telling me how dare I write about something in the public service
without talking to him. Well, okay, that sort of illustrated my ignorance but made me think, ‘Well, what else don’t I know?’ Because what I was tending to do was I would know who the Under-Treasurer was but I didn’t really know how Treasury worked, *et cetera, et cetera*. So I, without making it a mission, I was just finding out about more how government worked.

Then I didn’t know anything much about the Policy Secretariat except that it existed. I knew of Bakewell’s activity and so forth. But then I got a call from Bakewell saying that they’d been trying to fill a job for some time, several calls, and couldn’t find anybody; would I be interested? And so I had a bit of a talk and then went and I think – well, I was interviewing Bakewell more than the other way round, you know: what might I be getting into, and terms and conditions. And then, in proper public service manner, he said, ‘Well, you’ve got the job but you’ll have to apply for it and be interviewed’. (laughter) So that’s how that happened.

‘*We have the merit process.*’

That’s right.

**Can you remember what the job was called?**

I think it was something like Senior Project Officer or Policy Officer, something like that.

**Yes, probably ‘Project’.*

But it was described as being responsible for the Policy Secretariat with – I think this is right – with Bill Voyzey as the person I suppose sitting between that and the head of the department.

**And do you remember what the main role of that position was, what Bob would have explained to you – or Bill probably in a bit more detail?**

Yes. I must admit that I don’t recall whether I spoke to Bill before I got the job. I certainly spoke to him before I turned up on the job. But I was given a rundown of what was involved in terms of types of activity, like projects and looking up policy issues and giving advice and servicing committees, committee secretariat, that sort of
thing. Bill Voyzey, certainly when I arrived, gave me a very down-to-earth
description of how he saw things, and he was very open and very straightforward and
gave me a young boy’s guidance on how to stay alive.

Did he talk about ministers at all and how to relate to them?

Oh, yes. Well, I wasn’t told very much about that sort of thing at all; it was more a
matter of – well, within the department, I was responsible to Bill Voyzey but I wasn’t
told, ‘No, you can’t talk to anybody else’. Bill Voyzey told me, ‘Listen, this is the
way it runs’. As he kept on saying, ‘There’s no show without Punch, so there’s a
Bakewellism somewhere, everywhere, just watch out for that. He’s very effective,
but’ – and I remember him saying this – ‘if you’re doing anything in writing, word it
very carefully and check it through, and then go through every sentence and stick the
full stops down on the page’. (laughter) And he gave me other little bits of advice
like that, ‘Watch your back’ in that context.

He told me more about relating to the small number of ministerial staff and,
without himself being fazed by it, specifically he was saying, ‘Peter Ward, you want
to keep out of his way because he’s an angry type and he thinks he owns everything’,
or whatever. But there was nothing particularly about dealing with the Premier.
Like he said, ‘We in the Policy Secretariat’, or whatever it was, ‘on occasions deal
with ministers and so forth, and so you have to expect that you’ll be called on’, but it
wasn’t regarded as what you’d be doing every day of the week or that sort of thing.

Interesting. One of the reasons I’m asking is there was a chap – I think you might
have taken over his position – David Rodway, who was just below Bill and I think
his first experience was Des Corcoran really rattled him a bit, given Des’s tendency
for profanities. And David I think was a sort of New Age Christian –

Yes.

– and whether that influenced his decision to move out or not I’ll never know, I
might ask him one day. But it’s dealing with ministers and their robust language
and even wacky ideas sometimes.

Always a good sign when they had ideas. One of the big advantages that I had was
that, having had a senior journalistic position, I was used to dealing with ministers
and I’d been dealing with them over a period. For example, some of the Labor ministers – while we’re talking about Labor – I’d come across when they were union secretaries sitting around in little dogboxes in the old Trades Hall, and some of them would come to me asking for my opinion about various things or peddling stories or whatever it might be, and also on some of the things that I’d written about in *The Advertiser*. I also had a commentary-type thing I used to do once a month on the ABC radio, which was picking a subject of interest to me and then just talking about it. With Des Corcoran, for example, he was Minister of Works or whatever and I’d been doing a series of pieces about the West Lakes development and the financial workings behind that, and I had quite a few yikes with Des Corcoran, which was not just getting a statement from the Minister and me writing the opposite, it was in his office saying, ‘Well, how do you justify this?’ and found on a number of occasions he didn’t have any idea what was going on. A simple thing like the Government had provided land to the West Lakes developers for nothing and then it was buying it back: how had they worked that out? And, well, there could be many rationales for that - but there wasn’t one. And so I was quite used to the, in that case, reasonably friendly and careful abuse of Corcoran. And most of the other ministers – well, they knew who I was and I’d had dealings with them.

And an anecdote which may be relevant. I can’t remember who told me this, but after I’d been there some time I’m pretty sure it was somebody who was working for me was having a problem on some issue and I said, ‘Well, go and talk to the Minister’.

And they said, ‘You can’t do that’.

I said, ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, this is the process’, and they’d fill me in on what the process was.

And I said, ‘Well, I’ve never followed that’.

It never occurred to me that if I wanted to speak to a minister I couldn’t, and so just by doing that I probably got more access to ministers than otherwise.

*Interesting.*
And I guess with Dunstan there had been a couple of issues where I’d been saying things, I can’t even remember particularly what they were, but I do remember contacting his office and them saying, ‘Oh, he doesn’t want to speak to you’, and I said, ‘Well, okay, we’ll escalate this’ and so forth and in the end saying, ‘Well, here’s what I’m going to publish, which is “The Premier refuses to speak about these things.”’ So suddenly I got an interview and we had a reasonably tense exchange. That was not too long before I was hired by his department.

**Just following on from that, did you pick up any sense of ‘What the hell’s this guy doing?’ And you used to work for The Advertiser, and ‘We’d better watch out what we tell him’ and that?**

Oh, yes. Absolutely. I think it might have even been the first day or the second day I was there. There was this great distinction between the tenth floor of the Admin Centre and the eleventh, and I was going up the back stairs from the tenth to the eleventh one day and there was this person coming down the other way with a leather coat and a scowl on the face, and it turned out it was Peter Ward, who bailed me up and demanded that I should get out and get down to where the media centre was because that’s where journalists belonged.

**Really?**

And I said, ‘Well, I don’t belong there; I belong here’.

‘What do you mean?’

And I said, ‘Well, I work for the Premier’s Department.’

And he said, ‘Yeah, pull the other leg’. And he hadn’t heard and Dunstan hadn’t heard, so he immediately turned around and hoofed it off to Dunstan, (laughter) and within an hour there was a certain amount of ruckus that this bastard had been taken on and explanations had to be given.

**Well, they must have been satisfactory.**

Well, I don’t know. It’s quite clear – well, I would think it was say two or three weeks where there was no direct dealing with the Premier or whatever and a frosty
feeling. But once I started dealing with him on normal business we just got on very well and kept going.

Can you remember any of the early projects you worked on, or issues, in support of some projects?

The thing that I was given to do on the first day – like it really is you’d got a new kid on the block, what do you do? You give him something to read or whatever. David Corbett’s public service review had finished what I was told was a final draft of its report, so Bill Voyzey gave it to me and said, ‘Let us know what you think about it’, and I asked what form he wanted the comments back in and he told me and so forth, so I prepared a whole series of points and comments which were then handed back and that took not a huge amount of time, only a couple of days maybe, and I think – well, you ought to know because you were probably on the receiving end of this – but it was about a couple of months later before the final final report came out.

Right. I wasn’t actually – I think I read a few of the drafts but I wasn’t on the secretariat or anything, no.

You weren’t, yes.

Interesting.

So there was that. And to some extent it was, ‘Well, here’s something you might look at’, but also my major task was familiarising myself with what the rest of the group were doing.

And what about links with the other central agencies? You mentioned the Public Service Board and Graham Inns, then you mentioned earlier on Treasury and probably more in the US context.

Yes.

But was that you’d started to work up relationships with them or was that a sort of as-needed basis?

Well, even despite the introduction with Graham Inns, I didn’t know anything about the Public Service Board or people in it until – well, first of all I was interviewed for
the job by a couple of the deputy level ones, level below, and Bill Voyzey in giving me his introduction to the public service had said, ‘Well, over there, and with a lot of things in the public service there are’ – I think it was – ‘three people that you need to know, either because you’ll find them useful or because you’ll find them totally obstructionist, and just get to know them’. And it was Hedley Bachman, John Burdett and David Mitchell. I think that was all, there were three of them. And so I got to know them and got to understand their way of working and how they affected other departments or whatever. But for the rest of it it was almost opportunistic, like ‘You need to deal with something on finance, ask Bill’. ‘Who should I talk to?’ Or asked other staff and they would tell me who their contacts were, and fairly rapidly I was developing a lot of contact with Ron Barnes who at that stage was a deputy under-treasurer.

And there was a particular format, say, on – I don’t know if there was an established methodology on research, but a format on the presentation of whatever analysis had been done and particularly with Cabinet submissions I guess the reports were two-staged: there was a report or terms of reference and then you had Cabinet submissions which supported or didn’t support or wanted to revise them. What did you think about those when you started? I’m sort of leading up to your ideas about what was good policy thinking and research thinking.

..... ..... ..... format.

I don’t know how Bill explained all that to you if he ever did.

Oh, yes, he did – like I asked how things worked and that had a certain mechanical significance because I know that – well, you were in your very junior years –

Yes.

 – but we were still using manual typewriters –

Correct, yes.

 – and you didn’t want to retype it again. But there was a format then. But one of the earlyish things that I was asked to do was pass opinions on the format, and I recommended and we introduced the changes; for the life of me I can’t remember
what they were. But essentially it’s the same sort of format the most people use now and have used for some time, just making it possible for busy or lazy ministers to see in one sentence what it was about, see what the main issues were and what was actually being recommended – particularly given the South Australian Cabinet tradition of not explaining decisions but just saying, ‘We agree with 3A’ or whatever it might be.

**And no minutes taken of Cabinet meetings.**

Yes.

**I’m just wondering how you, say after a year or two years, if you can recall your ideas about how to improve the processes.** I’ll set aside the Cabinet comment processes for a while, but your ideas about what was good policy thinking and advice and what wasn’t.

Well, I guess if I can be rude enough to pass comments on the people that were there and what they were doing –

**If you like, yes.**

– it struck me that the group, to me, was a great idea in the first place because, as I understood it, it was through Bakewell’s advice that the public service - or he - somehow got hold of young graduates, the important thing being (a) that they were graduates, (b) that they were young and (c) that they were backed up – even though young, they were backed up with authority. He started this off in the Public Service Board but in Premier’s Department he had much more authority, so that somebody who was relatively junior but not hidebound with public service practice could ask basic questions and require justification of people and they couldn’t be dismissed.

The people who were chosen were in some ways a mixed bag but in some ways very similar: they were all pretty focused people with quite overt public spirit, they weren’t there to make a dollar or make their career so much but they were interested in particular things; they were interested in general issues rather than being total specialists, and I think that helped a great deal in developing interconnected policy so that they wouldn’t see that urban policy was just about this park in Norwood –
though I do remember one project which was designing a park for Norwood (laughter) – and so they naturally tended to or they developed the habit of talking to other people and getting cooperation rather than sitting up in some eagle’s nest and then impose it on people.

**Or being too detailed and hidebound, yes.**

Yes. And there was a great commitment to questioning things, including their own work. And while everybody’s got pride of authorship there was the ability to argue something out without having a fight: like, ‘Okay, well, that might be a better way’, or, ‘If we can’t do it this way we’ll do it another way’. And the thing that struck me, though, was that it was a fairly insular group of people in the sense that as far as I recall they were all South Australian, all had been brought up here and so forth and didn’t have much wider scope; quite often were up with issues in a local sense but not more in a national or international sense. And that’s one of the reasons why, over the years, I tried to develop opportunities for people to go overseas or go elsewhere or even if it’s just going to another department to get different perspectives on things. And I think that people showed in their careers that they had what it takes and no paths were rockets to the top but they developed and were very valuable contributors.

The other side of that coin was that, progressively, one of my biggest problems that I felt was, as Dunstan had become much more dominant, a shorthand way of getting things done was to get on the phone and say, ‘The Premier wants to do such-and-such’, and so a lot of people would take that as command, which means if you’re in a hurry, well, you can say ‘The Premier’. Sometimes the Premier hadn’t heard about it. So one of my problems as a supervisor in that area was to counteract that. (laughter) Or at least get to the Premier before somebody else told him what he thought.

**Yes, I was going to lead onto the links with the other departments because some had – you’re talking about young people: as well, I remember Ian Cox’s department, Community Welfare –**
Yes.

– and him hiring a lot of young graduates, social workers, and they were given very senior positions. But was the policy mainly done in the Premier’s Department or was there more of a sharing? I’m flagging another question about the present day, but I’m just wondering your recollections of the level of sophistication in policy thinking around the public service in general.

There are a series of answers to that. I guess in the beginning this Policy Secretariat or the Committee Secretariat or whatever it was quite an innovation in Australia, it hadn’t been done elsewhere. There were odd bods in one place or another who were hired to do a job within either a ministerial area or a department that were somewhat similar but there were no units, and this was regarded as a great centralisation. What it really was was raising the issues of policy in a rigorous way rather than just working on precedent or a variation on precedent and more of a problem-solving approach. One of the things that I think was also interesting: that Dunstan was very good at dragging in other people to be involved, and I can remember there was an inquiry into grape pricing because of problems up on the Murray with people growing grapes and not being able to sell them. Now, that may have had a political origin but it’s certainly an economic problem, and Brian Chatterton, who was a backbencher at that time but an agricultural scientist, was drawn in to deal with that with a committee. But I’ve forgotten who the people were who were working with him, but in some ways they were teaching Brian Chatterton how to go about a project while he was teaching them agricultural economics or whatever it was, and that had a double value that that had an effect on the Parliamentary Party, et cetera, and other areas of government.

The idea of an independent – independent in the sense you’re not necessarily from a department and part of that. I remember reviews at the Housing Trust and a few other things.

Yes.

I don’t think Alec Ramsay was too happy with it, but things were done in the Premier’s Department because they were seen as not having a vested interest.
Yes. Or, on the other hand, they were seen as having an agenda that was going to be imposed on people. And I think it ended up with the personal performance of the project officer involved plus the way the unit carried it through. Bill Voyzey had been put in as head of that, partly because he was an old stager and he’d been in the Public Service Board and I think he’d been in Education Department or somewhere like that.

**Not sure, yes.**

Or Lands. But he’d been around. He had a degree of some sort. But his attitude was pretty straight up and down and he was able to, on the one hand, calm the situation where the feathers had been ruffled, but on the other hand he was gritty enough to say to people, ‘Well, you can’t just dismiss these people. What is the answer to their question?, you know, and he’d put it back on them. So because it was a beginning I think you get all sorts of answers to those questions. No doubt there were failures.

One of the things that is interesting [is] that alongside this was the Economic Intelligence Unit –

**Yes.**

– which, from one point of view, was just there to ask nasty questions of Treasury; from another point of view it was to get Treasury and others to actually think about the issues rather than just doing it by rote.

**Or finance, yes.**

But also it was a discipline on the Policy Secretariat and the Premier’s Department as well because they asked, without damning economics too much, very narrow-minded questions about figures and ‘How are you going to demonstrate this?’ and putting a much sharper point on that aspect of policy.

**I don’t remember a lot of costing analysis, in the early years anyway.** Sure, people would come up with some idea of cost, but there wasn’t some sort of rigorous budgetary assessment that I recall until much later on, partly because of the context of there being a lot of money around, in the early ’70s anyway.
Yes. Well, there were partial costings on some things. I guess it’s also relevant in terms of my involvement that when I was at *The Advertiser* one of the early things that I was asked to deal with was the recession and lack of hiring and all the rest of that, and I was told, ‘Go and write the story about how there’s no decent labour in South Australia, whatever, whatever’, and I found out who had been telling *The Advertiser* that and I went off to inquire of them. One of them was called Uniroyal and Bob Footner the general manager, and so from my background I was saying, ‘Well, where are your figures and what’s your case?’ And it turned out there was no case at all. But in the process I started to get referred to Milton Smith, who’d been working for Chrysler’s in the declining days of Chrysler’s – as Milton used to say, when they defined an optimist as somebody who brought their lunch to work. They were really declining. But Milton and I were the only two in South Australia who were actually looking at the local economy, as to some extent we were – if I did some analysis I’d give it to him and vice versa. And so when he moved into government I had a certain amount of contact there and I had a lot of time for Milton’s sometimes absolutely-infuriating focus on what the question was, like not allowing any of this fussy policy stuff into it, but ‘Here’s the economics’, and progressively that was a more and more valuable thing.

Yes. That’s interesting. What I was also leading up to was, given your later experiences – you became head of the Policy Division and later on head of the Premier’s Department and then a professor of public policy – just thinking about the way policy development, I’ll call it ‘progressed’ – it may not have, but certainly these days if you look at the Cabinet handbook for the Premier’s Department it’s quite long and much more is required of the thinking and the presentation than there used to be back in the early ’70s – just thinking about what happened subsequently and then reflecting back on how things were done in that period of the early ’70s, what sort of I guess observations you’d want to make about policy thinking and development in that early time.

Yes. Well, I guess in those days there were very few books about policy because people hadn’t really thought about what policy was in any depth. I do recall before going to the States for the Harkness thing reading up every available book on how the Congress worked and how policy worked and there weren’t a lot of them; very
little from England at that stage. And I guess practice at that stage was similarly thin on the ground. There had been some policy work done in some parts of government over in Europe and so forth and particularly in France in the Cabinets, the ministers had their own cabinet, which was essentially a private office but staffed by public servants as well as contract people or political people. So – well, you were talking about format before – in a way, nobody had thought much about format, partly because they hadn’t thought about the guts of policy. I tend to take Cabinet handbooks now as a measure of the lack of performance. The thicker they are the less people are actually doing what you want them to do because bureaucracies are great at appearing to do what you tell them to do rather than necessarily responding greatly to detailed instruction. So in some ways you could take case examples from those days and they would be as valid as any right on now to how to go about a local policy issue. Others, you’d think, ‘My god!’ You know, the level of analysis was rudimentary and all the rest of it; well, it was everywhere else.

I guess what’s been understood much more, or the biggest change in understanding, is that now governments are less able to come out with a policy or a strategy or whatever it is and impose it on people and have people be impressed by it. In those days there was still significant respect given to the Engineer-in-Chief or the Chief Medical Officer or the Chief Inspector of Mines; these days, those people don’t even have the best command of a lot of the issues they’re dealing with. Like on environmental issues, the head of the Environment Department is not in command of everything; the community is much better-informed as an entity and so there has to be an interplay. And these days the importance of feeding off of the community, supporting it, reacting to it, the dialogue or the exchange is much more important than the definition or the decision of what to do.

But again, some of Dunstan’s strategies would fit very well, whether it was on electoral reform, his overall strategy of all policies, how much he could get done over a particular period, how much he could stir people up without losing the plot; or
on things like urban development or on things like food, where he was regarded as a *real* idiot, but now we take all his idiocies –

That’s right, yes.

– not just for granted but, ‘Well, who would ever have done anything different?’

Of course, yes. Lifestyle, you name it. Just looking at when you became Director of the Policy Division when I think Bill went over to – was it run Services and Supply Department?

That’s right, yes.

Can you recall the sort of things you had in mind to take things up a notch, if that was the case? And I’m sort of leading to a question about the role of the central policy units.

Well, there are a few things behind that. The Department of Services and Supply was a creation from the Corbett Report and one of the concerns in that report and reflected by other people was there were far too many departments and they were too small and all the rest of it, and this was partly a reduction in numbers exercise. At that stage, one of Graham Inns’s main focuses was on, ‘We had fifty-two departments and now we’ve got thirty-seven’ and whatever, so anything to do with reduction was good. The other thing was trying to get some synergies between related areas and a parallel one was the Lands Department created out of those Gilbert & Sullivan Surveyor-Generals and Valuer-Generals and whatever. So to some extent it was a decision on ‘Who can we get to run that?’ And to some extent Bill had got to the point where he’d had enough, not that he was giving up or whatever but yes, he would like the chance to run his own department or whatever.

To me it wasn’t an opportunity to do things differently because I hadn’t found any resistance on anything that I was trying to do before that. It gave me a different title but, to some extent, I was already doing the job beforehand anyway.

**Was he focused on some review areas or something like that, Bill?**

He was doing that. And most of the time we were effectively working as a unit, if I was doing something I’d get him to contribute and vice versa, and we’d to some
extent keep out of each other’s way so we weren’t wasting time; but in other ways, like if it was a personnel issue, we’d talk it through and whatever.

And do you recall what the role – just think about the role of the central policy units, I’ll call them. I remember there was a sort of project area, like that’s new development, there was some sort of a review area –

Yes.

– and there was a coordination area –

Yes.

– and I’ll throw in the Cabinet comments but I want to come back to them in a minute.

Yes. And there was an intergovernmental area.

Intergovernmental, that’s right, so that was another one brought in. So do you recall what the overarching rationale for all that was, or were things just sort of happening all over the place and then somehow that needed to be brought into some organisational structure or it was getting bigger and bigger, notwithstanding it was only a twenty-odd policy size, twenty people or twenty-six, compared with these days about a hundred or whatever.

Yes. Well, when I came into it – I can’t even remember all the details, but there was definitely a committee secretariat and there were projects. And when I was being told what the unit was doing I was given the project list and such list is still in the archives somewhere showing what was being done. And my first – well, Bill said, ‘What do you think about this?’ – my first run through was to be surprised that it was project-oriented so much and some of the projects that were there I thought, ‘Why is the Premier’s Department doing it?’ And on several of those Bill’s typical comment was, ‘Well, his nibs said so’. And ‘his nibs’ could be either Dunstan or Bakewell – although Bakewell was usually ‘Punch’. (laughter) So we were developing it.

When it started off, one of my functions that I identified needed to be done was intergovernmental stuff, not in the sense that ‘We have to have a section’, but ‘These are issues that we have to get on top of’, and I had to do it.
And that’s cross-departmental, not just what the Premier was dealing with but right across the board.

Oh, yes. Particularly the State Government relating to other state governments and the national government. And my assessment of that was that it needed more and more attention and we hired somebody to do it who came in, and we had Andrew Strickland and then later on Jeff Walsh, who’d come for other purposes, took over. And that actually freed up things, but it also tended to create a little bailiwick for intergovernmental relations and I think that we had developed in that way and it gave, to some extent, an opportunity for some leaders to develop; the people with more experience could go on and take up that role, though we tried in staff meetings and mechanisms like that to make sure that everybody was involved.

So I guess the other thing that was happening was that, increasingly, people who’d been around for a while were getting a reputation or there was the expectation that they would be dealing with this sort of issue, and it was almost an overlay that, well, if it was public sector reform it was me plus people who’d worked on the review process; and if it was infrastructure it was these people and whatever; so it was criss-crossing all the time.

Also, mainly as a result of the Corbett Review or what was decided out of it, we’d set up other coordinating mechanisms which were not necessarily a function of the Policy Division. For example, there was the Urban Development Coordinating Committee, which was a device for getting the heads of the infrastructure agencies sitting round a table and chaired by a minister, so they had to take notice or they had to turn up. And I was made secretary of two or three of those, and in some ways that made me the chief initiator of things with reluctant heads of departments; in other ways it gave me permission, I guess, or the passport to go and talk to all these people as a matter of routine, and also to find out more about their departments and what they could do themselves.

And this is getting somewhat off your point but it’s relevant: on urban development it was quite interesting, there were a group of what I’d call middle-level managers who might be head of planning groups or operations or whatever in places.
like the Housing Trust, the Engineering & Water Supply Department, the Highways and I can’t remember how many more of them, but these were people who actually were saying, ‘We can’t keep on with town planning the way we’re doing;’ – because it was called ‘town planning’ – ‘we actually need to get our act together, but we are having trouble with our permanent head’, they would say, ‘and when we put things up they tell us we can’t do it or whatever’. And for quite some time I used to convene this little, secret meeting of these middle-level people, which was (a) what’s a sensible set of strategies to deal with these issues or opportunities, but (b) how do we get the people up at the next level or several levels higher to take notice and actually do something sensible? And I can recall there was a particular problem with the Highways Department where they’d been specifically told by their head, who was Keith Johinke, they were not to be involved in meetings and consultation, everything had to go through him – hence they were secret meetings. (laughter)

Can you recall any particular things that got advanced through this process that might not have been, or was it a gradual type of thing?

Well, I’m not sure whether ‘advanced’ is the thing. There was the running issue of population. The Borrie Report I think was not the first report on population but I think it was the first one that the State Government had taken any notice of and people or departments hadn’t thought of it sensibly in their own way. For example, education: they said, we know what the population of schools is going to be because they’re all born in a certain year and they’ll come through, and their planning was based on parents filling in slips of paper and handing them in, and they would add them all up and say, ‘Oh, we need a school at Christie Downs’. This sort of thing was not very sophisticated. The Housing Trust was making decisions about where it should put things but was having to battle every time to get the transport people to take notice, or they would do it but they wouldn’t have been coordinated with E&WS for water and sewerage. So it was more a general easing of the restrictions and so forth, or the limitations.
Where I thought it might not be progressing then was with Monarto. It was actually a big discussion ground for issues that were related to Monarto: ‘Is the Adelaide metropolitan area overpopulated?’ or whatever. And then, eventually, ‘We don’t need Monarto, it’s a waste of time’. So to me that was a very significant thing. It was like a replicating of the Policy Division outside of departmental boundaries where people didn’t always agree with one another or do what they said they’d do but basically were trying to do the same thing and cooperate.

Just slightly off that, how did the projects or jobs come into the Policy Division? Was it because there was a matter that crossed a number of departments or was it just the Premier wanted an independent view that wasn’t captured by departments to start off with, or a combination of a few things?

You’d almost have to get a list out and we’d go through them one by one. I think increasingly it wasn’t so much a matter of the Premier having said ‘I want to do X’, or Bob Bakewell saying ‘We need to do Y’; it was more a matter of things emerging. So the national government would decide it would fund something like TAFE development and we’d be aware of it and the TAFE people and Education would say, ‘We’re looking after it. Stay away, stay away’.

But then we would discover that the advice that had been coming from one department – this is a classic example: the funding for TAFE colleges was put through Cabinet in several phases saying, ‘Here is this money. All you have to do is approve it and we will get a nice new college here and a nice new college there and it’s all free money’. What they weren’t saying was who was going to employ the staff to go in there. And it even got to the stage I was once in a car with Dunstan – I think this was going to the opening of a water filtration plant or somewhere out in Tea Tree Gully or Hope Valley or somewhere – and at that stage Don was – so this must have been about ’78 or so – he was half asleep in the back of his big, white limo and sort of emerged at the corner of Blacks Road and the North East Road and sort of looked out there and said, ‘Oh, what’s that big building over there? I haven’t heard anything about that’.

And I said, ‘Well, that’s your new Gilles Plains TAFE’.
He said, ‘What?’ (laughter) ‘How much did that cost?’
And I said, ‘Well, it cost’ – whatever it was.
And he said, ‘Oh, really? Aren’t we supposed to approve these things?’
‘Yes, Cabinet did approve that, you might recall, and we said you’d better look into it.’
‘Oh, really? Well, what was the problem?’
I said, ‘Well, you’re having to pay the salaries’. And he sat bolt upright (laughs) and started to pay attention. So out of that there would be one thing that would be chased down.

One of the things that Andrew Strickland was doing quite a lot was picking up on national issues and either using that as a funding lever with departments to get them to do something sensible with it or trying to get the best value out of the Commonwealth subventions of various sorts, and that in itself created – well, it was a trading community, like ‘We can help you get more provided you do it the way the Government wants to do it’. And so that hauled in a certain range of infrastructure, education, social-type investments that otherwise would have just been dealt with by departments.

Or they would have made that commitment and others caught the wash on it.

Yes.

Interesting. I mentioned Cabinet comments: when did they start, can you recall them?

I can recall them, yes.

Were they going before you’d arrived or soon after?

No, they came after I arrived. There was – and I’m not clear on the chronology of this – if you go back to how the Department operated, when inducted by Bill Voyzey he told me, ‘Basically, Bakewell likes to control things, therefore he controls access to the Premier very closely and it’s very difficult because you quite often don’t get feedback or you don’t get enough feedback or his priorities are different, you know,
dealing with –––.’ So Bill had worked to get a regular time when he could see the Premier, and I think it was probably once a month to begin with, and that was half an hour, and Bill fairly quickly got me involved in those, initially on the excuse that, ‘Well, Bruce is doing something and he ought to come in with me’. And Bakewell started off being involved in it as well and then eventually he realised that it was a waste of his time, that he didn’t need to be there. At a certain stage, this developed into a regular pre-Cabinet like a Friday afternoon run-through of things with the Premier and then, from that – it might have been that we were starting to prepare comments on a piece of paper and then he wanted it on everything, and for quite some time they were just comments for him. And then, a little later, it was that – as I recall it, Des Corcoran got up on his hind legs and swore at him and said, ‘What’s this? You’ve always got these things, these secret comments’, and Don just said, ‘Well, here they are’. And I can’t remember what the issue was, there was at least one that was slightly offensive to a minister which we heard about for a long time afterwards; but after that we were essentially providing comments on everything we thought there should be a comment on, to all ministers.

And they’d presumably have their people providing comments on the comments and all that stuff.

That’s right, yes. But also, apart from – well, that created some bad blood on occasions; it also made people realise that there was value in dealing with the people who were going to make the comments and not just in the sense of trying to buy them off somehow but because of the reputation, ‘Well, you make your case. And if you can make your case we can put into our comments that this is good, and if you haven’t done your homework we’ll say it’. So there was trading involved in that.

I think at some stage, I forget when, there’d be a requirement of consultation between the central departments – I think it was departments in the end –

Yes.
– and other departments, the central departments and other departments, before things had actually gone to the point of being a formal Cabinet submission, people not having to rework stuff later.

Yes. And the dynamics of that just varied, because occasionally there were ministers who were a bit more enterprising and they’d work out how to subvert the system, and sometimes it would be the senior one saying to Don, implicitly, ‘Do you want a real fight on this and I can be difficult? Or what say you give me a general go-ahead or whatever?’ Or John Cornwall used to love walking into Cabinet later on and saying, ‘Well, okay: this is generally what I want to do’. And then he would go and try and subvert people and Policy Division by saying, ‘Oh, well, Cabinet’s already given an okay’. (laughter)

But in Dunstan’s time he was very careful to manage those relationships and, instead of being a lightning rod all the time, he would – for example, after Cabinet – say, ‘So-and-so wasn’t very happy about that, and can you go and talk to him?’ Then you’d go and talk to them.

**Was it the minister or the department head in particular, or both?**

Well, it depended. Because a lot of this was based on what was said in or around Cabinet it came through the minister. Whether it was the minister that was the person who really thought about it was another matter. Sometimes you’d find out about it, you’d go to the minister and say, ‘Well, the Premier wants me to follow up on it’, and either truthfully or otherwise, ‘Ah, well, it’s not me so much, it’s So-and-so’.

‘Convince them and you’ll have me on board’, yes.

Well, that did happen sometimes.

**Was there anything, just talking about the public service – because I want to move on to when you became Executive Assistant as well, I think it was after Peter Ward had left – was there anything else that you wanted to cover in just the operations of the Policy Division?**

Well, it would seem to me that a lot of the development that took place was from increased experience and competence and confidence of the people who were there.
And, in a way, the system was working so well that it was a danger. I do remember saying after we’d hired another new person that we were hiring too many people that looked like us, and I do recall talking about the people who were reasonably tall had gold-rimmed glasses (laughter) and we needed some variety, and also that people were becoming a bit stereotyped in their own work, and some people who wanted to be managers were finding they couldn’t get jobs because, ‘Oh, you only deal with policy’. So we were starting a much more explicit process of trying to get rotations in and out, which improved the maturity of the whole show and it was much less a collection of individuals and much more a group that was capable of doing quite varied things.

Yes. I recall some of that. There was one chap from the Engineering & Water Supply, quite a smart engineer: he came in and just couldn’t handle the ambiguities, I’ll call it, or the flow of things, because within a department you had a much more specific role, I guess.

And then he went to work in Victoria.

Yes, I forget where he went after.

Yes. So there was a way of doing things and it developed. But also, externally, the feedback that we were getting from other governments and nationally was really significant. Like it was regarded as an experiment and then, as it was cemented in, we were getting more and more people asking us, ‘How do you do it?’ And I, not frequently, but was regularly asked to go and talk to other governments and help them when they were reviewing things or whatever.

But also we had established a reputation with national departments, and particularly the central departments, that if we’d done a job they could assume it had been done thoroughly. They might also assume that we’d hidden something in there that wasn’t asked; (laughter) but they respected it and they also knew that they had to front up and do a reasonable job. And one of the things that you were involved in, it was quite interesting, the uranium issue: for some time we had essentially a policy, a strategy, of not having the national government make decisions that would be
unwelcome to us – which is covering a multitude of sins, I guess – and as a result we were essentially determining the progress or otherwise of discussions and the direction of them, what got put in it; and the fact that we could do that in various ways just showed that we were at least up with the national people and probably ahead in terms of the tactics and the analytical ability.

Yes – having thought of the broader issues in a broader context.

Yes. And when we were applying for money, when the money was falling from Heaven or otherwise, generally we were finding we had our act together, it was credible, met their requirements, *et cetera, et cetera*, could be made accountable, and so we were getting people who were wanting to come and talk to us. In fact, I recall on that uranium visit overseas that Dunstan did just before he resigned, in several of the world’s capitals that we were in, people who met us and looked after us, like diplomats or other Australian representatives, were sidling up to me and saying, ‘By the way, have you got any jobs in your Policy Division that I could come back to?’ Some of them have been quite significant names, since.

Really? That’s interesting.

Yes. Because I said, ‘No’. (laughter)

Oh, really?

Well, we didn’t have a lot of jobs, did we?

No, you kept it tight. Just while you’re talking about trying to broaden the profile and experience of the people in the Policy Division, can I ask you and do want to talk about its demise in the end, when the Government changed? Not so much Dunstan to Corcoran, but when Corcoran got defeated and Tonkin came in: was that a factor of some of that inbreeding and everybody being looked on as being similar and too involved in policy, or what?

Well, I think there are two things. The Corcoran change was significant because Corcoran came in and, whether he’d called us ‘the Gestapo’ or what, he was actually in many ways more dependent on our group for comments and support and analysis than Dunstan ever was, but on the other hand – well, I suppose the anecdote would
illustrate it. I particularly wanted him to talk to all the Policy Division people as the new Premier to tell them what he wanted to do and the approaches he was going to take and all the rest of it. I had about five discussions with him before he agreed to do it, and it was reluctantly – and I’m sure you were there – and he organised it in the Cabinet Room and I rather recall that we were there to listen to what he had to say. He was fairly uncomfortable and actually asked me to say what was supposed to happen and I bounced it back to him. And he said very little and then, you know, awkward silence, ‘Well, has anybody got any questions? Here’s an opportunity to talk to your Premier’. There were some. And the answers were so limited and lacking in substance that you could see everybody figuratively or actually rolling their eyes. And after that Des said, ‘Well, it’s getting on in the morning, we’d all better go and have a beer, hadn’t we?’

Yes, that’s right. That was the end.

And to me that was more significant for what he was going to get done than anything else. Like people kept on working and doing a good job and so forth, but they knew that they didn’t have anywhere near as good a leader.

..... strategy.

To me the Government that came in was similar in some ways, in the sense that they didn’t have their head around policy. And you might recall that Jennifer Adamson had been given the task of writing up policies for their party and it was mainly, as it’s described to me by a number of senior Liberals, because she was just a damn nuisance and you had to give her something to do. And then, against expectations, they won the election and then suddenly there were all these policies that had to be implemented. But that didn’t mean that, as a party, they’d come to terms with policy.

They were thinking very politically and they regarded the Premier’s Department as the instrument of the evil Dunstan and, oh, there’d been Corcoran in between, and therefore they had to be all suspected and, even though they denied it, they had a
blacklist, had a list of names of people who had to be shifted – which, interestingly to me – like they said it didn’t exist, but somebody gave me a copy of it – (laughter) and it included three people that I knew were paid-up and active members of the Liberal Party, that they hadn’t realised that. And so in a way it’s the destruction. But in terms of policymaking it’s probably one of the better things that happened because, well, it was a diaspora. Having had that focus in the centre, what they did also forced people to go off and work in departments with different focuses, and what did they do? They acted like they were: they were analytical, they were consultative, they could be a burr under the saddle; they cooperated with one another across departmental boundaries and that lasted on, and in many ways that was the next stage of development.

Well, Tonkin realised I think in about the last few months that that was something that he could have worked on, he could have harnessed. Like I had one encounter with him in that time when he was virtually a figurehead because the others had taken away the running of government from him, and he was saying, ‘All those people, we were wrong about some of them. But, whether we were wrong or not, we could have used them a lot better’.

Interesting, yes. I recall somebody saying some of the ministers – probably ministers in particular, I don’t know about their advisers – saying the politicians or the ministers do the policy and the public servants are there to implement it.

Yes.

So any public servants actually even mentioning the word ‘policy’ seemed to be a bit of a no-no, let alone developing something. Sure, there was something in there that people were doing, but – – –.

Of course, that was a statement that was made by a number of Labor politicians too, you know.

Oh, right, yes.

You know, this ongoing either battle or pseudo-battle between politicians and public servants. But it was encapsulated much later, at a time when I wasn’t there, so the
second-hand story of Dean Brown coming into the Premier’s position, who actually gathered up the people in the Department and addressed them, not Corcoran style at all, and laid down the law that ‘We are the policymakers, we know what we want to do, you just do what you’re told’. But after this harangue and very few questions, because people thought, ‘Well, okay’, he then said, ‘Okay, well, that’ll be all. And by the way, So-and-so, would you drop in for a while? I need some advice on something’. (laughter) And people just said, ‘Oh, well, here we go’.

Different clothes. I’ll just pause there.

END OF PART 1