This is George Lewkowicz for the Don Dunstan History Project interviewing Mr Graham Foreman, who worked in the Policy Division of the Premier’s Department in the ’70s and, in the later ’70s, the Public Service Board. The date today is 1st July 2008 and the location is the Don Dunstan Foundation.

Graham, thanks very much for being happy to be interviewed for the Don Dunstan History Project. Can you just talk briefly about your education and employment before you joined the Premier’s Department?

I went to school in Sydney and moved to Adelaide, where I did a Bachelor of Economics degree. At the conclusion of that degree I was recruited into the State public service under what they then called a graduate recruitment program – probably the first that they had – and I worked in the Public Service Board as a research officer working mainly to Bob Bakewell, who at that time was the Chief Recruiting and Training Officer but later became a member of the Public Service Board when they created one, and then moved to the Premier’s Department.

That’s in the early ’70s, about late ’71 or ’72.

Yes. I left the Public Service Board and went and worked at Elders GM¹ for a year, and then came back and worked in the E&WS² Department, and from there I moved to the Premier’s Department’s Policy Secretariat, I think it was called then.

Right, okay. So what did you know about Don Dunstan and the Dunstan Governments before you started your role?

My knowledge was fairly much the sort of knowledge you pick up from the press and everything else. I mean he was seen to be someone who wanted to change what was obviously a very conservative community in many respects and a very conservative government structure that was in place, somebody who was prepared to go out on a limb and certainly wanted to modernise and perhaps add levels of intelligence to governments and the community structures in particular.

And you were pretty impressed with his style?

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¹ Elders GM - Elder Smith Goldsborough Mort Limited.
² E&WS – Engineering and Water Supply.
Yes, I was impressed with his style and I was aware that he was interested in administrative reforms. When I’d worked in the Public Service Board I’d done some work for the Corbett committee of inquiry into the public sector, which led to a new Act, so I was aware of the sorts of changes that he was wanting to make in the public service.

**What attracted you to join the Policy Secretariat?**

Job interest. (laughs) After working for two years in the E&WS Department on a computer system I was ready to find something a bit more interesting.

**And what did you know about what it was supposed to be doing, was there some scuttlebutt around about it?**

No, I really only knew what Bob Bakewell and Bill Voysey had told me, which was fairly general but was new to the public service at that time or as new as I was aware of it. I was broadly aware of how the Commonwealth public service operated so had some idea of the sorts of structures that they had in mind.

**And when you started, what was the impression you had about – when you started the job, the impression you had about the Department?**

Well, the impression I had was that it was very much being put together piecemeal and that a lot of the work, there was so much work that there was only so much people could cope with so there was a relatively limited number of projects; but they were being dealt with fairly intensely.

**And there was some idea about the style of the place and the approach?**

Yes. I think the fact that he had Len Amadio working in the same area as us (laughs) gave a fairly clear signal about arts and other of those sorts of liberal type of things that governments previously – here, at least – hadn’t delved into much.

**When you joined the Policy Secretariat, what was your role?**

I was I think it was called ‘project officer’ and basically that’s what it was. I’d have the odd few projects, some things we worked together on but largely we each had our own projects we worked on.
Like a portfolio.

Yes.

**What was your specialty?**

If to the extent there was specialties, I suppose public sector things tended to fall in my camp a bit. But it was pretty open.

Just going through the projects, you mentioned earlier on a few of them. If you don’t mind, I’ll sort of run through them but if you can think of any others — —?

Sure.

There was ‘exotic fruit and vegetables project’: what was that about?

That was part of I think Dunstan’s effort to lift the standard of restaurants and that sort of thing in South Australia, fitted with – I think he had another project going on family-owned wineries and so on. But the idea of this one was to use particularly the prison system, where we did grow a lot of things and had capacity, particularly in the Riverland, to trial growing things that might have a future in South Australia and might spark demand. That project was led by the chap who was heading the School of Food and Catering at the time.

**Graham Latham.**

Graham Latham, yes, and he was very energetic and enthusiastic.

**What was the general impression of the working party: they were doing it to humour Don or were they pretty serious about it?**

Oh, no. I think because of the enthusiasm of the chairman, who did sell the ideas very strongly, the committee were very keen. But I must say I think the Correctional Services side of it found it very difficult; also the Agriculture Department’s side of the thing, I think they were very cynical about it as well. From memory, the chap who represented the Agriculture Department was their potato expert –

**Oh, really?**

– so it didn’t really (laughter) sit that well with the objects of the committee.
No, that’s interesting.

That was one that was serviced out of the Committee Secretariat.

And what happened with that?

I think at the end of the day it withered on the vine, so to speak, to be honest, I don’t think a great deal came of it, from memory.

Well, they – what? – grew baby carrots?

They did grow a range of things and they planted fruit trees, but I think the carry-through at the end of the day was just not there. It was something that perhaps should have been picked up by the Agriculture Department [which] would have the sort of extension services to promote the growth of things, et cetera, and maybe the markets weren’t ready.

And the ‘design and craft-based industry project’?

Yes, this probably typified some of Dunstan’s attitudes. He was certainly keen to broaden South Australia’s industrial base from our tariff-protected, limited manufacturing, and had this thought – looked at places like the UK and others where big industries are grown from small craft things, like Wedgwood crockery comes to mind and others that he pointed to – and wanted to (a) build craft and design skills. We did have an Industrial Design Council at that time and a lead-in project to this that I’d worked on, which the assessment was that it was being funded by government but it wasn’t really contributing a great deal so that was wound up and resources directed into something else. This had much more a craft emphasis and the idea was to try to engage master craftsmen with whom budding craftspeople could work and that this should in the long term lead to industries that’d be based on craft and design. That was the object.

Who worked with you on that one?

There were people from Industrial Development Department, there were people from the Treasury; there was a number of art people and craftspeople on it; and we brought out at one stage a chap from the UK who had played a similar role in
helping craft industries in the UK. And the upshot of it was the Jam Factory and then, when the Jam Factory was established, a board or a group, and Bruce Guerin took over that role in that and I moved on to other things. But I think it certainly led to the Jam Factory being commenced out there at Marden.

Payneham, yes.

Payneham. And it’s gone on, I suppose, in certain ways. I mean we wouldn’t have the glass crafts and a range of other things here. But it probably hasn’t contributed as much to our industrial base as was envisaged, but it certainly fitted with a lot of Don Dunstan’s thoughts on industrial development.

And the review of the railways was another project you worked on.

Yes.

What was that about?

The railways were running at a huge loss and it was a very decrepit organisation. It did everything itself. It ran trains where most of the carriages were empty on a regular basis. (laughs) It just needed a big shaking up, which happened, and then later on, of course, it was sold off to the Commonwealth. But this was a forerunner of that, this was about making it a bit more efficient, which wasn’t hard to do; but it made it a lot more efficient, but it still wasn’t efficient.

Yes, enough. And what was the attitude of the railways people – was this part of a five-yearly review type thing, or was it just a one-off?

I don’t recall. I think it was a one-off review. Certainly they had a Commissioner for Railways at that time who was very powerful and he wasn’t particularly keen on this review. But they cooperated and showed us things, made statistics available – they had statistics on everything because they had armies of bureaucrats (laughter) all of whom did the same thing all their life. Yes, it was a very sad organisation.

These were in written ledgers, were they, rather than computers?
Oh, everything was written, yes. They made their own pies and pasties, they had their own factory that manufactured their own canvas products to cover cargo etc.; they did everything themselves and all highly inefficiently.

**Interesting.** What about the local government finance project, you did something about that –

Yes.

– and this was before the Local Government Grants Commission was set up?

Yes, it’s before there was tax-sharing arrangements with local government. I got into this initially because the [Adelaide] City Council was seeking assistance from the Premier at the time, and I think the Premier at the time realised the importance of the CBD, and probably was sympathetic to some of their issues. So from a project that looked at financial assistance for the City Council the Fraser Government, when they took power, had a proposition for tax-sharing with local government, so there was then an exercise at looking at how that might occur, which was an intergovernmental thing, which led to the formation of Grants Commissions and local legislation, et cetera.

**What was your impression, if you can remember, of local government at the time? Was it inefficient?**

Local government, yes, it was very backward in the sense that I think at that stage there was something like – I forget how many; there was a very large number of councils, particularly in the rural areas, very large number. And so they were all very amateurish-type shows.

**Then you had the sort of town-based ones and around them the district-based ones.**

Correct, you’d have a town base and you might have one or two district councils (laughter) all based on the same community.

**Be a bit hard to unscramble who was doing what.**

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3 CBD – central business district.
Yes.

So what happened – well, I also recall Geoff Virgo, the Minister of Local Government, he set up a royal commission into local government boundaries. Was that linked up with any of this, that Keith Hockridge – – –?

No, it wasn’t linked. I think this came after that. Yes, Keith Hockridge was certainly involved in the work that we did on local government finance.

And can you remember the flow of any advice he was giving?

Oh, his advice was not – you know, I think we were all in the same tram. He was pretty much on the ball about the sorts of things that needed to be done in local government. But it was very difficult for governments because [of] the political power that just came simply through the large number of councils and the number of people involved.

Was there any sense of service-shifting, like the Commonwealth giving stuff to the States and then the States to local government, but not paying them?

At that stage it really hadn’t got that far. Councils just did roads and rubbish, basically. (laughs)

Roads, rates and rubbish.

Yes, that was about it.

Three R’s. And another project was the national compensation body that the Whitlam Government got some thinking going and you said you worked with John Bannon on that one. What was [that]?

Yes, John Bannon was in the Labour Department and the national compensation body, of course, that was proposed was going to cover workers’ compensation as well as motor vehicle compensation.

Motor accident.

Yes. I mean our role was to try to see if something sensible could be done here whilst protecting our own state’s interest. I mean it was one where we found all the other states were vehemently opposed to national compensation, there was a lot of patch protection going on. There were a few people from other treasuries and the
like who were prepared to try to chip in and try to find better solutions, but in the end the resistance of the states just was too much.

And just generally you mentioned earlier there was the ‘savings in government project’: that might have been one of the first because the ’70s, particularly the early part and maybe then after the Railways Agreement, seemed to be awash with money and notwithstanding some of the reviews that were going on, like the railways and the Housing Trust and I recall an ETSA\(^4\) one as well –

Yes.

– there was a bit of a drive to come up with savings ideas.

I think this came from the Premier’s Department participating in budget discussions and wanting to find money for other things and the Treasury at the time not necessarily going beyond their budget processes. So the Premier’s Department formed a group with Mike Schilling from the Public Service Board and myself and I think John Hill from Treasury was involved, to try to look at what sorts of areas could money be saved, because at that stage the public service hadn’t really had the exercise of those sorts of disciplines, things just happened. But there is particularly historical things that just remained in place, that was more the issue I think.

There was a process of taking last year’s figures and pretty well adding for new initiatives.

Adding. Yes, adding inflation. (laughter)

Inflation for new initiatives rather than cost-cutting and shifting priorities.

And the public service hadn’t looked much at just simple concepts like delegation and there was a lot of centralisation of things, there was a lot of duplication of effort, and so it wasn’t hard to find savings at that time. It wasn’t easy to implement them.

We might pick that up later on when we talk about when you went back to the Public Service Board.

Yes.

\(^4\) ETSA – Electricity Trust of South Australia.
Just looking at these projects and any other reflections you’ve had, can you just talk a bit about the general approaches to some of these projects, like reviews in policy thinking, policy development, and also interaction with other agencies?

Yes. Clearly, most of the work was done with other agencies and the feeling you often got was that you were trying to drag other agencies into the thinking of the government at the time and departments seemed to have built-in inertia and not a great deal of appetite for change. Most changes were seen to be outrageous or silly. So it did involve a lot of consultation, involved a lot of, I suppose in a sense, leadership by the Premier’s Department to try to move things along; and I think it had a lot of that effect, changing thinking at the time. But also it was resisted because premiers’ departments didn’t use to have these capacities; they were rather like a post office for correspondence and questions for parliament and the like.

Were there any particular people who were being seen to be moving and shaking things along, that you recall, including yourself perhaps?

Well, certainly there were quite a range of people who came in and contributed, not just in the Premier’s Department but into other areas, and I suppose most new people that came in were of that ilk because they were recruited for that purpose. An example would be someone like Derek Serafion coming into the Transport portfolio. There was clearly a need for our public transport system to be looked at and our roads, and we’d have Commissioners of Highways having huge power in the system, and so someone like Derek coming in really shook up that area to some degree and was seen to be a bit off the map initially. (laughs) But, you know, there was people of that ilk came in at different areas of government.

And one of the reflections we have is [as] you mentioned earlier on the graduate recruitment program, and a lot of young people who were asked to pick up these project positions and then expected to go out there and represent the Department, discussions with quite senior departmental people. Can you recollect any?

Oh, for sure. When I was part of a graduate recruitment program, up until then the public service had recruited people from school and many times only people with their Intermediate or not even Leaving Certificate. So the public sector had been built on that sort of foundation. That’s not to reflect negatively on people who got
to the top of the public service, a lot of them were bright and probably if had the opportunity would have been to university and the like; but there was a need for the public service to get in people who were better-trained, and those people when they came in often had to – I can recall projects dealing with senior people in the education bureaucracy who’d worked their way up through the education system and regarded themselves with great authority and resisted talking to (laughs) people like myself, who would have been seen as a young whippersnapper, and that happened probably on numerous occasions. I can recall dealing with the head of the Labour Department, Lindsay Bowes, who’d been on the Public Service Board not seeming to appreciate (laughter) having to deal with junior people e.g. from the Premier’s Department looking at policy issues.

That’s interesting. And what were you doing in the Education Department discussions, was that part of the savings project?

I’m trying to think what it was about. It was about something to do with music.

Oh, right.

Because I had to see their senior person on music. But I can’t recall what project it was for. It might have been review of the Festival Centre Trust or something, I can’t remember.

And just recollecting about your own methodology in any of this, was there any pattern to it? Like there’s a lot of discussion these days about good policy and good policy development and good practical recommendations and implementation.

Yes. I think the thing that always struck me is (a) I always felt I had to do a fair bit of research because often there weren’t local models, and we had to do a bit of that. And I think with Don Dunstan being the way he was, it was always important to explore options, because you didn’t always know exactly (laughs) what sort of things he had in mind and the development of options, I think, really helped. But at the end of the day practicality in the implementation, you know: finding things that would work in the circumstances, because we were a small state, we did have a
public service that wasn’t always ready for these things, and so we had to find the ways and means that would work.

**So there’d be consultations –**

Yes.

– and then you’d have to make a judgment on what would be practical.

And sometimes there’d be structural changes to recommend or recruiting different staff in order to do it would have to be recommended. You often had to recommend a structural answer in order for the thing to be done.

**The idea of costings didn’t come in till later on, I think.**

No, costings was not (laughs) important at the time.

**It’s immediate and ongoing now. And do you remember any interplay with section 96 grants at all, any of the dates there?**

Yes, quite a bit. I mean I remember them well from intergovernmental relations times. But there was a lot of money came in for roads and schools and health, of that kind. In many ways I suppose in that area we always thought they were good because you were getting money in to do something that we’d never – it was adding to the overall capacity: I mean TAFE\(^5\) colleges, all these sorts of things – so it hadn’t got to the stage then when we worried about, ‘Well, can we spend it on what we want to spend it on?’ because we all wanted the things that they were going into at that point. Although the roads money was always a bit of a worry, because a lot of it went into rural roads where there wasn’t necessarily the population and demand and the urban areas were not being well-serviced, and we probably still suffer from that.

**And you went to the Public Service Board: was that head of the – there was some review area?**

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\(^5\) TAFE – Technical and Further Education.
It was called Operational Review Unit, I think it was called. The idea there was to build some capacity in the Public Service Board for conducting reviews, particularly of some of the bits of the public service that needed shaking up. That was always a hard job because you had to agree your terms of reference or whatever you were doing with the area and there was always resistance, strong resistance.

**What was the interaction with Premier’s Department?**

There was quite a bit of interaction. The areas being looked at often were areas of policy development, *et cetera*. I was only in that area for about a year and a half and part of that I went to Canada for three months. Then the job in Treasury cropped up, which seemed – – –. I must admit I felt I was banging my head against a wall a bit in the review area of Public Service Board.

**And in Canada you were looking at review methodology – – –?**

In Canada there was a review of the administrative structures of their public service. It was more like looking at the roles of, in particular, the Labor Department and their Public Service Commission and their Treasury, because their Treasury did a lot of the labour side of stuff as well, so there was a confusion of roles and it was a review to look at that. I went to have a look. I was lucky, really, to spend three months with them. On that job they asked me to focus on the roles of the different departments. A lot of them were out talking to unions and hearing from people all over the country.

**So you were pretty unique: you had views from your work in the Premier’s Department, then the Board and then the Treasury.**

Treasury. (laughs)

**So what were your sort of reflections and recollections about how you viewed their various roles?**

Well, the Public Service Board initially was a very backward area. It was really re-doing ordinary management decisions that departments were making. And over time that was delegated out to really now there’s virtually no function at all, so the ultimate delegation’s occurred. The Treasury Department had a very routine and
bookkeeper approach to the job when I went there. It was changing, to some degree; and soon after Peter Emery came in as a deputy from Canberra and he really did a lot of changing of Treasury to being more of a thinking policy type of department. But it took a long time. And the Treasury Department naturally has a stewardship-type role and more conservative influence in government, but under Peter Emery when he became Under-Treasurer he played more of a role of trying to implement things that were useful. I mean one small example I can think of was how he really facilitated the clearing of native vegetation legislation, et cetera, by helping find money for compensation and he played a very active role in that – and in a range of other things.

But from your view of sitting in the Board and Treasury, what did you think about the Premier’s Department: they were a bunch of upstarts, or – – –?

There was certainly that view. You were often told these things; and the view that the Premier’s Department would try to be bullying and the like. But I think generally there was an appreciation. I mean, there was a sort of sense – I think overall there was more a sense of creative tensions being a good thing. I think most people appreciated that, and it did lead to much better government, long-term. The Cabinet processes of course were – you’ll recall, George, when we used to write little Cabinet comments –

Yes.

– (laughs) which has now become a major industry in itself.

So I hear, yes.

And I think it’s got right out of hand. But in those days if we were lucky to see a particular Cabinet submission we might do a brief comment, but we could never say more than a few sentences –

That’s right, yes.

– and make a recommendation as to what Cabinet might do with it. And that had to be a good thing. The Cabinet processes were bizarre in terms of relying very heavily on ministers to know and see and read so much stuff.
Just looking at Don Dunstan and the Premier’s Department and the central agencies and the departments, there was a lot of change going on.

Yes.

What are the some of the key elements you might recollect there?

Clearly, there’s the things we know about, like promoting arts and that, the social changes we’re aware of; but I think he did a lot in terms of redressing the balance in industrial relations, *et cetera*, in a pretty reasonable way; I don’t think anyone would say that any of that was out of – it wasn’t bizarre or wasn’t heavy-handed, I think it was just a redressing of the balance. Certainly administrative reform, which is something that people outside the public service probably wouldn’t see a lot of, I think Dunstan always – he mightn’t have actively had that on his public agenda but it certainly was part of what changed government. I mean even departments like the Welfare Department, his interest in Indigenous affairs gave him a good exposure to some of the more moribund parts of government and his desire to – – –. I think he was Minister for Community Welfare at a fairly early stage of his career –

He was, yes.

– and I think that showed him it wasn’t just in the sort of economic/arts-type areas where the bureaucracy needed change; it was across the board.

And is there any other broad reflections you’d want to get on the record for the project?

I think, personally, I think he probably took on too much without sufficient capacity. You know, in this day and age a person with his agenda would have much more machinery behind them in government. Even though governments are moving much more to having strong and powerful ministerial offices, (laughs) but that’s in some degree probably counterbalancing a development of policy capacity in agencies. But I think it was so much for him to take on, and he handled it, particularly in the public interface, so well because of his capacities and his capabilities, but it was a huge task to take on starting with a public sector that really had very little capacity to service that desire for change.
And what about his ministers, did any particular ones come to mind in .....?

I saw a lot of ministers in operation and you really take your hat off to many of them. I did a fair bit of work with Geoff Virgo and I think Geoff’s public persona was as a fairly dour sort of operator, but he was actually I thought very smart and used people in the organisation. He had the Labour portfolio and Transport, two pretty big ones, and I think people like him carried a big load for the Premier. Back in that era –

Hugh Hudson was around.

– oh, Hugh Hudson, yes: he was strong in the Planning area, which Don Dunstan obviously had a big interest in. He had the capacity to carry that sort of area and make some pretty strong reforms in his own right.

What about Des Corcoran?

Yes, Des was the sort of loyal deputy type with the strong arm. (laughs) And Hopgood – oh, he came along a bit later, didn’t he?

Yes, a bit later on. And they were the main ones – oh, Len King, of course, too.

Yes, Len. Yes. I mean Len King, it struck me, was a bit like a number of governments, they often have a good, solid Attorney-General and that’s a strong part of a cabinet. But often linked more to the Premier, around the sort of key reforms that an attorney would be interested in.

Just one other area I just recall: PAPAC, the Planning and Priorities Advisory Committee –

Yes.

– and Urban Development Coordinating Committee. Did you have anything to do with them?

I didn’t have a lot to do with them. I think we’ve seen a lot of those sorts of bodies come and go over time, but it’s clearly been a need for key ministers and key bureaucrats to get together in some form or other to pull off some of the key changes.
Just one final thing: you were the head of a department – Administrative Services, was it?

Yes. DAIS, in administrative services, yes.

So looking at management and being a leader then, which wasn’t so long ago, and the Dunstan years, do you have any contrast to talk about?

I think the contrast is the capabilities of the public sector. What Dunstan started in terms of policy capabilities and policy advice in departments, Cabinet focusing on policy issues and the processes for that have now become part of the mechanisms of government; in fact, they’re probably pretty wearing processes these days. (laughs)

So in the old days in the Dunstan years it was doing policy but sort of getting on with it, maybe taking risks.

Yes. Probably the risk for the present day is that the present styles of government don’t become so overburdened with routines and guidelines and restrictions that we don’t become totally bogged down again. I mean I think there’s a risk of that.

All right, Graham. Thanks very much for that. That’s been good.

Pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW.

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6 DAIS – Department of Administrative and Information Services.