Interview with Ms Deborah McCulloch, former Women’s Adviser to Don Dunstan, conducted by Dr Margaret Allen at her home in South Australia, on 12 July 2007.

INTERVIEW COMMENCES

This of course is for the Dunstan Foundation, and we’re collecting an oral history, really, of the Dunstan years. I was going to just ask you how did you first know Don and where did you meet Don. How did you know him?

Well, really it was because of John Summers, who was my partner at the time. Not that we used that word then. (laughs)

Yes. ‘Boyfriend’?

No, I don’t think we even said that. I can’t remember.

No.

I know we didn’t say ‘de facto’. But anyway, ‘partner’ includes everything, it’s great. Well, I met John in 1969 – I think. Yes, I’m pretty sure it was 1969 – and I moved in with him quite quickly. He was living in Collinswood and I was working at Salisbury. He was a great friend of Don’s. He was one of the young men that Don always had a tribe of, moving round with him, and he’d been very close to Don for about three years. He was, of course, married to Anne Summers.

But by the time I came along there was an estrangement between Don and John. But when I first met John also he’d gone to university – this is John – he’d gone to university and started a science degree and failed Inorganic Chemistry twice, which in those days was sufficient to exclude you from the University entirely.

Yes. Clause 4(c).

That’s right. And he had joined the Commonwealth public service and was working in the Income Tax Department. But at this time, hanging out with Don a lot, who by then – now, let me see: well, this is the mid-’60s – Don got into power as Attorney-General and Social Welfare Minister in 1966. They were in for about eighteen months, I think –

That’s right.
– and then they got pushed out. So I think in those years – ’67, ’68, ’69, I was living in Canberra in ’66 and ’67, I came back to Adelaide — — . (pauses) I thought I came back to Adelaide in ’69.

I reckon you did. I remember running into you at the Wayville Showgrounds at something for teachers –

Yes.

– and I was surprised to see you back, and I was doing Dip.Ed. and that was ’69.

Yes.

You could have been back a while.

I think I must have been in Canberra ’67–68 and back in Adelaide ’69, that’s right, now that you mention it. So in those two or three years in the wilderness when Don was the chief theorist about the one vote, one value and the need for electoral change, he and John were very close. Then John, urged on by Dunstan, went to Amata, the Aboriginal reserve right up in the north-west corner of the State, and while they were there they found that the superintendent was ripping off the people.

Those reserves had only recently moved from missionary care to governmental care, and by and large it was disastrous because the government administrators had no expertise and they were not being driven by Christian ideology, which at least said that these poor “blackfellas” deserved the best they could have in terms of cleanliness and — — . And they didn’t rip them off. They fucked them a lot, though. Taplin. Taplin was down south at Raukkan; but there was a Trudinger who set up Ernabella who had a lot of little Trudingers.

But you were saying — — ?

But by and large the government intervention – which was done, of course, with the best will in the world and to take it away from the Christians and to take away from them the permanent and persistent religiosity of all of those reserves – did not do well for Aboriginal people, and in particular this guy, Dudley – can’t remember his last name, Dudley something – was ripping them off. And John and Anne were there for about eighteen months and they dobbed him in, and the whole of the public service closed and protected him. He was moved to Elizabeth. He wasn’t sacked,
nothing happened to him. He didn’t even have to pay the money back. I don’t know how Don reacted to that incident but it burned deep in John’s soul, it really did.

So when I and he started to hang out together in ’69 we didn’t spend much time with Don at all. Later on we did, but even then it wasn’t very much, like I’d say maybe two or three times a year we might see them, him in particular.

Him and Gretel, or him?

No, him and Gretel, really. Him and Gretel. I remember going to something where they played charades and Gretel and Don did a bit from ‘To His Coy Mistress’ by Andrew Marvell:

‘The grave’s a fine and private place
But none I think do there embrace’

Something like that. Near that section of the poem. Yes, in fact I think that might have been in John’s living room, but maybe not. So we didn’t see them very often.

John talked a lot – I mean, John was very knowledgeable about South Australian ALP\(^1\) politics, he really knew a lot, and he talked a lot about it and I learnt a great deal from it. But 1969, I didn’t read Shulamith Firestone until 1971. John kept on trying to get me to join the Women’s Movement, because of course he had been listening to Anne for so many years, and I was quite resistant. I read *The female eunuch* and then I read *Sexual politics* and I can remember saying, ‘This woman sure hates men.’ Then I read *The dialectic of sex* by Shulamith Firestone and that was it, I was totally converted, utterly, in one fell swoop, and I rushed off doing things. Set up Women’s Liberation branches all over the city and sat around listening to women whinge. It was great.

So when did you read that?

‘Seventy-one. I remember that much. Then Women’s Electoral Lobby was set up.

I see you were one of the co-founders I saw written somewhere.

Yeah, yeah.

\(^1\) ALP – Australian Labor Party.
Who was that with?

Dawn McMahon. She was an old communist, you see, so she really knew how to run an organisation, thank God, because I had no idea.

Had you been ever in any organisations before?

No, nothing. Well, occasionally in the union but that was it. All that time I’d been teaching because my husband was a student, my first husband is a student, and he was finishing his degrees and I was working. Then he got a PhD scholarship to Canberra in ‘67 and we split up there. He was infertile – thank God! – because otherwise I would have been a drunk at twenty-eight with five kids. Anyway, that did not happen. I’ve never stopped giving thanks for it.

So Women’s Electoral Lobby began, we had our first meeting here in July [1972] because of the election in December. Carmen Lawrence and a woman called Helen Glaezer – G-L-A-E-Z-E-R – who I think is still at the Institute of Family Studies were friends in Melbourne and they said, ‘A questionnaire for the election on women’s issues.’ So they wrote to me and asked me if I would set up – – –.

So how did you know them?

I didn’t.

How did they know to write to you?

I don’t know, somebody gave them my name. I was a sort of academic.

So you were at Salisbury by then.

Yes. Had plenty of time. So we did that. I called a meeting of women, I can remember two of them in particular walking out in such disgust. You know what they’re like when you’re actually going to do something useful instead of going around defining the problem yet again. So it very quickly split women into those who wanted to do something and those who didn’t. So we did it. It was great. And we published it in the Sunday Mail. It caused the most enormous stir. And all through that time I had no idea how to do any of that, none of us did. We made it up as we went along.
We got into terrible trouble, too, because I was getting Salisbury to do all the printing for nothing and John McLeay, who was the Member for Boothby, picked this and hunted us through the courts. My poor sister had to take the rap and then she wanted to be a lawyer and she was terrified in case this minor civil conviction would stop her. But it didn’t.

I don’t even remember any of that. It’s ridiculous, isn’t it, because I was there.

Where were you?

Salisbury, from ’70 on.

Really?

Yes.

Oh. Remember the little guy, Norm, was the printer? He did so much work for us. But what I didn’t know, of course – I mean, this is so simple now – every political statement has to have the ‘authorised by’ and these were all political statements authorised by nobody. So when Norm discovered that he’d been breaking the law he really panicked and refused to have anything more to do with it, so we had to find a printer who would reprint everything and put that on the bottom. And he did, but then he was visited – he was visited by the Federal Police.

Really?

Yes, and he never printed again, ever. He’d just spent a thousand dollars on a printing machine and was hoping for a career change, and it smashed all his hopes. I discovered that years later.

Who was he?

I don’t remember his name anymore. Betty Fisher who was a printer told me all about it.

So you were doing this for the election, though?

Yes, for the December ’72 election, right?

Yes, of course you were.

So the point I’m slowly trying to make –
No, that’s all right.

– that between ’69 and ’75 I was really busy with the Women’s Movement and we might have seen Don once or twice in that time. I can remember having dinner with him in the Ceylon Hut being really impatient with the public servants because they just couldn’t get it, that grapefruit was a desirable commodity.

He was – – –?

He was saying, ‘We could export grapefruit. This climate is perfect for grapefruit, but the public servants themselves don’t like grapefruit and therefore see no reason why they should encourage people to grow it.’ And it was true, I suppose. The notion that it would be elegant doing grapefruit was certainly beyond any South Australian public service imagination at the time.

That’s sort of just reminding us of how things were in those days.

They’re the people that Blewett called ‘troglodytes’. Well, actually, no; he was talking about the trade union people (laughter) in the ALP. But it was the same thing, really.

You know, there’s a wonderful story about Don which really illustrates, I think, how significant he was to the public service and how he and Peter Ward, the first of the ministerial staffers, really, they were. I don’t think Playford had – I’ve never heard of Playford’s ministerial staffers; he worked with the heads of departments like Frederick Somebody-or-other and Gilbert Somebody-or-other. But Don had ministerial staffers because, of course, Playford had been in for twenty-five years. The entire public service was, first of all, deeply under-resourced. There were not enough people working in it for Don to do all the stuff he wanted them to do. So it was a very bare skeleton of a thing. Then secondly, of course, they’d been appointed by a particularly conservative government so Don couldn’t get anything done, and this is a beautiful illustration. This is when he was Minister for Social Welfare in 1966. John told me this story.

At the time – now, I don’t know when this practice started, but at the time it was the practice to make all applications for public relief, as it was called – ‘public relief’: what a Dickensian term – all applications for public relief had to wait a month from the time they arrived on the DCW desk – Department of Social
Welfare, it was, not Community Welfare. Ian Cox changed it in 1970. So the Department of Social Welfare. And at that time also – and Whitlam changed this – all single mothers were on State relief for the first six months after the baby was born and did not transfer to the Commonwealth until the child was six months old. So not only were you going to be paid very much less as a single mother on State relief, you had to wait a month before you got any money at all. So Don said, ‘This has to stop. Stop it.’ And luckily he went back and checked, because they hadn’t stopped it, of course. They were continuing to do it.

**Because it made people really desperate and grateful, I suppose.**

I’ve no idea. Probably just because they didn’t want to be told by this upstart Labor bugger, who did he think he was? You know. They knew best. They really did have that attitude, even the good ones among them.

So he learnt from that experience and so, as Minister for Social Welfare, he went to the Department every day at nine-thirty and he read through the mail and he said, ‘Pay this. Pay this. Pay this.’ And then he made them bring him the stamped piece of paper and the cheque stub by the end of the day.

**My God. So he saw the need to have ministerial advisers –**

That’s right.

**– to watch out for some of these rackets.**

That’s right. I mean it’s incredible to think that that would happen; but it did.

I don’t know how he came to decide that he wanted a Women’s Adviser, but he did.

**Well, you’d had a baby, I think, in the meantime.**

Yes, ’74 I had a baby.

**And you came back to work, I think for a while.**

Yeah, yeah, I did. Yes, I had six months off.

**So there hadn’t been a Women’s Adviser. Had there been a women’s adviser at the Federal level?**

Yes, yes, yes: Liz Reid.
Right, ..... ..... my chronology. So you’re saying you don’t know how he decided?

I’ll come to that, okay?

Right.

So I was just about to say Liz Reid was the first Women’s Adviser and she was appointed in ’73, but which month I forget. But eighteen of us were chosen from all round the country to go to Canberra to be assessed for that job, and she was a Canberra woman and it could have all happened without the great expense. But it was great fun. We all went out and we caucused, we all wore the same T-shirt, we all behaved badly, got drunk. Yeah, it was good.

Anyway, Liz Reid got the job. Then they slowly set up the Office for Women and Sara Dowse got the job of that. I applied for that too, but I was pregnant at the time, six months, and they could barely contain their rage and their astonishment that anybody would do that. But anyway, she was really good, Sara, but she hated it and stopped being a bureaucrat and became a writer, and wrote an excellent book about it — —. Anyway, so there were no State women’s advisers until February 1976, when — no, that’s not true. I think in 1975 the Victorian Government, which was a Liberal Government, Dick Hamer was the Premier and his wife was very deeply moved by the Women’s Movement. I saw her give a speech once in which she said that hers was the ‘wasted generation’.

Good heavens.

Yes. And she burst into tears. It’s not every day you see a Premier’s wife do that sort of thing.

Certainly not.

So they had appointed Penny Ryan —

Penny Ryan.

— who’d been really active in the Women’s Movement. But, as I understand it — mind you, you know, I never really knew what was happening over there; but, as I understand it, there was from the beginning total confusion about the role and what it was for. Penny saw it as a policy role, just like Liz’s. You know, women rang up
or wrote letters or begged for her help, identified their problems and then the Women’s Adviser interacted with other public servants and had those problems addressed. That’s what Penny saw it as. But she was actually appointed as part of a community advice service with a citizen’s advice bureau and advice for various people, various kinds of people, maybe even – I can’t imagine that they had advice for people with a disability then, but that sort of thing. It was community advice. So she was expected to help people with the sort of questions that people ring the Citizen’s Advice Bureau with or the information services of various kinds now. I mean, we take those information services for granted.

Exactly.

But they used not to exist. The Citizen’s Advice Bureau here was set up by Marian[?] Disney, Julian Disney’s mum and Helen Disney’s mum. She hated the Women’s Information Service, of course, but still, we didn’t know, we just went charging ahead. ‘Bugger you, bugger you, you’re old, get out of the way!’ (laughs) Happens to me now and serves me right, I often think. So after six months she either resigned or got the sack, I forget which. She had been – as one easily became – angry with the Victorian public service and their attitude and treatment of women, so I think she was glad to get out. And years later she was – I don’t know if she still is, because I stopped being in co-counselling – but when I was in co-counselling in the late ’80s Penny Ryan was the Australian rep. Used to go overseas and go to co-counselling conferences all over the world. Since then I’ve no idea what happened to her.

So she was actually appointed first, in ’75. Then Kim Boyer was appointed in February ’76, and then Dunstan appointed me in May ’76. And I had one meeting with him, five minutes. ‘Debbie’, he said – (laughs) he always called me ‘Debbie’. I hate being called Debbie, but I put up with it – ‘Debbie, I want you to eliminate sexism from the South Australian public service.’ (laughs) We talked like that in those days.

So was the job advertised, did you – – –?
Oh, yes. It was perfectly kosher. I was, however, interviewed for it before it was advertised. Me and – informally, of course; no suggestion for a minute that anything might depend upon this.

**Just a little chat.**

Just a little chat. Joan Russell and I were asked to have a little chat with John Dahl, who was her lover of the time, and Bob Bakewell, who was the Director General of Premier’s Department and John Dahl’s best mate. As I understood it, one of us was to be the Commissioner for Equal Opportunity and the other one was to be the Women’s Adviser. But Bob Bakewell apparently decided that I was the Women’s Adviser and Joan missed out on the Equal Opportunity because that turned out to be in somebody else’s gift, Bannon’s, and he gave it to Mary Beasley, which in some ways was really good because (a) she had business cred, and (b) she had Helen Mills, who used to tell her what to do and was really, really, really, really good. And it was only after – and when Mary was under my spell and did what I told her she was fantastic; but then when she got under Suzy’s spell things went wrong, is my view of it. But, you know, shit, what do I know?

**Yeah. So what was the interview like with John Dahl and Bob Bakewell?**

I can’t remember. We met in the German Club, we drank a little, we talked. No doubt they asked me leading questions about women, no doubt I spoke. That’s all I can remember. I can remember Joan looking particularly triumphant, which is why I said, ‘What do you think’s going on here?’ She said, ‘This is what I think: we’re being lined up for big jobs. Goodie!’ (laughter) Or something like that.

**But then you had this five-minute interview.**

Oh, no, then we had the proper –

**Oh, yes.**

– you know, I had to write a job application and be interviewed and all that, right? But then I had five minutes with Don in which he said I was to eliminate sexism from the public service in three years. And that’s what he was really interested in.

**The public service.**
Yes. Partly because that was the issue of the time. Because David Corbett, who was the Professor of Politics at Flinders, had been appointed in '74 to undertake a review of the public service and the idea of that review – and the report was published either the end of '75 or the beginning of '76 – and the report was all about how to modernise the public service and in particular how to introduce women. In those days the Public Service Board was a triumvirate and they ran everything. They’ve sort of got a Public Service Board back again, but in between they had twenty years in which it was quite different. So there was the Chairman, who was totally powerful, and in those days it was Graham Inns, I think, pretty sure it was. He really was not interested in women. Then there was David Mitchell, who was a total fuckwit and just did what everybody told him, and Iris Stevens, who later became a judge, who later became the judge for the Hindmarsh Island.

So Iris Stevens – and, you know, like they were really rude about Iris behind her back, but she did a bloody good job, as far as she could. She was no feminist. She had no analysis, no political analysis at all. She’s a fucking lawyer, you know: she looks at the words and tries to match them with the actions. It doesn’t work, it’s not that sort of thinking. So she managed to identify one problem, which was that women hired as office assistants could not easily become clerks. So when you entered the public service at the bottom, with no degree, then you entered as either an office assistant if you were a woman or a clerk if you were a man. Women were not allowed to enter the clerical range until 1974, and even that year I think only three did. It was a totally male environment. And it had sixteen steps from there to the director general of a government department. Each of those steps, of course, had maybe twenty incremental steps.

And they looked after each other. They favoured each other, they had their pets. They told them where to find the jobs – what jobs were good, what jobs were pointless; what jobs had a future, what jobs didn’t. They kept on telling you, ‘This is how it works’, and then they tell you. I can remember Peter Fleming saying – oh, never mind. There are just so many stories. David Mitchell himself after a couple of years said – because we had this weekly panel talking about women – David Mitchell said, ‘You know, Debbie, you know how you’re always going on about information and how it’s the key to everything?’ He said, ‘Well, you know, just the
other day there was this young kid in the office. He’d been in the office six months, he’s really good: hard-working, keen, literate. I’d been watching him, of course, and so had his immediate boss and we had a little talk about him and we took him aside and we said, “Now, look, you need to advance yourself. Now, where you are is okay, but there’s no future. You have to move from there if you want to go up, and what we suggested is that you move over here to Staff Development because, even though it’s the same rate where you are, there are several steps above it. You get a bit of expertise at this level and you can move up.” And’, he said, ‘I did that for a young man of seventeen who’d been in the department for six years, and both of the office assistants have been in this department and I’ve been working with them for eight to nine years and I’ve never done anything like that for them.’

He said that to you?

He said that, yes. So that’s how it worked. And it was an incredibly small environment. After six months, I think, maybe nine, I gave a speech about the public service to the public service. I’d no idea. I had no idea. I was such a fool, really. Anyway, I gave this enormous speech about the public service and how women were disadvantaged in it and how it worked, how the disadvantage worked, how it worked. (laughs) And I said, ‘And the clerk who’s the head of the Premier’s Department office pool has said, “No woman will be in the clerical pool over his dead body.”’ And I got called up to the Premier’s office within a second. ‘How dare you be so rude to poor Graham? In public!’ I said, ‘I never mentioned his name, what do you mean? I never said who he was.’ And they said, ‘Oh, don’t. Everybody knows who he was.’

So you’d had to go and talk to poor Graham about these things anyway, by the sound of it.

Which poor Graham was that?

The one you just mentioned, who’d said over his dead body.

Oh, that was reported to me.

Oh, yeah.
(laughs) But yeah, I talked to him. He always behaved himself when he was with me. They lied. All the time, they’d lie to your face. They’d tell you, ‘Yes, of course.’ They were absolutely used to it. They’re public servants. ‘Sir Humphrey’ is utterly accurate. ‘Yes, of course I’ll do that, Minister’, and then they don’t. ‘Yes, of course, Deborah. How concerning, I can quite understand your distress.’ A month later everything’s still the same.

I got two or three guys who would rewrite administrative instructions and regulations on my behalf, and that’s how we did anything. Catching the imagination was the secret, I always thought. You gave them a new problem. They were really all bored. Give them a new problem and say, ‘Hey, look.’ Like part-time work. I had this friend, Maureen Fallon[?], who was the senior librarian in the State Library who had a baby and wanted part-time work and they wouldn’t give it to her because she was a senior woman. They said, ‘If you were putting books on shelves, sure. But no, you’re at policy level: you can’t work part-time.’ So I hired her – because really all I knew was what women had said at conferences and over and over and over again they said, ‘We want retraining; after motherhood, we want permanent part-time work; and we want to rule, we want to make the decisions.’ So I took those three as my direction. So I got Maureen Fallon to come and work on permanent part-time work and she said she just talked to Jack, she’d just talk to everybody, said ‘This is what we’ve got to do’ and Jack worked out how to do it.

Who was Jack?

A guy called Jack Merchant, who became Equal Opportunity Officer for a while, and he was also a member of the Sex Discrimination Tribunal. He was a great guy. He’d left school at grade seven, worked his way into the public service by working really hard, studying at night. But he was always a country boy – a gangly country boy. But not into football, thank God. Anyway, where were we? We digressed; I was trying to say something about Don.

Five minutes on Don in the public service, yes. That’s what really mattered to him because of the Corbett review, and the Corbett review, it only had one chapter on women – I think there were nine chapters – but really it was to try and modernise the public service and make it into the kind of professional, policy-driven, service-
delivery kind of set-up that we would all want – or people like us would, anyway. And women were part of that.

Anyway, what Iris Stevens had done had been more or less to create scholarships for about thirty women who had all been office assistants for at least ten years and probably more, and they got a chance to move across into the clerical range. The clerical range got paid a thousand dollars a year more, which in those days was a lot of money, for exactly the same educational inquiries – and in fact the women could type as well, and the men couldn’t. But this was where the public service was built –

Yes, on that.

– and I think we would have to say it’s not like that anymore. Certainly that is a way. That is a way for working-class boys, if you can get there; but there haven’t been intakes for years with youth unemployment the way it is, I’m pretty sure there haven’t been. So hardly anybody – but a working-class boy, and possibly a girl, could enter at that level and with part-time study and support get quite high up. But most people now enter at the policy level with a degree, and consequently they reformed – – –. After we got women into the clerical structure, they reformed it and then they created Level 1 and Level 2 which stuck women down the bottom. That’s seventy per cent of women are at the bottom of that clerical range still. And the fucking bitch who’s responsible for doing something about it a couple of years ago, when Steph Key did a conference on women in the public service this fucking bitch said, ‘Seventy per cent of women are at Level 1 and Level 2 and we must do something about them. And I was at dinner the other night with a CEO, and he said to me – – –.’ And then followed some slighting remark that the CEO had said to her, and she then went on, you know, ‘Isn’t it terrible that such things can be said to one even in this day and age? That just shows you what I’m working with.’ And I’m thinking, (shrieks) ‘What about the seventy per cent, you fucking bitch! Do something!’ But they don’t.

So were there any women working in the clerical grades at all in those days?

Well, lots in the office assistants, yes.

But only in the office assistants?
Well, some women had managed to get across. But of all the women I knew who
did get across it took them more than ten years.

**What about when they went across, or even when these women went across under the Iris Stevens scheme or when you were there: did they find hostility there?**

Of course, yes.

**That they weren’t -- --?**

Usually they put their head down and they worked very hard and made themselves indispensable to some man who then looked after them, and after a while they were okay. You know, gradually people got used to working with women. I mean, I wonder at it myself now, it’s taken for granted; and then, thirty years ago, ‘Have to talk to him’ or ‘Have to talk to her’, you know, there’s this real sense of you were stepping across a divide. But only twenty years before that it was Catholics, as opposed to Protestants. Peter Fleming, who’s Bannon’s best friend and who is really active in the public service, set up the management training, his first job was as a personnel officer at ETSA$^2$ – assistant personnel officer, 1962. He’s Father John Fleming’s brother and he had come from Saints$^3$. And his first job, as assistant personnel officer in ETSA, was to throw all the applications from Catholics in the bin.

’Sixty-two, my God.

Yes. I was working as an equal opportunity consultant in the ’80s in the State Library, and the personnel officer, who was a woman from the old days, was a Catholic and hadn’t hired anybody except Catholics for years. Only turned out after she resigned. Everybody assumed I knew it. I had no idea. Never assumed anything like that. Stupid me.

**So when you started, Deborah, was there – I just printed something off today and I saw that it was noted that when you were appointed your salary was $18,000.**

Yes.

---

$^2$ ETSA – Electricity Trust of South Australia.

$^3$ Saints – Saint Peter’s College.
Was there quite a lot of furore about a woman getting this good job in the public service?

There was a page-long interview in the paper that everybody said was terrible for me. I didn’t see it as terrible; I thought it was quite honest. I don’t remember people making a lot of fuss about money, I don’t. They made a lot of fuss about having a woman in a job, like having a Women’s Adviser, did we need one? No. What about the men? The sort of crap you’d expect. But it all died down quite quickly.

I’m just trying to remember. The Liberals, David Tonkin had had some support for women’s issues, hadn’t he, I seem to remember?

He introduced the first, as a private member’s bill, *Sex Discrimination Act* bill. I think it was 1975. No; earlier than that. The year Miriam was born. David was born in ’74, Miriam was born in ’73. So in 1973 he introduced a private member’s bill called the Sex Discrimination Bill which really upset Dunstan, of course, because he was upstaged terribly.

So Dunstan set up a select committee, chaired by Peter Duncan.

Had Dunstan done much on women’s issues before he appointed you?

No.

So he’d been in there quite a few years, really, hadn’t he?

They were his gay years, I think. Those were the years of Johnny Ceruto.

The early ’70s.

Have you read *It’s grossly improper*?

I don’t think I have. I might have read it ages ago.

Well, you must. You must. You *must*. It’s very, very good.

Apparently there’s a play on that coming out now.

Really? Oh, golly.

Rob George, next year in the Festival it will be here.

I’ve got a copy of *Grossly improper*, I’ll give it to the Dunstan Foundation. It should be there.
I think they might have one.

Oh, good.

So really that’s just sort of interesting, isn’t it. You often look at things from this perspective and cast things back. So he didn’t really do much for women’s issues.

Well, when he started to do things with women’s issues is when Adele Koh joined his staff, and she joined his staff I think in ’72, ’73. I’m not quite sure. She died in ’77, she wasn’t here long, poor darling. She was so beautiful. But she did a lot, okay? But as a ministerial adviser. When she went she couldn’t do anything very much. Also it’s not her culture and also – I mean, what they were really good at was having the correct, liberal opinions about a great deal.

Dunstan was brilliant, but he was not infallible. He was hopeless on prostitution, I’d have to say, but there you go. But on the other hand he was right.

Why, what was his views on that?

His views on prostitution were those of a lawyer: that there could not be rape of a prostitute if the man had the money to pay.

(makes sound of surprise)

Yeah, that’s right. In other words, she was not able to say no. It was a situation in which she was selling whatever for whomever, and he made the decision: the buyer made the decision, not the seller.

You can have a shop but you decide to close that day. Anyway.

So he wasn’t perfect. But on the other hand when I went to him and said, ‘I really want to change the prostitution laws in this State’, he said, ‘You won’t be able to’, and he was quite right. I’ve lived through three attempts, worked quite hard on several of them and they’ve never worked. Who said he was the best political brain in Australia and he fucking was, it was just brilliant. Really, really brilliant. Anyway, Adele did what she could and she did a lot: like, for example, in 1975, which was the International Women’s Year, she persuaded the State Government to give $10,000 to the Festival Centre and Jill Matthews did a history walk, remember that?

Vaguely.
...... ? And there was a concert when Robyn Archer was booed off the stage for having male musicians, remember that?

‘Jocks off!’

(laughs)

Yes, we were talking about that the other day. Yes. We organised a seminar that day, the Salisbury people.

Yes.

So that was Adele Koh organising that?

Yes. Well, it was Adele Koh got the money. And when you think of it, so many things begin with that sort of festival or celebration. People just got together – whingeing all the way, mind you.

So what did you do in International Women’s Year, can you remember what activities you were involved in?

I had a six-month-old kid. I didn’t do much. I didn’t go to Canberra, for example, for the conference. I was on that committee, the Festival Centre committee. Westie put me on it. But I don’t remember doing very much.

So it’s the following year that you took that job.

But the other thing we were doing was we were working on the equal opportunity legislation or the sex discrimination which was passed in ’75 but not proclaimed until ’76. That was really important.

David Tonkin was one of five sons whose father had died when the sons were quite young, and his mother was living on superannuation and bringing up these five sons but found it extremely difficult, but could not work. Now, I don’t know why, because even in those days widows could work; but she must have tried and been denied it – you know, ‘You should be home with the boys’ probably was the argument that was given her – and she found the poverty of it just absolutely devastating and so she whinged all the way through their childhood. So David Tonkin understood how important it was to have access to money for women. So he
introduced the Sex Discrimination Bill. Now, I don’t know whose model it was because we didn’t actually spend much time on the bill itself. What we were doing was rallying people to go and talk to the select committee and making sure that the point of view was put.

Indeed, the suggestion for equal opportunity legislation had come from Women’s Electoral Lobby because Rosanne DeBats, as an American, knew what it was. They started equal opportunity legislation in I think 1944, in its first state. Well, actually it was 1941 Roosevelt signed the thing saying there would be equal opportunity, no discrimination in the American civil service. That was the very first act. But they had legislation of some kind; but their legislation is so different and so complicated I could never follow it. Rosanne had grown up knowing that there was equal opportunity legislation, so she was really active in WEL and she said, ‘This is what we need’, so we kept on saying, ‘This is what we need’, and David Tonkin queued Dunstan and set up – you should read the second reading speech where Dunstan says – you know, you can just hear it – (mutters) ‘All right, then, we’ll have to act on this, yes, okay.’

So he was really peeved at being shown up.

He was peeved, yes. And so they set up a select committee and Peter Duncan, who was the A–G, he chaired it, and David was on it and I can’t remember who else was on it. There weren’t any women, I don’t think – oh, well, there probably would have been Molly Byrne and she would never have said anything. So we all gave evidence to it. In fact, my sister gave evidence and that afternoon gave birth. Carla?

Yes. So that was ’73. I can’t remember – ’74 I had a baby and in ’75 women in education really began to pick up and there were several education conferences in Adelaide and around, most of them organised by Denise, but one of them at least organised by Kay Schaffer.

There was one at Underdale I remember being at when Anna was tiny, that was ’76.

---

4 Chris Westwood, then Education Officer with the Adelaide Festival Centre.
Oh, right.

Then the Festival of Light people were starting up something or other and a whole lot of people went down to Christies Beach to stack a meeting, I think.

Yes, that was ’79.

Maybe it was with Eve.

It was; ’79.

I thought it was when Anna was born.

I’d left. I was in Paris. When I got back Woadie was full of it. She really organised brilliantly. There were six hundred women there.

Who, Rosemary Wighton?

Yes. Festival of Light didn’t stand a chance.

Going back, so Tonkin put that bill in – you said ’73 the select committee?

Yes, must have been.

Wow. That’s when Carla gave – – –?

Yes, November.

Right, okay.

So remember, December ’72 Whitlam was only just in. Everybody was as busy as cut snakes. There were submissions to write and arguments to put forward and projects to consider. You know, everybody was really busy. So there was the equal opportunity legislation, and then – – –.

When you say ‘equal opportunity’ are you saying the Sex Discrimination Act which led to the Sex Discrimination Board?

Yes.

Right, and it was proclaimed in ’76.

Yes. Which was then made the Equal Opportunity Act in 1984.

And I understand that when that was proclaimed it was shortly after you took up the job and you were a member of that Sex Discrimination Board.

Yes, I was.
Who else was on it?

Elizabeth Johnston, Elliot Johnston’s wife, who was Crown Solicitor at the time, and the first guy was Father Peter Travers who until very recently – and indeed he may be there still – was lecturing in Social Work at Flinders, until recently he was. He was good, although (laughs) again you just don’t know what people don’t know. One of our very early case brought by Women’s Liberation was about a really rough pub in Hindley Street. It was called the Metropolitan then, and it’s the pub – it’s still a rough pub – on the corner of Hindley Street and Rosina Street. Do you know Rosina? Rosina runs between Hindley Street and goes up to the TAFE college, and it’s got all that beautiful sculpture of all the little cars.

Yes.

Yes? So on that pub –

Yes. It’s right near Imprints, yes.

– yes. In that pub, Noel Teasdale was the publican and he was an ex-footballer – and his whole family were in pubs, they owned several – and he announced in the paper that he was closing the front bar to women because there were acts of prostitution taking place, okay?

Yes, keep going.

So Jill Matthews and that lot brought in a complaint to the Sex Discrimination Act, and one Tuesday afternoon I think we heard from Noel Teasdale in which he said these absolutely disgusting things were happening in the women’s toilet and there was one woman there raking it in, making a fortune, acting as a prostitute in the men’s toilet, and, ‘So, you know, all I could do was cut all women out.’ So we went home to think about it and the next day Peter Travers said, ‘You know, I know there’s something wrong with it but I can’t put my finger on it.’ (laughs) And I said, ‘Well, they’re treating all women as though they’re all the same. Like here’s one woman who’s doing actually something they don’t want her to do, but instead of actually tackling her they’re saying, “Okay, no women at all”, so everybody.’ And he looked at me as though this was the greatest, profound statement he’d ever heard. It was really funny. So then it was reformed and it was Roby Layton, Jack
Merchant and me. Jack Merchant was the guy who got us public service part-time work. Lovely guy, haven’t seen him since. He’s probably dead.

So you were on that, that was just an ongoing part of your job being on that board?

Separate from the job.

Yes, but something that was an ongoing activity.

Yes, until ’82, I got off – can’t remember; when they got rid of me, I think. Of course, the Libs had got back in in ’82. ’Seventy-nine to ’82 was Corcoran lost the election Tonkin was in. Tonkin was quite fond of me, but nevertheless – – –.

But you lasted till ’82.

Yes.

That’s right.

I was appointed just before the government changed. We all were: Robyn, Jack and me, all good Labor voters. Don’t tell me they don’t give the jobs to their own.

So when you started in your job as a Women’s Adviser, was it just you? Did you have any staff?

I had a secretary.

Who was that?

A woman called Sandy Palmer, who’s now a grief counsellor, a psychotherapist in Ireland.

In Ireland?

..... woman, yes. She was a South Australian but she had fled to the Old Country when she was very young and fallen in love with a guy called Graham Palmer who later killed himself: walked into one of those – I think it was indeed like ‘Innisfree’: let us ‘arise and go now’. With his pockets full of stones, like Virginia Woolf, which of course in Ireland is kept very, very quiet. She never tells anybody because the children would not be played with, would not be spoken to. Anyway, she worked with me for about a year. She was fantastic, very efficient. But we got staff, but – I mean, that was another thing: the only staff I’d ever had anything to do
with hiring were tutors at Salisbury and you just said to people that you liked, ‘Would you like to come and work as a tutor?’ and they said ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. So that’s what I said. I said to Julie Ellis – because Julie Ellis was really good on education – I said to Julie Ellis, ‘I really want somebody to handle TAFE’ and she said, ‘Yeah, I’d love to.’ And I said to Maureen Fallon, ‘I really want somebody to do part-time work and I know you care about it.’ So then the boys held that against me for years. I had no idea, I had no idea I’d broken the rules, let alone what rules I had broken.

But they let you hire – you were able to put them on the payroll.

Yeah, yeah, they all patched it up behind me. Well, Don told them to. I mean, to live under the – there’s a word for it.

‘Protection’?

Bigger than protection. To live under that support, I had no idea. But the moment it stopped, oh my God, you felt it. So I went into the job wanting to do education and employment.

Education and employment in the public service, or – – –?

Well, employment anywhere. I set up a small group in the Department of Labour to keep statistics on women’s employment, headed by a woman with a PhD from Yale in Economics who drifted into my office one day looking for a job, and she hung around for ten years in South Australia. Ended up working in Treasury quite high up and then went to the UN in Vienna.

What was her name?

Cheryl Vardon – no, it can’t be, no; Cheryl Vardon was somebody else. Shit. Cheryl somebody. Jeez, isn’t it terrible? Can’t remember. Cheryl.

It’ll come to you later.

C-H-E-R-Y-L. Her PhD wasn’t that good, you know, it really wasn’t that good. From Yale. But anyway, every time people said, ‘Where do you get your figures from?’ I’d say, ‘From a PhD at Yale’, and they’d go, ‘Oh.’ (laughter) It was very handy. So I was really passionate because it was to do with the analysis of the time.
Because we’re just coming out of sacking women on marriage. The Commonwealth public service had stopped doing it in ’66, the State public service had not stopped doing it till ’69, the cops didn’t stop doing it until the Sex Discrimination Act of ’75. In 1976 when I was first Women’s Adviser Bob Bakewell took me to meet the State Bank board. They had a lunch in my honour and the most senior woman in the whole of the State Bank was the head typist; everybody else got the sack on marriage. And that was another fascinating thing, because if you went round from government department to government department to government department and met the most senior women, they were all dykes, because you got sacked on marriage.

But they were all still typing away?

No, no, they weren’t necessarily head typists. For example, in A–G’s there were a couple of women who were lawyers who’d got in on the expectation that they wouldn’t be there but had managed to cling. In TAFE there were quite a few. But again they all got sacked on marriage so the ones that were left, the ones that had advanced at all, were mostly connected with secretarial work, a little bit with dressmaking, and they were all dykes because all the married women got the sack.

I went into the history of it once, it was really interesting. It all happened after the First World War. Before the First World War, by and large it was the practice that women gave up work when they married, but it wasn’t insisted upon, it was never in legislation, it was only ever in the regulations – which are, of course, much harder to change and much more easy to be devious about. So they had these regulations that sacked women on marriage and they introduced them in 1919 and they insisted on them. They were scrupulously implemented and it wasn’t until the late ’60s that that started to change. The Commonwealth public service let fourth division women, that is clerical assistants, go into third division, that is clerks, in 1949. Very advanced. But they didn’t let women stay married until 1966. And we didn’t let women stay married till ’69. And, as I say, the cops, it took the legislation.

The State Bank, which is pretty conservative, changed in ’74. Probably ..... made them.
Was he on the board by then, was he?

Yes.

My father worked there.

Did he?

Oh, yes. He had his ‘girl’, his secretary.

That’s right, his ‘girl’. (laughter)

And she was a single woman. You know, you thought she was old as a child but in her thirties and forties. ‘Miss So-and-so’, you know. So your first day – are you okay just to keep going a bit longer, Deborah?

Sure. Sure, sure. We haven’t done much of Don, but the background – – –.

Well, this is all part of it: it’s the Don years and what Don did and the things that started off in this era. So you were saying you concentrated on education and employment, and we were also talking about your first day and who worked for you and all that.

Well, education and employment. It’s the women’s analysis. Remember we are dealing with women who are stuck in marriage. Stuck, literally stuck. Have no skills to sell. The only reason the Women’s Movement happened is that because of Keynesian economics there is a fantastic explosion of activity, mercantile activity, across the world, because it’s not laissez-faire and governments are controlling the economics and there is a commitment derived from Marxism to collectively owning things. You should listen to Stretton, it’s like listening to somebody from the past. He goes on and on and on about the way ..., which is to give it all to the public. ‘This is the way we should be going.’ And I look at him and I think, ‘Oh, for God’s sake, sweetie, grow up. We haven’t been doing that for twenty years. I mean, I can see why you think we should do it, and I’m not saying you’re wrong, but could we please address the – – –?’

The real world.

So you had women who were stuck in marriage who had skills but they were unsaleable and there was no public recognition of them and they were generally discounted and they were stuck with brutal or uncaring or really boring men and loads of children, but not enough children – they had four children; they were all out
of the house by the time the women were fifty and then what did the women do? At the same time, there is this tremendous expansion of the workforce and we’re introducing immigrants, but we have a literate, numerate group of people within the culture who understand the culture and could take the jobs, and slowly that happened. By the end of the ’60s the contradictions around these women were just too great. And of course it started in the public service first rather than in the private sector because that’s where all this kind of change happens first: long service leave, superannuation, holidays, you name it, sick leave, it’s all started in the public service and then the private sector demand it. So that’s what happened. Hiring women equally began in the public service and moved into the private sector.

Of course, there were individual examples of women in the private sector – all of them under the protection of some guy, otherwise they never worked, they never got on. That’s how certain single, individual women – powerful individual – – –. Like Mary Beasley. She was working for a personnel firm and the guy who was her immediate boss had a deli down at Woodville Park and he used to spend all his days at Woodville Park in the deli selling, making a fortune, and Mary ran his business. 

And covered for him.

And covered for him. Deeply underpaid, but able to act at a level which she would never have been able to act at if it hadn’t been for that circumstance. So she came with quite a lot of business cred, which was really useful.

And then, because of my work at Salisbury and because of Denise and Kay and everybody else who was concerned about these topics, it was obvious that women in particular dropped out of Maths and Science far too early and concentrated on the humanities and were entering a market that was swollen with people like them, and even though it was expanding it wasn’t expanding as fast as other markets where they would have been highly desirable because there was a labour shortage. So we were trying to get women through.

And push them into these other areas.

So Denise did huge work on the teaching of Maths and Science in education. But I stopped caring after a while and I got really interested in welfare and violence, and I’ve more or less stuck there ever since. I should have been a social worker,
probably. But anyway, so then what we started to do was to set up women’s services, and that was quite a change because we stopped trying to change the existing structure and started to put in alternate structures. So the Women’s Information Service was the first and the Working Women’s Centre, and the Rape Crisis Centre, which I had something to do with – not much – and the women’s health centres. Again, my signature is on the submission for the money for the Mary Street – I didn’t have anything to do with the planning, though. But this was the move at the time. You couldn’t possibly reform the system, it was too corrupt; you had to put in alternates. So I moved there pretty quickly. That was one of the things. They didn’t like that. That wasn’t how they defined the job at all.

They were happy – you know, like it was so popular, the women wanted it so much: like Aboriginal people, they wanted their own territory. They wanted to be able to walk into a place where they ruled, where it was their territory, they were utterly familiar, they loved it.

And felt comfortable.

So the boys stopped whingeing because they could see the votes. But the real job was to reform the existing structures. Well, I gave up doing that because I didn’t think it was right.

So about when do you think you did that, started giving up?

Probably end of ’77. No, it was probably earlier than that. I think it came about, looking back on it, it came about as a result of individual women ringing up – you know, just as Liz Reid said, the moment the office was there we were inundated with demands for help. Of every kind you can think of. Pam Schulz – do you know Lucy Schulz?

I know Pam, I know both of them.

Right. Well, Pam’s husband stole her four kids. She wrote to us and said, ‘What can I do?’ and we got her kids back.

I thought it was a person with second sight who said they were in – the whole story about how she got them back; how she found one of them, anyway. Lucy.
I don’t know, but whenever I meet her in the street she says thank you, still, all these years later.

**So you were inundated with demands for help?**

Absolutely inundated. And from within the public service as well as from outside. I remember one woman coming to me, a draftsperson in the Department of Lands, saying, ‘I’m probably complaining too much but it does seem to me they don’t treat me fairly. When it’s time for leave you’re supposed to put down when you want leave, and by the time it gets to me there are about three weeks in the year I can take it because all the other blokes have taken it.’

Yes.

‘And if the receptionist is sick, I have to do her work. I have to sit at her desk, and they all go on with their work in the back room.’ And in terms of promotion – mind you, it still happens: I was at a BP lunch recently and this woman said to me, she was quite young, she said, ‘What can I do about the public service? I’m a senior environmental officer and we’ve just put out a report. There were four of us worked on it and when it was published my name had been left off. And I pointed this out.’ I said, ‘What happened?’ They said, ‘Oh, oops!’ I wrote to every fucking woman in the ministry saying, ‘Do something about this.’ None of them did. None of them, not even Steph Key. ‘Come to our conference on women in the public service’, where the stupid woman said there were seventy per cent – I told you. Anyway.

**So you think, having been inundated with these demands for help from in and outside the public – – –.**

Well, that was where you began to hear the welfare stories. No money, having been abandoned by the husband, left with children, no car, in the country or near the edge of the country, having to walk a couple of miles into the supermarket and back again with three kids; and domestic violence stories and rape stories, and that’s where it all began because you opened the underbelly. It is the analysis from above that says education and employment are the answer. Of course they are, in terms of public policy; but if you’re going to deal at an individual level at all, which I cannot resist even now, then what you get are stories of violence, stories of rape, stories of horror, stories of oppression. And I’ve been there ever since, really.
So when you first got the job you had your five-minute interview with Dunstan –

Yes.

– and you said he protected you in a way when you made a couple of mistakes with employment.

Oh, yes, ..... ..... ..... ..... 

So you used to see and report to him quite often?

Well, it was about every two months. It wasn’t very often. If I did anything wrong I got called up and I could tell, not from him or even the other people in the office, but much lower than that – like it went down really fast: he was on the twelfth floor, we were on the tenth – – –.

So you were structurally in the Premier’s Department, were you?

Yes. So the way people looked at you in the lift –

You thought, mm.

– no, no, you knew whether you were in or out, whether you’d done it well or you hadn’t done it well, and it was quite clear that from quite early on we were doing just fine.

Really?

Oh, God, yes. He loved us.

What particularly did he like that you – – –?

I don’t know, really. He never said, they never said. You were just approved of, in a general kind of a way. They left me totally alone. Occasionally I’d fuck up, like I remember in ’76 – must have been quite early, so I think it was ’76 – but I must have been feeling pretty bold – although I don’t remember feeling bold, I just remember thinking, ‘This is a good idea.’ There was a survey published in The Age about women and men’s reactions to uranium mining, and sixty-seven per cent of women wanted to leave it in the ground because they were concerned about children. Fancy that. So I thought this was fantastic, so I wrote to him and said – because at the time it was a big issue and he was really brave over that. He came back from overseas where he went to look at uranium and uranium mining and he
came back and he said, ‘I can’t do it. We’ve got the uranium, we need the energy, but the poison lasts for, in its half-life, seven hundred and fifty thousand years. What am I going to do? Poison the earth? I can’t do it.’ It was fantastic. So this debate – this is before he’d gone overseas – this debate’s going on. I’m dimly aware of it, probably because of John, and I thought I’d write to him and I’d say, ‘Hey, look at this. Sixty-seven per cent of women really want to keep uranium in the ground.’

Well, no, no, no, no, no, that was not good. I got called up. I forget who the media guy was – he was a tall fellow – and I got out of the lift – – –.

Not Bruce Guerin.

No, no. Got out of the lift, looked at him, I thought, ‘Oh-oh.’ I mean, you could just tell, the glee in his face –

Because he was going to dress you down.

– because I was wrong. No, no, he was just going to take me in to Don, but I was going to get dressed down. And I thought, ‘Well, that’s really interesting. You really don’t like me; I must be doing well. For you to be so pleased that I’ve fucked up, I must be doing quite well. That must mean you’re a fucking jealous bastard. You’re very happy that I should be looking bad. Ah well, that’s okay, that’s very useful.’ So Don …… …… …… ……, ‘You cannot do this. You cannot write to the Minister for Energy and tell him this sort of thing.’ I said, ‘Oh! Oh, all right.’ …… …… I said, ‘Okay, okay, if I’m not supposed to. ‘Anyway,’ he said, ‘it’s terribly sexist. Fancy thinking that women care more about children than men.’ And I didn’t say, ‘Well, the figures show it’, but I said, ‘Oh. Well, I suppose it is really, yes.’ Whenever challenged I just turned tail and fled, you know. It was their territory; they were all – – –.

You’re saying you can remember sort of fucking up on that issue of uranium. And what was the problem? Was it because you had – – –?

It was because I was right was the problem. Women hated the idea – and they still do – and wanted to keep uranium in the ground, and they still do.

But you’d written to another minister.
I’d written to Hugh Hudson, Minister for Energy, and Hugh Hudson was not known for a long temper. (laughs)

And you should have not addressed another minister, full stop?

No, I shouldn’t have written. I don’t remember what the actual effect was. I think it was that I shouldn’t have written. The Minister for Energy is not interested in what you have to say.

But you were saying that basically he kept supporting, Dunstan was very supportive.

Oh, yes. Well, there were many little straws in the wind, like for example the National Council for Women. It’s a dreadful organisation, really shocking, but when I got appointed they got really angry and they had me round to lunch, and I just bombed in and suddenly after I’d been there about three-quarters of an hour out came the viciousness. So I asked them what they were cross about, and what they were cross about – well, they were cross about many things; but the one obvious thing was that every National Council of Women office in the country got some State money except South Australia.

And this National Council of Women represents a whole lot of women’s organisations.

So it says.

So what happened with that, did they get any money or – – –?

Yes, I went back and got them some money. I can remember going to see Dunstan about it and he said, ‘Look, I would have given them some money, of course I would have, but that Margaret Davey is so unpleasant.’ And she was, she was horrible. I think she’s still alive, she must be a hundred. Anyway, so it had been personal.

Yes.

So I stopped it being personal and then they stopped hating the Labor Government quite so much. Then the next issue that I can remember that directly involved him was the St Peter’s Women’s Centre, you know, the one that Marilyn Rowles works now, and it had been set up by Jenny Walker, who’s dead now – died really young,
Jenny. It had been set up by Jenny Walker and it was in Dunstan’s electorate, right, and it’s funding was running out so I went to see him and he gave some more money because of course it was in his electorate. Then I made sure all the women rushed around and wrote letters of thanks, and sent over and gave him flowers and stuff like that, and he loved it.

And the Women’s Information Service, he loved it. Just we dreamt it up – Maureen did and Andy did, really –

Maureen Fallon?

– yes – – –. Well, you see, she was in my office on part-time work and she got part-time work, and then she got herself a job as executive officer to the Library Committee, because South Australian libraries were in a terrible state. And then she got $10,000 set aside for an information service to be run through a library, right? And then she made sure (laughs) that it went to women. She made me write a submission and I wrote a submission about how women needed information, and then she got the money for us so then we set up the Women’s Information Switchboard, it was called.

So you wrote that submission to the Libraries Board?

Well, ..... ..... ..... , she might have. I would have signed it.

So then you were moving towards providing services and sort of feeling that you couldn’t necessarily reform the Social Welfare Department, although I guess you did a bit anyway.

Well, I actually helped write their Act but it never seemed to me that I did much. I was on a small committee of people who wrote their Act and I rewrote their Act in ’76–’78, and I was on a major committee for child care and I was on a major committee for post-secondary education. It was all really quite big-time, and I’m sure we made some small changes; but they would have happened, anyway. I mean, look at it. Look at TAFE now. Women everywhere.

Yes, it’s interesting, isn’t it, to think these things were happening – – –.
That’s right. Remember the University of Adelaide? I remember going to a meeting with the University of Adelaide in about 1983. I could not believe it, it was like Oxford. It was still the same. (laughter) I think it’s a horrible place, yes.

But as you moved towards providing services like the Switchboard and the Working Women’s Centre and these sorts of things, and of course women in the Women’s Movement were pushing for these sorts of things too, weren’t they –

Yes, for sure.

– like the Women’s Health Centre – you kept reporting to Dunstan every couple of months about these things?

Yes.

And he was quite happy with it all.

After a while they gave me Hedley Bachmann to supervise and he was the Deputy Director General of Premier’s, and he’s a lovely man, Hedley. He really is a lovely man, and he was a very successful public servant and his idea of success was don’t rock the boat. If it’s not going to make any trouble it’s just fine; if it’s going to make any sort of trouble it is not just fine. He had a very negative, what I found was a very negative, view of the world. But he was a great person to sit and chat with and I used to talk through policy issues with him because he’d been in the public service all his life, he really knew how it worked, it was great. And he was nice, and Graham Inns who by then had stopped being the Chairman of the Public Service Board and become the head of Premier’s was vile, so it was great.

After a while he’d say, ‘You’d better go and see Don and tell him about this’, so I’d go and see Don. And the meetings I remember were in Parliament House at about six o’clock, and you’d go in and he’s sitting behind this huge desk and I start talking and he fell asleep. Always.

Really?

Absolutely. And what’s more, he did it to everybody, the poor bugger. According to It’s grossly improper he’s fucking himself stupid all over town, he’s running a government. He’s in Parliament, which is quite tense even at the best of times and even when there aren’t very many sitting days. He is really whacked.
Exhausted.

And then he’s being talked at by a range of people, the topic’s always changing, it takes about half an hour, and all I was ever doing was reporting. I hardly ever asked for anything because I did all that in writing, because you didn’t want to go and ask in non-writing because then you had to go back and write it anyway.

And did you keep all these memos, Deborah?

They were kept in the public service, yes, somewhere.

But you didn’t keep your own files or anything?

Well, we did have an extensive filing system but I think it was mostly paper clippings, which we never used, either.

I just want to ask you – some of these things – – –?

And a lot of the things you set up, like Cheryl’s job, right? I said – now, I can’t remember how this happened, but Bannon was Lindsey Bowes’s offsider, and Lindsey Bowes was the head of the Department of Labour and Jack Wright was the Minister, but it was Bannon; so I’ve got this woman in the office who’s doing stats who’s the Yale PhD and probably I think she comes to me and says, ‘What you need is a proper statistics office over in the Department of Labour looking at this because’, I remember her saying, ‘the way you’re writing these things it just won’t do. You’re comparing apples with bananas, it just will not do. You can’t write like that; you have to have somebody who knows what they’re talking about.’ So I said, ‘Well, can you get a job there?’ I remember having Bannon to morning tea, that always helped. Lace tablecloths, small, delicate mouthfuls and cups of tea in fine china, they all adored it. Such ..... ......

Really?

Yes. And they loved lunch, they loved being invited to lunch in the room, in my room, and specially loved prawns. That always worked. They’d beam at me and give me anything I wanted. It was bizarre.

So you were sort of playing the feminine lady, really.

Absolutely.
Entertaining the gents. And so you had yourself and this secretary.

Well, there was Julie Ellis but she got pregnant and left; there was Maureen Fallon, she got herself another job; there was Andy Sebastian, she was the information officer, so she set up the Switchboard and was the first co-ordinator; there was Wendy Badge; and we had Gilly Llewellyn there for a while, who was okay except – well, you know, she’s a poet, she’s not really a public servant. There was poor Pat Barr, I think about her a lot, she was the secretary. I did treat her badly, gave her too much work. So that’s six. There were thirteen there at one point.

Good heavens.

Yes. I went from one to thirteen in all that time, but I can’t remember who the others were.

Must be all written down somewhere, anyway. So this woman, you got her a job, she got a job and they set up a section in the Labour –

Yes.

– to do sort of, what did they call them, sex-segregated, aggregated something?

Remember there used to be a women’s bureau in the Department of Employment and Training, set up in 1963 in Canberra?

That was the Federal Department, yes.

And Howard –

Got rid of it, women’s bureau.

– fucking bastard, yes. Anyway, so we set up a mini-Women’s Bureau in the Department of Labour that just kept stats on women’s employment. David Cox worked in my office for a while, wrote a paper – a very bad paper – on employing married women.

I’ve forgotten who David Cox is.

He became the Member for Kingston.

Oh, yes, I thought it was an MP.
He worked for Mark Latham, with Mark Latham, quite closely for quite a long time. Used to speak of him quite highly. Then he got chucked out and now has a vineyard at Willunga somewhere. He was a horrible little man, he was really a bad Member of Parliament. Really, really, really.

I was just going to say with all these services that you set up, you know, you said Dunstan was happy as long as there wasn’t any problem; but some of them – you said, for example, Women’s Information Switchboard that Marian Disney with her Citizen’s Advice Bureau – – –.

Who cared about Marian Disney? She was out of the public service and all she did was run a Citizen’s Advice Bureau.

**Working Women’s Centre: was that upsetting to the Trade Union Movement, Rape Crisis Centre to the doctors?**

No. Had to get the Trade Union Movement to support it, of course, from the beginning. Had to have long, drunken meetings with Bob Gregory. Oh, God. But we did it. And indeed that one was so hard, and of course I’m terribly upper-class and I don’t know the Union Movement very well at all so I kept putting it off because it was too hard. Meredith, Frances Meredith, Meredith Frances, Meredith Baldwin, I don’t know what her name is –

Yes.

– she rang me up one day and said, ‘What’s happening with it?’ And I was so guilty, I said, (shrieks) ‘Okay, okay!’ So I did it at once. Well, within a few months. (coughs) So at that point I can’t remember when Dunstan was around then. Was it June ’79 I opened that? No, I think it was – July ’78 was the switchboard so it could have been quite late in ’79 because I left at the end of June ’79. It could have been quite late in ’79 that we opened the Working Women’s Centre and I just did it all through Jack Wright. But I had to cuddle Bob Gregory’s balls a lot.

**So was there criticism from the Trade Union Movement about that, setting up a separate thing for women?**

As it turned out, there was not only huge criticism but really bad practice, but nobody told me and I never asked, stupid idiot that I am.
What do you mean, ‘bad practice’?

Well, for example, just quite recently – well, in the last three years – I ran into Bob and Helen and we were talking about it and he said, ‘You know, you gave me a really hard time.’ I said, ‘I did not.’ He said, ‘Yeah, you did. Do you think those union people, do you think they were easy to persuade? They were not. I had to promise that every member of a union who turned up at the Working Women’s Centre would have been sent to that union for advice and would not be dealt with by the Working Women’s Centre.’ I had no idea.

Well, I don’t think that’s what happened.

No, I don’t think that’s what happened, but that was the agreement.

They might have been told what their union was, then the women might have told them what the problem was with the union people.

Well, most of the problems were with the union. But anyway, apparently that’s how he sold it. This was written into the agreement, everybody knew except me that (laughs) these were the rules, and I think the staff never obeyed them.

I don’t remember these things. So you basically did your three years in that job, Deborah –

Yes.

– and you didn’t seek for an extension or you didn’t seek reappointment?

No, no, no, I wanted to leave. They offered me Deputy Director General of Local Government, working with Ian McPhail, but I was in love with Andy. I didn’t want to be a public servant; I left and became a lesbian hippie.

In Paris?

Well, we were in Paris first and then we had to come back because of my kids.

But you stayed on the Sex Discrimination Board.

Yes. Very handy it was, too – money-wise, I mean. Just that little bit of money, because I really knew nothing about gardening.

About – – –?
Gardening. I had very romantic views about feeding myself and becoming self-sufficient. Fucking crap. But anyway, at about the time, one of the things that happened, almost the last thing I did was to go round – because when I’d first started, what I did is I went round to all the government departments and called a meeting of all the women in that government department, and I hardly ever got any professional women. Occasionally.

**Because they didn’t think of themselves as –**

Women, perhaps. I don’t know.

**– or being in with all the typists or something.**

Yes, probably. But the typists would come. So I’d talk about women for a bit and then I’d say, ‘Tell me your horror stories’, and they would. They were just horrific. Sexual harassment, overt discrimination. Horrible, horrible stories just piled out of these women. Then what we did for women in the public service was to try and change the clerical structure, which we did, but it didn’t work. We changed it, it’s just that – these days I wouldn’t change anything, ever, right? I’d let the changes happen organically, because – and I learnt this from Aboriginal people – every time there’s a change in policy, Aboriginal people suffer because they’ve worked out how to deal the old way, they’ve worked out how to make that work for themselves; and now you change the rules on them there’s this period of absolute chaos where they’re trying to work out what they do next. And women are the same, any disadvantaged group is exactly the same. They want stability, first and foremost, because it’s safe. Of course, in those days I was into change, big-time, big-time, but how do you learn? So I went back. So they told me all their horror stories and it became clear that it was slowly, slowly, slowly – – –.

Out of their stories – we analysed them, of course, and what we got was they needed management training, they needed training in how to write an interview, they needed training in how to do an interview – I mean write an application, do an interview; and they needed women’s-only training where they talked about things like, ‘Well, what do you wear if you’re a senior typist instead of – – –?’ You know, all the questions that women have, thousands of quite different questions from what you expect. And we set this all up through the TAFE Management Centre on
Greenhill Road, which was first of all Anne Dunn and Susan McPhee in ’76 and then they fell out, and then Eve Reppin and Miranda Rowe, and they hung in there for a long time, those two, and they did a whole series of training and they used to roll me in. I used to talk about women in the public service historically, but I didn’t actually have anything to do with it. I had to fight a few times to keep – they didn’t want to hire Eve because she was a lesbian and they tried to get rid of the women’s program every year.

This is TAFE did?

Public Service Board, really, because of course some women would go back changed and the men would complain bitterly to each other and to their superiors and I’d be hauled in, you know, ‘This course isn’t going well.’ ‘What do you mean, it isn’t going well?’ ‘Well, there’s a bit of disruption.’ ‘Well, let’s look at the figures. How many women turned up? Thirty-five. It takes thirty-five – well, actually there were thirty-eight because they couldn’t turn – – –. Thirty-eight women, and that was last week. A month ago, forty women. Do you think this is an unsuccessful course, you really think this is your definition of an unsuccessful course? We cannot keep these women away. Well, of course you can expect some disruption.’ So the comfortable world of these male public servants, they changed a little now.

Yes, so where were we?

Were you saying that was one of the last things that you did?

Yes, the last thing I did was to go round and say, ‘Look, we’ve got all this done now, okay? You said these are the problems; these are the answers we’ve got for you. And it’s there. You can take advantage of it, and you should if you want to.’ And that’s when I began to hear, (whispers) ‘I don’t have the confidence to apply.’

‘Don’t have the confidence to apply.’

But it took me months to hear it. I went into Old English, ‘Oh, you’ll be right. No, no, no, no, no, don’t think of yourself like that. Have the courage of your convictions.’ All that sort of stuff, you know. It took me months actually to hear the terror at the bottom of that, and so for the next ten years really I went into
training, to confront that, to confront that terror which I found underlay almost every woman.

It’s interesting, isn’t it. I was just thinking, I look at the young ones like my daughters and they’re having a running jump at this and that. Quite a lot of young women, you think, ‘Oh, they’re very ambitious, aren’t they?’

Yes, that’s right.

But it reminds you −−−.

It’s a different world.

Yes, exactly. It is, isn’t it. So then you finished up in ’79, and I think Dunstan was still there till −−−.

No, no, he resigned in February ’79.

And you stayed on.

And I stayed on, yes, and I had Corcoran for a while, and Corcoran called an early election because It’s grossly improper was going to be published. I heard that from the horse’s – well, not the horse’s mouth; I heard that from John, who heard it from C.J., who was the only person −−−.

Who’s C.J.?

C.J. Sumner.

Oh, Chris, I was wondering.

And he was the only person in cabinet to say, ‘I do not advise going to an early election, despite It’s grossly improper. He voted against it, everybody else voted for it, they lost.

So how was it with Corcoran?

Oh, he was all right. He was (a) a drunk and (b) in permanent pain, poor bugger. He used to do what Don thought he should do and occasionally did but really had no talent for. Corcoran was a very groupy sort of person.

Go out and shake hands with lots of people.

No, he’d have them into his office. So on Friday nights there would be a drink-up in his office from half-past four till seven, sort of thing, and I was always supposed to
go and I did a few times, of course, but I didn’t enjoy it. And Dunstan occasionally did that but not very often, and he was never any good at it. I always found him terribly hard to talk to, really hard to talk to, and we would sit in silence. (laughs) But, you know, oddly – I mean, I can’t read Greek or Latin, but I know To His Coy Mistress off by heart. We could have had many good conversations about our –

**Literary interests.**

– our literary interests, yes. And quite recently, when he was alive, I can’t remember – at the restaurant there was a feast event where gay poets read their poems, and Dunstan’s were – they were very, very beautiful and very unspecific, and it was clear that he had a great deal of distaste for work that he thought was unnecessarily flamboyantly graphic. But there is a whole tradition in gay literature, because it’s been underground for so long, of being graphic. And I in particular have a particularly graphic poem called ‘Women in employment’ which I read and which he didn’t like, and that’s the last time I saw him. But Stephen bobs up from time to time and asks for my help, which I can’t ever give him because I don’t think anybody can now.

But he was a wonderful man. But that way of thinking has been – I read in the New York review of books last fortnight there was a marvellous essay describing the dead – no, is it that? Yes, it’s partly that and partly an article by Doris Lessing – not in the London review of books – about the shift, how it is. Well, the article in the London review of books said it’s because the Texans suddenly dominated American discourse, and they did this through money because they had the oil because they had the money, and they changed the Democrat party more or less forever, and then they became rampant Republicans, and at the same time this process occurred with Milton – – –. You know, before he died, I mean before he stopped being Premier, one of the things that Dunstan did was make speeches all over town against Milton Friedman, the laissez-faire economist. There’s this bloke in Chicago it began, there were quite famous – there were newspaper reports of it and in particular it was reported in the Herald, the Labor Party paper, and there he was saying he recognised the deadliness of that analysis.

**Economic rationalism, yes.**
Really early, ’78, ’79 he’s doing this, and the rest of us are going, ‘Who?’ It was just brilliant, he was just brilliant on that. He saw it at once, how deadly it would be and how deadly it has been to any sense of collective responsibility, any sense that I owe my neighbour something, any sense of working together to a common goal. And one of the things, after I stopped being Women’s Adviser I tried three times to write a book about it, and I remember one I was really proud of: I was trying to deal with the economic basis, right? And I wanted to amount an argument on the fact that – which is a small enough figure, but it seemed to me significant at the time – that South Australia had more women employed in community services, it was called, community services, which meant – nowadays that would mean NGOs, but then it meant teachers and social workers and nurses as well. And this was all part of Dunstan’s plan, modelled on Scandinavian countries: develop services for the people. Hire, the universities train them, the public service – people pay high taxes, women in particular are employed in these services, which make people’s lives obviously better and everybody benefits and it’s one of those spirals, you know, where it just keeps on going up and up. It was because he believed so passionately in that and had spent so many years working on it, all the way through the ’60s, all the way in the early ’70s, he’d been studying.

Reading it, studying it.

Reading and studying that approach. And of course he always said, ‘I’m a social democrat’ – or a democratic socialist, I forget which one; but whichever, this is what it meant. There would not be huge inequality and you defined equality through housing, education, health and child care – well, the care of children, shall we say, rather than child care because child care was impossible. So it may come again, but I doubt it very much. I think its time has gone, I really do.

Doris Lessing says it is quite remarkable for somebody who was a communist to have seen Marxism, the precepts of Marxism, the ideas of Marxism, the very belief system of Marxism, be so entirely adopted by un-Marxist agencies, I suppose, and people. She said it has just been absorbed.

So this was a recent essay in the *London review of books*?
No, she didn’t write in the *London review of books*. I think it’s the ‘80s or the ‘90s she’s writing this. And she said goodness knows what will happen next. Well, what happened next was the rebellion against it, the individualistic rebellion from America, who has always hated communism for exactly the reasons that we might love it.

**Well, I have my students who have chosen to do Gender Studies can’t understand why the government would give women a baby bonus, like you might get a few thousand dollars. Don’t pay them proper maternity leave. They sort of have this, some of them, ‘They’re getting paid money to have a baby. How shocking!’**

Really?

_I think ...... ..... Anyway, that’s what my work is this semester: working on that with some of them. But I think some of them you plant it and then later on they get it._

Oh, for sure.

**Later on they get it.**

I don’t think people, women, hardly – some women, some women like Gabrielle Cotton[?] who’s a friend of mine, she’s nearly forty, she became a feminist at fifteen; but most women, in my view, become feminists in the thirties because that’s when the contradictions show up well, and that’s when youth’s star is no longer with you and you no longer get the benefit. Men’ll do _anything_ for beautiful young women, _anything_, and almost all women are beautiful. You know, you have to be really ugly to miss out on that general ‘Let me pay attention to you because then you might pay attention to me and I’ll get a fuck out of it.’ You know, it’s just going on and on and on like that. I can see it in my daughter, so that’s where she is. But after she’s had a couple of kids –

**She’s not looking so good.**

– then all of a sudden – – –.

**Struggling up on the bus with a couple of kids and the shopping or something.**

That’s right.

**They’ll find out.**
That’s right.

Yes. Well, look, I might stop there, Deborah.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

So thank you very much.

No worries.

And just pray to God that it works.

Well, do you want to test it, or don’t you dare?

I will. I will do it later because it might be frightening.

No, do it now.

Hang on.

I have to have a pee. Honestly, there’s something about the ageing body. (leaves room, shuts door firmly)

END OF INTERVIEW.