This is Alan Hutchings, a volunteer with the Don Dunstan Foundation, interviewing Mr Dean Brown, who was Premier of the State but before that he had a long political career and entered parliament as a relatively young politician when Don Dunstan was Premier.

Dean, can you perhaps reminisce a bit about your first days there, but perhaps start off by just telling us who you are and how you got to be in parliament?

Yes, certainly. I was a Member of the South Australian Parliament for almost twenty-seven years. I was Premier from 1993 to 1996. But I first went into parliament in 1973, 10th March 1973, which was very much at the peak of the Don Dunstan Era. I was twenty-nine at the time so I was one of the younger members of parliament. Peter Duncan, Ted Chapman, Peter Blacker and I all went into parliament on the same day. I had been President of the Young Liberals from about 1971 to 1974, and Joyce Steele retired in the seat of Davenport. I had nominated. There was a bit of a history leading up to that because there was the history of the Liberal Party in turmoil – or the Liberal and Country League, as it was then, very much in turmoil; it had, of course, had a very long period in government under Playford up until 1965; it lost the ’65 election to Frank Walsh and Playford retired. Then you had the Hall Government elected in 1968, which lasted only two years over the Chowilla Dam–Dartmouth Dam situation. However, during that period that Steele Hall was Premier, there’d been considerable turmoil within the Party itself over the issue of franchise and the loading for country electorates.

In 1968, Steele Hall very narrowly won government, on the casting vote of Tom Stott, and Tom Stott was made speaker, and Dunstan had been Premier just before that for a short period after Frank Walsh retired or resigned as Premier, so you had a short period leading up to the ’68 election with Dunstan as Premier. Steele Hall won the election but, in terms of popular vote, the Labor Party had secured a majority vote but didn’t get into government. And during the period – there was a period between the election and when the parliament sat, and Don Dunstan ran that period out and made a very strong issue indeed over the electoral gerrymander, where there was a much smaller number of – what it basically boiled down to – a smaller number of voters in country electorates compared to city electorates, and the argument was because of the distance that country members
had to travel to try to service their constituents. But it faded the Liberal Party and there was no doubt about that, or the then LCL.

When Steele Hall was Premier and tried to change that he certainly met some opposition within his own party and he did put through a bill. The 1970 election was on the new principles of equal numbers in electorates, plus or minus ten per cent, which is still the standard today, but there had been a real undercurrent develop within the LCL – I guess Ren de Garis was one of those who bitterly opposed –

Oh, I remember Ren, yes.

– who bitterly opposed those reforms. And it really developed into a Steele Hall/ Ren de Garis factional argument within the Party; and it wasn’t just about that, there were other issues as well, including the – what would you call it? – who could vote for a Legislative Council. And up until then, and still as you went into the franchise for the Legislative Council, up till then it was that you had to own property in the city or live in the city – sorry: you had to own property to vote for the Legislative Council. Not all adults were able to vote in the Legislative Council election. And I'll come to that in a moment because it, I think, reflected Don Dunstan’s style about how he tackled some of these problems. And then the Liberal Party had an internal split in which the Liberal Movement was formed within the Liberal Party, and certainly I was heavily-involved in the Liberal Movement, but it was still within the LCL. I was at that stage President of Young Liberals and I was also on the reform group that was headed by Tony Messner, and that was a group of both conservatives and liberals within the LCL that was looking at a rewrite of the constitution. And we did it and we put it up and there was agreement between both sides, largely, about that reform of the Constitution of the Liberal Party. And out of that the LCL then became the Liberal Party, and that was dealt with largely in late 1972, from my memory.

However, I’d put my name forward for Joyce Steele’s seat for the preselection, there were nine people who stood, including some well-known people like Alan Hickinbotham, Tony Messner was another one, and I was by far the youngest of those people. Somewhat surprisingly, I won the preselection. I was the first to nominate, but I think it reflected very much the very strong views that the members of the Liberal Party were looking for
reform. Somewhat surprising, because in those days the seat of Davenport, which covered the eastern suburbs of Adelaide, really a strip right along the foothills from Magill right through to St Georges and coming down to, in some cases, Portrush Road. It was a strip running about a kilometre or so out from the edge of the foothills. It was an older electorate. There were 2,300 financial members of the Liberal Party within the electorate, just enormous. One in eight voters were a member of the Liberal Party in those days, in Davenport, and it was a plebiscite vote, they didn’t have electoral colleges in the Liberal Party in 1972. And so it was a postal vote, and we had a petrol strike in the middle of it, and I remember having to get around on foot huge areas of the electorate, because we had – I guess it was about a six-week period or eight-week period to get out and meet people and you had 2,300 people to meet. Mary Nicholls was seen riding around on a pushbike with her fur coat on. She was one of the candidates. And it was quite cold at the time, it was August/September, from memory.

So I entered parliament, as I said, in March, at the March elections. Bruce Eastick was the Leader of the Liberal Party. It was still enormous divisions within the Liberal Party. Some people ran using Liberal Movement logos in addition to the Liberal Party, or it might have still been at that stage called the LCL and subsequently became the Liberal Party. But I know that there was enormous division within the Party. Don Dunstan won the election, probably not by as big a majority as most people would have anticipated considering the state of upheaval within the Liberal Party. Don at that stage had been Premier for three years.

Would you like me to go on and then talk about my impressions – – –?

Yes, yes, please. Because that would flow nicely now that you’re in parliament.

Well, I came in and, as a young member of parliament, in those days we didn’t have electorate offices, they came shortly afterwards.

So you had to operate from home.

You had to operate from Parliament House or home.

Oh, Parliament House, of course.
You didn’t have any staff. There was one secretary at Parliament House for about six members, so you can – and in those days you had typewriters and you would handwrite your letter, send it off for typing, or you might use a Dictaphone and send it off for typing, and it would come back with three or four errors in it and you would send those off for correction and if you were lucky you had a letter that you could post off within about four days, five days of the original. (laughs) And I sat in a room, when I first went in, in the basement of Parliament House; I think there were four other members of parliament in that room, and one of those was Robin Millhouse, whom I’d known very well and who was quite instrumental in me standing for parliament, because I had not intended to stand for parliament, and Robin Millhouse I’d known because I lived at Belair and he was our local member of parliament, he would come to the school – I went to Unley High School, he would come to Unley High School – and so when issues came up I would tend to go to Robin Millhouse. And he suggested I come along and become involved in a discussion on contemporary issues at his place and, as a result of that, I joined Young Liberals.

So I suppose the first memory of Don Dunstan was we had the opening of Parliament after the election and we had the Governor come and give the address, and, whereas everyone was expecting a very long address, normally about a half-an-hour, on what the Government intended to do following the election, it was extremely short indeed and was centred entirely on the franchise for voting for the Legislative Council, with a threat by Don Dunstan that he had one piece of legislation only and if this legislation wasn’t passed he would once again go to the polls.

Wow.

And so you had what in my memory was a five- or ten-minute speech given by the Governor purely about the franchise for voting for the Legislative Council with the threat of this election, and so the first experience I had of parliament was being thrust into a couple of months of debate over this legislation. It was the only piece of legislation put up. It had to go through the Lower House and I can remember numerous Party meetings, firstly of the Lower House but then joint Party meetings, that the Liberal Party had. And up until that time there had not been joint Party meetings, but on this occasion, for this legislation, the Upper House came and joined the Lower House; and there were somewhat
divisions between the Upper and Lower House. But I think that said a lot about Don Dunstan, the style. He picked an issue that he knew he could win on, he went out on it, he put it up larger than life, somewhat gambled everything on it but knowing he would win the battle, and got it through. But in a very dramatic way, particularly publicly. And was so therefore seen very much in control, particularly on this issue that had been an ongoing and very contentious issue. He’d put it up there and it was accepted or rejected, and, ‘If you reject it I’ll go straight back out to another election’. And I guess that portrayed to me – and I think it had clearly portrayed to the people in the community – a leader, a Premier, well and truly in control, setting his own agenda and dominating very much the Parliament.

And I think that was the style of Don Dunstan. And there are many other examples of where I thought he wanted to make bold statements and he made bold statements. He did it with the arts and the film industry and the sort of support he gave them. He took on issues – you may recall when there was a run on the building society –

**Oh, yes. That was very dramatic.**

– Hindmarsh Building Society – and Don grabbed a hand microphone, as you had in those days, and went down to Gawler Place with all these people lined up trying to pull their money out and more or less told them to go home, there was no trouble with the building society. I think some, probably the majority, believed him but there were some who didn’t; but it was very dramatic indeed.

There was the other occasion I recall of where he stood on the steps of Parliament House, and I don’t remember the exact issue, but there was a union rally and he told the union rally what he thought of them in no uncertain terms. And so he had a style if there was a problem there he wanted to go and confront the problem and he had tremendous belief in his ability to put a case, put an argument and argue it, which he did extremely well, there’s no doubt about that, and you saw it in the Parliament.

One thing I always remember – and Don had a remarkable use of words when he was debating or speaking particularly passionately in the Parliament – he would paint a picture and you would say, ‘Well, I’m sure he’s just said this, this and this’, and yet when you went and read Hansard you would see, when you carefully studied it, he hadn’t quite said
that after all. (laughter) So he had an ability to paint a picture in people’s minds which, when you saw the reality of his words, he hadn’t really said. So I found I had to invariably go back and check, on crucial issues, what he had said by reading the written word rather than the perception he’d conveyed. So he had quite an ability in that regard to convey a better picture than what he was actually stating, and no doubt that’s a very powerful political tool to be able to have.

I’m just comparing that, Dean, with your comments there with – I’ve interviewed a couple of senior public servants and developers, and they said that when you went to him for a briefing he was very clear and it was completely unequivocal. So that’s interesting, there’s two sides to him there: a political performance – – –.

And he was. Yes. I mean, one was a performance in the Parliament or a performance to the media, which was larger than life and always very dramatic, but then – you’re quite right, and I recall Don and I saw a different side of him when I sat down in parliamentary committees. I sat on a select committee with him on a couple of occasions and I found him personable and very easy to talk to, which was somewhat counter – you know, here was a young member of parliament seeing this larger-than-life figure in the Parliament, but when you would sit down and sometimes – I still have a recollection of walking into one of these select committees and I was early and he was early and we both sat down and had just ten minutes of discussion, just one-to-one, and it was an entirely different sort of person to the one you had the public image of.

What about some of his other programs? It was the legislative reforms, and then there was the whole business of the *Planning and Development Act*, there was the arts –

Yes.

– there was Monarto, there was the social side of things – you know, the six o’clock closing and all of those things.

Yes. Well, you see, I think there had to be a reform after the Playford Era and the community was yearning for that reform on certain general social issues, and also for a more colourful life. I think the arts and the film industry all reflected what was an aspiration out in the community: they’d come through the tough times of the War, they’d come through the tough times of rebuilding in the ’50s and the restraints and also into the early ’60s, and there was more prosperity around, more security around, and so Don I
think reflected that aspiration of the community and did that very well, particularly after a
long period of Playford where Playford, by his very nature, didn’t reflect that. So I think
the public saw the Dunstan Era – you had the Playford Era; very briefly, in between, the
Frank Walsh and the Steele Hall period – they were both relatively short, two years for
Steele Hall and two years for Walsh, approximately; but then you went into this extended
period of Don Dunstan.

I had an admiration for his ability to perform, to debate. It actually drove me to want to
take up debating, which I did, and participate in the State debating championship and even
a national debating championship, simply because of seeing his ability to get up and argue
and articulate a case without a great deal of preparation in doing so.

But he then took on other tasks. There was Monarto, and he became passionate about
Monarto, often I think without going back and revisiting the logic behind his decision, and
Monarto was one such case. I remember him standing up and announcing that I think
Monarto was expected to have 200,000 people in it by the year 2000, something like that,
and I did some figures on the population, I took some Bureau figures on the population
projections for the whole of South Australia and found that the total population increase in
South Australia by the year 2000 was expected to be less than the total population of
Monarto. And so therefore, if you’d put everyone into Monarto, every new additional
person in South Australia, you still wouldn’t have achieved the population projections he
was putting out. And it was based on the fact that during the ’50s and ’60s you had rapid
population growth that slowed right down in the ’70s.

He took on and clearly for the first time in South Australia took on an international
focus. He initially, I think, had a strong affinity to Singapore, but that tended to die away
when Lee Kwan Yew didn’t quite reflect the same views as Don Dunstan, and then he
took on Malaysia. When I say ‘took on’, he developed a very strong link with Malaysia
and became quite passionate about it, and tended to do this sort of thing.

The legislative work – and really I think Don’s real strength was as a lawyer, still was
as a lawyer and working through legislation – the legislative program in 1973 was just
massive. We sat, the Parliament, night after night after night, sitting until eleven-thirty,
twelve-thirty, one-thirty; and then, as we got closer towards the end of the year, sitting
until two-thirty or three-thirty, some nights right through the night. And it wasn’t the sort
of program of two weeks on and two weeks off that they have now, in those days we sat every week except for Show week. I think we started sometime in August, sitting in August, and we sat from then right through to the end of the year and had, I think, one week up or might have been two weeks up. So by the time we’d got to the end of November even rational people like Hugh Hudson were starting, I thought in the last week, starting to become quite irrational. And I saw this and I remember learning the lesson: don’t push your team too far, because it tends to fall into disarray. And I remember by the last week of sitting or last two weeks of sitting in 1973, even the steady, hard ministers seemed to be reflecting almost disarray amongst themselves.

_In those days, too, comparing it with now, they wouldn’t have had a lot of ‘minders’, as they’re called, to fall back on. But, having said that, minders may be – – –._

Don Dunstan, he was the person who _did_ have a big staff. Playford didn’t. And I knew Playford – not in the Parliament – but Playford used to come in on Fridays, non-sitting day, and give to those who wanted to sit around and listen to them, the parables according to Playford, and I was probably the most regular attender and one of the few that would go along and sit down, and Tom would sit there and tell you stories about the development of the State, but there was always a real lesson behind it for a young member of parliament, and I appreciated that. And Don Dunstan also tended to sometimes have discussions about these things, which were almost a bit of personal coaching, almost, without it being seen as coaching; just sit down and discuss situations of how you might deal with a constitutional crisis in the Parliament.

_When you became Premier, was there anything – thinking back to those years, was there any lessons you learnt, good or bad, how to do things, how not to do things? Certain policies that may or may not have been appropriate?_

The answer is yes, to both: sort of lessons passed on by Tom Playford, and certainly having experienced and understood and seen Don Dunstan. You couldn’t help but sit in opposition and learn from the situation during the 1970s. Don was a very good political performer, he strode out there with a confidence and with a big program; and it was also interesting to see, though, that his senior ministers – and he had three beneath him, Geoff Virgo, Hugh Hudson and Des Corcoran, Des Corcoran was Deputy Premier – and there
was, sitting in the Parliament, because you had a vision of these people there day after day, Don Dunstan, Des Corcoran, Hugh Hudson, Geoff Virgo and Len King. Len King, of course, left in ’75 or ’76 from memory, it might have been ’77. He was Attorney-General and he became Chief Justice. But a very, very powerful front bench, but it showed me that it didn’t matter how weak the rest of the ministers were; provided you had four other good ministers, that’s all you really needed. And that’s how Don ran the show.

And it was also interesting to see that Don kept things at a pretty high level. He was involved on those broad directions and it was the other senior ministers who picked up the pieces, the details, and ran with that, and how important that was to have that layer of ministers below the Premier who could work through the detail of the major portfolios.

Yes, a number of people I’ve interviewed, and mainly in the development game, mentioned the way that Des Corcoran was the ‘doer’: Dunstan set the policy and then apparently would lose interest and Des Corcoran would keep it going.

That’s right, very true. And Hugh Hudson too, to a large extent. Hugh Hudson had the – you may recall, I think Hugh was Minister for Planning at one stage.

Yes.

And he had to pick up the Monarto material.

Yes.

I remember sitting with Hugh on about three occasions – I quite enjoyed Hugh because you could have a good, academic argument with him without any ill-feeling at all, put a counterpointed view and he would argue on the issues and it wouldn’t become personal. And he and I often sat down and had those discussions. I can recall several with him on Monarto. Because I was actually the first member of parliament to stand up and question Monarto as was proposed.

As a project.

As a project in terms of the basis under which it was being built.

As you said before, with a population – – –.

With a changing population, it didn’t have an economic development base behind it, it didn’t have an employment base behind it, they were going to relocate public servants out
there, and I don’t believe it would have worked, in fact, I’m certain it wouldn’t have, to have had a largely public service town sitting out at Monarto away from Adelaide. It just wouldn’t have functioned.

**Did you have any other personal interest there? Ag. Science was your original degree.**

Yes, my background was rural. I had a bachelor and master’s degree in rural science. I’d also done a postgraduate business administration course at the old Institute of Technology, which was equivalent, almost an MBA,¹ it was a five-year, part-time program. And one interesting thing was that in 1976 Don Dunstan decided – and I think this reflects the nature of the person, how he believed that members of parliament should be better trained – and so he decided to establish a scholarship so once a year a member of parliament could go off to the Australian Staff College at Mount Eliza, which was regarded then as the best management program in Australia. Now, he had it lined up to give to Peter Duncan because Peter Duncan was a young member of parliament, very similar age to mine, we’d come in on the same day, and I think he thought that he needed some broader experience. But then for some reason Peter Duncan had to pull out and so they opened nominations again and I was the only person who nominated. So here was this scholarship to go off to Mount Eliza and I ended up with it in 1976. And I put that down as a very valuable experience indeed. But I think it highlights the fact that Dunstan had a broad perspective, a view that members of parliament needed training and a broader education than what they had, and I was one of the beneficiaries of that. Because this was not a cheap course; this was an extremely expensive course. I was the first member of parliament in Australia to attend the course. Other states then started to follow suit, afterwards.

**Coming back to your premiership, that business of the Premier with two or three key people to take the running –**

Yes.

– from my memory I can remember one who took the running on your behalf, that was Stephen Baker.

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¹ MBA – Master of Business Administration.
Yes.

Were there others?

Oh, yes. There were several. I worked on the principle you needed that four or five strong ministers and you let them have some rope or reins, you gave them the reins. And I believe that Stephen, for instance, cleaning up the financial mess of the State Bank, did an excellent job in doing that, and that was very important. So I learnt that from the Dunstan Era.

I guess another thing I learnt was that Don, with all his strengths in the arts and his broad policy – legislative policy, planning policy – had one real weakness in my view, and that was in the economic area, and he didn’t understand what it took to create jobs and he often thought that you could paint that broad-brush picture in the economic development or industrial development and it would all flow from it; and it didn’t. There are a couple of examples I could give. For instance, if you look at the figures, the State went into an economic decline that started in about 1976, ’77. We started losing manufacturing jobs. And I don’t think Don really comprehended that. I remember sitting next to Don at a dinner, some economic development dinner, it was in late 1978. He was late getting to the dinner – it was over in what is now the Stamford Hotel, it wasn’t then – but he was late getting there because he had been to the premiere of Blue fin, the premiere performance of Blue fin –

Oh, yes, the film.

– and he went and launched the film, Blue fin. He was probably inappropriately put or I was inappropriately sat next to him – it was inappropriate for a mere shadow minister to be sitting next to the Premier, but I was – and he gave his speech on economic development. And I remember having a discussion at the table afterwards, and it was a genial discussion, said, ‘Don, that’s just not the reality of what is out there’, and I think that he took at face value what I know his agencies were telling him and believing it was working when it wasn’t. A classic example: he set up this initiative to build all these houses in Malaysia, low-cost houses in Malaysia, you may recall, and he was going to build a fireproof, straw-panel walling and he was going to supply appliances built in South
Australia, ship them up, and he made quite a few visits up there. And I remember asking him a question with notice how many appliances had been shipped from South Australia. And in those days questions with notice got answered by the government agencies honestly and concisely. I think there’s been a lot of political spin put on them since. So if you put a question on notice down, you got an honest answer. And back came the answer after a while – and remember he’d taken planeloads, they’d had special charter flights up there and promoting this and talking about the big economic impact for South Australia – turned out to be 40 double stainless-steel sinks were the only appliances sent up from South Australia. (laughter)

That’s very interesting.

And I remember putting that out to the media on his return from one of his trips to Malaysia, which created a great deal of publicity at the time. So I think he had a picture or vision about what he wanted to achieve in economic development but I don’t think he had the understanding and didn’t give the attention to it to make sure that it occurred.

Yes, because he put a very strong load, so to speak, on tourist development hoping that would drag everybody in and boost the economy, but it’s always one of those difficult things to pin down, isn’t it?

I thought he did a reasonable job in tourism. One, for instance, was – I think they called it the South Australian Development Corporation, Geoff Pridham was the CEO of it and Dick Cavell was the chair of it, and he’d got them out there believing they were doing a really good job. They had a pretty big budget and they were out there spending money on so-called economic development. One was the Riverland Cannery, where he’d got John Elliott had come in and sold Don a story about what could be done with the Riverland Cannery, and Don – without consultation, I know, with the board of the cannery, which was in some trouble – Don was going to use IXL, which John Elliott was managing director of, was going to do all of the marketing of the product out of the cannery and they were going to make IXL products in the cannery and it was going to become a major food company. Instead of just processing fruit grown in the Riverland, it was now going to make a whole range of canned products for IXL and they closed their factory in Melbourne and shifted the equipment, and Don paid far too much for it. The whole thing
turned out to be an absolute dud, the whole thing collapsed about a year later in one big heap owing about 30 million dollars at the time. And it was a classic case of having a vision there but not seeing the detail of that.

There used to be a number of people from all walks of life who’d go to see Don, as I recall, and he would be convinced that they had something to sell.

Yes. And quite genuinely, and I think he got conned by a lot of people. And John Elliott was one of those, that was one of the first big killings that John Elliott made.

Right, yes.

And I think that’s where, on economic matters, Don took people at face value, and slightly naïvely so. He set up something I supported very strongly: a research and innovation centre or research and development centre, and again he didn’t deal with the details of it and that collapsed within 12 months or 18 months and had achieved nothing.

Was that a germ of an idea that may have been kicking around – I think the first time I met you face to face was when you were minister and Tech Park was one of your responsibilities.

Yes.

I don’t know whether one thing led to another, but Tech[no]logy Park was a practical application –

Yes.

– wasn’t it, of that research and development idea.

Very much so. I remember, though, being a supporter of what Don had tried to do with this, but they just hadn’t looked at the detail. They were slow in putting a board together, slow in appointing the CEO. I don’t think they’d given enough attention to it. But then, yes, I came up with the concept, together with Ian Kowalick, and set up Tech Park – and, I might add, I remember going into Cabinet one day and said, ‘We want six and a half million dollars to set up Technology Park’, and cabinet ministers sat there and looked at me and thought I was wanting to set up a six-and-a-half-million-dollar playground. (laughter) They had no understanding of what a tech park, technology park, was. But it’s turned out to be very successful.
Yes, well, it’s moved on and now it’s at the core of Mawson Lakes with the other campus of University of South Australia.

Yes.

So it’s turned out to be, as a sort of comprehensive urban development area, a very successful little unit, actually.

But I think that’s where I learnt from where Don failed in the economic area to put a lot more attention to the detail and understand that how industry thinks is not always the way that government thinks. You see, they brought out Wilkinson. Wilkinson’s were going to set up a washing machine factory – well, they did – and they only lasted a year or so and then folded. And then there was another big factory, a German group, that set out, built a massive factory out at Elizabeth, all in the industrial park of Elizabeth, and that was never used, the factory was never occupied.

Well, thank you, Dean. Is there any last-minute things, or – – –? That’s been quite comprehensive.

Look, I see the Dunstan Era as an important transformation period in South Australia, particularly following on from the Playford years. That’s not being critical of Playford –

No.

– I’m a great supporter of Playford. If ever I said I had a mentor it was Playford. But I think it was a necessary transition period. I didn’t agree with all of his things; I agreed with many of his things, particularly in terms of planning, an emphasis on the environment, I was a strong supporter of – and environmental issues, I remember being a very strong supporter, I was a very strong supporter of recycling. My first parliamentary trip overseas I went and looked at recycling. I thought his deposit legislation was very good legislation. And so I think it was a period of transition for the Liberal Party and certainly Don Dunstan reflected the thinking of a change in generations of South Australians, and so therefore I’m delighted there’s a Dunstan Foundation to remember that period. I happen to be on the board of the Playford Memorial Trust and we have scholarships to remember Tom, which I think is a fitting way, and I think the Dunstan Foundation’s a fitting way to remember Don Dunstan – both of them larger-than-life people, and I have very fond memories of someone who was a political opponent, whom
in some things I strongly disagreed with and other ways I strongly supported, but was a
great mentor there, perhaps not on a personal basis but more in terms of learning by sitting
in the Parliament for, what, six years, with Don there.

Yes. Well, thank you, Dean. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW.