This is George Lewkowicz for the Don Dunstan Foundation’s Don Dunstan Oral History Project interviewing Mr Mark Day on the 28th September 2009. The location is The Olives at Yankalilla in South Australia. Mark was a news reporter starting in 1960 and then later on edited the *Sunday Mail*, so he’s got a good insight into some of the politics and media management of the time.

Mark, thanks very much for doing this interview for the Don Dunstan History Project. Can you just talk a bit about yourself, your education and employment and time in South Australia so people have an idea of who you are?

Yes. I was born in South Australia at Victor Harbor in 1943. I then lived in Western Victoria and did my schooling in Western Victoria up to and including the Leaving Certificate because my father had a soldier settlement property near Hamilton. Through contacts that he had in Adelaide, I was introduced to Rohan Rivett, the editor of *The News* in 1960, and I became a copyboy on February 29, 1960 – it’s memorable only because of the scarcity of the date. And in 1966 I became the political writer for *The News*, political reporter, and in 1968 I left South Australia, worked two years in New York as a correspondent for News Limited, both Australian and UK publications, and I came back in 1970, took over as editor of the *Sunday Mail* and remained there until September 1972 when I went to Sydney. Which meant that I had a good, close look at the Dunstan Government on two occasions.

**Good. And currently you do some media writing for *The Australian*?**

Yes, for my sins, I’m about to notch up fifty years in the business and I’m still tapping out a weekly column for *The Australian*’s media section.

**So you’ve got a very long and deep insight into how the media’s related to politics, as much as other things. Just going back to the early and late ’60s, if you can recall that, just your recollections of South Australian society? This was particularly under the Playford time and then the transition to let’s call it a ‘Walsh–Dunstan Government’ in the latter part of the ’60s.**

Well, it’s true that South Australia had a very great reputation for being stitched-up and prim and proper, and Tom Playford was one who wouldn’t countenance lotteries, for instance, because it was ‘like putting poison in the hands of children’. The style of
government was very paternalistic. Playford had been in there for more than a quarter of a century and his Opposition Leaders, like Mick O’Halloran and later Frank Walsh, tended to see their position as permanent; and O’Halloran, at least, would frequently travel with Playford on overseas missions in order to get industries to South Australia. I’m not saying that Playford was wrong for his times – probably quite the reverse, because he was able to get manufacturing industry here in the postwar period and through the ’50s and into the ’60s – but certainly socially the winds of change that swept the world also inevitably swept away Playford, in spite of his gerrymander; it would have happened years earlier, but these were the issues, the gerrymander, the power of the Legislative Council, which at that point I think I’m right in saying didn’t have universal suffrage. Might have just come in. But anyway, the Upper House had been instrumental in maintaining Playford’s conservative political line.

Dunstan was very much the mover and shaker within the Labor Party, the ideas man, the policy powerhouse; but he was also regarded as a little too radical and a little too dangerous and Frank Walsh had been there for umpteen years and deserved the premiership, and he got it with I think a pretty clear understanding that he wouldn’t be taking the party into the next election. And so it came to pass: Dunstan took power about a year out, if I remember rightly; and already as Attorney-General he had underway a whole slew of reforms, but when he became Premier he just put his foot on the accelerator. And that’s what ultimately brought him down, he broke the political speed limit. People couldn’t keep up and they were concerned about where he was taking us all. He was too radical for too many people.

**You were a young political columnist for The News, the position in 1966 through to 1968. What was the role of a political columnist then?**

Well, I was actually political reporter, in other words it was my job to hunt out stories and when stories were handed out it was my job to handle them. And all governments over the years have announced their initiatives and in the Playford years it used to be old Tom calling together the reporters from The Advertiser, The News and the ABC and sitting them down over a cup of tea and telling them all about it. Under Dunstan, things got a little
more showbizzy and the media handling – I won’t say ‘manipulation’, but the media handling – of that era I think was very much the precursor of the art of spin that (laughs) plagues us today. But yes, Playford’s style was just to have a little chat and to tell the reporters what it’s all about and what he saw as important and make some considered commentary, and that would be faithfully reported, particularly in *The Advertiser*: it was a paper of record, it didn’t allow any opinion except in its editorial pages. All that’s changed now, of course.

I used to report straight, but Dunstan – I think engineered by Crease – took a different view.

**That’s Gerry Crease.**

Gerry, yes. The tradition was for Playford and Walsh to release their information to *The Advertiser* as the paper of record, so press conferences took place at five o’clock in the afternoon and the ‘Tiser had the story and *The News* would do a follow-up the next day. And it was regarded *The Advertiser* was the proper paper and *The News* was a bit of a rag. But it was Crease who argued to Dunstan that *The News* was a popular rag and the people who read it might have been working-class but they were also likely to be Labor voters, and the paper of record will report for the record everything that happens, so why not have two bites at the cherry? And so they started a deliberate habit, a deliberate procedure, of releasing stuff to *The News* in our time so it would be in the afternoon editions of *The News*, it would be on the radio at lunchtime, it would be on television news at night and next morning in *The Advertiser* dutifully, as a paper of record, would report it as well. So they got their message out far more effectively doing it that way. And I was the very fortunate beneficiary of this: being the political writer, they came to me with all the stuff.

Now, this sounds as if I was constantly being drip-fed. I wasn’t. I was also digging around for my own stories as well, and it was a sometimes-difficult tightrope to tread because Dunstan, when he got the shits, he could be *terribly* intimidating. He’d lash you and call you all sorts of things and tell you why you’re wrong, and all this on the telephone at seven o’clock in the morning. (laughs) And he could be very petulant about it as well.

**So you’d written a story in the afternoon or it would come out in the afternoon.**
If I’d written a story that he disagreed with or that he thought was wrong or he was embarrassed by. I no doubt will get to who the leakers were in his Cabinet and so on. (laughs) There was a lot of Labor Party – yes, a lot of party machinations going on during this period; and yes, Dunstan could get very furious. But when he saw stories that he thought favoured him or were carrying the Government message plastered all over page one of *The News* for him it was smart work.

**Did he do any stroking of you in terms of ringing and saying ‘Good story’?**

No, the stroking – (laughter) and I’ll use the word carefully –

**Sure, okay.**

– was carried out by Crease. Of course, Don could be charming and all that sort of thing, but he could be both ways.

Crease and David Combe, the Secretary of the ALP at that time, they were the ones that I would have after-work drinks with. They’d background you?

Yes, absolutely, absolutely. And sometimes deliberately, I think, selling me a pup, sending me up blind alleys and so on. Look, I’m not saying that I wasn’t at times taken for a ride and sometimes I might have knowingly been taken for a ride, but it was all part of the *quid pro quo*. I wasn’t exclusively on a drip-feed and I made absolutely certain that I was my own man and not in their pockets, but I was unquestionably a beneficiary of their media management policies and they were great times. Eric Franklin from *The Advertiser*, the political reporter from *The Advertiser*, he used to take a very, very dim view of this. He was always following up, he didn’t want to take the lead.

**So why didn’t he? Apart from the record and *The News* being the popular paper, why wasn’t he getting the stories?**

I think because I was young and energetic and he wasn’t.

**He wasn’t, yes.**

I was, well, young and energetic.

**Can you recall any of the times Don got mad at you or any of the incidents?**
Well, I can’t actually remember what the incidents were, but I can clearly remember getting tongue-lashings from him and you had to be very quick-witted if you were trying to argue and often I felt that the best way was to let Vesuvius erupt and then get on with your business. But I had very good contacts in the Labor Party and there were a lot of Labor Party battles going on, and Don used to get furious when – there was one minister – I suppose they’re all dead now, it doesn’t matter; one shouldn’t nominate one’s sources – but there was one minister who just couldn’t help himself whenever you went to him and say, ‘Well, Clyde Cameron’ – who was the power behind the throne in South Australia – ‘he’s saying this or doing that’; and this minister, who was the Minister for Works, Cyril Hutchens, he couldn’t help himself, he’d blab everything, he’d tell me who was up whom and who was doing this and who was doing that for what reason. Clyde was a bit the same way. And Geoff Virgo, I think he was the State Secretary and Combe took over from him, Virgo went into the Parliament. You’d ask Virgo a question that had to do with the Labor factions or something and you could hear the mind ‘tick-tick-tick’. ‘Who will I shiv with my response?’ (laughter) Forty-plus years on, I really can’t remember the individual incidents, but I will never forget the venom (laughs) that I used to hear.

And most of them I worked with between seven and nine in the morning, you’d just get constantly on the phone, because our deadline was nine o’clock or something like that.

I see. That was in the old days with typewriters.

Yes, absolutely. And sometimes – (laughs) I’m just getting ahead of myself. I used to work late into the night sometimes, I’d go to a lot of functions and that’s how I got the Andrew Jones ‘Half drunk half the time’ story, at a late-night function. But yes, I’d go carousing with Crease and Combe on a frequent basis and come back with stories or tips, and then I’d run them by Hutchens and Cameron, and when I went to Dunstan with ‘They say this’, (mimics snarl) Dunstan would explode in fury and demand to know ‘Who told you that? That’s a canard’, he would say. (laughs)

And did he ever admit he was wrong? What sort of personality did you see – – –?
No. Oh, he was a driven reformer. He could have a laugh but most times he had reform on his mind rather than falling about giggling. But yes, there was no doubt that in journalistic terms I was in their eyes a ‘favoured son’ who they could use to get their message out, and they did. But, as I said earlier, sometimes, wittingly, rarely – although not without examples of being unwittingly used. But that still happens. People will give you stuff and you’ll take it on face value only later to realise that there was a benefit, that wasn’t apparent at the time, to them.

**So you would find a story, if you like, or somebody would tell you.**

Yes. Yes, it’s always the way that a good reporter will dig out material they don’t want you to know, that’s your job, as well as handling the more mundane announcements the Government do want you to know.

**Yes, I was going to ask you about how they would handle the announcements. Was it simply repeating what was said?**

Well, that’s right, normally. Monarto, is that right, the town?

**That’s right, yes, new town.**

That was one of Dunstan’s – the new town, that’s right – that was one of Dunstan’s favourites. And typically in a thing like that over a beer on a Tuesday night Crease would say, ‘What have you got for tomorrow? Well, do you want something? We’ve got a new contract being let for Monarto and we’re going to build an expressway over the hills to Monarto’. ‘Ooh, yeah, okay.’

‘**That sounds good**, yes.’

‘Well, Don’s got all the details, talk to him in the morning.’ ‘Yeah, okay, I’ll do that.’ ‘Oh, Don, Gerry was saying you’ve got an announcement coming up on Monarto?’ ‘Oh, yeah – – –.’ And sometimes he would say, ‘But not for a couple of days’, and other times he would say, ‘Yes – well, what we’re going to do is blah-blah-blah and build a six-lane expressway et cetera, et cetera’. ‘How much is that going to cost?’ ‘Well, Engineers Department says three million’, or whatever. That’s the way it would go, it would be
conversational. And I at that time had a pretty reasonable shorthand and would just get on
the phone and take it down.

There were times when we’d have sort of conversations and there would be no kind of
statement from Dunstan and he’d say at the end of that, ‘Well, what are you going to say?’
And I would say, ‘Well, I haven’t worked that out yet, I’ve just got to go and write it’.
And he said, ‘Well, ring me back and read me the quotes’, and I would do that.

**So you’d check the accuracy.**

Yes, that’s right. Well, it’s the paraphrasing in a conversation, I might get the sense of the
story and I would write it up, ring him back and say, ‘Blah-blah-blah, and I’ve got you
quoted as “boom-boom-boom”, okay?’ ‘Okay.’ Or sometimes he’d say, ‘No, can you
change this?’ and we’d work it out. But there was never any press releases, no paperwork,
no packaging –

**So that hadn’t come yet.**

– no videos handed out..

**Not yet, no.**

No, the way they do it these days. It was very much one-on-one. And I didn’t get Don out
of bed but I was pretty well first call each day.

**Yes, he mentions that in his book, Felicia.**

Which I’ve never read.

**Okay. So what happened within the paper? You would write a story and then your –
would it be a subeditor would look at it?**

No, well, normally – things weren’t quite that big at *The News*. (laughs) Normally, Ron
Boland, the editor through this period, he was very much hands-on and he and Frank Shaw
as the chief of staff – that was during the early days; no, by this time the chief of staff was
John Kroeger – we worked closely together and Kroeger would know what I was doing
and he would go into morning conference with, ‘This is the news list and I think the best
story is “A new university for South Australia”’ or something like that.
And I was telling you earlier sometimes the news drops were managed by Dunstan, other times they were inadvertent. I was driving back to Adelaide with Dunstan in his big, black Dodge Phoenix and we were going down Main North Road past Parafield and we were talking about Adelaide’s suburban sprawl north and south and whether this land would eventually be little boxes and all that, and he said, ‘Well, that land’s reserved for a university’. ‘Oh, yeah?’ My ears pricked up: what university? And next day the headline on *The News* was ‘New uni for SA’. Don didn’t deny it, but I think it took twenty years for it to happen. There is a campus out there now.

**Yes, Mawson Lakes.**

Yes, that’s right.

**University of SA now.**

So the land was earmarked for a university, I wasn’t wrong.

**That’s right.**

But sometimes you just pick up on and blow up, often with a bit of an egg-beater, snippets of information.

**And your editor or chief of staff, would they make a lot of changes subject to some general line the paper was – – –?**

No, no, no, no, no. They were very much aware that *The News* was the beneficiary of the Dunstan–Crease approach and they were circumspect in their criticisms. I can’t remember how they advised readers to vote in ’68 or ’70. (interruption, break in recording)

Where were we, what was the question?

**Just looking at the line and the role of *The News*.**

I don’t recall any conflict with the way I was reporting things and the editor’s willingness to carry those reports, no conflict whatsoever; and nor can I remember what the editorial policy is. I know *The Advertiser* was very firmly conservative and I seem to recall *The News* being less so without being a strident Labor paper, even though its readership was very heavily made up of the people who were the factory workers and the soldiers in
Playford’s industrial revolution. So it made sense for *The News* to be a little less rabidly conservative than the ‘*Tiser*. But if you’d asked me this question about some events later in my life I could tell you that there was editorial input. (laughs)

Yes, I was going to ask about Rupert Murdoch, his eminence – so he wasn’t a feature at this time?

Well, this is jumping ahead a bit. But Don felt that he had a right to have a direct line to the boss and the managing director in Adelaide at that time was Ken May, and he went on to take over as Chairman of News Limited in Sydney; and even when – I’d long gone, so this was post-’72 – Ken May was Chairman in Sydney, Don used to get on the phone and complain to Ken that *The News* was saying this and *The News* was saying that, and it used to get right up Ken May’s nose that he was being forced to respond to ‘pissant complaints from that bloody Dunstan, he’s a pain in the arse, he’s a pest!’ And he really wore out his welcome in Sydney. And of course every time Murdoch came to town he’d go and see him, but Murdoch never took his calls. Refused. Always left it to Ken May, who was less than delighted to have Don on the phone. But I think Don realised there wasn’t much point in talking to Ron Boland, he had to go over his head to management. (laughs) And I think Ron was instinctively a conservative character, anyway.

So Don wasn’t seen as a major national figure to be highly respected?

Well, yes, because he was the Dunstan Experiment, he was South Australian Reformer, I think for a while he was – was he ALP President in that period?  

I think he was for a while, yes.

In that period, I think so. During his second term or the second half of the decade. But, you see, Don and Whitlam were co-conspirators in what Labor Governments can do together, national and state, and they talked about it a lot. Not much was achieved in that field but they certainly saw themselves as partners in unique experiments and all that sort of thing. And also at that early stage Don took large leaves out of Lee Kuan Yew’s book in Singapore and was a defender of Lee Kuan Yew’s draconian litter laws and that sort of
thing. But Don and Harry fell out somewhere along the line and Don became very bitter about the end of that relationship.

**It might have been over Adele Koh.**

It might have been, yes.

**Human rights issues and political restrictions in Singapore.**

Yes, I think human rights issues, yes.

**I was going to ask about where the Opposition was in all of this. Would you talk to the Opposition and get their opinion?**

Of course, of course, of course. The Opposition was primarily concerned with tearing itself apart, because this was the era of Steele Hall and Ren Degaris, the Liberal Movement, the ‘wets’ and the ‘super-drys’, and the internal battles there. I think Hall was surprised that he actually won in 1968, but, as I said earlier, I think that was because Don had frightened the populace, broken the speed limit and people were nervous about it; but I don’t think there was any kind of policy of intellectual framework around the Liberals and Hall that swept them into power. Quite the reverse: it was the sweeping-out of ‘that radical’.

**And were they running a media management process as well?**

No.

**So you didn’t get – – –.**

No. But Steele was a most personable chap. I remember when I was in New York both of them – Hall as Premier and Dunstan as Opposition Leader – came through New York and we went out on the town and headed for a few bars and fell about, and I didn’t take them to Scores, either of them, (laughs) which wasn’t operating then, but it was I suppose that kind of equivalent, that our relationships were such that when they were in town we caught up and had a good old chinwag. But until I bought this place in 2006 South Australian politics was off my radar from the moment I left.
Fair enough, yes. We’ve sort of gone backwards in terms of importance – statewide, anyway.

Well, ’twas ever thus. I think it’s very much in the minds of South Australians that they don’t think in terms of can-do, they think in terms of can’t-do. I don’t know why. Because, if you think big, you can often achieve – and that’s what Dunstan did. But I suppose now there’s more chance of economic clout through mining developments and all that than there was back then, because the State was running on what are now rust-bucket industries.

Motor vehicles, yes.

And Dunstan was above all a social reformer, he got his jollies in turning the Athens of the South into an outdoor eating city and all that sort of thing rather than, like Playford, industrialising at all costs.

Yes, so sort of ahead of his time in a way, just thinking of what’s now called ‘creative economies’ –

Yes.

– and all those studies about them.

Yes. But Don loved nothing more than running off to Europe and looking at O-Bahns and alternative transport systems and light rails and saying, ‘Hey, we could have that in Adelaide’; and sometimes we did and most times we didn’t, but nevertheless the consultants’ reports looked lovely. (laughter) That’s right, there was a reporter doing the Town Hall beat, Garth Rawlings, I think –

I remember that name, yes.

– and Garth and I would have competitions to see who could get the prettiest pictures from the consultant report because he was doing all the Town Hall development applications. ‘Here’s a development application for a skyscraper in King William Street’, in the meantime I had a new tram system from some little German town. (laughs)

Do you recall Dial-A-Bus?
Yes, I remember Dial-A-Bus, yes, that’s right.

And what was your view about that at the time, if you can remember?

Well, I suppose we were all very excited about it, more Dunstan innovation. (laughter)

Well, it seemed all right in theory. And it wasn’t for us – we never said, ‘This will work or won’t work’, we just reported what they were saying.

I was going to also ask you your impressions of how Adelaide – particularly Adelaide, given it was a sort of city-state – but South Australia, how that worked, just the power systems. It’s always taught that SA until Dunstan and maybe even while he was there, there was an Establishment, if you like.

The Establishment, yes.

Did you get any sense of that at all?

Oh, absolutely. And I think that was very true. The Establishment was centred on the Legislative Council and it was a property franchise that for many years meant that only property owners would have any vote and influence in the Council and only the crème de la crème of the Establishment sat in it. And it had the power to knock back legislation and probably still does. But Dunstan was always railing about getting rid of it and reforming it because it was an ‘obstruction’ and it was an ‘excruciation’ and it was ‘antiquated’ – all of the above – and never had the numbers to do it.

He never had the numbers to get rid of the gerrymander, either, and it took Hall to put in place that particular little piece of suicide – on a great moral foundation, too. I mean he should be remembered for that, bringing in a greater form of democracy to South Australia or the voting system.

But yes, the Establishment was bigtime – the McLoughlins, the McEwens, the Downers – old Sir Alec Downer who spat the dummy and left the State after Tom Playford, of all people, sanctioned the loss of a corner of his estate up at Aldgate –

Yes, Raywood.

– Raywood – to the freeway. How dare they! Was that Playford?

Yes, it was, I think.
So the Establishment and through *The Advertiser*, which was the voice of the Establishment, yes, they had a very, very powerful voice. And in a way they kind of traded off ‘Oh, we’ll let that Dunstan have his social reform as long as he doesn’t get his hands on the gears of the economy and land ownership and the Legislative Council and all that sort of thing’, that social reform didn’t matter as much as the Establishment continuing to control what *really* mattered. That was the kind of attitude.

Yes.

Ren Degaris, as I say, was a key element in all of that because he had the power in the Upper House.

I used to write the ‘Onlooker’ column and on one occasion De Garis devoted – I don’t know how much time, but it would not be inconsiderable – to putting together a little booklet to satirise the unnamed author of the Onlooker column and he circulated it amongst the parliamentarians, and I remember reading it and saying, ‘Is this all he’s got to do? Get out of here!’ I’ve still got it somewhere.

**Interesting. It should be in a collection, perhaps, somewhere.**

Yes.

The other thing I wanted to ask you, when you were getting these stories from the other members of the Labor Party, some of the I’ll call them the ‘functionaries’ or the machine people and some of the ministers, you mentioned the word ‘factions’. I’m asking that because people claim there weren’t factions at the time, but you got a sense that there were.

Oh, absolutely. Well, I think people claimed there weren’t factions, probably that’s not inaccurate in the sense that the dominant faction was Clyde Cameron and the AWU and what they said goes, just like the New South Wales right. But it doesn’t mean to say there aren’t those struggling to be heard, and the left were certainly there and in Cabinet these balances seemed to be important. But Clyde Cameron and Geoff Virgo, and Mick Young of course before Virgo, they were the AWU faction and they had the clout. But, look, it’s the mists of time, George.

**Yes, that’s fair enough.**
I really can’t remember individual incidents or who stood for what anymore.

You weren’t there when the uranium policy came up?

When?

That was the anti-uranium. That was in the later ’70s where I think some of the factional elements came to the fore, the left and the ‘centrists’, I’ll call them.

Yes, that’s right.

But just in observing Don, and the Government at the time but particularly him, when you were there in the two periods, did you think about, ‘Well, how does he get these radical ideas through?’, notwithstanding a lot of them were social ones and maybe the Establishment wasn’t too concerned about them; and within his own party, although there were some issues like homosexual law reform – but did you see any method in what he was doing? His reform methods, his change methods?

Well, I think over the years he had seen and nominated a whole raft of things that he regarded as wrong and his time in the courts defending the likes of Dawn Fraser and that sort of thing gave him a public persona as a man on the side of the underdog. So it came as no surprise to anybody that he would want these reforms on the basis that individuals had to have freedom to choose what they would like to do, within certain limits. But this was consistent across homosexual law reform, late-night drinking, eating on the pavements: wherever you boil them down, they were built on ‘Why shouldn’t people be able to do that if they want to do that?’ And it was a pretty compelling argument, not only to a young, somewhat naïve reporter like myself but also to the general public. ‘Why shouldn’t we be allowed to drink after six p.m.? I mean, get out of here’.

If I remember rightly, that was Don’s last great reform before the 1968 election and we went out on the town that night and we photographed him taking last drinks at ten p.m. in the pub on the Norwood Parade. ‘Gee, this is history!’ (laughs) What nonsense.

You could go somewhere and have some wine with your meal at some stage.

Yes, that’s right. And you could actually eat outdoors instead of having laws that prevented you from doing that.

Yes.
I always felt that Don didn’t push as hard on homosexual law reform as he might have. He was always in favour of it and so on. But in fact he didn’t carry the legislation; it was Len King, wasn’t it?

**Well, he was the Attorney-General. Peter Duncan –**

Duncan, was it?

– **put up a private member’s bill on there and Don sort of adopted it.**

Yes.

**That was after the other Duncan, the lawyer –**

George, yes.

– **George Duncan was murdered.**

Well, I was on the *Sunday Mail* then as editor and I kept that story going month after month after month, and we all but fingered the coppers who we said did it. And I think they did – I know they went to court, but some of them got off and some didn’t, is that right?

**There was a Scotland Yard report.**

Yes.

They got some people in and in that report I think they said that there wasn’t enough evidence for the prosecution to nail the people who were suspected.

Yes.

**But I’m not sure whether anybody was ever charged or not.**

But, Don, he was always, I think, on dangerous ground when he was dealing with the pink files and what was the name of the Police Commissioner?

**Salisbury, Harold Salisbury.**
Salisbury, yes, Harold Salisbury. He was between a rock and a hard place. And Peter Ward, if my memory serves me right, he was his – was he his press secretary then or had he just left Dunstan –

He’d left, yes.

– and he was then writing for *The Australian*.

Yes.

That’s right.

He was writing about that.

And Ward and I would often discuss the ramifications of this and I’d point out that this was not a horse that Don could ride very hard.

Had to be careful, yes.

Yes. And it was in this period that Don – I think during his opposition that he really took to the gymnasium and muscled up, and I think left Gretel around that stage.

That was in the early ’70s.

Yes.

Just looking at how this change process and the announcement of reforms and things like that, I’d spoken to Rod Cameron about polling and he was interesting, but he said it wasn’t a poll-driven government, if you like, although the political sensitivities were there. But how would you compare what Don was doing with what’s happening these days with governments?

I think Don was driven by his passions, and pure politics was one of his passions but also individual freedoms and legal rights and all of that. And if Don decided that something was right and proper – (laughs) as distinct from ‘grossly improper’ – if something was right and proper it was worth doing regardless of the polls. He pioneered so many methods of getting his point of view across in order to lead people to his way of thinking. He bought a half-hour on Channel 9 in one – I think it was a pre-election period, it was in the phoney war, not actually in an election campaign but prior to that – the Government bought the time for Don to explain his policies and he had a personable manner on
television, he was comfortable with it and where other politicians were sort of stitched-up in front of the camera reading from their scripts and so on Don was sort of walking around the studio in short-sleeved shirts sort of camera-tracking while he had a conversation. He was very, very skilled at that kind of communication; and it went with what he was saying: ‘Let’s do things differently. We are kind of different. It’s South Australia and this is our way and we’ve been a crucible for social reform in the past and we can be again.’ And people who had not much to hang onto would say, ‘Yeah’, because of this South Australian ‘we’re the rump state’, ‘we’re the little ones’ and we’d never had convicts, (laughter) ‘we’re different’.

The other thing about South Australia, we have never appreciated our architecture, our heritage or our natural environment. I used to go up into the Moomba oilfields with Easley – and forget his name, he was the boss of SANTOS with an American – Charlie, Charlie Easley. And we’d sleep in swags out in the desert up there and people would say, ‘Oh, it’s just desert’. And Don would say, ‘Yes, but wow, what a desert! Look at the Flinders Ranges, look at all these wonderful places’. And Reg Sprigg of Arkarooa and so on. Absolutely marvellous, unique environment, and we in South Australia would say, ‘Oh, it’s just desert’. Get out of here! (laughs) We’d choose to think small and Don was different because he chose to think big.

Well, we’ve covered a lot of territory. Is there anything – I’ve asked you about Don as a national figure; was there anything you wanted to round up on?

I think Don, he would have liked to have been more of a national figure than he was, I think. And there were always talks about ‘Dunstan for Canberra’ and this, that and the other. But I think he was deeply wounded when he went to Victoria and took on that tourism job there, he copped shit from South Australia and Victoria, and he wasn’t successful in it and he hated it.

But I really don’t recall the final years of his administrations because I was in Sydney, but I know that I had a profound sense of loss when he left because he was so different and uniquely different in his ideas and his capacity to get things done. As I said earlier, he
could be excoriating in his critiques if he chose to be, but equally he was able to be inspirational to an awful lot of people, including myself.

Good. Well, Mark, thanks very much for that.

Pleasure, George.

That’s very interesting.

END OF INTERVIEW