

Robin MILLHOUSE

This is George Lewkowicz for the Don Dunstan Foundation Don Dunstan Oral History Project interviewing – was it Chief Justice Robin Millhouse?

Yes, I am now.

Okay, good. Chief Justice Millhouse was a parliamentarian in the South Australian Parliament. I think he started in 1955, so he would have a very close and long experience of and involvement with the politics and policy work right through when Don Dunstan started Parliament and well into the 1970s. The date today is the 6th May 2010 and the location of the interview is Mr Millhouse's residence.

Chief Justice Millhouse, can we call you 'Robin' through the interview?

Yes, please.

Can you just give a brief background on your education and early employment before we ask you about how you got into State Parliament?

I'm three years younger than Dunstan, but my education was much the same as his. I remember at Saint's he was the big boy and I only a kid, and then he was living at St Mark's College when I went there. And then he went into Parliament in '53 and I came in in '55. I remember, although we'd argued and squabbled about politics when we were at the university, he was the first person to send me a telegram congratulating me when I was elected –

Oh, really?

– when I was selected for the seat.

Interesting. Do you know why, or thought about why he might have done that?

I suppose it was just out of friendship.

So you were friends with him?

Oh, yes; we weren't enemies. Politically, later on, we became really antagonists. He was always on one side and I was on the other, but we were seldom personal enemies, really.

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Do you have any recollections of him at Saint's when you were there? You said he was a 'big boy'.

Oh, yes. The first time I ever saw him I think I was 12 and Red Ray, the Reverend Canon Ray as he became afterwards, took us to Scout camp up on Henry Rymill's property in Mount Lofty. I was in the prep school at Saint's then, and Dunstan – it was during the War and there weren't too many masters about – Dunstan was in charge of the senior Scouts, who were camping nearby. I remember the first time I saw him he came over to ask Red Ray's advice because his Scouts all had diarrhoea.

Oh, no!

He must have been only 15, I think, then. That's the first time, literally, I ever saw him.

And what were your impressions?

I didn't have much of an impression of him at all. Then I can remember a year or so later, when I was in the senior school, we had our school exams and we had two-boy desks, and they used to split us up. He was in the Leaving, I think, and I was in Intermediate; he may have been in Leaving Honours but he was sat next to me. He was doing a French exam. I can remember looking over at his paper and I can remember the phrase, '*Pétain et tous les autres traîtres*', (laughter) he was writing in his paper. But that's just a flash.

Interesting. And he would have started university, what, three years before you?

Yes.

And when did you start, what year?

I started at the university in '47.

And do you have any recollections of Don Dunstan or any contacts with him in the university?

We were living at St Mark's together and so we saw a lot of each other. And quite extraordinary, really: on one occasion – I don't know, I doubt if this is relevant to

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your project – but on one occasion a well-known homosexual who'd come to speak at the College, a well-known man, invited me to meet with a group, all of whom were gay, and I was only a kid. Dunstan heard about this and absolutely went off his rocker, and he got Don Laidlaw to speak to my father, because Laidlaw was also articled in the office. I didn't know what to do and in fact I went up to the office in Victoria Square at lunch time and saw my father without knowing that he'd asked John Burdett, who was another articled clerk, to ask me to come and see him. The result was Dad said, 'Don't go near them', so I made some excuse. But it's ironic, in view of what happened later on. He saved me from what could have been a quite calamitous incident.

Interesting, yes. And do you recall any of Don's political activities, if you like, in the uni?

Oh, yes. Yes. He was a communist and an atheist, and then he became a Christian because he was influenced by the Kelham Fathers who were up at Mount Lofty – members of the Society of the Sacred Mission- Anglican monks. Then of course he was in practice, legal practice, and I was also after him. Another extraordinary coincidence was when he left the firm of Roder, Dunstan and Lee, having poached Lance Lee from our office, he left the practice to concentrate on politics. My sister, who was nine years younger than me and also a lawyer, went and worked in the firm and actually sat at his desk.

So you studied law, as we've been talking about, at the university –

Yes.

– and you practised for a while.

I practised all the time until I went on the bench.

Right, I see.

I was never a full-time politician. Full-time politicians are a very bad thing, in my view. If one is full time one is dependent on the parliamentary income for the family and oneself. It's bound to influence one's vote: one will not want to risk losing pre-

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selection or an election. If one has an independent source of income- as I always had both from the Bar and from the CMF-Citizens' Military Force-one can speak and act independently, knowing that even if one goes out of Parliament it won't be a financial calamity.

Interesting. So what led you to be interested in joining the – I think it was the Liberal Country League at the time?

A group of us at the university formed what we called the Liberal Union, which was in fact the Liberal Club. We became interested in going into politics because we regarded the then electoral system as utterly unfair and we thought that the best way of changing it was to get into the party and try and change it. So we formed a ghost branch of the LCL (laughs) and got to the annual general meeting and moved a resolution, which of course was booed out. But that was my impetus for going into Parliament.

Interesting. Were you seen as a troublemaker?

Oh, yes. Eventually I was pushed out.

But even in those early days how did you then get preselection if you were – – –?

My old predecessor suddenly died on a trip to Melbourne, which was a big deal in those days – Commonwealth Parliamentary Association trip – and I was preselected, as it was called, by the Mitcham District Committee. All the old ladies voted for me, I think. There were 74 members. I think that's how I got in.

Right – and they hadn't heard about your – – –. Did you get up and talk about your electoral policies?

I suppose I did, I don't remember.

And do you recall any of the other sort of issues at the time, in the '50s?

That was the main one. Of course, Dunstan was hammering from the Opposition about it. The only reason we were ever able to do anything was because the nature

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of the electorates changed against us. Adelaide sprawled out into the small country electorates and gave Labor the majority in 1965.

And that wasn't foreseen by the party, or by the majority?

I don't know whether they did or not but afterwards they realised that, out of self-interest, something had to be done. When we came in in '68 we managed – in fact, I think I probably worked it out – to devise a system which meant that almost inevitably we'd lose the next election but at least it was a good step towards being fair.

Yes, interesting. We'll come back to some of that later on. But just in the 1950s and early 1960s when Tom Playford was Premier what was it like in the Liberal Country League at that time?

He dominated it. He found me a nuisance, I think, but he was very kind to me, he treated me well. I can remember on one occasion he said, 'Robin, I don't want to come down on you like the stern father, *but* – – –.' (laughter) And I'm afraid I wasn't always as loyal as I could be, I suppose.

Were you asked to look at any particular areas?

No; but he put me on as many parliamentary committees as he could. I overheard him say to one of the others, 'We've got to keep him occupied'. So I was Chairman of the Subordinate Legislation Committee and others. Road Traffic Committee. Industries Development Committee.

I picked up a statement – I forget whether it was in the Wikipedia entry –

I don't know who wrote that.

– yes, the 'intellectual driving force' behind the LCL: what do you think they might have meant by that?

I don't know. I'll leave others to work that out.

But, as you say, you picked up quickly that the party needed to appeal to the metropolitan voters.

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Yes. I think the old chaps who were running the LCL in those days, when the preselection came up, they were very keen to get me in as a counterweight to Dunstan.

Right, I see.

Collier Cudmore and people like that.

And what were they concerned about ?

Dunstan, obviously> – The Labor Party was split into two factions, Protestant and Catholic, and been pretty well absolutely useless until he got in in '53. He got in and John Jennings got in as well. They started to revive the Party. And dear old – what was the chap's name? – Mick O'Halloran was the leader.

Oh, Mick O'Halloran, yes.

He used to get drunk regularly. (laughter)

Oh, really?

In those days the country members could live at Parliament House, and somebody would take him up to bed. That nice fellow, Cyril Hutchens, used to take him up. Cyril was a Protestant, of course and Mick a Catholic.

It's been said by people, I don't know how true it is, but Mick O'Halloran was quite happy to be Leader of the Opposition.

Yes, that was always said.

Rather than Premier.

Yes. He and Tom Playford and their wives went 'home' to the Coronation in '53 together and so on.

Interesting. Can you remember any of the issues Dunstan was strong on through those early years?

One of the calamities, political calamities and in fact judicial calamities, was the Stuart case.

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Rupert Maxwell Stuart, yes.

Yes, which was mishandled absolutely from the beginning.

By the Government?

Oh, yes. Unfortunately, Colin Rowe, the Attorney-General, had had a heart attack and Playford was acting as Attorney when it happened. But it all came about because my father and other silks, Queen's Counsel, had said to the Law Society, 'Look, we're tired of having to take all the murder cases for free, there's no reason why senior juniors should not have to do it. Why don't you instruct juniors?' And the first murder case after that had been agreed was this one. They brought in James David O'Sullivan, who really – it was beyond him. So it may never have happened if one of the silks – Dad or Pickering or someone else – had been briefed to appear. Anyway, that's by the by. Then it went wrong at every stage.

What was your father's name, just for the record?

Millhouse.

No; Christian name.

He was V.R. Millhouse.

V.R., okay. We'll just get that one in. That's interesting. So that became a bit of a *cause célèbre* all over the place.

Oh, yes – Dunstan pushed it very hard.

Did you try to think about why was he pushing this: was it just an anti-government –

Oh, political.

– just political, yes.

Oh, yes, and he thought he had right on his side.

That's interesting. And you were, as you say, friends – well, I wouldn't call it 'friends', necessarily, but you got on fairly well when you were in the Parliament until later on when you became an antagonist.

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Yes, when he became Premier I used to pinprick him and irritate him until he exploded. (laughter)

But you were, from my recollection of your parliamentary performances, a good debater so you were both seen as good debaters.

I think we were probably better than any of the rest. Hugh Hudson came in but he was rather ponderous. Once Dunstan went out of Parliament the challenge for me had pretty well gone.

What did you think about when you were going to debate Don Dunstan, whether it was before he became Premier or after?

I don't know what I thought about. What I was going to say, I suppose.

And the style – I'm just interested in, you know, what makes a good parliamentary performer, and one of the ones is being a good debater.

Yes, we'd both been debaters at school, from school time. Then we did a lot of public speaking and debating at the university. And, well, you just do it. I never thought about how to do it.

Right – picking up the points and the counterarguments, getting the media interested.

Yes. Another of the issues that he raised was capital punishment. I was then and always have been in favour of its retention because I think there are some crimes that are so dreadful that it's the only possible punishment, penalty, that's appropriate. But of course that's a very unfashionable view now.

Yes. Interesting. What would you have seen as the major differences between the two of you?

He was a socialist and believed in government enterprise and I was a free enterprise liberal, and that was of course the basic difference between us. The Labor Party had its socialist objective in those days-government ownership or at least control of the means of production, distribution and exchange. One of the problems of the Liberal

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Party now is that they've succeeded too well, in that the Labor Party was persuaded eventually to drop the stupid policy.

Now it's an argument about implementation and fine-tuning, I suppose.

Well, not much difference between them except personalities.

Yes, it's interesting. You became the Minister in, was it 1968?

Yes.

That was after the election that the Labor Party, or particularly Don Dunstan, promoted as being lost through the gerrymander.

Yes, in a way it was. He almost had a nervous breakdown about that, of course.

Really?

Yes. After the election he was distraught that he'd been defeated.

What, because of his pride or because of the unfairness, or both?

I think so – more his pride. And of course we didn't have a majority; we had to persuade Tommy Stott again to come in and support us or come across and support us, which Playford had hated having to do in 1962. He didn't like Stott.

And what were your feelings at the time?

I was keen that we should get into office.

Notwithstanding you'd got in on a gerrymander? I'm just going back to your original ideas about electoral fairness.

Oh, yes but I knew that if we were in office we could do something about it and we might be able to persuade the party to do something about it.

And you were Minister for – I've got here Aboriginal Affairs.

I was Attorney-General, Minister for Social Welfare, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, and then in the last few months before the election in 1970 I became Minister for Industry, I think.

I've got 'Labour and Industry', as it was at the time.

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Labour and Industry, that's right, yes. And lost Social Welfare.

Just thinking back over your period as Minister, what sort of achievements do you recall?

One of them, the first one, was fluoridation of the water supply. Then the abortion debate and setting up the intermediate courts, which was done in the teeth of Labor opposition.

Why was that?

Oh, politics. They didn't want me or the Liberals to have had any achievement. And compensation for victims of crimes of violence, I started that. They're a few of the things.

And you set up the, was it the Zelling Committee?

Oh, yes, a law reform committee, I set up that and appointed Howard. And also there was the Parole Board, I think: we appointed Joe Chamberlain (later Sir Roderic Chamberlain) as Chairman of that.

And the area of Aboriginal affairs, it seems as though you advanced some of the self-determination issues at the time.

Yes. I'd never had anything much to do with Aborigines except there was a place at Blackwood, the Colebrook Home for Aborigines there, that was in my electorate. (Lois O'Donoghue was brought up there). I was absolutely shocked when I went to the North and found old ladies getting water in a tin can out of a soak in the ground. To think that was happening in South Australia, I couldn't believe it. But I don't know that anything much has changed since then.

Despite all the policies and money.

Successive Ministers say the same thing. I've always said it'll take generations.

Were you involved in any of the debate about self-determination, like the AP Lands – Anangu–Pitjantjatjara Lands – eventually got handed over.

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Yes; that was rather later, though. Tom Playford hated getting Tommy Stott to become speaker but Playford had retired at the 1968 election.

Yes – he had by then, yes.

But he did hate Tommy Stott. I know he hated having to do it in 1962, when he had to approach Stott, and he was our Speaker until '65.

And what was it like being a minister in the Steele Hall Cabinet?

Not easy. I enjoyed it, because it gave me a chance to do something, and that's the only time in my political career I've ever had any direct influence on things; but we were riven because – you've heard of Renfrey De Garis?

Yes, Ren De Garis.

He didn't like me personally, he was suspicious of my politics and very conservative and he was the Chief Secretary, and it was very difficult to get things through Cabinet, mainly because of his opposition.

And what was the interplay between the [Legislative] Councillors and the Lower House [House of Assembly] people?

When we were in office we managed all right. It was only after we went out of office in 1970, in the early '70s, that the thing really blew up, and it was because David Brookman moved in the party room that we should have joint party meetings. Of course that meant that the Upper House, the conservatives, would dominate (laughs) and that's when Hall left and I felt duty bound to follow him out of the party.

We'll come to that one in a minute as well. But the reason why I'm asking that is was there a sense of there are more – I'll call them 'progressives' – in the Lower House but when matters got to the people in the Upper House, within the party – – –?

Yes. The Upper House was predominantly conservative because we hadn't been able to change that system, it was only the Lower House system that had been changed, and so we had people who'd been there for years and who were very conservative:

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Rymill and Collier Cudmore and Sir Walter Duncan, who was the President, people like that. Pleasant men personally but very conservative.

And De Garis, of course, too.

Yes – he came in later than them.

Apart from the electoral issues, were there any particular policy issues?

I can't remember now. I think anything that I suggested they viewed with great suspicion. (laughter)

Just getting to that electoral reform, there were two phases or two parts to that: one was the gerrymander and the other one was the adult suffrage, if I could just summarise them.

Yes.

What led to the changes in the gerrymander that you recall?

The change was that the party, both parliamentary and lay, realised that on the old boundaries we couldn't win. Again, it was a fluke that we'd won in '68. Therefore we had to do something which might allow us to win sometime in the future, so they knew there had to be change, and we nussed out the system. It was fairly complex, wasn't it? I can remember we argued it in Cabinet and suddenly whatever the result was came to me in a flash, almost, and that's what we did.

There was that margin of I forget whether it was 20 per cent or 10 per cent either way.

I don't remember the detail. You'll have to look in Hansard for that.

But were there people calculating the possibilities, like scenarios on future population movements and all that sort of thing?

Yes.

I guess like it occurs now, when the redistributions happen.

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Yes. There was no Electoral Commission in those days. That was another thing I was able to do. Immediately after the election, of course, there had been a Court of Disputed Returns over the election of Des Corcoran.

That's right, yes.

– and under the old system there were five [or] four of us Members of the House of Assembly who sat with the junior puisne judge as a court of disputed returns. It was very obvious when we heard the evidence. Len King led that there would have to be a fresh election in Millicent. Len led for Corcoran with Terry McCrae as his junior. The evidence, in my view, was overwhelming. I was not regarded well because I came down in favour of Corcoran; and David Brookman, who was the other Liberal on the Court, had said, 'Oh, no, we've got to support the party candidate'. (laughter) The result was that there was a second election and Corcoran won fairly easily.

Yes, that's interesting. And the other part was the adult suffrage in the Upper House. Did you have any involvement in those discussions?

Yes, but that was after we went out of office.

Oh, I see, right.

I can remember Steele Hall telling Dunstan during, I think, the negotiation stage, 'If you give into them we'll kick you from here to hell', and 'them' being the Liberal Upper House Members. You know the system we had then of resolving disputes between the two Houses: the house managers, meeting together and just staying together until they came to a compromise or decided that it was impossible.

And what was the breaking point, can you recall that?

No, I can't remember that. But eventually we got there. It was Steele Hall and I from our side of the House and Dunstan and I suppose it was – Hudson from the Government and set against the Legislative Councillors.

Right, yes, he would have been there.

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I can't remember who the Upper House ones were. But those conferences used sometime to go all night and into the next day. It was exhaustion – – –. (laughter)
Anyway, eventually it went through.

What was Steele Hall's mood about all of that that you recall?

We were dead keen that it should. We did show, I think looking back on it, some altruism. We knew it was against us politically, and from a party political point of view it was against our interests; but morally the old system could not be supported.

Yes. Just thinking about the Steele Hall Government, then the Labor Party came in in 1970, can you recall any sort of views about how good or bad that was for the State? Because one of the issues that comes up in our discussions with people [is] Dunstan seemed good on social issues but economically maybe that's very debatable.

Yes. It started in '65. Playford's overriding aim as Premier had been to keep costs for industry down in South Australia so that we could compete on interstate markets. That's why wages were less and working conditions were probably not as good as in other States. As soon as Labor came in that went out of the window and – well, of course, old Frank Walsh was the Premier until '67 – but as soon as Dunstan was in charge, that policy was absolutely abandoned; it started under Walsh but of course Walsh was really only a figurehead. When Dunstan came in in '70 the policy went for good. The result was that South Australia lost its competitive edge and it's never regained it. So that was Dunstan's doing.

Interesting. Did you have discussions with what I'll call the 'captains of industry' and their concerns about that?

I suppose we did, I don't remember.

Okay – and you never went to the Adelaide Club and spoke with people there?

I've been a member of the Club since 1956, so – – –.

Okay, so what was their talk about the Dunstan – – –?

We hardly ever talked about it.

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Right, so there's not this thing about the Establishment running everything?

That's crap.

I'm asking because there were some articles written about the Establishment, and it wouldn't matter what government was in they were still running everything.

I won't comment on that.

The political dynamics – we've talked about Tom Playford and then the Dunstan premiership and then Steele Hall's premiership and your role, you were Deputy in addition to being a minister – – –.

No, I wasn't.

You weren't deputy of the LCL, right.

No, not in name. Who was the Treasurer? That nice chap from the West Coast, Glen Pearson. He was the Treasurer in the Steele Hall Government, and he was much more senior than I. The Deputy Premier was De Garis. When Steele Hall was away, De Garis, as Chief Secretary, was Deputy Premier.

I see, that's interesting. And the Dartmouth *versus* Chowilla issue leading to the election, what do you recall about that discussion?

Again, the answer was, although we'd said we were going to get on with building the Chowilla dam, which was a Tom Playford enterprise, as soon as we came into office we realised that it was absolutely wrong, it was quite the wrong place for a dam. So we just had to – again, because we thought it was the right thing to do – we had to reverse our position. Tommy Stott, who we had in as Speaker, of course, was dead keen on Chowilla. He represented an electorate on the Murray. We lost his support, and Steele Hall did very little; he wouldn't even eventually talk to Stott and he made me go and talk to Stott about it all the time. Dunstan, quite unscrupulously because he knew perfectly well, and the Labor Party, those who'd been ministers – Cyril Hutchens and others who'd been ministers between '65 and '68 – knew perfectly well that Chowilla was no good. Yet to get an election because they knew Tommy Stott would not continue to support us they went hell-for-leather for Chowilla. Then

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within 12 months of course they had to, quite without any shame at all, they had to abandon it, as we always knew they would. But they'd got us out of office over it.

And what did you think your chances were in that '70 election?

Oh, we knew we'd lose.

Because of the past issue.

Yes. We'd changed the boundaries sufficiently so that there was really no hope that we could get a majority at that election.

What about policy -- --?

Glen Pearson[?] was the man I was thinking of as the Treasurer.

Oh, Glen Pearson, yes, that's right. Was there any attempt at broadening the policy issues that the LCL at the time was wanting to put to the electorate, like Dunstan with his heavy social reform process?

No.

Were you arguing -- --?

Policy, you ask questions as though policy is one of the overriding concerns for Members in politics. Personalities take the priority.

I see, right.

People don't talk about policies much.

Yes -- I'm just recalling all those policy statements, all of those speeches given all over the place and releases of the time. And the other reason I'm asking about that is again that great broadening of Dunstan pushing a lot of the social reform issues, that I don't know whether they were picked up by the LCL or thought about and rejected.

Not really.

That's interesting. With the defeat of the LCL, then there was that -- I won't call it 'the split' at this stage, but the formation of -- can I call it two camps or two groups?

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It wasn't as things are now where all the parties seem to have these factions; there was no question of factions.

One other thing I did which has passed into history, of course: I was very keen to promote the use of seatbelts and I managed to get that in. I think the installation of seatbelts, I think that was when Playford was still Premier. I can certainly remember I tried then. But it was after we lost the election in 1970 when I was elected Deputy Leader of the Opposition that, as a private member, I moved that they be compulsory. And there was a lot of opposition to that, but it got through.

Got through – right, that's good.

I think we were the first State to make the wearing of belts compulsory. That was *my* bill.

Interesting. So what led to that formalisation of those groups?

There was no formalisation. I've mentioned the motion that we should meet with the Upper House; when that was – did it pass? I think it did pass, actually, and that's when Hall just stormed out and said he was leaving, and I left, and did anybody else leave? I can't remember.

Had he spoken to you before about scenarios?

No.

Not at all – oh, that's interesting.

We then formed the Liberal Movement. First of all – well, it was a surprise to everybody. I think on the day after the party meeting at which he resigned, at lunchtime suddenly a group of university students appeared in the hall of the Parliament, inside the front entrance, supporting him, and that was really what encouraged us to form a separate party. I don't know how earnest they were or whether it was just a joke, but it had that effect.

So the word had got out and got to the uni.

Yes, of course – it was headlines, I think.

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Oh, right. That's interesting. So what in particular was different about the Liberal Movement?

We hoped – we were and were seen to be more progressive, I think, than the more progressive element in the LCL. We said we wanted to bring the LCL into the 20th Century.

And I'll come back to policies or 'ideas', we'll call them: what particular ideas do you recall –

I don't recall any in particular.

– that was different in terms of the LCL?

A lot of people on the conservative side of politics were disillusioned with the LCL and that's why we got quite a lot of support. Of course, it was never enough to – I think in the following State election we got 19 per cent of the vote or something.

I see, that's good.

But then Hall crawled back to the Liberals.

Right, yes.

And I'd thought that he meant, as I had meant, all the hard things we'd said about the LCL, then I found he didn't really think that at all. I couldn't possibly go back on what I'd been saying.

Were you given any enticements to go back or promised any enticements?

I don't think so; I don't remember. No, I don't think so. But I wouldn't have, I just felt I couldn't do it. I was always in the happy position that I wasn't entirely dependent on politics for my income and therefore my family's welfare, because all through this I practised the law. I was at the separate bar. We formed the bar in 1964. And so I always had the profession to fall back on if I'd been kicked out.

And what was your own electorate saying about all of this?

It supported me right through until I resigned. The Liberals tried three times to defeat me, and eventually in the 1979 election the Labor Party (laughs) gave their

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preferences to the Liberal candidate, Worth, rather than to me. There was a Labor trades union man, Niland, who was going about during the election campaign boasting, 'I'm the one who's bringing Robin Millhouse's political career to an end', because he'd persuaded the Labor Party to do this. So, three days before the election, my people letterboxed the whole electorate with a how-to-vote card: 'How to vote Labor and give your second preference to Robin Millhouse'. The result was that, in the election, only 10 per cent of the electorate followed the Labor how-to-vote card, and I won fairly easily then.

Very loyal.

Yes, so I was well-supported always.

So there was the Liberal Movement and then the New Liberal Movement.

Yes. When the others went back to the LCL I was left alone. The vote at the Liberal Movement meeting only succeeded because Steele Hall and Joan Bullock, his wife, transported from Yorke's Peninsula busloads of supporters and just succeeded. As it turned out, that was the best result. A lot of people stuck with me and so we formed the New LM; but within 12 months Ian Gilfillan, whose name you may know, put me in touch with Don Chipp, who was about to be kicked out of the Liberal Party in Victoria. We got together and between us – and others as well; I don't take all the credit for it – we formed the Democrats.

Interesting. Did you reflect how the political dynamics changed because of the Liberal Movement?

George, one doesn't think about these things, only academics think about these things.

Okay.

You just *do* it at the time, whatever you think's the right course.

But the impact on the LCL and then the Liberal Party, there was that string of elections that was reasonably close, particularly the 1975 election when the Federal Labor Government wasn't very popular.

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Yes, that's right. I know that during that campaign, because Whitlam was unpopular, Dunstan spoke to him and said, 'Look, I'm afraid I'll have to repudiate you', and Gough Whitlam said, 'Oh, that's all right'. And so Dunstan repudiated the Federal Labor Government and was able to win.

Yes. But did you think at the time, 'Well, the Liberal Party's just lost; was that my fault because of the split?' or anything?

You don't think about these things.

You don't – right. I guess from the other side, the losers, they might have thought about the split.

Maybe, I don't know.

Okay. As a leader of a party then, what did you see your role being – that's the Liberal Movement and then the New Liberal Movement?

My aim was to get as many Members in as we could, and because the electoral system for the Upper House had changed we were just able to get Lance Milne in. His first election – was it his only one? I don't know – was a fluke and (laughs) he wasn't expected to win. When he got all the formal papers and letters and things from the Clerk of the Upper House he noticed that they'd all been addressed to the Labor man who was expected to win and who didn't. They'd simply – (laughter) they'd forgotten to change one of the names. So I had a colleague in the Upper House. He was a volatile sort of unpredictable chap. I thought at the time he was our best candidate and he was.

He'd been Agent General?

Yes. I can remember I'd met him somewhere before he went to London. He'd told me he was Labor. His old father, of course, was a dyed-in-the-wool LCL man who disinherited Lance probably because of his politics. I'd had something to do with him when I was Attorney-General. He was Agent General then in London. I went to England on the abortion issue, particularly, saw him, spent some time with him.

Robin MILLHOUSE

That's how I got to know him. He became a supporter politically; he had left the Labor Party.

Apart from getting more members, the role of an opposition minority party in the Parliament, how did you see that working through – – –?

I just did it.

Right, so you'd get up when it was your – did you get allocated time, or how does it work in Parliament?

No, no. There were only two issues on which the Labor Party and the Liberal Party agreed. One was the raising of parliamentary salaries and perks, and the other was their political dislike of me! But I had a ploy whereby I'd call a division, even though I knew I was going to be defeated: the bells would have to ring and so on; then, when I was the only one voting in favour, the division was called off. It drew the reporters' attention to whatever was my issue and maybe bring some publicity.

And you had a chance to say your piece in those.

Yes, I managed to find plenty of chances. I did, in the later days, make an arrangement with Peter Blacker, who was the Country Party man, that we would each second the other's motions so that at least they could get an airing, even though that didn't mean we'd vote for them eventually. At least we'd get some time to put whatever it might be.

What about during a debate? The minority party gets some time?

Not formally, no.

Not formally, I see.

There were very seldom any time limits on debates so you could usually get in. Question Time, of course, as much as they could the Speaker made certain that I didn't get too many questions. It was Eastick in the last Parliament before I left. If it hadn't been for me he wouldn't have been the Speaker at all. The Liberals were going to put up Keith Rusack – a Liberal man – and he expected me to support him.

Robin MILLHOUSE

When it came to the vote, Des Corcoran, who was sitting below me in Opposition, said, 'If you vote, well, we'll get Eastick in:' (laughs) as the paper reported there was mud all over David Tonkin's face or egg all over his face. And we did, everybody except the LCL people voted for Eastick – and Eastick voted for himself, I've no doubt. But afterwards, when he was always against me, I used to remind him. (laughter) Rusack became Chairman of Committees.

And of course we had the great fun of getting Janine Haines into the Senate.

Yes, that's right.

She had been one of our candidates in the Liberal Movement days for the Senate. Those above her on the LM how-to-vote card and for some reason or another, couldn't be nominated. The first I knew that she was going to be nominated was when Des Corcoran, the Deputy Premier, came across to me and said, 'The deal is this or that and the other.' We then went to have the joint meeting with Upper House members in their chamber. Dunstan proposed her and I seconded it, and the Liberals were absolutely furious! That was after Steele Hall had resigned from the Senate. And we got her in, of course.

Oh, really? That's interesting.

She'd been my unpaid parliamentary secretary. I always claimed after that that I trained her in politics. She used to come in every day during the sittings of Parliament to sit in my parliamentary office and deal with the reporters and anyone else who wanted me.

Just looking back over the time Don Dunstan was Premier, what were your impressions of him, like his ideas about what he wanted for the State, just reflecting back on that?

I've no idea. One doesn't sit back and think about these things.

Okay. Was he good for the State?

In some ways he was, but I remember Max Harris making a good point. He asked in his column, 'What in fact has Dunstan done that hasn't been done in other states'?

Robin MILLHOUSE

And of course most of the things that Dunstan did that stuck happened in all the other states as well.

That's your recollection of the sequence?

That was Harris's comment and I think it was pretty correct.

I see, yes.

What's ever happened to Dunstan's industrial democracy? Has that all disappeared?

Well, it's manifested in other ways, like there's the quality movement involved – we'll call them 'the workers' – in management decision-making about their work, and some of that came from that early industrial democracy work. That was done in the '70s. And [in] the whole occupational health and safety area there are joint management and union committees to work through – – –.

So that's all sprung from the – – –?

I wouldn't say – the ideas were around.

But there was legislation about it; was that repealed? I've forgotten.

It was never put to Parliament.

Oh, wasn't it?

It was drafted. It was about getting community directors, if you like.

Yes – oh, well, that's something – – –.

No, Dunstan thought, or he might have been told, it was all too hard.

Yes.

He resigned and then Des Corcoran wasn't interested in it – – –.

No, Des Corcoran wouldn't be interested in that at all.

So you can see the influence in a range of I'll call them 'people management' and management practices, but never as formally here in Australia as occurred in some of the European countries like Germany.

Yes.

Robin MILLHOUSE

But every now and again the Labor Party, one of the Conferences will want to pick it up –

Oh, is that right?

– or the ACTU,¹ but it never gets legs.

No.

It's still in the background as a formal thing, but not really progressed terribly far.

Yes.

But that's something for the academics to have a look at if they want to follow up the issue. What about Dunstan's political style, I'll call it?

It was flamboyant, of course. He was a very good debater. He was also a good amateur actor and I can remember – I suppose it was his last year at school – he took the leading part in the school play and played Abraham Lincoln, did it very well.

I see – oh, good.

He then, for a few years, did quite a good deal of acting. That was a tremendous advantage for him. His great advantage over me was he was nearly always on the winning side in elections. He was nearly always in government with a majority, whereas I was hardly ever; I was only in government for two and a half years. He was in for what, about 10 or more, I suppose.

Yes, the 'Dunstan Decade' over the two periods.

Yes. So he had all the advantages, being in office, being able to put into effect what he wanted to do.

As a South Australian, what did you think of him as the State's leader, political leader, if you like?

I opposed him. (laughs)

¹ ACTU – Australian Council of Trade Unions.

Robin MILLHOUSE

Yes, but just standing back from that, you know, given he was the Premier, was he in your view a good Premier/leader?

He was a very good politician, very good politician; but I was opposed to him.

Right – his ideas.

Yes.

Interesting.

And of course it was he who brought in all these parliamentary press officers and that sort of crap. The numbers of hangers-on has mushroomed ever since.

What about as an election campaigner?

He was very good. He was articulate and could put a point of view, and again he had a majority usually behind him, both of parliamentarians and of the general electorate.

Yes. And do people get gauged on their energy levels in campaigns, like some leaders are seen as saying things but not actually doing that much work around the electorate – – –?

I don't quite understand what you mean.

Well, it's said Dunstan, he was out there all the time. He was not only the Premier but he was working his constituency a lot –

Oh, yes, he was.

– he was working all the interest groups, he was working the ethnic groups.

Oh, yes. He did a very great deal in the electorate, especially in the early days. I, from my first year in politics, I regularly doorknocked my electorate, every week I'd go out, spend the morning doorknocking, and covered the whole electorate twice, I think. But yes, Dunstan was – especially before the 1965 election, he spent a lot of time out in the electorate, not only his own of Norwood but in other electorates as well.

Just out there, yes. Interesting. Were there any areas you agreed with what he was doing? You talked about opposing.

Robin MILLHOUSE

I can't remember. (laughter)

You've talked about some of the disagreements. Were there any you wanted to add to that list?

No. I can remember, and it may have been after he left, at some stage one of the Labor Members – it wasn't until I was pushed out of the Liberal Party that I started to have any friends on the Labor side-Gavin Kenneally, one of them once said to me, 'You know, Robin, we gauge the wisdom of what we've introduced by your reaction to it.' (mobile telephone interference, break in recording)

We were just talking about any major disagreements that we haven't discussed and you were reflecting on some of them.

I was saying that he said that they gauged the wisdom or otherwise of the political value of what they were doing by my immediate reaction when it was announced. (laughter)

So there might have been a string of things you disagreed on.

There were some things in which I'd supported them when I was on my own, but this was probably more after Dunstan had gone.

And what do you see as any of his big mistakes? I'll lead on a couple of issues in a minute.

The Salisbury thing was his downfall. And of course – and I know you don't want to go into this, and there's no reason why we should – he was very foolish in writing those letters to Ceruto. Was it Ceruto?

Yes, Ceruto.

Ceruto was an absolute bastard. I unwittingly facilitated all that. It was the letters that brought Dunstan down. Of course he then said he was sick and so on. But you probably don't want to go into all that.

What about the Salisbury, why did you think that was a mistake?

Sacking him was a big mistake.

Robin MILLHOUSE

Right – why?

Dunstan did it because of the gay issue, the ‘pink slips’ and so on, and it didn’t occur to him that there’d be any public reaction against the sacking of the Commissioner of Police but there was, immediately.

Well, you were Attorney-General at one stage; how would you have handled that particular issue?

Again, if it was an issue, which came through me. If I was the one who asked the questions to which Salisbury didn’t give frank answers. When I was Attorney the Commissioner was John McKinna. I knew him through the army. I really had three occupations in those days: I was at the bar, I was in politics and I was also in the CMF, as we called it, the Army Reserve –

That’s right, yes.

I knew John McKinna through the army before I went into office. It was easy for me to approach him directly and talk even though he was a very much more senior officer than I was. I can remember a few days after we came into office the Police suddenly did something about gambling or betting or something without any discussion with us. It was unpopular and people were saying we were turning the clock back. I happened to see him at lunch at the Club and said, ‘Look, can you please call your people off?’ And he immediately agreed, so that fixed it. (laughter) That’s the best way, always of fixing problems.

Right, so leave Salisbury there and – – –?

Although Dunstan had chosen him, I understand he was only about fifth preference when Dunstan went to England –

I don’t know what order.

– he was the fifth person they approached to come out as Commissioner. Yet, Dunstan just sacked him out of hand, without any attempt, I think, to discuss things with him or talk to him.

Robin MILLHOUSE

So legally he could do it but overall – – –.

Legally, yes. But politically it was a very, very bad mistake.

Then they had the – I forget whether it was a judicial inquiry or royal commission.

Yes, Roma Mitchell.

Roma Mitchell, yes.

It's the only time I've ever appeared as a witness.

Oh, really?

(laughs) And I was called before her as a witness.

And did you agree with her conclusions?

I can't remember what they were. They didn't lead to anything, did they, much?

Not really, but basically it seemed to, not a sense of justify, but didn't say anything against what had happened – in legal terms, anyway.

Legally he could do it, but it politically led to his downfall.

What about the uranium exploration area, what was your position on that?

I was very strongly against it.

Against it, right.

Yes.

Did you talk to Dunstan about that particular issue?

No.

Because he went overseas at one stage to see what was – this was toward the end of his term – and see what was happening overseas, came back, and not long after he resigned.

Yes.

But there was some talk or it was not that clear whether he was initially pro-mining, then he changed his mind, and there was some talk about him changing his mind again, perhaps.

Robin MILLHOUSE

Yes. I don't remember that. But I always was and still am anti-uranium, anti-nuclear power.

You were in the Parliament when, was it Goldsworthy mainly, promoted the ---.

Was I still there? I can't remember.

Norm Foster was in the Upper House.

He went out over it.

Yes.

Good for him. I can't remember if I was still there or not.

Happened in the Tonkin Government period. You were appointed as a judge.

The Liberals having tried three times to beat me in the electorate. I'd always made it absolutely clear that the only way I'd leave politics voluntarily was by appointment to the Supreme Court. They tried successively to get me to accept appointment to the District Court and then the Family Court and each time there was an informal approach I said, 'No, I'm not interested'. Then, finally, to my great surprise and much against Trevor Griffin's inclination, the party made him approach me to go on the bench.

That was a move to try and get your seat, but they never succeeded.

Yes, then they failed to do that. If the Democrats had had a better candidate they wouldn't have got it the next time, either.

And, just wrapping up our discussion unless there are any other things you wanted to talk about, South Australia under Dunstan's premiership, did we progress or fall back?

I think that economically we fell back. Socially, as I've said, he brought in a lot of things-South Australia, according to him, was always going to be the pacesetter for Australia. Yet, there were very few things that he brought in that the other States didn't also bring in, but not so flamboyantly.

Robin MILLHOUSE

So depending on the governments at the time, as there were those changes in New South Wales and then Victoria, I think.

Were there? Yes, I've forgotten.

Well, New South Wales with Neville Wran, he took over from – there was the Askin and other Governments before him.

Yes.

And then John Cain took over from Rupert Hamer, I think, in the early '80s.

Yes, I've forgotten the sequence now.

There was Bolte and then Hamer.

Yes – did Hamer come after Bolte?

Yes.

Of course, Playford didn't really like Bolte because he saw him as – I think subconsciously; Playford was too decent to feel this way consciously – but he saw him as a sort of rival figure.

I see.

As indeed in many ways he was.

On the national or the interstate competition?

He was also a popular Premier and a very powerful Premier, and he was there quite a long time. Henry Bolte.

Well, thanks very much for doing the interview for the Don Dunstan Oral History Project: interesting perspectives all over that time since the '50s, so thanks very much.

Not at all. I don't know if we've covered everything you wanted to cover, but I can't think of anything more to say that you haven't asked me about.

Okay, thanks very much.

END OF INTERVIEW