

**Dennis RYAN**

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**This is George Lewkowicz for the Don Dunstan Foundation don Dunstan History Project. Today I'm interviewing Mr Dennis Ryan. The date today is the 24<sup>th</sup> June 2008 and the location is Level 8 of the Riverside Building in North Terrace, Adelaide. Dennis worked in the State Government, particularly the Premier's Department, in the late 1970s.**

**Dennis, thanks for doing this interview for the Don Dunstan History Project. Can you just talk a bit about yourself, your education and how your employment experience worked itself into the State Public Service and then the Premier's Department?**

I was educated in Catholic schools in Adelaide, went to St Joseph's Primary School and then went to St Ignatius at Norwood in those days. I left school in about 1964 and then did a science degree majoring in maths. That took me through to about 1968. I then went into the Commonwealth Government for a year as a graduate clerk, then I got a bit bored being a graduate clerk in the Commonwealth Government in the Department of Civil Aviation so I came out and did teaching part-time while I did a BA and did a BA (Hons) at Adelaide Uni, mainly political philosophy-type subjects. I then got recruited into Foreign Affairs, became a Foreign Affairs trainee for a year and then went on to spend a year in Papua New Guinea in the Australian Office, as it was called, in Papua New Guinea.

At that stage I just decided that foreign affairs wasn't for me. I decided it was essentially, I must say, a glorified travel agent in many ways as a role, and my wife wanted to pursue work and career and that was pretty well incompatible with foreign affairs training. I applied at relatively long distance for some jobs back in South Australia. A chap called Michael Court, from then the Department for Community Welfare, interviewed me for a job which I didn't get – I really have forgotten its name now – but then contacted me several months later and said there was a job that he thought I'd be interested in which was called a social planner in the Department for Community Welfare and I took that job, which brought me back to Adelaide in late 1976.

I then worked for three years in the Department for Community Welfare, and then I applied for a job in the Premier's Department Policy Division, and I actually

**Dennis RYAN**

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suspect that a guy called George Lewkowicz got that job, I'm not absolutely sure, but I remember being contacted by Graham Foreman, if I recall: Graham said that he thought I was an interesting candidate and that there would be other jobs that would fall due. And subsequently I was, I believe, seconded across to work primarily as a secretary for a review that was being conducted under David Corbett of the Community development area. I'm a bit blurry on the details of it, but at some stage my secondment across became permanent and I spent then from whatever that time was – it would have been about 1977, I think – to about 1979 when the Government changed, which was the election of the Olsen Government.

**Right, good. So can you recall what South Australian society was like at the time? You would have been picking this up in your social planner job in DCW. What sort of things can you remember?**

It was a time of very rapid change. There was a lot of optimism, there was a sense of social experimentation, there was a sense that South Australia was the leading government in Australia. For example, I think that if you were in a department such as Foreign Affairs and said you were going back to work in the State Government bureaucracy now – I'm talking in 2008 – people would have looked at you in disbelief. In actual fact, in 1976 it was actually seen to be quite a stylish thing to be doing because South Australia had a real reputation as being the trendsetter, the fashion leader, in social policy and general sort of savvy government interventions.

**And what were some of the issues coming out of your social planning that you can recall?**

Well, there's one issue which I should mention, which is an aside which could be of interest, because one of the things that people say to me was that being around at that time, 'What exposure did you have to the Stolen Generation?' The answer was absolutely nil, and when I look back on it it's quite an interesting exercise because the Department I think may have been called, shortly before I joined it, the Department of Social Welfare and Aboriginal Affairs. And I joined in say approximately 1976, which would have been right at the tail end of some of the grimmest and most difficult periods of that Stolen Generation experience. In

**Dennis RYAN**

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practice, and looking back on it, there was a sense of denial and withdrawal from the area which was quite dramatic. Departments of Aboriginal Affairs were being set up, and it was almost as though the old establishment of the Department of Social Welfare and Aboriginal Affairs had a collective exercise in amnesia when it came to the sort of situation. The only reason I say that was because a couple of times I spoke to experienced, senior people at the time in the Department and I remember when one raised the issue of Aboriginality and the need for that in community development and social planning work, that type of thing, there was really – and this is hindsight judgment – there was almost a sort of ‘We don’t go there any more’ type of attitude and one had the distinct impression there was a sort of sense of suppression of memory. The state welfare department, which had become the Department for Community Welfare, had really turned its eyes in another direction and did not really want to know about that problem.

**Interesting.**

So if you needed to talk – this is aside again – a guy like Andrew Hall would be quite interesting to discuss that with because he did a lot of work on that subsequently.

**Okay.**

That’s all hindsight because I really was not aware of it at the time. Our exposure to Aboriginal issues was virtually minimal.

**Now, the wider community, the non-Aboriginal people, what was the social planning and the Department trying to do there, that is those people who were needing help, if you like?**

It was very proactive and the atmospherics of it were we are moving away from residual welfare, casework-type models – you know, the traditional if I can call ‘middle-aged, female social worker sort of looking after’ – and we are moving much more at this time into an interventionist model, a lot of use of the Chicago School social work models – I’m trying to remember the names now, but social action, empowering communities, creating networks of community groups. There were things called Community Council for Social Developments, there were a very

**Dennis RYAN**

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vigorous distribution of a set of local welfare offices in each area, so there were probably in Adelaide I suspect probably in the order of 25 different local areas, and the vision promulgated by Ian Cox at the time was that these welfare offices should become engines of community development and community empowerment within their own areas.

**So this wasn't just a deficit model; it's really going above and beyond that.**

No, it was quite proactive, influenced, as I say, by a lot of work in Chicago and a lot of work that had come from British – it was the sort of renaissance: Social Administration was introduced as a course at Flinders at much the time, and that saw itself as a somewhat superior course to, for example, the old Social Work course at Adelaide Uni, so there was a real sense of quite aggressive interventions.

**So you had Michael Court and people like Ray Brown as well up at Flinders?**

Ray Brown was up at Flinders, yes, he was the professor at Flinders.

**Now, this background must have alerted you to some link with the Premier's Department. So you said you applied for the job – – –.**

The Premier's Department was seen to be the élite department at that stage. The Premier's Department was rapidly strengthening. I think Bill Voyzey had set up the – what was it originally called? –

**Policy Secretariat.**

– Policy Secretariat, still relatively-small in modern terms, I mean compared with current cabinet offices, *et cetera*, but it was young, it was seen to be innovative. The Premier himself was seen to be strongly interventionist; there was a sense that the Premier's Department was there to help other departments. Treasury at that stage was very much a bookkeeping and a financial compliance operation, quite small, and most policy and strategy was generated from Premier's.

**So this attracted you.**

Yes. It was clearly the place to be. And there were equivalent units in the Health Department, I think there was Michael Forwood's operation, the Health Department.

**Dennis RYAN**

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There were four or five. The Monarto Development Commission, of course, was operating at this stage. So there were clusters of what I call 25 to 35-year-olds in the Government, right, who really had their eyes on the far horizon. And there was Bert Surman I think was running the Monarto Development Commission –

**Social .....**

– Social – and there was a lot of emphasis. A lot of rivalry, but it was pretty positive stuff in the sense that people were really thinking that they were going to change the world in a significant way.

**So you arrived in the Premier's Department. What was your initial impression – well, initial and after a few months – about the Department?**

Well, the initial impression was Bruce Guerin was very dominant and had a set of people around him. Andrew Strickland was there at that stage. Jeff Walsh was about to arrive; I think I arrived pretty much about the same time as Jeff did. Graham Foreman of course was quite influential. There were a group of very bright, young people who were really thinking long-term and strategically and attempted to reframe and were very influential. I don't think the senior bureaucracy welcomed us, but we certainly had access to senior bureaucracy's and ministers' offices with a degree of familiarity which is surprising when one looks back on it. And there was a Cabinet comment system, which was quite influential, probably was considered by the people who were running it more influential than in practice it probably was, but there was no doubt that Cabinet comments were prepared and discussed in Cabinet in contravention to the ministerial submission, which I think probably earned us some enmity in the bureaucracy but again quite influential.

The other thing I should mention was – this is a personal note – that I was co-located, because there was quite rapid growth in the place, in the middle of the Women's Advisory Unit under Deborah McCulloch, and that had a series of quite interesting personal situations being immersed – with Andrew Bishop, I might add – in the middle of about as strong a group of women as you'd ever strike in a long day's march, at the very height of their powers and influence.

**Dennis RYAN**

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**Very good. And we haven't talked about Don Dunstan yet, but what was your sense of the link with Don?**

The links with Don were quite carefully-managed. They were managed primarily by Bruce Guerin. Graham Inns was head of the Department at that stage, I think, for most of the time. Graham Inns, Hedley Bachmann, Bruce; but Bruce really operated with very much a relatively open door policy to Don. One wonders at times whether he mightn't have exaggerated exactly how open a door it was. Who was the chief executive assistant at the time?

**With Don?**

With Don.

**It might have been Stephen Wright, or Bruce was actually in a dual role.**

Yes. So it was a very unusual role for a public servant and there were eyebrows raised up and down the bureaucracy at the degree of overtly-political, and if you run through the Hansards there would have been some fairly solid criticism of that in the Hansards: it was inappropriate for a public service role to become that politicised.

**The dual role, yes.**

Probably an example of what was to become much more widespread in the '80s and '90s.

**Yes. And did you get any sense of Don's style and reform view and the element of freedom that gave you and your operations?**

My sense was – I probably only spoke to Don probably half a dozen times in my whole period there. There was a sense of reverence and a slight sense of awe in the man, he did tend to conjure that up (laughs) in those around him. He was actually not an easy man to have light conversation with. I found the times I was actually chatting with him he didn't have what I call a light Australian banter; he tended to actually be somewhat – you know, you listened to his opinions respectfully. The times I briefed him on working matters, and I'm thinking of one which, oddly enough, related to law of the sea which was something that I was not expert on but I knew I had to brief him on, and it was a Commonwealth draft treaty which the

**Dennis RYAN**

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States had to comment on and he was taking it away to a Premiers' Conference. I spent about two weeks absolutely immersing myself in it because I knew this was relatively-important and I didn't have strong background in the area, so I really worked at it. And I got there – I think I was there with Bruce Guerin – and we were ushered into it, and I remember starting to rather laboriously come out with this briefing and suddenly realising that Dunstan knew everything that I knew about this particular area and to a power of about three times, and thinking, 'How did he possibly know that?' I mean, it wasn't as if it was front and central to a state government's premier. But the mind was sensational, the mind was seriously good. He got told something once and you got half the sentence out and you might as well shut up then because he'd already grasped your point and moved on and probably interpreted it at about two or three levels beyond which you were capable. So I was pretty impressed, I was pretty impressed.

**So you mentioned earlier on you were doing some work on the Community Development Review with David Corbett. What was that about?**

There was conflict that developed really between the Premier's Department and particularly I think Andrew Strickland, who had come across from DIRD<sup>1</sup> and was rather suspicious of Ian Cox's initiatives in setting up these Community Councils for Social Development, and Andrew was of the view that these were dangerous meddling. Andrew was of the view, I that it was an attempt by the State Government to create a welfare-based initiative that was not going to do much good. It muddied the water between the Federal Government, the State Government and local government. Given the fact we'd got three tiers and whether we needed the *three* tiers was a matter of debate, but you had this injection of this kind of quasi-state sphere which seemed to run parallel and in opposition to local government and simply confuse matters. I've paraphrased that a little bit, but it'll be interesting to see whether Andrew would express it the same way. He was supported very much in that by Ian McPhail, who I understand is still – I saw him cited in the paper the

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<sup>1</sup> DIRD – Department of Industry and Regional Development.

**Dennis RYAN**

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other day, so he's still obviously going round – and he was also supported in it by Jim Hullick, who was the Secretary of the Local Government Association. They were very suspicious of these Community Councils for Social Development which had been structured around the DCW district offices.

At the same time you had the Social Security Department. The Commonwealth Social Security Department had set up what they called Regional Councils for Social Development, right, and there had been too many tomato bushes planted, as it were, in terms of this whole community development, and the decision was made to bring David Corbett in and to try and get David to actually sit over the top of a committee that would rationalise this proliferation of community consultation entities. In practice, I think that what happened was that it was essentially putting up the roadblocks for what was called in those days DCW, Department for Community Welfare, in order that enough was enough. They brought out a report, it was a report of the Community Development Committee – quite frankly, I've forgotten the precise recommendations of the report, but it was essentially to round up these DCW entities and to bring local government and to recognise local government – you know, to recognise the legitimacy of local government and in some ways to placate local government, who'd got their noses out of joint.

**And can you recall how Ian Cox reacted to all of this?**

Oh, they were very defensive and pretty aggressive about it, because I can remember there was a lot of hurt feelings about it.

**What happened to the Community Councils?**

I think they may have continued on for a while. I don't know when they actually died out, George, to be quite blunt, but I think it would have been in the early '80s. I don't think they were aborted or blown up or anything, but I think they just lost momentum and I think they've gone away now. I've never heard of them for a while.

**I've got a note that you also worked on the Freedom Of Information: was it a working party or committee?**



**Dennis RYAN**

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It was a working party. We had Attorney-General's, I think Anne Rein might have been from Attorney-General's, I'm not [sure].

**She worked for Peter Duncan.**

Yes, that's right. That tended to be an interesting exercise because there was a strong push [for], and it was quite a strong push for quite radical, freedom of information laws which was coming from I think it was Anne and there was another woman and I've lost the memory of the name, but they were pushing very strongly for quite radical freedom of information.

**It wasn't Margaret Doyle?**

No, but Margaret Doyle was involved – well, I had dealings with Margaret Doyle, was very impressed by her – but this one was more from Duncan's political side of things. There tended to be a fair bit of conflict on it, right, because even though Premier's Department was a progressive place it was still a core government agency, and core government agencies are quite anxious when freedom of information comes up because they can smell trouble. We did get a compromise report out which was quite well-received, it proposed modest but reasonable freedom of information reforms, I think they were enacted in the early '80s; they have been since considerably extended upon, but it was really the first time – certainly in South Australia, and I think federally – that freedom of information had actually been really recognised as some sort of basic citizens' right.

**Was there some overseas link with this, like somebody had done it somewhere, like the Ombudsman, or ---?**

It was right through the Scandinavian countries, of course, and Brits were sort of fooling with it. But we were fairly early in the piece there. As I say, looking at, for example, the more recent legislation – because I'm the freedom of information person in this agency now – it was pretty humble beginnings; but the recognition of a principle was there and once the principle was recognised there's just been a progressive extension of the process.

**Were there any other major projects you were working on or linked with?**

**Dennis RYAN**

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Well, I was talking about that review of DFE, but I'm just trying to remember whether that was ---.

**Department of Further Education, yes.**

General comment on health, education and welfare, just sort of looking at that whole area.

**So you had a portfolio, if you like?**

Yes, a portfolio, but it was kind of human services areas rather than pipes and wires or law and order, and basically a fair bit of Cabinet commenting and *ad hoc* committee work. For example, there used to be a thing called the old folks' home at Magill, it was Bill McCoy was chairman of a committee which looked at that, which was finally agreed that it be closed down. It was an interesting old facility. So that type of work, sort of one-off work.

**Just reflecting on the methodologies of the time, like there was a lot of talk in the texts and that about policy development processes, and you've probably done a lot of work since then, but just reflecting on the methodologies and the approaches, the overlay was social reform –**

Yes.

**– but just thinking about how you went about it, was there anything particular about that or just fairly standard?**

It's interesting. There was a lot of talk about policy, 'policy' was the in word at that stage. In practice, policy is a very diffuse concept. The argument is that it's usually sort of part-evidence, part-hunch, right, and part-instinct driven by ideological interpretation. And I think that, when I look back on that time, there was actually an increased attempt to draw on particular areas like sociology and anthropology and research. The one that I think *you* were more closely involved in was the Royal Commission for the Non-Medical Use of Drugs –

**Yes.**

– and that was one of the major projects of the area in those days, and there was a substantial attempt to generate an evidence-based case which would argue for a

**Dennis RYAN**

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more rational treatment of a drug like marijuana. In practice, evidence takes you so far but then instinct and ideological persuasion cuts in. We were certainly probably the best-educated generation of policy advisers to that point, whereas in most departments most of the seniors would have either had directly professional qualifications – doctors, lawyers or whatever it may be – or they had come through the administrative ranks, whereas here you had a set of people most of whom had honours degrees or the equivalent and often in what I call the soft, emerging disciplines of economics, humanities, those types of areas, who were throwing around literature in a way that I think the outlying departments found a bit bemusing. So there was a sense that we were policy wonks, but I don't think that there was a systematic – and I don't think it's ever been; policy is always a very, very broad church in terms of intellectual concepts.

**And there wasn't any sense of this fitting into some overall strategy?**

Oh, there was a sense of it fitting into a Northern European strategy which was probably exemplified by – well, written to a certain extent, but also the Germans and the Danish, you know, that the state was an agent for good. There was a strong welfarism which really only broke in the early 1980s.

If I can summarise it, the intellectual high ground was commanded by the left. If you take the Chicago School stuff and those types of ideas, they were starting to emerge but they were still locked away in the universities, and the struggle was really between the bright young things who had been trained up in and tended to look very favourably on things such as Fabianism and the guy who's the father of the present British Foreign Minister, what's his name –

**Miliband, Ralph, yes.**

– Miliband, and those sorts of characters, they were the bee's knees, the opposition was almost a rusted-on conservatives of a Liberal Country League mode, who [were] really probably most exemplified by Harold Salisbury and the big conflict over the Moratorium, [and there was no doubt that people saw the world through blue – – –](#). And the modern economic conservative notion of pulling government

**Dennis RYAN**

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back and letting market – that wasn't on our scenario. We probably did, every now and again, act as a brake on some of the excesses of over-enthusiastic – but we were still pretty much left of centre. We were pre-Thatcher and we hadn't really thought through what Thatcher meant.

**Yes. She'd emerge late in the '70s, yes.**

Yes.

**Did her thing after. Just reflecting on change processes, again you've had a lot of experience over the years in the public service, in that time did you get any sense of anything particular going on – like obviously Don Dunstan and his political leadership, if you like; but you had the Premier's Department, the Policy Division, the other ministers, some individual movers and shakers and then of course the young Turks. So how did you reflect on all that? Did it fit together or was it in conflict sometimes?**

It was certainly in conflict, it was certainly in conflict. Up until then, a government such as the South Australian Government entity was essentially five or six big pillars. Let's cite the Highways Department; – I'm going to call these out of the top of my head – I can't remember what it was called, but I think it was called the Department of Public Health or might have been called the Hospitals Department at that stage, I'm not quite sure; welfare wasn't all that influential; education certainly was; Crown Law was small but to be taken deeply seriously, you did not mess with their territory; Treasury was relatively a bureau; and the big engineering departments, the E&WS,<sup>2</sup> the railways had already gone at this stage, but certainly PBD, Public Buildings Department; there would have been about six or seven of these senior mandarins and, in a very clubby and Adelaideway way, they ran the State. Ministers would come and go, and obviously a man like Tom Playford was an immensely powerful man, but basically you knew your place. Adelaide in the 1970s was still essentially a very conservative town, things like there were still remnants of the Orange and the Green and fading fast but there were still remnants of the Orange and the Green –

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<sup>2</sup> E&WS – Engineering and Water Supply.

**Dennis RYAN**

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**The Methodists and the Catholics, yes.**

– the Methodists and the Catholics, that’s right. There was still a sense of certainly clubs, things like the Naval and Military, the RSL<sup>3</sup> was very important, even the Freemasons were still relatively important. This group which we’re talking about and which I think I was part of were coming in very fast against that old, ruling-class, private school base. Mind you, in fairness, just reflecting back on that, there are about five or six government schools which probably provide better education than the best of the private schools. The best science teachers, for example, were at places like Henley High and Norwood High and Unley High and Brighton High, and that was even recognised by some of the private school characters. So you’re talking about a state that’s under major influences of change. You still had a huge blue-collar workforce and there was still a rusted-on Labor vote which was almost complete with cloth caps and riding bikes to large factories, and that really only evaporated from about 1986 onwards, and if you look at the blue-collar workforce in Adelaide, and it was the rapid onset of about the economic reforms which were associated with the Labor Government of ’85 onwards, the Hawke–Keating, and they took a blowtorch to that. And the emptying of the factories, which you still see in the mid-west of Adelaide was spectacular. I think our employment of what I’d call traditional, blue-collar factory workers dropped somewhere from about 110 to 75,000, and that was before the State Bank. A lot of that damage occurred regardless of the State Bank. So there was that sense that there were two competing élites: there was a competing élite of the Labor Party, which was still working class but led by the savvy, smart Hopgoods and Sumners and Dunstans, *et cetera*, and particularly Dunstan – and don’t forget they brought Len King in.

**Hugh Hudson, yes.**

And Hugh Hudson from the University of Adelaide. Because bloody Walsh, old Frank Walsh, had created majorities, I think, absolute majorities back in the ’60s, if

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<sup>3</sup> RSL – Returned Services League (1965–1990) or Returned and Services League (from 1990).

**Dennis RYAN**

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I remember right, but had never been able to actually work out how to turn them into power. I might have that wrong.

**Yes.**

Whereas Dunstan just took to that like a duck to water. So you had these sorts of competing élites and there was a lot of tension, a lot of tension, and people didn't like if you said that you were pro Dunstan. There was a lot of innuendo and you were both fashionable but not liked all that much. It was still a very conservative society.

**Is there anything you wanted to cover that you don't think we've covered just to talk about?**

The only other thing I'd say that was still very big in people's minds was the outing of the Whitlam Government in 1975 and the Vietnam War experiences were pretty influential for the people who we're talking about. The Vietnam thing conditioned them to a somewhat anti-Establishment orientation and it was quite a cheeky, anti-Establishment workforce with an enormous velocity of change in gender relationships which can't be overestimated. There was social turmoil in terms of the way people related to each other. Blokes were still pretty much in charge, but it was right on the edge of breaking wide open and there was a lot of experimentation.

The other issue was that there was a sense that what had happened with the dismissal of Whitlam was [intolerable]. It's curious, because when you look at the Fraser Government the Fraser Government continued to be a heavy spending government in many of the same processes that Whitlam continued to spend. I mean there was a little bit of political play about, but Fraser's Government was probably closer to Whitlam's Government than the current Rudd Government is to Whitlam's Government. The momentum of the growth in the government sector was continuing on apace. But there was a lot of sense of outrage that Labor had been duded unfairly and there was a sense that that was pretty important in making people's minds. That's about all. I mean, you could go on and on for a long period of time.

**Dennis RYAN**

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**And how would you locate your experience, overall, looking at your public service career?**

I think I wouldn't have missed it for quids. It was an exciting time. The people you dealt with, they were interesting and the people were experimenting with different lifestyles. There was a lot of carnage, a lot of wreckage, in terms of marriages and families and all those sorts of things, but if I had my life over again, no, I'd certainly live it. We got terrific experience at high levels, at levels which you would not normally get. I think we were then subsequently identified in our subsequent careers as part of a generation that was looked upon with a certain degree of scepticism and suspicion, but that's one of those things: you get opportunities, you pay costs for those opportunities. The subsequent way that South Australia turned out was – we certainly didn't know it at the time – but, as I say, from about 1985 South Australia had a knee-buckling set of economic changes instituted by Canberra and then, just as it was about to straighten its back from that, got *crunched* by the State Bank disaster and that was a savage disaster in terms of the exercise. Overall, no complaints.

**Very good.**

Never complain and never explain.

**Thanks, Dennis, that's been good.**

END OF INTERVIEW.