

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

LC Members Ante-Room, Parliament House, Sydney Monday, 16 July 2018

The discussion commenced at 11.10 a.m.

Present

Mr David Blunt

Dr David Clune

Mr Robert Webster

Dr CLUNE: How did you become a member of Parliament?

Mr WEBSTER: I became a farmer by accident. I was supposed to be a lawyer but being an only child of relatively elderly parents I started doing law at Sydney University in 1970 and not long after my father had a stroke. We only had a small farm with no farm hands and basically my dad said, "I can't pay someone to run the farm and keep you at university at the same time so you will have to come home and look after things until I get better." So I went back to the farm but he did not get better. I ended up doing a wool classing certificate instead of a law degree. But I was always interested in the law, in history and in English—which was my main subject at school—and it did not take long before I got interested in politics. The Whitlam Government was elected and did a lot of things which people in the country did not like so as a consequence I joined the then Country Party.

I was elected to my first position, which was a director of the Carcoar Pastures Protection Board, in the early 1970s and I enjoyed it. My dad died when I was 21 so I took over full responsibility for the farm and my mother. I got married a couple of years later. Gradually I became more interested in politics and got involved with the local branch. Then the opportunity to run for the Crookwell Council came up so I ran and was elected. Our local member was Ron Brewer, an old soldier settler from Marulan—a bit of a crusty old character but a good local member who was well liked and who was a genuine character. He was elected in the Askin Government victory in 1965. Prior to that Goulburn had been a Labor seat for a long time. Father and son, Jack and Laurie Tully were the members.

When Laurie retired it was interesting. They had a three-way contest in Goulburn between Ernie McDermott who was the Labor mayor and Brian Keating who was a local dentist who was the Liberal candidate. Keating and McDermott who were both Catholics got into a huge blue over State aid to Catholic schools. Ron Brewer, being a farmer and a Protestant, picked up a lot of votes from people who got sick and tired of all the hoo-hah. He ran a very good campaign and he became a bit of a local hero just before the election because a bushfire went through and there was a great photo of Ron taken in a pair of overalls, just covered in soot, standing on this burnt ground. Anyway he won. Obviously he needed Liberal preferences. But both Keating and McDermott were very much better known than Ron in Goulburn, but in the end he won. He held the seat for 19 years.

Ron was renowned as a bit of pugilist. At one of his elections he ran against a train driver. In those days there were lots of train drivers in Goulburn. This guy said something about Ron's family and Ron ordered him out onto the bowling green at the workers club and flattened him which, naturally, increased his majority as a consequence—at least that is what the local history says anyway. Ron was the member and by this stage I had become the chairman of the electorate council.

He was very keen on me being his successor and then all of a sudden he went a bit cool and decided that he was going to put his 23-year-old son, Peter, up against me to have some family succession. That turned the pre-selection into a bit of a contest. They work on a compulsory preferential system. There were another two candidates, one of whom made a terrible speech so he got no first preference votes. The other candidate, who was not a bad guy but who did not have a lot of support, got three first preference votes. I got 39, Brewer got 39 and when they distributed the preferences I got two and he got one, and I won by 41 votes to 40 which did not please old Ron very much. He sort of roughly shook my hand and took off. We thought we had about eight months until the election. Pre-selection I think was in October or November 1983. We started getting ready. We shot the television advertisement and a few things.

Nick Greiner was giving Neville Wran a bit of a hard time at that stage. So Nifty Nev decided to pull a swiftie. In those days, obviously, the Premier decided when the election was to be held. So he called the election for 24 March 1984. I had only just been pre-selected when the election was called and it was a three-week campaign, the shortest you could possibly have. I needed a campaign director in a hurry so I got hold of my old mate Duncan Gay and we rented a shop in Goulburn. We brought in two stretchers from the shearers' huts and we camped in the back of this room for three weeks. I did nothing but walk the streets of Goulburn and talk to the media. Duncan did a great job running the campaign. I was up against Bob Stephens who had taken Ron Brewer to 700 votes at the election before. I think Bob was an employee at the Police Academy, and he had a lot of support. His wife, Ursula, subsequently became a New South Wales senator.

Anyway, it was a good contest. We had a couple of Independents as well as Bob and me. I won by 1,320, I think it was. But the funny thing was, about two weeks—it would be 10 days into the campaign—Ron Brewer turned up and said, "I think you're going to win. I'll have some photos taken with you now." So we got a few photos taken and did an advertisement and so on, although I do not know how much that helped. After that he was fine, old Ron. So we won and it was good. I became the member for Goulburn. And then, as happens with political careers, there were lots of ups and downs. It was maybe 18 months or two years into my first term and I became the shadow Minister for Local Government and Planning.

And then, of course, I was expecting to be a Minister after the election in 1988 and the Nationals did not win as many seats as the Liberals so the ratio changed and I missed out. Wal Murray's mate Matt Singleton bit the dust about 12 months later and I replaced him as a Minister. It was probably a good thing in many ways that I had that bit of time. I was Wal's parliamentary secretary and I had a couple of interesting projects.

He gave me a project to solve which I did in the end—the first Government House site. They were going to build a skyscraper there when Nifty was Premier. They started digging around and found the ruins of the first Government House. They did not know what to do with it. Nifty said, "Cover it over" so they put a sheet of bitumen over the top of it and it was just sitting there as a vacant block. There had been a couple of proposals put to the Government to build skyscrapers on the old State Super building site. There were a series of small office buildings as well. NSW Farmers had one, and so on. So Sid Londish and the State Authorities Superannuation Board got together and put up a proposal. What we did was negotiate with them. The Department of Planning owned the terraces there which had heritage orders on them. There was a laneway called Raphael Place which went through the middle of the buildings. There were five landowners; I remember that. We had to negotiate a solution, which in the end we did. The Department of Planning sold the air space over the terraces. We bought the laneway from the Sydney City Council. We got approval for those two towers—Governor Phillip and Governor Macquarie. The Governor Phillip Tower is cantilevered over the terraces to keep them in place.

Part of it was that we build a museum to commemorate the first Government House. That came out of the proceeds and the rest of the proceeds went to the Department of Planning which were invested. They still provide funding for the heritage restoration grants that are given out every year in the budget. So it was quite a good solution. Wal gave me that as a project and we got that up. That gave me a bit of an indication of what you can do if you are nice to and occasionally bully public servants into action. Then Matt Singleton got himself into trouble and I became the Minister for Administrative Services and Assistant Minister for Transport.

Dr CLUNE: Can you tell us how you subsequently became a member of the Legislative Council?

Mr WEBSTER: Prior to the 1991 election Nick Greiner kept one of his election promises, which he should not have kept, which was to reduce the size of the House from 109 to 99. In doing that he almost sealed his fate. The seats of Goulburn, Burrinjuck, Bathurst, Camden—I think it was called Southern Highlands then—all came into play and one seat was eliminated which was the seat of Goulburn. I had a bit over half of the old seat of Goulburn in Southern Highlands, which was John Fahey's seat, and then bits of it went into Bathurst, Burrinjuck and Lachlan I think.

On paper I probably had a stronger claim to the seat than John Fahey but they called the seat Southern Highlands, not Goulburn, which we tried to get. But at the time the Liberal Party and the National Party put in separate submissions. I honestly do believe Nick. I do not think Nick Greiner knew what the Liberal Party was doing. I think its plan was to take me out of action which it succeeded in doing. In the end the National Party gave way. They did a deal with the Liberals where we got an extra seat in the upper House, which was supposed to go to me, and Fahey got to be the member for Southern Highlands which included the City of Goulburn obviously.

Of course, I had to win a pre-selection; it was not automatic. There were a lot of people in the National Party who were very unhappy about what had occurred and who reckoned I should have stood against John Fahey and so on, but clearly you cannot have two Cabinet Ministers standing against one another. I had to win a pre-selection which was not easy, but I did. I ended up number two on the ticket for the Legislative Council in 1991. Of course, we almost lost the election.

Dr CLUNE: What was the Council like when you came in? How did it differ from the Assembly?

Mr WEBSTER: It was a very different place to the lower House. It was a much less combative environment. It used to get a bit warm from time to time and obviously we would ham it up a bit to wake people up. I quite enjoyed it. I could never see myself being a Legislative Council member and not being a Minister. I really loved having my own electorate. I really enjoyed the electorate work. That was one of the hardest things in making the change, that you lost that connection to the local community. I know you are supposed to represent all of the people of New South Wales. That is true but it is not quite the same.

Some people really enjoy the upper House. If they are policy orientated or whatever they get more time to do that sort of stuff. But I think if you are a grassroots politician it would be quite difficult, particularly if you have been in the lower House. There have been a few who have made the switch both ways. Egan did. There were a few who have gone in the other direction. That was the main thing. Another thing was the length of the debates because there were no time limits.

It was just a different and slower pace—more genteel, more polite and less vitriol, although occasionally it flared up. That is probably the difference and the fact that your constituency is the whole State but that is like a cop-out really.

As a Minister I was very busy, especially in those last three years where I had responsibility for planning and housing. I had the Olympic site to deal with, lots of planning issues and the HomeFund scheme. I never really saw myself as a legislator but I did have some really important legislation during that time.

Dr CLUNE: After the 1991 election the Government was dependent on the Independents in the lower House.

Mr WEBSTER: We became dependent when we lost the The Entrance after the Court of Disputed Returns. Windsor was much more reasonable in those days and he basically voted with the Coalition. He even attended party meetings in the early days before he fell out with various people. He became very bitter and twisted towards the party but he was there. We could rely on his vote pretty much all the time. The other Independents were tricky to deal with. John Hatton was an interesting character. He was probably an old-style Labor guy philosophically. Hatton was tricky. He was quite a good man, I think. He achieved some good things. He pushed very hard for the police royal commission and eventually got that but he did not have a lot of flexibility. You basically knew what he was going to do and he stuck to it. Peter Macdonald was a very smart guy. I liked Peter a lot. He was a nice man who was very smart. I do not know what he was. I suppose you would say that today he probably would have fitted into The Greens I suspect. He was very environmentally focused and so on but again he was a good man.

And then Clover Moore. The present Government appointed me to the Central Sydney Planning Committee. I sit on that and I have done so for a few years so I see Clover every month. She and I always got on but I mean she is such a politician. I'll tell you a story about the HomeFund scheme as an example. It was set up by Neville Wran and Percy Allan, the head of Treasury. Percy described it as the magic pudding. However, it was not designed for a recession with high interest rates. All of these people who started on low repayments all of a sudden went to big repayments, and they could not afford it. So we had to do something about helping save these people's homes. Fahey said to me, "You have to find the money for the rescue package inside the housing portfolio." Fortunately, there were a few hollow logs there: the Rental Bond Scheme, the Building Workers' Long Service Scheme and a couple of others. I think we found about \$400 million that we could access. Of course, the Independents wanted people to be given more money. John Fahey said, "If they want more money, it will have to come out of their public housing budget." I knew I was not going to get anywhere with Hatton or Macdonald. We had Windsor, I needed Clover's vote.

It was very funny. I knew how big Clover's public housing budget was; it was the second largest in the State. We were spending a lot of money at that time building accommodation for people with AIDS. She had the second largest public housing budget of \$700 million and she had one HomeFund borrower, we found out, in her entire electorate. So I said to her, "Clover, it's like this, I need your support. You have one HomeFund borrower and you have the second biggest public housing budget. John Fahey said I have to get the money from somewhere, so if extra funding is needed it will come out of your public housing budget." She said, "I'll think about it." It might have been 15 minutes later that the phone rang and we got the bill through as we wanted with Clover's vote. Very pragmatic. I always got on well with Clover and still do. She is about the longest serving politician in the State, if not the Commonwealth. She reminded me the other day that we first met at a protest meeting when Barrie Unsworth sacked the Sydney City Council when Doug Sutherland was the mayor. We put on a big turn in the Parliament over that, because he sacked a right-wing Labor lord mayor, which was a fairly radical thing to do, but they had 26 councillors, remember, including Jack Munday, Clover, Frank Sartor, and a real mixture of people. She reminded me that we first met at a protest meeting. It would have been about 1987.

Dr CLUNE: How did the fact that you had to rely on the Independent vote in the lower House affect the position in the Council?

Mr WEBSTER: The upper House was easier because in those days we did not have any Greens. We had Richard Jones and Lis Kirkby, who basically made it their life's work not to get on. They were always blueing with one another. They were notionally Australian Democrats, and then we had Fred and Elaine Nile. We were pretty confident of getting Fred and Elaine with us on almost all things. We only needed their votes to win after 1991.

Dr CLUNE: What was your approach to your role as Deputy Leader of the Government?

Mr WEBSTER: I think when I first came up here we had Ted Pickering, and then Ted fell on his sword over Police Commissioner Tony Lauer. Ted didn't like Tony Lauer. He appointed him, but he didn't like him. I didn't mind Tony, but it was just that time in the Police Force. I knew John Avery quite well, who was

Tony's predecessor. He was a very nice man, John, very strong Christian, and if anything went wrong in the Force, which was often, John just used to resort to getting on his knees, hoping that the Almighty would help because no-one else was going to. I heard great stories from both chiefs of staff. You remember Jim Jolley. Jim was Avery's press man and some of the stories were hair-raising about the drug room and all the carry on that went on. They used to go in there and help themselves; it was like a supermarket. I think something needed to be done with the Force.

At one stage there were four Ministers in the upper House, which broke with convention because in the past there were only usually two. They were all good Ministers. Ted was the leader and then he fell on his sword as I said and Hannaford became the leader. I think there was a bit of sourness there because Virginia Chadwick thought she should have been the leader.

The interesting thing is that I was always probably philosophically more a middle of the road liberal than I was a right-wing zealot. In fact, most of the National Party members were like that ideologically. We had a couple of guys that were probably on the right wing in terms of their social views and so on, people like Ian Causley and Gerry Peacocke, but the majority of the National Party members were pretty much middle of the road liberal. They might have been a bit more conservative on social issues because that reflected their constituency but, by and large, there was never really much philosophical argy-bargy in the Cabinet, even in the party room, to a great extent, between Nats and Liberals. The Nats all had enormous respect for Nick and I think also for John Fahey, Gerry Peacocke and Joe Schipp blew up when they lost their ministerial portfolios, but that was not a Liberal Party-National Party thing. That was just a couple of grumpy old folks. I shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but they were grumpy.

Dr CLUNE: How did you get on with the other side?

Mr WEBSTER: I got on all right. When I first got into the Parliament, Neville Wran never spoke to anyone, really. He spoke to no-one on our side and not too many on his own side, so he told me after he left. I used to say hello to him when he was Premier and of course he would ignore me. I always admired Wran immensely as a parliamentarian. He was the best performer on the floor of the House I have ever seen—better than Keating or Howard or Hawke. He was amazing. He was obviously a leading QC, but he used to entertain us almost daily. I was at a function one night and Neville was there. I said, "Hello, Mr Wran." He said, "Hello, son", in that raspy voice. I said, "You spoke to me." He said, "How are you going? I followed your career a bit." I said, "That's good. How come you didn't speak to me when I was in the Parliament?" He said, "I didn't speak to you blokes and I didn't speak to most of the sods on my side either." That was Neville. He was amazing.

I ended up with a few good mates on the Labor benches. Interestingly, in the upper House I always got on well with Michael Egan. I liked Egan. He was a very good parliamentarian, very smart, good Minister, good Treasurer. Good sense of humour too. He always referred to the Left as the "comms". He was a good hater. When John Johnson was trying to get Michael Knight into the right-wing faction, I'll never forget Egan and Brian Langton coming out of the meeting absolutely furious. They didn't want him in there for love or money, and they were right, of course. I liked Egan.

I always got on very well with Meredith Burgmann and Annie Symonds. Even Franca Arena, who was pretty erratic. Meredith and Ann Symonds I really liked; they were always good fun. I am not too keen on some of the others.

I remember Obeid. I never really spoke to him. I would sort of nod to everybody but I never really spoke to him. He never really participated. He used to turn up late for question time and sit in the back row and chat to someone. He used the place like an office. I never, ever remember him making a speech the whole time I was a Minister in the upper House. It was just a means to an end, I think. Obeid was very interesting. As I say, he was like a ghost: he was there but he wasn't there. The other one, of course, was Macdonald, whom I did get on quite well with.

Dr CLUNE: What about the crossbenchers, how did you find them?

Mr WEBSTER: Well, as I said, I always got on well with Fred and Elaine Nile. Elaine was a nice woman. Fred was a very pragmatic Christian. I think he respected the fact that the government of the day had been elected and, therefore, unless it was part of their mandate that went totally against his Christian beliefs and so on, he basically believed that they should support the government of the day—which is what I believe. I have to say, I had no trouble with the Niles. I always got on quite well with Lis Kirkby. She had things that she was interested in; she had quite good staff; her speeches were generally reasonably well thought through. Richard Jones was a different character. He came into the House one night and all he was wearing was a fig leaf—seriously. He brought a dingo into the House on another occasion. He was a funny fellow. He was quite an amiable guy to get along with, but he had some very unusual views. Again, I suppose, in the modern era he

probably would have been in the Greens rather than in the Democrats. Lis was more in the Don Chipp style. You wouldn't describe Richard Jones as being like Don Chipp, that's for sure, but he was a funny guy.

Dr CLUNE: Did you have regular meetings with the crossbenchers? Did you negotiate with them?

Mr WEBSTER: Yes, we did. We tried to. I think we probably could have done it better. As I say, most of the issues with the crossbench were in the lower House. John Fahey appointed Garry West, who was a good mate of mine and a reasonable person, to negotiate with them. He was a good parliamentarian, had been here a long time and understood the ways of the House. When Tim Moore had to resign, Garry took over as Leader of the House and that's how we got most of that tough legislation through: the HomeFund bill, the corporatisation of Sydney Water, which was the other big one that I put through, and so on.

In the end, we had everyone supporting the corporatisation of Sydney Water except the Labor Party. That was because the unions got to Craig Knowles and said they didn't like the fact that we were reducing jobs. I think Craig did change the legislation when they got into government, slightly. He took some of the independence out of it. That is when we had Jeff Angel from the Total Environment Centre come in and say, "I never thought I'd be supporting a National Party Minister putting legislation through." It has been very enduring, the Sydney Water legislation.

I think the first Green came in at the 1995 election, He was quite a nice guy, Ian Cohen. He was the guy who attacked the nuclear warship on a surfboard. I remember when he came in and Dunc Gay thought he was pretty radical, then Lee Rhiannon came in and Dunc thought that Ian was a conservative.

Dr CLUNE: Was it reasonably easy to negotiate and compromise with the Council crossbenchers to get legislation through?

Mr WEBSTER: Yes, absolutely. As I say, I always felt that Fred's philosophy, which pertained to the Labor Party as well, was that providing it was part of their mandate and so on and it didn't contravene his moral issues he supported the government of the day—which I think the crossbenchers should do.

Dr CLUNE: As a Minister, did you have to deal with the lower House crossbenchers, or did Garry West

Mr WEBSTER: I did. I have given you the example of my dealings with Clover on the HomeFund bill. I suppose the three big pieces of legislation were the Sydney Water corporatisation, the HomeFund bill, and the Adoption Information Bill, although I can't take any credit for originating that. The reform itself, as you will remember, came out of an all-party upper House committee, chaired very well by Max Willis. Eventually they persuaded Fred to change his mind, so they actually had a unanimous report on it. That social issues committee report wasn't ground-breaking in the sense that it was the first time it had been done but obviously what they did was look at the legislation in the United Kingdom and maybe one of the other States. I think we might have been the first State to do it. That is the way committees should work.

It was challenged in the party room, I remember, because there were a number of prominent constituents in the electorates of some of my Liberal colleagues who had adopted children and had decided not to tell their children they were adopted. I remember meeting with a chap and he and his wife had adopted four children back in the 1950s, so his children were in their 40s, and they had never told them. You understand the way the bill operated: the adopted children and their birth parents had access to the files, unless there was a contact veto put on by the individuals. But if the children didn't know they were adopted, then they could theoretically be contacted by their birth parent, and that is what this guy was worried about. He wanted me to change the legislation. I said, "I can't. This legislation is in place around the world. It has been sought after by adopted people and their birth parents for years." He said, "What's your advice?" I said, "Well, if you are as close to your children as you tell me you are, get them in a room and tell them. Explain to them why you didn't tell them." I don't know what he did, but that was my advice to him. I had a big debate with John Laws about it because Lawsy had a few people ring up and say this sort of thing. I said the same to Lawsy and he accepted it.

I still occasionally have someone thank me for it. It is quite interesting. All I did was put it through Parliament. The bill was drafted in Virginia's time as Minister, came out of the upper House, so there was no attribution to Robert Webster other than that I put the legislation through. I was very pleased to do so. On the thirtieth anniversary, I suppose, of the bill going through, the people who had been administering the register invited me to a function to celebrate it.

Dr CLUNE: Do you think better scrutiny of the Executive has resulted with the crossbench having the balance of power?

Mr WEBSTER: I am sure it has on occasion, but I think it depends on the quality of the people and their motivation. If they are trying to get better legislation or better scrutiny, fine, but if they are just pushing

a particular barrow I'm not so keen. In general, I suppose my answer is yes, but I am sure there are some very ugly examples of where they have misused their power for their own ends. Equally, there are probably some good examples of where they have used it beneficially. In principle, I am in favour of a House of review, but I do think there should be some over-riding principles, particularly where a government has gone to the people and obtained a mandate. There was the Federal example of the GST. Many people regarded it as a good reform but then you had the Democrats down there basically castrate the thing. We wouldn't be in the trouble we are in now over the GST if we had been able to get it through in its original form. In the end, it cost the Democrats their existence. Meg Lees did the deal and was never forgiven for it.

Dr CLUNE: Do you think the right balance has been achieved, speaking generally, between the Government's right to legislate and the Council's right to scrutinise?

Mr WEBSTER: It is relative to the motivation of the people who are making the changes. I suppose I am sounding like I am a huge fan of Fred Nile, which I am not particularly, but at least Fred is reasonably consistent about the approach he takes, whereas I am not sure about the crossbench today. You have got some interesting characters there, I understand. I don't know any of them, really, other than Fred.

Dr CLUNE: Another consequence of crossbench control was the number of amendments to bills increased hugely. Do you think that was a positive thing?

Mr WEBSTER: Again, it depends on what they were. I can remember my good friend Duncan Gay was the chairman of committees. There were endless committee debates and divisions going on into the early morning. Were they good amendments or bad amendments? Only history will tell. They were certainly time-consuming and sleep-depriving. As I say, I believe in the committee stage of a bill. I am sure you can achieve sensible and improved amendments. But, again, it depends on people's motivation. Are they there to improve the bill or are they trying to make a point?

It reminds me of the old adjournment debates. We could raise issues with a Minister. I always found them quite useful. Sometimes you'd get some person who would harangue you over something that was not substantial. I always think if you make a reasonable speech, if someone reads it, some public servant or a Minister's staff reads it, it is surprising how things get done, even if they stand up and bag you in the House. I learned that in Opposition. I used to speak a lot in Opposition, raising things for the electorate. I got a lot done for Goulburn in my first term just by being persistent.

Dr CLUNE: New South Wales seems to have coped a lot better with having crossbench balance of power than the Senate has. Have you got any thoughts on why that might be?

Mr WEBSTER: It is interesting. I suppose my thought on that was it is probably to do with the set-up of the Parliament. Everyone says that the Federal Parliament has never worked well since it moved to the top of the hill. They had the old building where they were all jammed in, they had to go to the same toilet and so on, whereas in the new Parliament House they have all got en-suites and suites of offices and everything is spread out. They don't use the bar, they don't seem to eat in the dining room to the same extent, so you don't actually come across your colleagues, whether they are on your side or the other side, as often. At the end of the day, we are all human beings, we are all garrulous creatures. If you form some sort of relationship or friendship with people, it has got to help. Everyone tells me that's the problem in Canberra. I know John Sharp, who was originally in the old Parliament House, said it was so much better because he knew all the Labor guys. It has a mellowing effect, I suppose.

I am sure there would be other reasons. They have got away from the British principle or the original principle of the Senate as the House of review where there was an acceptance that the Government has a mandate to govern—they won't even pass the budget. If a government is elected and produces a budget, surely the government has the right to have its budget passed. They dissect the thing and reject it and so on. I just think it is wrong. There just seems to be a nastiness down there. I think these crossbenchers are outrageous in the Senate. If, for example, the government is elected to introduce a GST and wins, I think they have an obligation to support it. They just seem to say, "Oh, well, the government doesn't have a mandate."

Dr CLUNE: Crossbenchers have a job representing the interests of those who elect them but they also have a duty to the people as a whole. Do you think the right balance has been struck in New South Wales?

Mr WEBSTER: Certainly in the time I was here I think it was. I always found Lis Kirkby to be an honourable person who thought about what she said and did. I never quite worked out where Richard Jones was coming from, but I think at least he was true to his beliefs—he was definitely a greenie. That was his main mission in life. They could be persuaded if they could see something was in the public interest.

Mr BLUNT: You spoke before about the adoption of legislation coming out of the social issues committee inquiry chaired by Max Willis. Did you have any other dealings with parliamentary committees during your time here?

Mr WEBSTER: I did. There was a committee set up to look at Sydney Water. I had some interesting dealings with them. There was a HomeFund committee. That didn't last very long. I remember the committee on Sydney Water became quite political but, at the end of the day, the legislation was so good that it superseded anything that the committee might have done. I changed the CEO of Sydney Water when I became the Minister, which obviously didn't go down well with some people, so there was some reaction to that, bit of leaking and carrying on.

Mr BLUNT: Soon after you retired from the Legislative Council, the then Opposition, led by John Hannaford, and the Government, led by Michael Egan, had that great battle that eventually ended up in the High Court of Australia, the so-called Egan cases. While you were still here, while you were a Minister and the lower House was in that situation where Peter Macdonald, Clover Moore and John Hatton had the balance of power, the lower House made a number of orders for the production of documents from your Government. Do you have any recollections about those matters and how they played out?

Mr WEBSTER: I certainly remember the Egan case. That was very notorious. Nick Greiner and John Fahey were very much sticklers for parliamentary procedure and correctness. So I am sure whatever we were required to do we did. I don't remember that being a big issue. But obviously you have always got the Cabinet-in-confidence or commercial-in-confidence situation. If you are going to do business with the private sector, you have got to have that as the fallback position. You have to hold sovereign responsibility as a government. The Victorian Labor government broke new ground with that freeway contract down there. It cost the people over a billion dollars. You would hope that not too many governments would do that sort of thing. We introduced freedom of information, of course. That was one of Nick Greiner's reforms. It didn't exist before that. It obviously had its restrictions but that was a big step forward.

Mr BLUNT: When you think about some of the members of the Legislative Council with whom you served, who were the MLCs, both in leadership roles and otherwise, who impressed you the most and why?

Mr WEBSTER: I had an enormous amount of time for Virginia Chadwick. She was a very good Minister, a very good person. She was sensible, reasonable, clever, a good Minister. She was a very good Minister for Education. She took over from Terry Metherell—there was work to be done, shall we say? I took over from Virginia in Family and Community Services and she had done a lot of reform because the Labor Party had kept a lot of the welfare services in house. Virginia basically privatised a lot of them out to the various welfare agencies and churches and so on. That caused quite a lot of disruption. I think it probably improved the quality of services. When I came in, we were a year out from an election. Nick Greiner said to me, "I want you to calm the place down, show plenty of humility", and so on. I did my best for a year.

That was an interesting time. We had Juvenile Justice as well. We had to build a juvenile prison because we had those two horrific murders, the Janine Balding and the Anita Cobby murders, and they were all committed by minors. So they had to be incarcerated in a juvenile prison, and there wasn't one that was maximum security. So we ended up building this one up at Mount Penang. In the meantime, we had to keep these boys separate and secure. We put them in the old mental hospital part of Long Bay, which was separate and discrete but very secure.

I remember going out there one day with Michael Yabsley, who was the Corrective Services Minister, to see how they were being cared for. The one thing I discovered was that all of those boys—and there was another boy there who killed his stepfather—were all illiterate, every one of them. We saw their files and they had all started offending at age 10, which is the minimum age that you can record an offence. They had no hope really. They had all been abused. They are still in jail. Horrendous, when you think about it. That was at a time when lots of juvenile offenders were escaping. They literally walked out. Most of these places had no walls or fences or anything. It was an interesting portfolio.

I talked about Ted Pickering before. Ted was a very ethical person. I think he sometimes got carried away or diverted by things that obsessed him. Ted was a bit volatile and used to get himself into trouble by speaking his mind, or whatever, but I quite liked him. I think he was a good Minister. Hannaford was also a good Minister. Virginia Chadwick was excellent. They were the three Ministers while I was there.

We had some good people on our side. Ron Phillips was a good Minister. John Fahey did a particularly good job. I tried to persuade John to use the Olympics in his election ads to remind people that he was the one who won them. He wouldn't do it. He said, "It is politicising the Olympics". Remember that leap and embracing of Rod McGeoch?

On the other side there were some interesting people. I really liked Egan. I always got on well with him. Meredith Burgmann, Ann Symonds, Franca Arena were quite interesting people. I like Annie Symonds; she is a good person.

Mr BLUNT: You have commented very positively on the leadership of Nick Greiner and John Fahey and on the other side Michael Egan, Ted Pickering and John Hannaford. What was it that made them effective leaders?

Mr WEBSTER: I think they were well motivated. I always had a lot of time for Bob Carr. The only thing about Bob was he was terrified of reform. If you remember the circumstances of our losing the election, we won the Olympic Games and we lost the election in 1995 by one seat. We won the two-party preferred vote. Bathurst took three weeks to resolve and the National Party candidate there, Trevor Toole, won the primary vote but Mick Clough won the seat on Green preferences, which was a huge joke because you wouldn't get anyone less green than Mick Clough if you searched the Earth.

Bob Carr had promised to abolish the tolls on the M4 and the M5, which never happened. That helped win Badgerys Creek, Blue Mountains and a couple of others. Anyway, we lost the election. We had won the Olympic Games. So Bob's first task was basically to deliver the Olympics, which they did quite well. He and Mike did quite a good job, I think, on that. Then after the Olympic Games nothing happened in New South Wales for a decade, virtually. The population kept growing, roads got clogged, and so on. Bob proved the adage that a government that does nothing but manages competently, which they did, will last a lot longer than a reformist government. Egan was a good Treasurer. He was probably almost too conservative as a Treasurer. He managed things well. I think Bob was well motivated; Mike Egan was well motivated.

There are many good people in politics. I have always defended MPs when people criticise them. Obviously you get a few bad eggs, but I think most people on both sides of politics are well motivated and go into parliament with the ambition of bettering things for people. Whether you agree with the way they go about it or not is another matter. But I do defend them.

Mr BLUNT: With the benefit of hindsight and all you have done since leaving Parliament, what is your assessment of the Legislative Council and its role today?

Mr WEBSTER: I have changed my mind a few times. I used to be in favour of abolishing the Legislative Council, like a lot of people in the lower House. But I think if you look at the Queensland experience, we are probably better off with a Legislative Council than not having one. I think it does tend to allow time for reflection and can prevent bad decisions being made. It does probably give greater representation to smaller groups in the community that don't feel they are represented by the major parties. All of that is good. But I am still not convinced that the way the Legislative Council is structured is the right way. The main thing I would want to do is make it harder for members to be elected representing tiny minorities.

The thing that I found frustrating with the upper House was not having a constituency to represent. I know you are supposed to represent the whole State. I know they give responsibility to MLCs for Opposition seats and so on, I get all of that, but I think that was probably the hardest thing for me to digest, having been in the lower House and having enjoyed the electorate work so much. In some other States they have provinces in the upper House combining a number of lower House seats. But I doubt there is going to be any reform. No-one is suggesting reform of the upper House, I suppose.

Mr BLUNT: What do you believe were your main achievements during your parliamentary career?

Mr WEBSTER: Certainly the adoption bill. I've already mentioned the HomeFund bill and the corporatisation of Sydney Water. Some of the reforms I did when I was the Minister for Administrative Services were memorable. We had all those government businesses which were so inefficient which had been kept going because the unions wanted to keep them going. The Government Printing Office, the Government Clothing Factory, the Government Boot Factory. We had a factory making firemen's boots and policemen's boots. They did an evaluation of how much a pair of firemen's boots cost and it was in the thousands of dollars. We sold the clothing factory and the others. I don't know who bought them. The Printing Office was a funny one because the printing unions were left wing. I remember being rung by, I won't name him but he was high up in the Labor Council at the time, after I closed the printing office and he thanked me. I remember old Labor right types like Peter Cox and Ron Mulock saying, "Well done, well done". Peter Cox had wanted to close it down and he was stopped by the unions. The Government Motor Garage was another one. There was a whole group of businesses that the Government owned which were totally inefficient. They all went.

I had a great department head, Gordon Messiter, who you will recall was a great mate of Barrie Unsworth. Barrie had made him head of Premier's when Gerry Gleeson retired. He was a funny fellow, Gordon but I got on very well with him. He was very helpful. He loved all that stuff. Then I was Minister for Family &

Community Services. My job was really to calm the waters for the 12 months before the election. Then the Energy portfolio, I only had that for a year. That was when the first discussions were being held around the National Electricity Market and the creation of the national grid. I got quite involved in all of that. That is when I met Simon Crean; he was the Federal Minister. I always got on very well with Simon; I liked him.

Neil Pickard had begun the project of electrifying the last quarter of New South Wales. If you think of a map of New South Wales, you have four quarters. In the north-west quarter, there are only about 500 people. It is Wanaaring, White Cliffs, north of Wilcannia, mainly Aboriginal settlements, a couple of small villages and sheep stations. Neil Pickard had announced that he was going to electrify the area. It wasn't going well. I said, "If we are going to do it, let's do it". We found a hollow log called the Electricity Development Fund, which had been paid into by the County Councils. There was about \$40 million in it. My Department found it. I don't know how Treasury hadn't found it beforehand. It was there, so we used that. No-one missed the money but all these people got electricity.

We created this thing called the Darling Electrification Construction Authority, DECA. It had a board based in Broken Hill and they built these lines to far-flung places. I remember going out there and a fellow called Murray McClure was on the land out there, had five daughters. He traded as McClure & Daughters. He had a lovely property out there, a great big, old house. They had a generator. These days you probably wouldn't do it, with solar panels and things, but in those days you had either a generator or nothing. He said the beauty of it was that when they got the power through his five daughters could all use their hairdryers at once. He certainly approved.

We put in place some sort of financing scheme with low interest rates and so that the Aboriginal settlements could all afford it. I think we got an over 90 per cent take-up. That was quite good. I went out there and opened that scheme after I had finished being Minister for Energy.

When I was at Planning there was a lot happening, obviously the Olympics site. John Fahey was the Premier, Bruce Baird was the Olympics Minister and I was the Planning Minister. We were the three Olympics Ministers. I had the responsibility of consolidating the site out at Homebush Bay. We had 30 landowners or so out there, some of them private, some public, government departments and so on. We consolidated it all into one. We remediated the site. There was a lot of pollution out there. The site for the Olympic stadium was the cleanest out there. It was sitting fair on top of the old stockyards and abattoir. There was no pollution there other than a lot of manure over many years. It was a big saleyard. There was a rail line that went in there because they used to send the stock by rail in the early days, before trucks. So they didn't have to do a lot to fix the rail. It was already there and the easement was there for the rail. It was quite clever. I set up the Homebush Bay Development Corporation, which was the body that owned and developed the land. We did quite a lot before we lost government. We had already built the athletics stadium and the aquatics centre. We had to have those built to prove to the Olympics people we could do it. Sydney had such shocking sporting facilities they would not even entertain a bid from Sydney until we actually showed them we were willing to deliver. So we had the athletics centre and the aquatics centre done. I think the hockey might have been done and maybe even a tennis centre.

The other thing that I did which I am really pleased has worked is the Pymont Ultimo Regional Development Plan. That was something that we put in place. You will remember that CSR had a massive factory there where all those blocks of flats are now. Then, there were a lot of old, decrepit buildings there. We put in place a plan to retain as much of the old buildings that were worth retaining and integrate them with the new. We fixed the wharves. It was a continuation of Darling Harbour really.

We put the light rail in. Again, there was a train track there. So we used the old track for the light rail. They have extended that out to Dulwich Hill now. That was one of my initiatives. That has worked really well. The whole idea was to have residential and commercial in the same spot so that people could live there and walk to work and so on. There were lots of advertising agencies and small creative-type businesses there and the casino was the other thing. I was the consent authority for the casino.

When I was the Minister for Energy the other thing I did, which I am really pleased about was demolish the old Pymont power station. I ordered Pacific Power to knock it down. They tried to argue against it. I said, "You will demolish it now". They knocked it down. There were no protests about heritage and so on. It was the ugliest thing; it was terrible. They cleared the site. It was a massive site. When Nick Greiner decided we were going to have a casino—he won the vote in Cabinet by one to 19; no-one wanted the bloody thing but we knew we had to have it—we had a ready-made site, a clean site. Alan Jones and Kerry Packer wanted the casino to be on the other side of Darling Harbour, but there wasn't enough room. You know how big that site is where the casino is; it is huge. It is like a whole city block.

Then I had planning and housing, when public housing was in need of reform, HomeFund most obviously. We started redeveloping the public housing stock—which for some reason stopped under the Labor Government. I never understood that. There were virtually whole suburbs of those fibro public houses sitting on big blocks that didn't have sewerage. One of the people I worked quite closely with was Mark Latham, Mayor of Liverpool at the time, who was very keen to do it. So we worked with Liverpool Council on a whole block of these old fibro houses which had come to the end of their tether. Get a developer in, develop half the block with public housing and the other half with private housing which would pay for the public housing. And you get integrated housing. You don't have all public housing people jammed in together, which was the subsequent way. We started doing a lot of that and then it stopped. I'm pleased to see this Government is doing it again now. They were all good things. Gabrielle Kibble was my department head. She was marvellous. The best public servant I ever worked with. She was fantastic.

With the Sydney Water reforms, I had Paul Broad advising me. I brought Paul down to Sydney; he was running Hunter Water. He pretty much convinced the crossbenchers and the environment movement to back it. That was a great reform. That was really about improving the quality of the water, which we did. We also did the privatisation of the three water treatment plants. That was another initiative which again was not finished until we lost government. They are still going, still working. There were lots of good things. I had very good people around me, great staff. It was a lot of fun. But all good things come to an end.

Mr BLUNT: In conclusion, I thank you for taking the time to join us today. It has been a great interview and very informative. Most importantly, I take the opportunity on behalf of my predecessors who served and supported you as Clerk—John Evans and Lyn Lovelock—and all of the previous and current staff of the department to thank you for your service to the Legislative Council and to the people of New South Wales.

Mr WEBSTER: Thank you very much. I enjoyed it immensely, all of it.

Dr CLUNE: Thank you, Robert. It was very informative and thought-provoking.

(Discussion concluded at 12.45 p.m.)