

CPM Reviews

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Identifier	Name	Role
Bold Content:	Clive Haggar, Former Secretary AEU	Interviewer
Plain Content:	Cheryl O'Connor, Former Vice President AEU	Interviewee

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It's 2 September 2020 and I've got the opportunity to interview Cheryl O'Connor. Cheryl was a very early member of the union and also particularly longstanding and broad ranging in her experience and perspectives, both as a teacher, deputy principal, principal, director and member of the ACT Schools Authority as the vice president of the ACT Teachers Federation. Cheryl also enjoyed later in life the opportunity to be a director of personnel in New South Wales, worked for several years as an independent consultant before returning to the ACT in the role of Chief Executive of the Australian College of Education for 5 years. Following this, she returned to consulting working to assist many schools and individuals in the system as an educational consultant. So welcome to our discussion Cheryl.

Thank you Clive.

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I thought we might begin Cheryl, if you wouldn't mind, although I've done a very quick tour of all of the things that you've done, just to talk initially about becoming a teacher and your experiences there, and in reflection what was important to you about them.

Clive, yes, I suppose like many middle-class girls, basically my option was to be a teacher. You know, my mother said that was the way teaching was a wonderful career that enabled an independent income which she saw as very important for a woman. I finished school at 16, nearly 17 and they had been posted overseas and decided that teaching was my option and they saw me as being in a safer environment at teachers college than university in Sydney, where we'd been living at the time. They were over-protective probably, but I enjoyed everything that was offered in teacher training.

So, in 1966, aged nearly 19, I started my first year of teaching. It was the first year, I think, of equal pay for equal work Clive. I had 44 students in my class, not unusual at the time, and we had no immediate relief. The size meant issues arose because we didn't get relief until three days of absence had occurred, so we used to then split or cover each other's classes until we were entitled, or not, to a relief teacher.

So classes were broken up and distributed and those numbers were blown out?

Yes, they were. Funnily enough the truth is I took to teaching like a duck to water and so it was easier for me to manage with my class and the class next door helped by a very capable 10-year-old. Nevertheless, staff were agitating for immediate relief.

These were very conservative teaching years. I've since looked on that time as more of a trade than a profession, though I was very proud to be a teacher. Strict methodologies, timetabling and content were prescribed. Classes were graded and usually, male teachers were given the A classes and older students. At the time there was principal and deputy, both male; generally, for women, leadership was more readily available with the position of 'infants' mistress'.

Yes, I remember that classification.

The primary and infants' 'schools' were separate identities and really basically ran themselves. The principal and infants' mistress met separately and we didn't have joint staff meetings even until maybe I'd been teaching five years, and then we started to have the infants' staff coming in with the primary staff from time to time. You know, you talk about the separation between secondary and primary, it was there between primary and infants, and infants and the few preschools that were about at the time.

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At the top of the hierarchy, in schools at least, were inspectors. I was only 'inspected' by male inspectors.

Another thing that happened in those first couple of years is I was married so I lost permanency straight away. The other thing that's interesting in today's discussion is that once you were married you were no longer permanent; you could give up paying superannuation. And because the salaries were low, I did give it up because it helped us as a couple financially in those early years because of the pay. I had no idea what it actually meant long-term to give up superannuation. That decision cost me ten years of superannuation.

As I mentioned previously, I took to teaching very quickly, loved it, and was given a degree of latitude to try some levels on innovation – which drew attention to my work. I'm going to say a few things Clive that are not meant to be boastful, they're just to give a picture of how things worked. In my third year of teaching I had a student teacher in my class and the inspector was in the school. The inspector asked the student teacher if she, the student teacher, thought that she could be as good a teacher by her third year of teaching as I was. The student teacher told me what was said; the inspector spoke to me that day and I was one of the best class teachers he had seen and 'one day' should think about going for promotion, but not to even think about it for seven years. That was just the statement, and yet he probably saw himself as being very supportive. My background meant that I accepted that.

A couple of years later another inspector was watching me teach and then he asked why I didn't go for a promotion? I reminded him I was not a permanent officer. A woman gets married, and becomes a temporary, unless prepared to go anywhere in the state. Not permanent. No promotion.

This inspector said that if I were a permanent he'd give me a promotion. I said I wasn't prepared to go anywhere in the state, and he said – which is funny in today's climate – said no Department of Education would post a wife somewhere in the state and leave the husband somewhere else, it just would not be worth the hassle. He said I should look into it, so I did. Funnily enough there'd been a bureaucratic error and they had never actually made me temporary. I got the promotion to the first list – a seniority list for promotion.

So these are structural barriers at the time?

These were structural barriers, yes. First the list, then waiting for your number to come up – seniority, which was seen to be a fair process.

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This is List One that you could apply for...

Promotion.

...as the modern equivalent, you could apply for promotion, but promotion in the New South Wales system at that time was on seniority, wasn't it?

Exactly, exactly. So however long you'd been on that list the next number became eligible – so I was quite lucky that I got onto it youngish, but I could have still waited for a long time for jobs. Because in the primary school there was basically the principal, deputy principal and the infant's mistress.

But also reinforced by attitudinal barriers as well.

Oh, definitely, definitely. It took a long time for the profession to fully understand that – which also partly why EEO etc caused such difficulties. That came through clearly in the '80s - the Lake Ginninderra College principal's position became a focus for that anger and misunderstanding.

And no other opportunities?

Not really, no. Two things changed that. First, Industrial action and the beginning of my interest in the teachers' union - I took part in my first strike in those first five years Clive. The main issue was salaries and the second, working conditions.

1968.

Yes. 1968 Charles Cutler was the minister. I was so angry with him and his lack of understanding. I began to hate the Minister for Education and believed the NSW Department was not interested in the ACT. Honestly, I think it was the beginning of my activism – it gave me a lot of courage, including to break away from conforming to authority. My parents were horrified, mortified, that I'd go on strike and so on.

Where were you teaching at that point in time?

At Hackett, Hackett Primary.

So in the ACT?

Always in the ACT Clive. I was an ACT person – working there from 1966 to 1994.

Yes, and very small number of schools at that time as well.

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Yes. Well I suppose basically you were looking at that older part of Canberra. There was no Belconnen, no Woden, you know, they came on quite quickly afterwards. But I do remember when all of that happened. Certainly no Gungahlin or Tuggeranong, or whatever. But I'd also begun to take a strong interest in the status of the profession and also the increasing pressure from a group of parents who wanted a separate system for the ACT.

The thing about that 1968 New South Wales Teachers Federation strike, it was not simply about wages, but the focus was very much on conditions and class sizes.

It was. The things that I remember that we went on was class sizes because they were ridiculous, really, including the secondary schools. Primary schools were just – and I think it went down from, like, 44 to about 35 but it took until the mid-seventies to achieve that. But the other thing was the provision of relief, the disruption to teaching caused by the fact that relief just wasn't readily available, or not provided, placed greater pressure on teachers because of increasing parental expectations – maybe particularly in the ACT, but I'm not sure of that..

Not provided would be more accurate.

It wasn't provided. There were some positives of course – basically we had a job for life. So quite a lot of us were the beneficiaries of all of that. Compare that security with the situation for many young teachers today. There may be a place for contracts, but the majority of teachers should be permanent, perhaps with conditions of various types to meet professional needs and also the needs of identified students and communities.

Of course, in your teacher training you would have been on a scholarship as well.

Yes. Yes, no debts. And of course with subsequent study, which I'd started straight away, by the way. It was all free, just the most amazing gift to me personally, but also to the community at large I think. Yes, so those things were there and they mattered a lot and I remain very grateful.

So yes, teacher's strike in '68 and from that time onwards there was – you'd call it an agitation, was starting to occur. People were talking about that schools should be run differently, that the way we taught kids should be different, and that related to class sizes etc.

This is particularly the case in the ACT with parents pushing the concept of a separate system of education.

Yes, I was going to bring that up Clive. Because at about the same time I became aware of the fact that parents were saying the ACT should have its own school system. There was quite a lot

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in the papers and so on by about that time, there were stirrings of it all. Of course, it fitted in with probably the industrial anger based on the strike, plus all of these new attitudes to how we should teach and how kids should learn came together. Teachers and parents involved in the education process. It appealed to me. So, it was very exciting, that whole period was extremely exciting and I had become very involved in some of what was then called progressive education, and had a good name for it.

So, when they set up the first open plan schools I didn't apply for it. I was transferred to Weetangera, one of the first of these schools. As a permanent officer – they could move me. This was 1973. Basically, it all took off from there. It was the stage where people were starting to talk about teaching strategies, differentiation according to ability, team teaching, gender – it was before computers and so on, we're talking '73 here. The way we had to structure teaching and learning so that kids learnt – basically learnt in a way that they can now with the dramatic advances in information technology. The teachers including me, were working together on the forerunner of 'computer aided instruction, at Weetangera in the 1970s. Computers started to be introduced to primary schools in about 1982.

What we were doing also let me see the positives and negatives of parent involvement, though I remained committed to the principle. Parents fell into three groups – support, to be convinced, unsupportive of new strategies.

You might remember that Weetangera was one of the first fully open plan schools and also the first suburb in Canberra with no government housing, This brought together defence force families, academics, business people etc who were very interested in their kids' education and prepared to challenge what was being done at the school. I learned that parental involvement in what happened in schools, as opposed to their right and proper interest in their own child's education, needed to be carefully delineated. But in fairness, the constant challenges from within the community, took me from being a teacher to an educator because the nature of the parents was that I had to understand what we were doing, and why. I had to do that to write things to help parents and staff work constructively from a shared, if not always agreed, understanding.

Also remember 1972, the end of that year, the Whitlam government was elected and all of the social interest started to come about very quickly.

I think I was very lucky that I had Elizabeth Reid as one of the parents at the school. She got into all of the stuff about what we were teaching the kids as far as gender equity was concerned, and

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world peace, not world war. Elizabeth opened my eyes to many important new initiatives because I was teaching her daughter at the time. So, it was a whole range of things acting on the scene.

So at the same time organisationally you've got teachers in the ACT considering breaking away from the New South Wales Teachers Federation.

Exactly.

And parents and teachers driving the notion, certainly by '73, of a separate educational system.

Yes.

I was just wondering if you could reflect on the decision to actually set up a teacher's union here, and why that was the case.

Well that's an interesting one really because I don't think that the New South Wales Teachers Federation was all that supportive of it at first, mainly because most people thought it was something of a pipe dream, but the longer it went on the more they saw there was virtually no way of stopping it. A sizable number of teachers wanted to return to NSW for promotions lists, superannuation, collegiality etc, but younger teachers were mostly excited at the prospect of change. Many felt limited by the rigidity of NSW so the prospect of change had gathered a lot of momentum amongst the teachers, but they wanted the break too. If they were leaving New South Wales, they wanted to leave the New South Wales Teachers Federation. The people who'd been actively involved in NSWTF, including on the NSW Council, helped develop the explanations of what the change would mean/ look like – you know, held meetings gave reports, people listened, people questioned and basically they voted for the fact that yes, a new – what was it called? CTF, Commonwealth Teachers Federation.

ACT branch.

Yes. ACT Branch and Northern Territory branch.

Yes. The decision to take that separate pathway was made in 1972 at a mass meeting at the Workers Club.

Right. All of this stuff happened very quickly after years of uncertainty.

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Yes, but parallel to the establishment of – you’ve got the interim Schools Authority coming into play in 1973. But in terms of those years you were also president of the Primary Teachers Association, the New South Wales branch at the time.

Yes. I’m not sure at what point we changed over. I know that I was there, Neil Dilly was there. Ian McPhee provided a wise and consistent voice. Members of the ‘old guard’, union and school leadership, including Max Badham, Margaret Dempster, Rudd Rimes from primary schools and Mick March, Dick Lee and Ian Alder from secondary schools added experience and insights and were generally terrifically helpful in, I suppose, putting a bit of a steadying hand on what was happening. What must be remembered was that the leadership of the new ACT branch was very young – Peter (O’Connor) was only 26 and he and his team had to negotiate salaries and conditions with some very experienced and sometimes very wily CTS leaders, such as Brian Peck, Alan Foskett, Jock Weedon and Jack Lenihan. They succeeded in winning important gains for teachers – a salary that was, I think, 5% above the standard, teacher release time, study leave in school time, school-based curriculum development. It’s hard to believe but many teachers resisted these benefits at first, but when the ACT began losing these conditions it was a real blow to morale.

I was interested, just how similar, when the organisation was established it was to the New South Wales Teachers Federation but in miniature.

It was essentially the same – it was what people knew and this saved ruffling feathers. I mean, the constitution was basically that of the New South Wales Teachers Federation, standing orders, the whole works, you know, modified for the Commonwealth Teachers Federation. That wasn’t an issue for me – it worked; it could be amended as needed. It made sense.

It was only in subsequent years that really the character of the organisation became quite different. One of the interesting decisions taken very early on was to set up a school based structure rather than a regional structure like New South Wales. That was a position, from what I understand, that came from the floor of council rather than from the leadership of the organisation at the time. That certainly meant that we had a very much more democratic organisation without having to deal with regions and separate associations.

Yes. Definitely more democratic at the time. Remember the loss of many older teachers back to NSW meant an influx of new people and ideas to the ACT from other states. Generally, these were not people who had a conservative bent – they knew the ACT system was different and a

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lot of innovators arrived. The service was younger and the leadership vacancies meant much younger school leaders than we had been accustomed to. The mood was for doing things differently. Staff meetings became more important and more challenging. Various subcommittees were active in most schools. Very very exciting.

Just reflecting at the moment in terms of the establishment of the system, it seemed to me as a beginning teacher in the system, or my early years in the system, that there was a substantial degree of competition between primary and secondary, both for resources and prestige within the new system. Can you reflect on that for me?

Well really Clive, the competition was non-existent at this stage. Secondary teachers and secondary schools continued to be staffed according to NSW traditional processes – with adjustments for the CTS. staffing formulae. Secondary teachers were also more powerful, and more militant in the union and resisted any suggestion of parity of any sort – staffing, face-to-face teaching, salary loadings etc There was a premise that older students were more demanding, harder work,, requiring a higher level of teacher skills and qualifications – after all, they were 4 year trained with a degree and a Dip Ed and Primary teachers were two year trained and didn't need a degree. That's the essence of it and it took a lot of hard work in the face of strong opposition to bring about change – even when all primary teachers were required to have a degree and research demonstrated the importance of early years learning to increase success in the secondary years. Pressure was also increasing in secondary schools about retention to year 12. It was a proud day when parity of salaries was agreed and advanced by the union, class sizes reconsidered, especially for early years learning and so on. Yes. It was a struggle, but the union has shown its capacity to accept and promote change and educational value. I was amazed in 1992 when I went to work in NSW that some of the old structures that I had opposed were still current – and still are.

However, those traditional ways of seeing the world of education – the educational hierarchies of importance and worth – also had to be examined in detail and reconstructed as it applied to, first and foremost indigenous education and also importantly to preschools, students with special needs, special schools and integration etc. It is all interdependent. The ACT has done well there too.

I think that's one of the interesting elements of it, that if you had principals in their early 40s, deputy principals in their early 30s, heads of department in their 20s, that opening up

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of the system. You found yourself fairly early on in terms of the amalgamated and new organisation in the role of vice president, and on the Schools Authority where you were dealing with I think a powerful parental influence, they'd been a driving force in the creation of the system. How did you find your role on the authority, and vis-a-vis your role in the union?

Well I think that by that stage, because we're now talking about the 1980s, the union and the parents – I've got to say to you, had accepted the fact that it hadn't all gone the way they wanted it to as far as the parental influence in the ACT. However, they had a legislated role in their local school in the form of a Council and these were seen generally to have worked well. Issues arose when some Board members thought their positions involved decisions about the management of staff. The union at the same time had realised that it had to be persistent to look after teachers' rights and conditions. It seemed to me that, at the time, there had to be a degree of give and take because otherwise we were going lose to a bureaucracy being strictly watched by the government, mostly because of severe ongoing budget constraints but also increasing expectations about school accountability. Remember also that the government continued to increase the number of Ministerial appointees to the authority in an attempt to reduce the influence of pesky parents and teachers. The role of parents and teachers was to provide arguments that could be used by the bureaucracy. So, in my time on the council I found the working relationship with parents was very, very constructive. It was a two-way street that we cooperated in relation to the things that we thought that we could win from the bureaucracy, i.e. politics and the compromises we could live with – or not. In this period the parents were a strong ally of teachers and very fair, I thought. And remember I had people there like Lindsay Connors who was just wonderful, and Joan...

Joan Kellet?

Joan Kellet etc. There were a few other people who, you know, appointees that we weren't so interested in, to be honest, because they were minister's appointees.

Yes. Well in fact there were regular changes to the makeup of representation on that body to diminish parent/teacher influence.

That's right. I think part of the reason at this stage that the parents and teachers went just collaborative as possible, was basically to try and save some of the underlying ethos of the system. Because it was going Clive, by that stage it was clear it was starting to be diminished.

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We're in a situation here where it's still being run by federal bureaucracy as opposed to local. We are talking about federal government employees.

That is right. It was still run through the commonwealth. Many federal ministers came and went, but overall, they were not supportive of the system and the fact that it was different and strove to retain that difference. But you see, the other thing that was particularly good, I believe that there was enough respect both ways as far as parents and teachers were concerned. The areas that we could not agree upon, we just agreed to differ and fought our corner.

And this would have been staff selection, would have been the most significant issue of disagreement.

That's absolutely one of the ones. You know, I've never been one to be afraid of that, but I've got to be honest and say that some of the early years at Weetangera made me wary about it because there were two people who were actively involved, writing to the minister, writing to the papers and so on. That was Frank Morgan and Roger Scott, both really lovely, intelligent, interesting people who were very, very keen about a good education. But it made me think I don't know that I want that to be the people who choose the staff for a school, the whole staff for a school. I just didn't think we'd end up with the balance that a good school needs. I was accepting about the school leader, but not everyone agreed.

This is a dispute went on for decades, and to reach the modern-day equivalent where you've got the school board chair sitting on a selection panel. There were ridiculous periods where principal applicants would meet secretly with school board chairs, contrary to union policy, and various other goings on. But it's certainly now acceptable that we successfully maintained a career service with promotion now on merit rather than seniority. But the nature of a school requires a cultural recognition that is supposed to be supplied in a selection process via the school board chair. And no doubt that has worked well in many places over the years with only the occasional hiccup.

Yes. Clive, another thing that was interesting in this period, and we're now talking after 1975, was the whole process of peer assessment and review. So where peers actually helped decide whether a person was ready for a promotion. It was still – there were still gateways.

Yes, the eligibility process.

The eligibility process to be eligible for promotion and so on, and that was step by step.

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You had a merit-based assessment by your peers as to whether or not they thought that you had the skills to be allowed to apply for promotion. Do you want to make some comments about that? Because in the end it was removed from the system because it was a structural impediment particularly to the promotion of women.

I think that is probably quite accurate actually because I spent a number of years on the committee that reviewed it for the ACT and the Northern Territory. So, we would get together and do all of the numbers, number crunching, how many applied, male/ female, how many got through, in the different sectors, in the different parts of the system etc. Definitely it became a barrier where women, who maybe had not been encouraged earlier but had suddenly started thinking maybe I do want promotion, found themselves at a gateway – an eligibility gateway once again. There were four promotional levels. Each level had to be passed, and promotion won, before you could apply for the next. The process was demanding, and the glass ceiling was evident, despite efforts to change attitudes.

So, we're into the '80s. By this stage we've had three chief executives and Eric Willmot is the chief education officer. I've just passed quickly over something you've mentioned very early on, which was the Lake Ginninderra debacle. So before we talk about your role in the system as a director and your relationship with the union during that time, would you like to just give us your perspective in terms of the Lake Ginninderra – I hesitated for a moment as I was going to use the term debacle, but in fact there was a lot of very positive things came out of that situation.

Yes. Well Clive, it was an interesting situation because I forget which committee I was on, but it also involved in the union and its belief that Lake Ginninderra College should be built. Radford College was on the drawing board and I think St Francis High School at Florey and the union believed that there could be a loss of government school students to these. The College system was also held in very high esteem. There was a long fight whether Lake Ginninderra College should have been established or not; The union led the charge. This was an exciting period for the college years with a lot of new research about post compulsory education, vocational education, links with universities and local businesses etc. I was very excited by the prospects.

We also had a dispute about the selected site.

Yes. It was a beautiful site. The site for that college was just lovely, but it was difficult because, well you see, education was changing so quickly Clive because suddenly this school came up that we'd had to fight for, and I'd been involved in that fight. Suddenly they were talking about

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vocational education, all the possibilities of this linking with University of Canberra etc, and I became very excited about the possibilities of that college. At this stage I was what was called a Band 3 primary principal, so not the biggest of schools.

This was Macquarie Primary you were...?

Macquarie Primary. I decided to apply for the college. I didn't apply for it because of EEO, or anything like that, I just thought it was the most wonderful educational opportunity. Pure and simple, I wanted to be the person who was going to help bring about change in the secondary sector, and so I applied for the college. There were a few issues along the way but in the end, and after the selection panel going to eight referees, most of whom were selected by the panel, I won the position.

You then faced multiple appeals. These were appeals were on the basis of purported equal efficiency or greater levels of seniority. Or superior efficiency and no substantive holder of the Band 4 positions, ie secondary principal equivalent...

Could appeal.

...could actually appeal, yes, that's correct.

They could apply.

They could apply originally but not appeal.

Yes, people who already owned a job at the same level could not appeal, even if they had applied. But people who had not even applied could appeal. The decision caused uproar – further exaggerated by the recent passage of Equal Employment Opportunity legislation and the Sex Discrimination Act.

Yes, that's correct, yep.

I think Clive I've got it right, that of the 15 appeals there were only three who had applied for the job. The person who subsequently won the job had not even applied in the beginning. But there were a few other things that happened along the way there Clive that shows some attitudinal things to women. Remember, all of this happened as EEO started to become important. People assumed that I'd applied on some feminist EEO ground, not out of genuine interest, and you mightn't remember Clive but there were the things in the paper, the cartoons, where principals rang up and there was a thing written saying how you had to be in the horse race but you could

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only win if you had chestnut hair or something, ie that's the woman applying and therefore if you didn't have chestnut hair you would not be able to win a job. There was a big union meeting at the time of the EEO legislation. All of this was happening at the same time.

But while I was the principal, I had the opportunity to be on the panel obviously to select the deputy who would work with me. The person that was chosen and with very good reason, for anyone who knows her, was Jenny Everett. A Department senior officer approached me about the selection and advised it wouldn't proceed – and this was said to me Clive – because they could not put two high flying women into that new positions at the College.

A different time, a different era.

Did anyone ever say that two high flying men? You know, it was just ridiculous. Of course, Jenny had had the college experience that would have been a huge benefit to me in running that school. I didn't have any problems whatever in relation to curriculum and so on because I'd been extensively involved in curriculum work at the commonwealth level, at the system level. You could almost name it Clive, so it was very, very exciting.

Anyway I subsequently lost the job on appeal and a few things came out of it. Number one was that they basically ended appeals except on the process, and certainly somebody that hadn't applied for a job could not appeal, so they were immediate benefits. Then with the EEO etc I appealed against that decision and ended up taking the department to the Federal Court, on the basis of EEO but also in relation to process. Now the justice who heard that five day case had a record and I think it was of 106 cases he'd found in favour of the commonwealth 101 times, so my chances weren't going to be great. But even little things that came through as part of the evidence – Elizabeth McKenzie was a person who was a referee for me, and she said to them that the problem was that I'd done so much choral work with students and that this was never held to be as valuable as a person who trained football teams, to which the justice just said, well that's right.

An interesting comparison.

I also learned that one has to deal with these matters and move on with life. I saw and was approached by many people who had not been able to do this and I saw the damage being done to their mental health. In a court you see that it's you and 'them' and they want to win, however hard you have worked for them. I moved on with my work and the Department was very supportive when I returned to school. You might remember of course that I paid the first thousands myself but the union then backed me after that, and because we lost it meant that the

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union was supposed to pay not only the costs associated on my side but on the department's side as well. Now Eric Willmot buried them and I don't know if we should even say it to this day, but the costs for the department at least were never charged. I just say yes, they looked after me. It affirmed my loyalty to them too because I saw people from other departments who felt abandoned.

You're right to identify the mix between the position and your winning it, which became symbolic of the EEO policies being pushed by the union and by the department at the time, or by the authority at the time. And the hostility of some members towards those decisions, but we managed...

Oh, very hostile, and some very good people unfortunately. I don't know how you'd say it, they basically fell on their own swords about it and we were probably the losers.

I'm just trying to think of the gap between that Lake Ginninderra incident and the way in which the union was caught up with things like the mass meeting held at the time to try to overturn the union's support for EEO etc. And then Eric Willmot decided that what we actually needed in the system were directors of schools, and he created a – in fact it wound up being six positions, five originally – regional directors that were teaching classifications. So the only people who could apply were members of the teaching service, and of course that process proceeded – and I'll declare my own interest in this – that I was then vice president of the union whilst also serving in the peer assessment section of the authority, I was asked to sit on the selection panel and you wound up being one of the six directors selected, yourself and Anne Murray being the two female directors. So, what was it like in terms of that newly created position, and your role as a union activist and leader in schools, to suddenly find yourself in that role?

Well at first the whole business to do with also being members of the union, which I think in fairness probably everyone except Anne Murray – I could be wrong there but I think Anne had been working in the school's office for quite a while...

She had, yes.

...at the time of winning that job, and a very efficient person in her work too, and very politically astute. I don't know that she had been a member of the union but I could be wrong. But I do know that I and the other three men who were appointed were all union members and all committed.

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There were actually four males because David Sutherland was a subsequent appointee. There were the five original appointments and David had come in ranked sixth, and Eric Willmot created the additional position.

Oh right, I wasn't conscious of that. So yes, there were Ron Lane and David, John and Brian Dooley I think.

Anyway, I thought they/ we were a terrific balance of personalities I think, and a range of interests and expertise. I mean, the grand old, wise old man was Ron Lane of course, he'd roll his eyes and give us his little philosophy about this or that, but there was just a lovely balance in the whole group. It was very creative because Eric was creative. So, for example we had our own budgets, we had our own counsellor attached to the office. Each of us had an assistant, a professional officer I suppose you'd say who basically did work, including research, correspondence, liaising with schools and parents and so on. But it was wonderful because if something went wrong in your region, basically a counsellor could be available to you to sort it out, and on top of what the schools had so it wasn't taken out of their budget at all.

The main focus for what we did was professional development for principals, that was our number one role. Then gradually it became a little bit more inclined to be professional development of principals and supervision of principals, i.e. were they doing what they said they would do in their planning? About that time a push started to come that we should not be members of the Teachers Union because we were supervising principals and it was becoming difficult etc. I think that the pressure was such that people agreed with that proposition – principals had said they were uncomfortable. I don't think it stopped anyone considering basically what the union was fighting for, especially in terms of working conditions in schools.

We also had a structural move by the department to turn the jobs into public service SES1 classifications.

That's right, yep.

Which meant that you were actually ineligible to belong to the union from that point.

Yeah, I forgot that little step in it. Yes, that was very interesting. So, the people that I worked closely with over that time, well first of all Hedley Beare and obviously Phillip from...

Phillip Hughes?

Hughes, Phil Hughes from the uni. There was Greg Hancock.

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Yes, as the second chief education officer.

So, in other words, from my point of view, how rich was I in having Hedley Beare, who was very close to my own personal philosophy anyway, and Phillip, he was also a terrific educator. How fortunate, as a relatively young person, to have those people there at your elbow, right the way through. And being specific here, of course I saw more of those people and knew more about them through Peter's (Peter O'Connor) role. So, there was that connection that probably enriched my life anyway, professionally, in that time. And the connections lasted long after.

Then Greg Hancock, I found him quite easy to deal with, but he was the first one who started to introduce a more bureaucratic management of the council. Phillip Hughes had gently managed education principles, politics and finances. Because remember, the sad thing about the ACT Schools Authority, was it had barely been started and you got all of the pressures to do with the 1970s and the fuel crisis, the fall of the Whitlam government. So, finances were cut when the Fraser government took power in 1975 and I think a lot of people just found that hard, myself included. A system established with the highest of educational purposes, the best of ideas, like the extra time for professional learning, the extra time for curriculum development etc. That was cut – it had hardly started when it was cut and we'd experienced that, that sense of excitement and commitment. I felt always it was different in places like New South Wales they'd never had it so they never understood just what we'd gone through. The loss, there was a sense of mourning about it I think. Even a loss of morale – I believe the union played a very important role in keeping things moving in a positive and constructive way at that time.

Yes, and of course associated with that financial squeeze was pressure to close schools as well.

Yes, yes.

Just in relation to that after Eric went off to become departmental secretary of education in South Australia, he was replaced by Cheryl Vardon, and of course you're sitting there still as a director with Cheryl's appointment. We'd had the deputy chief executive, Max Sawatski, for some 12 months as acting Chief Executive, but he didn't win the position. Cheryl Vardon comes in as a complete outsider, the first female chief education officer. By that stage it's self-government so it would have been secretary of the department, or equivalent. With Cheryl, she again appeared to push hard for principals not to be members of the union. Were you aware of that happening the time?

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Yes. Yes, I was aware of that because it was felt that the new structures they wanted for education, where principals were to be more accountable for what went on in their schools, that they should have their own principal's union.

Yes. That did not work out.

No. No, because I don't think that they wanted to but it would have made them vulnerable anyway. But I think enough seed was sown that – I don't know what the principal's membership was at that time, but I think there was enough pressure put on that at least it was undermined to a degree Clive.

Look I think that it was a very difficult period I mean, the fact that you've had conservatives in power locally and nationally, and the difficulties of self government, instability in those early years, disruptive government as well. But yes, in the end we've always maintained a very, very high percentage of principal members, but it was a difficult period.

Cheryl, you then went off to New South Wales as a regional director. Do you want to draw some comparisons between the systems, and particularly the role of the unions at that time?

Well Clive I did go off not as a regional director but as the director of personnel in south-west Sydney, so that was the position I took there. Basically, I suppose I've got to say it opened my eyes to many different educational issues. To be honest, good teaching is good teaching wherever one is located, but I did see many teachers had considerably more challenges in that part of Australia, and especially compared with the ACT. Schools are very hard to staff and there are reasons for that – pockets of extreme poverty, generational unemployment on a larger scale than I had experienced, schools almost exclusively made up of students from wide cultural and religious differences, some extremely high rates of suspension. I saw teachers in schools manage complex compound names as if they were saying 'John Smith'. I was interested to see how flexible many teachers were in making curriculum suit the needs of diverse student groups. I appreciated many curriculum documents and the details they contained so teachers had terrific resources whether they were working with particular students across NSW.

I saw relatively low-level staffing officers (public servants) who took a personal interest in schools, advising where special consideration should be given because of issues at those schools. They worked hard and long hours to complete difficult staff placements.

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The regional executive had a greater focus on teaching and learning than I had experienced in later years in the ACT where more was done about policies – a smaller system has more need for that, and let's face it, NSW has a huge bureaucracy with large specialist areas.

I found the union more difficult, less collaborative, than I'd found in the ACT. I think that maybe I'd just been spoilt because I was known, or because our structures were more collaborative. I found that the relationships between the union and the employer in New South Wales were far less trusting, both ways.

I missed the level of involvement in a range of interests that I had experienced in the ACT. I understood how comparatively socially progressive the ACT was. I was taken back in time to hear women address themselves as MRS and MISS – not many who called themselves MS. I missed the implementation and acceptance of EEO. I couldn't believe how 'blokey' the culture was, with most men having nicknames. There was language that startled me – 'catch and kill your own snakes', 'he just wrote a suicide note', 'swallow your own smoke' etc – as I'd never heard this in my career in the ACT. I missed the generally cooperative and courteous relationships between the union and the department. I missed the many networks of support, including women's networks. I understood just how privileged I had been in the ACT.

All that said, I learnt a great deal and met many admirable and memorable people.

I think it's fair to say that by this stage the great disputes that we had tended to be with government, particularly local government, about resourcing, about funding.

Well it had to be, it had to be that way Clive. If the department doesn't get the resources, it has difficulty doing what you (and often it) would think is reasonable. These constraints have been more or less severe for a long time and maybe requires a different view about how best to meet the needs of ACT public education and its teachers.

Yeah, whereas in the early years there were often disputes with the authority bureaucracy about policy, and we moved right away to head to heads with governments of both political persuasions, as the ACT was more resource constrained.

Interestingly Clive, I don't know if I've ever said this to you before but one of the studies I did as part of my Master's degree was the relationships between employers and what were considered at the time the toughest unions in Australia. The New South Wales Teachers Federation was considered among those. So the focus was how did employer management practices affect the ways that the unions deal with the employers strategies. What was the pattern of escalation? For

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teachers unions, it seems to me that there are times to fight aggressively for entitlements (especially if they are being played) and there are times to focus on the social needs that are challenges for people working in schools – that might be Indigenous education, or kids with special needs including providing for children whose disruptive behaviours make teaching and learning challenging. In other words, trying to use different approaches to be used to serve members to keep them committed to the union and their work.

It's an interesting point you're making there. You did then of course eventually return to the ACT as the chief executive of the Australian College of Educators (ACE). Would you just like to talk about the relationship that you had in that role with the ACT system, and with the Australian Education Union as we then were, both locally and nationally?

Yes. Well look Clive, the relationship in the ACT was very, very strong because of my background, and because I'd worked not only with people at the union level and system level obviously, but also with the commonwealth in various roles. These were very useful for national professional work. Fran Hinton was very supportive when leading what was then called NQITSL and the College was involved with literacy, numeracy and primary schools, the National Teaching Quality Awards, a range of things like that. I also undertook professional learning programs for schools. My work with the union was undertaken in the years between working in NSW and ACE. ACE, however, was part of a very crowded profession associations line up. ACE, like many big professional associations, was really finding it hard to attract and to keep members. It was not made easier by the establishment of ACEL, (Australian Council for Educational Leaders) an association that broke away from ACE in order to focus on school leadership.

ACEL, yes.

ACEL. So became an alternative for principals. There is also a plethora of subject associations also. I felt that one of the things that I could do because of the name was to go out there and provide professional learning, because it was a form of income for the college as well, and also to put the college's name into schools. Now probably unsurprisingly the membership for ACE in the ACT went up quite considerably. But while there were active pockets, more support came from the private school sector. I don't know if it's because of the unique conditions where it's good for them to belong to something like the Australian College of Educators, which of course was, and should have been the preeminent professional association for teachers. But it was an interesting period really.

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At various points, working as a consultant, for example I came in when the schools first started doing school review, so I provided the training for the ACT for that. I developed range of other documents pertaining to school management because I knew it so well and also I brought the experiences from outside the system. My work also included programs for the union where I did quite a bit of work to do with women and conflict resolution, assertiveness training because it remains the case that many women remain find it hard to say what they mean to say, or to put their hand up for professional growth, not necessarily professional positions per se.

No, no, leadership.

Which brings me back Clive to another strategy that the union initiated when I was there – Higher Duties opportunities on rotation, provided the person was interested and had sufficient professional experience, but nobody got a second chance until all interested people had had a first chance. Not all principals liked it, but I thought it gave women in particular the opportunity to try the position to see whether promotion was something that suited them.

The thing that mattered about that to me as a female, watching my female staff, is that it gave people a short period – it might have been three months, a term, it might have been six months – but it gave them the chance to see if promotion was really what they wanted. I'm not talking about two weeks, that's nothing. But once people got a term or a couple of terms on Higher Duties they'd say yes, this is for me, or they'd say look really, it's not, I don't like the extra thing, I don't like having to say nasty things to teachers who aren't doing the right thing, or I found it too difficult when I've got kids to manage the extra time commitments etc. But I thought it gave people a chance to at least try it before they bought it, really.

It's interesting too, I was just reflecting for a moment, that that was at the heart of the authority or department's decision to actually put forward that EEO policy that gave female teachers first bite at the HD for up to six months, to try and break that reluctance. And of course, that led to, in part, the hostility of the Lake Ginninderra selection and the associated fuss and bother at that time.

I'm just thinking too though, you're talking about a period where you were chief executive of the Australian College of Educators, and of course the union was negotiating such things as professional pathways for teachers, and getting additional funds from the ACT government even though it was a Liberal government at the time under Kate Carnell, to actually boost professional development of teachers and to take a greater role. Now my memory of the period was one of cooperation with ACE, but certainly an increased focus

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by the union on both creating professional development structures and providing professional development for members itself.

I have to agree with you Clive. I think it was right that that did occur, and to everyone's advantage really. Because the things I learnt from working with the ACT, and teachers, and the union there, were very helpful to me later when I was involved with ...and – what was it called, before ACARA?

Well locally we got the Teacher Quality Institute.

Yeah, it was prior to that. I mean, when at ACE I was involved in the discussions for establishing those national perspectives. setting those things up, you know, there was a great focus on teaching standards - to do with principal's competencies and so on, teacher competencies, teacher registration and teaching professional standards.

Yes, and the professional standards...

I think they're a great guide for schools. What you can reasonably expect of a beginning teacher compared with a teacher with more experience etc?. That was very exciting, very interesting work to do. And it's a very clear guide to competencies and expectations, easily read and easy to relate to. It's relevant, it's highly relevant.

So, you would have got a good picture of the operations of the system through your role as a consultant as well. The kinds of difficulties that principals and teachers face in today's schools, would you like to comment on those?

Clive, I think that the level of complexity of education is just absolutely increasing so much year by year. I said at the outset that when I entered teaching it was more of a trade – it was a series of processes with content, time and methodology that was very straightforward. Now, I know this to be a true profession of great complexity. The range of skills and knowledge - the things that people are meant to be able to do, understand, assess and report in order to satisfy the wide range of demands that are expected of teachers in schools are very demanding, requiring ongoing professional skills. The accountability of principals is extensive and detailed - absolutely phenomenal.

Teacher time at school is extremely pressured - the demands on their time for every minute that they're at school are just enormous. I believe they need something like sabbatical for professional learning or to update the school's documentation.

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I mean, the work I've done with a couple of schools more recently has shown me what I've always believed, and that is the majority of parents think the majority of teachers are wonderful and doing a wonderful job. Unfortunately, there's something amongst teachers that they find positive feedback hard to accept because they only hear from the complaining people or what they feel is lack of support from the department when problems arise.

Teaching has become so challenging and so complex, that I see that more support is needed, perhaps using paraprofessionals or with an increased number of teacher's assistants being employed to work with teachers in the classroom.

Of course, we're now in the situation where the paraprofessionals that do exist can be members of the union.

Yes, and that's great, that's great.

Yeah, we've had that breakthrough.

Clive there are quite a lot of people I've spoken to who started off as teacher's assistants and then said this is the job for me, I love this, and they used that then to keep moving through the training options that are available now, I think it's absolutely wonderful that people can move through qualifications more easily than it used to be. RPL is a great thing!

There's also direct financial recognition of any improvement in terms of lifting your qualifications and the union negotiated through the enterprise bargaining process, for example, for teachers who were three year trained could take a professional development pathway, and money being available for professional development in schools, they can select school goals, they can select their own goals, there are systemic goals supported financially through that education enterprise bargaining process. I think that's one of the big differences between the '80s and '90s today is that you've got that process of direct negotiation with the employer on very, very comprehensive agreements and professional development figures very substantially in those agreements. But you've also got teacher registration now in terms of maintenance of standards.

Which I strongly support.

Yes, and that was a union initiative in the ACT, the establishment of the Teacher Quality Institute and so on.

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I think Clive that's where the ACT might have been very lucky to have Fran Hinton heading up the development of these initiatives. Teachers and principals were involved all the way through, but I think her skills were ideal and the knowledge she'd gained of the ACT school system and its schools were important. I think TQI also something where parents wanted and supported.

Oh yes, yeah.

If parents and teachers are working hand in hand it's a strong partnership.

Yeah, there was a very strong relationship for many years between the ACT TF and the Parent Council, and that continued right from the establishment of our own system right to the 2000s.

Just one Cheryl, having taken you on this tour right through your career, can I just revisit a couple of issues that I'd just like your perspective on, and I'll reintegrate them back into the discussion in terms of their relevant place. When membership of the union were all stood down under the old CEEP Act...

Yes, one of the most exciting times of my life.

Would you just like to reflect on that for a moment?

Well Clive there industrial action in the form of a rolling stoppage was called and my school was one of the first to go out. If I remember, about a quarter of the schools were scheduled each day – but I may have that wrong. You might remember, we did a bit of staggered stuff, so we could carry things on longer if we needed to. But anyway, the strikes were called of course, and most teachers went on strike – it was well supported. But there were always a minority who didn't support the action for various reasons which always caused resentment for the people who were fighting for teachers' conditions etc. I think it was after the first day the Minister announced that striking teachers wouldn't be stood down, they'd be sacked, using the CEEP Act. There was a really very strong reaction to the fact that they felt that the government was attempting to coerce them, and all but a few walked off the job – you can sack us all. It was an enormously success for the union – it was pivotal, that particular period, for union solidarity. Very exciting, people were very excited about such a victory from such a risk – the membership was really uncertain that they would win. Colleagues would say; I was CEEPed. Were you CEEPed? Answering yes was a badge of honour – but also funny.

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No, and there were examples at the time, like the SEQEB workers in Queensland when the electrical workers there, when the state government dismissed the whole workforce, so that there was that potential prospect. But we did wind up with the federal commission, the Industrial relations commission intervening in the form of Justice Judith Cohen, which was very helpful.

There was one further query, you were on the executive with several early women activists, and some of whom now are deceased or not contactable. But Julie Biles was significant as an authority member, vice president, she became ultimately president of the Primary Principals Association, very active. Margaret Dempster was another. You also were in a situation to be on the executive with the women who became union officers subsequently to Keith Lawler or Peter O'Connor, that's Cathy Robertson and Joan Corbett. In terms of that shift from largely male dominated organisation through to something that better reflected the membership of the organisation, do you want to make a comment in relation to that?

Okay, well let me go back first of all, quite a way back, and that's with Margaret Dempster who – she was a very good, solid unionist actually, and widely admired, but I don't think back on Margaret as being somebody who mentored people in the same way Julie Biles certainly did. When I was a member of the peer assessment review committee, for example, Julie Biles actually taught me, as the newest member and youngest by a fair way on that group, about the importance of keeping notes, keeping minutes, writing down numbers, how to write a good report. We'd go over it, and over it, and over it until it was professional. And so when you've got somebody teaching you some of those basic skills, that's tremendously important. She really was quite wonderful.

Some of the other people probably that we're referring to, Liz Dawson. Liz Dawson and I worked very, very closely in relation to gender equity and primary parity. Audrey Duke and Rosemary Richards were both strongly involved in that, to try to get equal attitudes to girls in schools, the education of girls, as well as in relation to women as workers, women as teachers and so on. Audrey was a quiet, but a forthright supporter. There have been many outstanding women – I learned so much from them.

I also have to add the name of Shirley Randell who was a programs' director. Shirley was an outspoken and determined feminist who created quite a flurry in her determination to promote women only professional development initiatives that were so successful that men demanded the same type of attention. She made a real difference in a relatively short time.

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Well of course you had a work value case before the commission on primary parity...

That's it.

...which was rejected. The commissioner refused to accept that there was an equivalence of work value.

That's right. Actually, I don't know, I think it took two or three times before the commission, Clive, for that to be won. And I was a witness each time, I think, in relation to that primary parity. But do you know, when I went to New South Wales in 1995 they still didn't have parity. They were amazed to hear we had parity in the ACT.

Across all promotions positions?

Yes, yes.

In fact it wasn't a commission decision in the end to provide that. What got it was actual negotiation at the system level, and then recognition by the commission that we had done that. There was also the issue of principals' pay and in the end settling on a budget model which reflected, as it still does, the level of complexity that was being dealt with in a school. A rough instrument but nevertheless in the end that was accepted rather than simply a situation that was effectively enrolment based. And it was made easier too by the creation of preschool through to Year 10 schools.

Yes.

Joint campus or ...

...the understanding that the skills and so on that are required to run a primary school is no different from the skills that are required to run a good secondary school. I suppose, look, getting back to the Lake Ginninderra College case, that were other beneficiaries. I think Margaret McGlynn became the first female principal of a secondary school, and I think 1987 – 1987 – the appointment of the first female secondary principal in the ACT. It seems unbelievable now. Another immediate outcome was when Elizabeth McKenzie became the first primary principal to become a secondary principal.

Yeah, Melrose High School.

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Elizabeth took over Melrose High School. But see, Margaret was a secondary person going as secondary principal, the rightful order of things. But Elizabeth McKenzie went from a primary school to a secondary school.

That's correct, yes.

To Melrose High School.

She also did time as head of professional development in the department or in the office.

Yes, she did. Elizabeth – had a range of roles – very talented. They were interesting times, weren't they?

Of course she's actually written a history of the system which it's publicly available through the ANU for her PhD.

I've read it actually.

Yeah, and we've got the link on the union website with her permission, to publicise it as a part of the history project here. Although Elizabeth actually, quite strongly in her paper, laments the loss of parental influence and places it at the feet of the union, which would be a perspective that I think a lot of people would disagree with. It wasn't a zero-sum gain, the influence of the teachers was very strong, it was often in cooperation with parents rather than undercutting the parents, although we did have that major ongoing dispute about staff selection.

Yes, and that was probably one of the major areas Clive, I think. There's no doubt that the system got going initially because of the fairly long-term lobbying by a group of clever parents.

Particularly built around Campbell Primary School.

Yes, yes. But over my time with the department I met wonderful parents who cared about public education every bit as much as the teachers did. But the other side of it is that I don't know how many of them would want to have somebody who works for the municipal council helping select them for their job as a scientist or an academic, or whatever. I think that the role of teachers as leaders in schools is very much a professional thing. I'm not saying there shouldn't be parents involved, it's not a hassle to me if they are or they're not. But it going all the way through the school, I don't know. Look, I know of a couple of cases where a principal – and let me say this without wanting to be quoted – Julie Biles, with everything she had learnt, and she set up a

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school, I think it was at Taylor. She chose every clever teacher that she had met, she brought them into her school. She had a lot of trouble running it because she had selected a whole lot of chiefs, and some parents would do the same thing.

I reflect back on, say, Weetangera, which is where I spent nine years, there were some teachers there that parents – you know when parents come in and they agitate, they don't want their kids in that person's class etc, this teacher was one of them. Really, I suppose she was a lovely person, she was a little bit different and so on, but when I think back on it now, that woman was absolutely ahead of her time in relation to the environment. I think a lot of the kids that she taught will know stuff now thanks to her, that they would not have got to know otherwise.

Thank you, Cheryl.

[End of Transcript]