

CPM Reviews

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Files:	Mins:	File ID:	File Name:
1 of 2	38	23240	2019.09.06_19.55_01Peter O'Connor.MP3 (MERGED)
2 of 2	37	23241	2019.09.06_21.11_01Peter O'Connor Pt2.MP3

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Speaker Index

Identifier	Name / Position	Role
Clive Hagggar:	Clive Hagggar, Former Secretary	Interviewer
Mr O'Connor:	Mr Peter O'Connor, Former President	Interviewee

Start of Transcript

File 1 of 2

Clive Hagggar: I'll just do a little introduction. It's the 7th of September and I am meeting via WhatsApp with Peter O'Connor, the first General Secretary full time of the ACT Commonwealth Teachers' Federation and subsequently President of the ACT Teachers' Federation.

Peter, when you went into those roles, you were very young. You were 26 I think when you were appointed to the position of General Secretary.

Mr O'Connor: Yes, that's correct, and I thank the people who had confidence in me, because we were negotiating some pretty heavy stuff, you know, their superannuation and other aspects of employment, including original salaries that we kick off at. So yeah, they had a lot of confidence in me. I hope I discharged it adequately.

Clive Haggart: **Given you were relatively, I'll use the word inexperienced, but you were also very active in the New South Wales Teachers' Federation, you might outline for us the – how you got your start in teaching and your initial involvement with the New South Wales Teachers' Federation.**

Mr O'Connor: Certainly. I started teaching in 1966. I had a two-year qualification, probably one of the last of us, and I went to Canberra and had the most amazingly wonderful experience, really more as a young student or a continuing student than a teacher, because I was under Errol Sweaney as a principal and that was an exposure to what you might call innovative practices. So, there were no half yearly or yearly exams, and this of course shook the establishment, in and out of the school over the next three years, almost like a rash.

When we had the Vietnam War, Errol of course allowed all of the students to wear the Moratorium badge and attend moratorium marches without any penalty on their attendance record. Errol himself was an activist going back into the thirties, so there was a wonderful tutelage if you like in what I call compassionate political thinking. He was always interested in the students from their point of view as a unique individual. He wasn't too fussed about streaming. In fact, he didn't have any streaming in his classes.

So I was very happy then to take up the role of NSW Teachers Federation representative at the school, and then went to several conferences, and of course, in the New South Wales Teachers' Federation, you got a very good grounding in meeting procedure and arguments for and against, you saw the right wing and the middle and the left wing, and that was all highly educative for me.

Clive Haggart: **Errol was principal, was it Canberra High School?**

Mr O'Connor: That was Watson High School.

Clive Haggart: **Watson High School. So he was the foundation principal of Watson High?**

Mr O'Connor: That's correct.

Clive Haggart: **Right. I can remember being a first-year high school student at Campbell going to Watson High for competitive sport. With that sort of focus and taking on those roles in your first year, how would you have described the view of ACT teachers towards the New South Wales department and the New South Wales Federation?**

Mr O'Connor: Well, it is correct that there was a feeling of unnecessary rigidity. The inspectorial system was not really fully appreciated by us, it was tolerated, and I think Canberra had a sort of a special identity emerging amongst parents and teachers alike. We were exposed to the public service as such. We felt that we should be treated more as professionals and then when you're working under not just Errol, but other principals, who were mixing in that public service echelons, you know, within the school, so P&C association, there was definitely, shall we call it a spirit of professional independence from the system.

Clive Haggart: **It's 1966 of course is the year that the Campbell Primary School parents began to organise and express their concerns over issues like class sizes, the lack of teachers to replace teachers who were ill, which was forcing amalgamation of classes, and the impact of the teacher shortage that existed across the country at that point.**

Mr O'Connor: Yeah, they were all very strong influences, and now that you've reminded me, there was of course the staffing formulae that were, you know, applied fairly arbitrarily, quite arbitrarily, so literally parents have a common point of contact with teachers when you talk about class sizes.

Clive Haggart: **I'm just thinking too, I mean, you're there in your first couple of years of teaching and we get to the 1968 New South Wales teachers' strike, which was the first time teachers in New South Wales took major industrial action. From what I understand, Canberra was a fairly strong participant in that action.**

Mr O'Connor: Yeah, definitely. We had this wonderful meeting at the Albert Hall. There is a picture doing the rounds of a young Peter O'Connor and Neil Dilley. Neil was the primary teachers' president, I was the secondary teachers, and Len Childs, him much older than us at that time, and yeah, it was a terrific

meeting, and a first step of course, and quite moderate in retrospect as all, you know, like most teacher unionism really is, but yeah, it was a baptism.

Clive Haggart: **What was the parental reaction to taking industrial action at that time?**

Mr O'Connor: Now, you're stretching me a bit. I think there was, from memory, there was always the, you know, you shouldn't be doing this, bad example. Maybe we had an editorial that was trying to run down the middle of the line and urging us not to do it, but I can't recall any really strident criticism, and of course, it was only, from memory, a 24 hour stop work, or we might have even – some of them probably went back in the afternoon. Always with teachers there's a natural concern for the students.

Clive Haggart: **Yes. So people like Cath Blakers from that Campbell community, they worked very hard to organise with fellow parents and other academics and teachers and principals as well to push for a separate ACT school system, and began to see significant progress, particularly in 1972 under the tutelage of one Malcolm Fraser.**

Mr O'Connor: Yes. I don't think Malcolm had any motivational desire to do it, but he inherited a set of administrators in Department of Education and Science who, as individuals, yearned for the opportunity to do something different from New South Wales, and he obviously as a minister, looked at the options and decided to run with it.

Clive Haggart: **Do you remember that report, I think it was the Currie report that came out around that time in which it recommended a separate system in the ACT, and it was...**

Mr O'Connor: Yes, I do and...

Clive Haggart: **It was viewed almost as a government report, but in fact it was completely organised separately by the parents, academics and others involved in pushing for an independent system in the ACT.**

Mr O'Connor: Yes, that's true, but it had a lot of status because of people like Alan Foskett and Neil Edwards. As senior public servants they come to mind, and you know, if you've got that sort of internal departmental fostering going on, it

helps the final status of everything, you know, because Sir George Currie was a significant person with very good qualifications.

Clive Haggart: **Yes, and he'd done previous government reports on setting up education systems I think in Papua New Guinea and even the Northern Territory.**

Mr O'Connor: That's correct.

Clive Haggart: **With the first major steps leading towards a separate union from the New South Wales Teachers' Federation, I understand that you were involved in a discussion with three other significant personalities from our past, Mick March, Barry Price and Dick Lee, in a discussion, I think it was the Wellington Hotel, and the four of you decided that it was necessary on the basis of how the New South Wales Teachers' Federation was viewing the development of a new system, to establish a separate union in the ACT. Can you remember back to that discussion?**

Mr O'Connor: Yes, I do and I'm just wondering in my mind who might else have been there from either the New South Wales Teachers' Federation or some other person of significance, but certainly the four of us were there, and there was no real disagreement. We knew that there was going to be a separate teaching service, there was a federal industrial system, the teaching service was going to expand at that stage on an integrated basis, both the Northern Territory and the ACT, hence the word commonwealth, and it was just obvious that apart from anything else, would be the legal structures that industrial relations required a separately registered similar organisation in the ACT.

Clive Haggart: **As opposed to the state registered New South Wales Teachers' Federation.**

Mr O'Connor: Yeah, precisely. I mean, they couldn't – even conceptually, that organisation conceptually doesn't really think much beyond its borders, as did – well, not all the other teachers' organisations at that stage. I remember South Australia for example had that expansive approach looking at things like separate year 12s, year 11 and year 12 colleges, whereas originally in New

South Wales that was, you know, that was sacrilege. You couldn't possibly do that.

Clive Haggart: **And yet at the same time, here with our new system, there was a great push for a separate year 11 and 12.**

Mr O'Connor: Exactly, that was I suppose, part of the inevitable movement away towards total independence.

Clive Haggart: **I think it's March and McNeil in their joint Masters' thesis, who described the reaction of New South Wales as something akin to Imperial Britain watching the Americans try to break away, that it wasn't welcomed. They were an organisation suffering a lot of political pressure and financial pressure at the time, and they'd lost payroll deductions I think as a result of '68 and the strike. Compared to South Australia and the NT, New South Wales really didn't provide the nascent organisation with much support. Was that a view that you might have shared?**

Mr O'Connor: Oh, yes. Look, the Federation – and I can remember people like Ivor Lancaster, well you know, he was very, very traditional and the Federation, and he had a black and white highly structured socialistic view of the world, and you know, you just did not break away in little groups that might come up with their own ideas. We always have to remember that the Federation and the Department were, you know, reflected bodies of each other.

Clive Haggart: **Yes, I think that's been a point made.**

Mr O'Connor: That's the way.

Clive Haggart: **The – there was also, as a bit of a side issue, I mean Len Childs had been elected president of the New South Wales Teachers' Federation, but it was one of those very rare occasions when officers and admin staff and executive hadn't really supported his election, but he had, coming from Queanbeyan, had a lot of support from Canberra teachers. So it's been suggested, I think in the MacKenzie paper that there might have been a bit of payback involved.**

Mr O'Connor: Well, that was going to happen anyway. I mean, Len had a rough time at the Federation and, well firstly, I think Lancaster was the general secretary, so it was a bit like, you know, just down the hall there with two opposing schools of thought, and totally opposing, and you know, Len Childs disrupted the progression of replacement, you know, the predetermined result. So independently of whether Canberra was involved, he was always going to come up against it.

Clive Haggart: **So just on a more positive note, where in '72 you hold on, I think the 3rd of August, a mass meeting of members of the New South Wales Teachers' Federation in the ACT that determined that they would establish a new and independent union, From that point, you start to work towards the federal registration of the organisation in 1974, which gave you the legal status, but in fact, over the intervening two years, as you developed the ACT Federation into the voice of teachers in the ACT, you were also developing the – in conjunction with the Commonwealth Department of Education and the working groups that were put in place, the structure of the new system that was to lead to the Interim Schools Authority.**

Mr O'Connor: Yes look, you would say they've got a lot going on in a fairly short time, and in the background, there was this other informal organised session called a parent -teacher council, and Errol Sweeney was on that. I think it pre-dates a lot of this stuff actually. It probably started functioning, from my memory, around early 1970. It used to meet down in Acton in one of the nice buildings down there, and it was a sort of an organic synthesis of why we needed to be independent and how we could operate as parents and teachers.

It was – and a lot of the final structures sort of can be traced back to them as early meetings in the parent- teacher council. Mind you, I mean there were some very well educated obviously and thoughtful parents who had a very good concept of administrative structures and whatnot, so you know, they were ideas that were well founded on experience.

Clive Haggart: **And strongly pushing for a more democratic system, one with very high levels of community participation.**

Mr O'Connor: Yes, that was there, and you know, it was a sort of a – for teachers it was a two-edged sword because we were looking for the freedoms that go with more flexible curriculum and various other structures, promotion structures, more school involvement and staff involvement in decision making within the school, you know, a general move away from a strict hierarchical situation.

But at the same time, we ended up running afoul with the parents over staff selection and hire and fire, and that literally resolved itself, but we could have done it better. I think if there had been a transition agreement, I don't want to say like Hong Kong, but we did need something.

We did need something that maybe – something that laid out a plan where we could have reached an agreed end point. Anyway, and look, I've lost touch now with what's actually happening, but my understanding is that individual school boards do have opportunities to specify duty statements and cultural and educational objectives, and that it's working reasonably well.

Clive Haggart: And school board chairs sits on the selection panel for school principals, but the key aim that you had back in the 1970s when this was being fought out in the early years of the Authority, that is of a career teaching service, that's very much been maintained over the decades.

Mr O'Connor: Right. It's probably a good balance, because if you take it to an extreme where you have a community funded, you know, ala American type system, then you know, you don't have a career service, and I think that it generates a lot more instability and also disputation that somehow or other these groups have to organise, and within the Australian award system as it was then, and even under collective bargaining as it is now, it would become extremely complicated to try to run a totally devolved system.

Clive Haggart: And given the size of the ACT, you know, that would create issues as well with the teachers down the road who are being paid at a different level and working under different conditions et cetera.

With the early years, the establishment of the Authority, you were successful in getting significant teacher representation on the council

of the Interim Schools Authority, and there was also a debate at the time as to whether or not these people once appointed to the Authority were independent or they were there as representatives, rather than simply nominees of the Teachers' Federation.

Mr O'Connor: Mm. Well, yes, I mean we had the three vice-presidents of the Federation, Mick and Margaret Dempster and Max Badham.

Clive Haggart: They were the first, yes.

Mr O'Connor: Yes, they were politically – yeah, they were the first and subsequent people, but I'm just concentrating on the first, and they were members of the ACT Teachers Federation Executive and they were running a, you know, they were running full time educational positions, they were meeting every Tuesday with the executive, every council meeting once a month, plus their Authority work, so they were busy people.

Look, my recollection is that while you could argue, oh you know, the Federation, the big bad Federation will direct you and there will be – you know, it's a bit like Moscow sending out the orders, or in modern terms, you know, Beijing requiring X, Y and Z, but to tell you the truth, looking back, they were always capable as vice-presidents representing to have enough flexibility in any decisions we made, reporting back. They were very good negotiators between the two. So I don't think that you can – or you might find the key policy points where they had to draw the line or you know, stake out a claim. It was done in a constructive and intellectually positive sort of a way.

Now, I'm sure that the parents would find some issues where they think that that was sort of the – probably staff selection would be the classic example, but other than that, there was a lot of give and take going on, in my view, and that was the...

Clive Haggart: Was there much conflict between the Commonwealth Teaching Service administrators and the Schools Authority?

Mr O'Connor: Oh yeah, well that was, 'because you had Jock Weeden there as the Commissioner.

Clive Haggart: As Commissioner, yes.

CPM Reviews

Job Name:

AEU History Project

Date of Recording:

6 September, 2019

Mr O'Connor: Even though he was in his retirement, he was highly experienced and underneath him, Jack Lenihan, and they knew what career teaching services required. They had to deal with the Public Service Board, they had to get, you know, salary agreements. We couldn't get out of line with salary and staffing, general principles, the Public Service Board that the commonwealth were following, and the Schools Authority just had to accept these things. One of them was the staff ceiling thing, and there was concern. I think that the parents were hoping for a little more flexibility, but you know, Jock was a very firm person but enlightened in his own way. I mean, he had a wonderful experience. His mentor was H C Coombs and...

Clive Haggart: Sorry, his mentor was? You were saying his mentor was? I missed the name

Mr O'Connor: H C Coombs.

Clive Haggart: Oh, right H C, Nugget.

Mr O'Connor: Coombs.

Clive Haggart: Nugget Coombs, of course.

Mr O'Connor: It was H C Coombs. So you know, Jock did a lot of work under him and yeah, so you know, he knew how to operate very successfully and sensibly in many ways.

Clive Haggart: But at this point you're operating now as the voice of the teaching service in the ACT, the teaching profession, in terms of both industrial and professional matters. There's no longer any New South Wales Teachers' Federation representation and the Australian Teachers' Federation which had been involved early on with the establishment of the Commonwealth Teaching Service, because it covered both the Northern Territory and the ACT and other territories. I mean, you've put yourself very quickly into the dominant role representing teachers, and it seemed to come relatively easily.

Mr O'Connor: It was sort of an opportunity and obviously I was happy to do it. Both Dick Lee and Keith Lawler, who were our presidents, were you know, strong colleagues. Keith would always be very reliable in providing very firm policy

directions. Probably I was inclined to be a little more of the negotiator in the middle, and certainly in subsequent aspects of my career, dealing with the transport workers union and whatnot, you know, that side of me came out. But no, both the presidents and myself, so I felt that we had a good balance and so that made it easier to pick up the ball and go for it.

Clive Haggart: **So a strong team with a committed executive and council and membership behind you, you were able to mark out the parameters of influence very early on.**

Mr O'Connor: Yes. Yes, yeah. We had the opportunity and again, while some parents may lament what they didn't achieve, if you look at the final result, it's pretty impressive, I think.

Clive Haggart: **So, with the overall membership numbers, at that, I think that mass meeting in August 1972, you asked people to pay a dollar as a sign of good faith, and to join. What were the main issues in growing the membership with the speed and the success that you achieved?**

Mr O'Connor: Well, as the inevitability came to pass, the transition into the Commonwealth Teaching Service, that was really the main driver, because people had to decide what they were going to do, whether they were going to join the Commonwealth Teaching Service or I think there was some arrangement they could have opted for back in New South Wales.

And so, with that prime change in their employment status came the obvious need to keep up a Federation membership for protection against the worst that can happen to a teacher in many cases. It was often the stimulus for individuals who might not be otherwise pro-union, but they wanted the Federation behind them if something went awry in their relationships with either parent or with principals, or you know, or individuals within their school structure. So, but essentially, once the employment status changed, then the membership just more or less flipped over to us.

Clive Haggart: **Right. So there were a few examples of people with a lot of experience in the system remaining with New South Wales and transferring out of the ACT, but from what I understand, the major motivation for most of**

them being senior people, was the New South Wales superannuation arrangements.

Mr O'Connor: Yeah, that's correct, but as I understand it, the initial, or call it the initial transfer across had the famous John Carrick as Minister, "You will not be disadvantaged," clause. So wasn't it the case that they could retain New South Wales superannuation membership or get the equivalent benefits in the – in that first crop of teachers who came across?

Clive Haggard: Yes, I think that there were some transfer investment arrangements, but they did have an advantage also coming across that they were able to bring their improved long service leave accrual arrangements with them, and...

Mr O'Connor: Oh yes, yeah, and you know, behind the scenes we did very well, and people like Jack Lenihan and Jock Weedon, you know, they're on the inside, they're not going to let their teaching service, their new teaching service, suffer. They want the quality and they accepted the political reality that once John Carrick said what he said in the Senate, they were quite happy to run with that, and yes minister that means this has to be sorted out in terms of what you said, you know, "You will not be disadvantaged," and that has – you know, this and that all had to be sorted out. So we did well. I can remember Keith and I celebrating strongly when we heard Carrick say that in question time in the Senate.

Clive Haggard: And of course, he's Senator – this is after the dismissal of the Whitlam government, he's the Minister.

Mr O'Connor: Yeah. Oh, yeah, yeah.

Clive Haggard: Yeah, so we're talking in this instance, after 1975.

Mr O'Connor: That's – yeah, that would be correct.

Clive Haggard: So the interim arrangements are going on for '74, '75.

The 5% salary margin that you had over New South Wales teachers, there's a lot of mythology around that and I can remember people decades afterwards referring back to that 5% as something that was

not simply an encouragement, but an entitlement because of the extra work with school-based curriculum. Yes, so that 5%, I mean, how difficult was it to negotiate that margin and what were your expectations in terms of how long it might last?

Mr O'Connor: Well, speaking pretty broadly, of course this was where Jock was playing the double game. The Public Service Board as a concept would never ever acknowledge any margin over any state thing, you know, it's far too inflexible, and it's not the way they set wages, but at the same time had to have something in his pocket by way of encouragement. Yeah, there was some toing and froing and he said he had letters that guaranteed the margin, but getting hold of those letters wasn't all that easy. Maybe we never ever got hold of them.

But the point is that we started off with what was effectively an advantage in salary. We always called it a margin, because that was the easiest way to communicate it, but the intricacies of industrial relations, so you know, there were lots of other arguments that – or different approaches within the employer or administration as to how you describe these margins so-called. No one wanted to lock themselves into a situation like from an employer's point of view where they – we had an automatic step up whenever X or Y moved. We just sat on top at 5%.

Then of course we had the big work value case and we did well in that, and my recollection is that after that decision, we went for a few years and we were able to maintain it, and then there was the wage indexation introduced under Kelty and Hawke, and that went on to preserve the salary advantage margin, call it what you will, for a period into – until the wage indexation collapsed. That's my sort of memory, so on balance, you know, we did well, relative.

Clive Haggart: Yes, and I think in terms of Kelty's approach, we had to invent the Advanced School Teacher classification as a so-called skills based classification to maintain it.

Mr O'Connor: Oh, yes.

CPM Reviews

Job Name:

AEU History Project

Date of Recording:

6 September, 2019

Clive Haggart: **Yes, a great majority of teachers on the top of the scale happened to get that classification too – and that preserved a margin for a while.**

Mr O'Connor: Oh yes, you've just reminded me, the master teacher, and then it was the 4% too. We had those 4% productivity negotiations that went on.

Clive Haggart: **Yes, the second tier wage bargaining et cetera. All those sorts of different arrangements.**

Mr O'Connor: That was just a complete shonk. I mean, I can recall sitting in the Office of Schools Authority with Phil Sadler (a Deputy CEO) and running all of these computer models on very old Macs, until we came up with a magic 4.011%.

Clive Haggart: **That of course was an agreement that contained the contentious decision to remove paid assistant principal positions from the school system.**

Mr O'Connor: Yes. Yes, that's correct. Well, something had to give.

Clive Haggart: **Yeah, well that's a matter for a much later article than I'll be writing in the short term on the earlier years.**

Pause in Interview

Clive Haggart: **Okay, Peter, I'd like to talk to you now about your three years as president of the ACT Teachers' Federation, which came after a period of being a school teacher in one of the secondary colleges, Copland College, which you took up your role there as a classroom teacher after six years as secretary.**

The issues of the time, I was thinking probably one of the most significant was the issue of asbestos in schools. Watson High, Woden Valley High and Narrabundah College being three particular places where there were issues.

Mr O'Connor: Yes, so I mean, it was clear to all of us the environmental hazards of it. In fact, Canberra had already experienced domestic problems there with asbestos as insulation. I think in the buildings concerned we had that and we and other significant usages of asbestos in what was different for industrial

uses at that stage. So, there were evacuations in the sense of that sealing the fate of some schools. Very, very difficult times, for example at Watson, Arthur Wilks, the principal there, but you know, the whole atmosphere and structure of the school was declining day by day, just with the apprehensions of what was going on. A very difficult time.

Clive Haggart: **Was there difficulty convincing the administration that there were really serious matters at stake?**

Mr O'Connor: I think that the evidence wasn't completely in. I don't recall so much a resistance. It's a bit hazy now, but in terms of, there would have been an economic factor involved, 'cause these removals, short of complete closure, which is what can happen now in certain hospitals and whatnot you – there's been evacuations going on because of the subsequent incidents, you know, down the track. We all know that it can surface 30 years later and give you, from diagnosis to death, six months if you're lucky, maybe a bit more now with certain drugs. So at that time, I don't think there was the same willingness to fully embrace the medical problems that the asbestos was creating, but nevertheless, they had – they knew they had to get rid of it.

Clive Haggart: **Yes, and of course since then, Canberra has suffered two major waves of the Mr Fluffy domestic asbestos issues, and there's still Court action going on at the moment for people who have refused government offers to buy their homes so that they can be pulled down.**

One of the interesting elements of your return to a senior officer's role in the union, and of course, by this stage we were well established at Weston, the physical site at Weston, was the fact that you won an election defeating an incumbent. Now, what motivated you to return to a senior officer's role after being a classroom teacher for a number of years?

Mr O'Connor: Well, I was enjoying teaching, but I felt that it wasn't utilising all of my skills. At the time there was a feeling, rightly or wrongly, but Cathy Robertson was experiencing resistance, also somewhat her methods were highly individualistic with, shall we say, the vibes that she put out, and, you know, I

have to admit, there was probably some male prejudice going on in terms of some people reacting negatively...

Clive Haggart: **To actually having female senior officers?**

Mr O'Connor: Oh, yes, and somewhat highly, you know, there were fairly harsh judgments made in different situations she and Joan Corbett were involved in.

Clive Haggart: **Yes. One of the interesting elements in terms of the change in the union was the fact that it was essentially established by largely male and secondary teachers, but within a relatively short period of time you found the organisation with two senior officers, being young women, who had effectively organised support, and of course, subsequently we've had female senior officers as well, but it seems from a historical perspective that the election of Cathy first as secretary, then as president, and Joan Corbett as secretary, were very significant moments in the organisation's development.**

Mr O'Connor: Yeah, well at some stage the male lineage had to be broken, and they certainly did that, and it's to their credit, and while there was – I was able to go back in in maybe somewhat of a, broadly speaking, a more conservative approach relative to what was happening. I think that, you know, a bit more experience was needed. These are horrible terms to – well, phrases to use in this day and age. Then that sort of gets back to, I think personally, I've always felt, right from the beginning, that when – again, going right back to Waston High School under Errol, he had wonderful female subject masters, heads, and it was always, you know, equality of women as the principle. Whether we were all perfect in implementing it remains another question. But the conviction was there.

Clive Haggart: **Of course, in your time as the three years you were president you had Joan Corbett as the re-elected secretary, you had after she went to the federal office, Helga McPhie elected by council, and then Rosemary Richards, who went on to serve in the role of president of the organisations for some nine years and had a significant national role as well, being on the National Board of Education, Employment and Training.**

CPM Reviews

Job Name:

AEU History Project

Date of Recording:

6 September, 2019

Mr O'Connor: Yes, well I mean, just the name Rosemary Richards conjures up nothing more than the greatest of respect and acknowledgement of her abilities, and her philosophy, the way she went about things. She was a wonderful person. Losing her was a terrible thing, obviously to her family, but the whole service. She was a joy to work with. It was a very, very cooperative time.

Clive Haggart: **So in those three years where you had sole leadership of the – well, not sole – the senior role, because it was structured differently than your time as secretary, where essentially the president and the secretary had different but equal roles, when you came back as president, it was as the chief officer of the union, with the secretary in a subordinate role. In terms of the sorts of issues that you had to deal with there, there was also a strike of the staff at Narrabundah College over some staff issues.**

Mr O'Connor: Yes

Clive Haggart: **That involved the transfer of, or attempted transfer of a member of staff contrary to Federation and probably departmental policy at the time.**

I was just thinking, perhaps the most significant element was trying to negotiate what's called the second tier of the national salary arrangements. In order to get a 4% increase, unions had to demonstrate significant, I'll put the inverted commas around the word, "productivity" gains to access the increase. How difficult did you find that exercise?

Mr O'Connor: Well, obviously we had to cut costs and staffing structure being – staffing generally being obviously the major cost once schools are established and underway, meant that we had to look critically at the greatest good for the greatest number, and as that turned out, we did abolish, or did agree to changing the school structures and certain hierarchical positions (Assistant Principals) went by the board. It was difficult. It did well. It was great to have the diversity that three assistant principals in the usual college or high school situation that it was able to create, but those changes were made and we did access the increase in salary.

Clive Haggart: **And it was done via a vote of the membership, but we did move from a position of three assistant principals in secondary schools to an unpaid deputy's position, to which over several years tenure and salary were restored, again, by the vote of the membership in accepting a wages increase under enterprise bargaining. So an interesting attempt at democratising the power structure that gradually got worn away.**

Mr O'Connor: Yes. Well, yes, it's always a – well, the reality that you face in organisations like a school structure is leadership. It all comes down to leadership. So I've said it several times now, I had wonderful leadership from Errol as a school principal. I knew what it was like to strike out on policy and sell it and stick to it, despite opposition and whatnot. So within schools you do need to encourage, as in many organisations, you've got to encourage leadership, and I think that the restoration of a salary allowance was a positive big move in that direction.

Clive Haggart: **What was your relationship like with the Chief Education Officers that were running the system in the time in which you were a senior officer? You had Hedley Beare as the foundation chief.**

Mr O'Connor: Yes, yes, well look Hedley was very intelligent, lovely sort of personality, didn't want any conflict. Some have said we took advantage of Hedley. I don't think so. I think he – and the same was often with Phil Hughes (Chair of the Authority). He was a very good leader, but they were leaders with principles of moderation and getting along with people, and I think they served the authority well. Then later on, Greg Hancock.

Clive Haggart: **He was very young when he came into the role wasn't he? He was 37.**

Mr O'Connor: Yeah. He took over from Beare, didn't he?

Clive Haggart: **From Hedley Beare, yes. Greg Hancock was the second chief executive.**

Mr O'Connor: Yes. Well, I mean, he didn't have the true educational grounding and personality of Hedley, and it got confrontational at different times. Phil Sadler was underneath, and Phil was quite a long-time server in the public service in education, and there was a return to more we're the bureaucrats and we

know what's best type attitude, I felt, under Greg Hancock, and we did have our disputes. Then after that, who took over after Hancock? Oh, Eric.

Clive Haggart: **Eric Willmot, yes.**

Mr O'Connor: Well, Eric was wonderful. You've only got to read his book about Pemulwuy, you know, the Aboriginal warrior, the white invasion of his land, and Eric had some great ideas. He wasn't an administrator, so often I think he had to rely on – and I think Phil Sadler was still there.

Clive Haggart: **Of course Eric was the chief officer who had to deal with issues relating to the introduction of self-government in '88 and yes, that saw the abolition of the Schools Authority and its replacement by a Minister for education, and of course the early years of self-government in the territory were quite tumultuous in terms of change, but I think you had...**

Mr O'Connor: I think Eric – I had gone by then. I left in really '87 as I recall it, some time in '87. It was more or less at the end of '87 as the president, and I was weighing up my options. Some of my supporters were happy for me to be – have my experience acknowledge as equivalent to the band 4 eligibility status, meaning that I could have transitioned to a school principal, but there were - the majority view, and that was pushed fairly strongly by other colleagues that I worked with, that I didn't have the school experience, and it was made clear to me that I wasn't going to get band 4 eligibility.

So I thought, well I'll put my industrial relations experience to use and, you know, I'd done a lot of service with the Trades and Labour Council, I had good contacts in the trade union movement, and I had some opportunities come up with some very, very influential companies who were supportive of unionism, get on with unions, and so I took a job representing Road Transport New South Wales, and that led onto another, basically another 15 years of industrial relations practice.

Clive Haggart: **I was just thinking, in terms of those last three years as the chief officer, we had some pretty rowdy council meetings, particularly around the second tier, and I was going to test your memory in terms of some of the activist members of those years and earlier, and I was**

quite surprised in my research to discover that the structure of the union in terms of a conference being the supreme body, then council, then a basis for council representation being school branches, it's essentially something that we've maintained today, although the conferences have gone. But that was – that proposition, that structure which wound up the old associations, came about as a part of, I think it was John Hoskins and Clay Robinson as a council...

Mr O'Connor: Clay Robinson and another fellow in there too I can't – he was a deputy principal.

Clive Haggar: Oh, John Collins.

Mr O'Connor: No, no, John was high school. He was science in high school and the deputy. But no, there was another gentleman.

Clive Haggar: I think Ian Taylor was another activist at the time. Anyway, I was just – the question for me was, basically looking at these fairly contentious conferences and council meetings, what was your view of the left as it then was?

Mr O'Connor: Oh well, the left as defined by people like John, who I always respected to have an opinion and he has to respect my right to disagree with it, but I'd always defend that opportunity. I learnt that from another teacher when I first started at high school where he used to say to the young, difficult students, "You have the right to mismanage your own affairs," and I will defend that forever. He was an ex-World War II French teacher, a wonderful person.

Anyway, the problem is that it was a particular time, there were conflicts with the BLF and Joan was hooked up in that too. You know, there were times when those sort of more political differences would emerge, 'cause at that stage I still had my Labor Party membership and I was on the left, and Ros...

Clive Haggar: Ros Kelly (Member for Canberra)?

Mr O'Connor: Yeah. I was on the left of Ros, but ...

CPM Reviews
Job Name:
Date of Recording:

AEU History Project
6 September, 2019

- Clive Haggart:** **Yes, and of course there was a lot of political manoeuvring in the lead up to the first ACT elections under self-government. A lot of political manoeuvring in the...**
- Mr O'Connor: Yes, definitely. Yes, yeah. And that was an opportunity – I did have some support from the Trades and Labour Council to take a role in that . I should have weighed it up, but I didn't pursue it.
- Clive Haggart:** **Yeah, and in the end, I think Wayne Berry was elected as the member and became – eventually became Speaker. He was for a while education spokesperson and his daughter, Yvette, is now Minister for Education.**
- Mr O'Connor: Oh, right. That's interesting. Wayne was in the Firefighters' Union.
- Clive Haggart:** **Yes, that's right. Yes.**
- Mr O'Connor: There were a lot of other – there were the quite stronger left people, but I think he had their support as well, helping make the BLF into being part of the CMFEU. And David Lamont.
- Clive Haggart:** **Yes, who won the position eventually of Deputy Chief Minister and then lost his seat in the subsequent election.**
- Mr O'Connor: Yes. David's power base was in the public service in the, was it called fourth division? That was his power base.
- Clive Haggart:** **And the Transport Workers' Union.**
- Mr O'Connor: Yes, yes.
- Clive Haggart:** **One of the other interesting elements I'd like to explore briefly with you is the role between the – or the relationship between the ACT Teachers' Federation and the Australian Teachers' Federation, the national body.**
- Mr O'Connor: Well, it was – I mean, early on the ATF under George Smith was, you know, pretty well just a lobby group and federal representation at different times related to school funding, you know, broad school funding issues. We had a role to do things, make submissions in relation to government reports, and then as time went on it seemed to grow into a much stronger organisation.

You had the Victorian Secondary Teachers' Association coming in, some other Technical Teachers' Associations, and had a stronger research base going on, Simon Marginson I think...

Clive Haggart: **That's right yes. Very competent.**

Mr O'Connor: Yeah. So, and the need was there and so it became a more rigorous organisation, stronger organisation.

Clive Haggart: **And of course...**

Mr O'Connor: We had to make a role, and you had the forming of the branch structure.

Clive Haggart: **Yes, and of course, in terms of national roles, Keith Lawler was a member of the executive of the ACTU for a number of years.**

Mr O'Connor: Yes, well that was Keith's forte. He was very good in the role and was a major contribution. I, at the same time, had a role with Bob Hawke in relation to integration of the teachers in ACSPA, the professional association. So it came under the ACTU structure.

Clive Haggart: **This is when Hawke was president of the ACTU?**

Mr O'Connor: President, yeah. I remember being involved at some time and he popped in at 8 o'clock or so, and a few schooners were drunk and the deal was done.

Clive Haggart: **Yes, well he was famous for those sorts of deals at that point in time.**

Mr O'Connor: Yes.

Clive Haggart: **In terms of the...**

Clive Haggart: **Sorry, I was just going to say, another interesting area of course was the relationship over the years between the union and principals, and there were a number of principals...**

Mr O'Connor: That's true.

Clive Haggart: **...that played a significant role in the Federation, both in its early establishment and in subsequent years representing the union on the**

Authority, and also being on the executive of the AEU, or ACT Teachers' Federation.

Mr O'Connor: Yeah, see there was always potential for personality conflicts. So not all the principals wanted to cooperate with the Federation. It was felt to be a reduction of their right to rule. Their personalities were also tied up I think with the way they saw unions as a whole, and to this day, up where I live at the moment in Byron, there are former school administrators, like subject people and whatnot, who still hold those views, you know, that they're in the minority, that I would never join the Federation, I'm not going to be told that. So that's just part of the culture.

On balance though, I have to say that the consensus was that principals, through their leadership ability, were able to accommodate the different aspirations of people within their staff and the Federation, and it was to their advantage too, because if you cut them loose they become their own representatives, you know, their own industrial organisation, and I think there was some time when, you know, the secondary principals' council were flirting with ideas and that of course would have driven a wedge between principals and staff which would have led to a lot more confrontation and difficulties, rather than being able to work things out.

Clive Haggart: Of course, whilst I'm just thinking of the different sectors with the establishment of the union, you had the pre-schoolers in from the very beginning and you had the primary and secondary associations, but you also then brought in the TAFE teachers.

Mr O'Connor: Yes, and that was more difficult than any – with the preschool teachers it was wonderful and they were closely linked with their primary school and linked with the profession as a whole, and they were looking at increasing their, you know, their status, and it worked very well, and they had representatives, Sylvia Cullen and several others, and they put in the time on the executive, as you recall.

Clive Haggart: Yes, well Sylvia and Jacqui Haslam who was another one who was there for many years, and then Polly Plowman, who wound up working for the ACT Teachers' Federation.

Mr O'Connor: That's true, and I think you were in the same...

Clive Haggart: Yes. We were both organisers at the same time. So with the addition of...

Mr O'Connor: So with the tech teachers, the tech teachers were a different kettle of fish. Qualifications were different too, and a sense of independence, you know.

Clive Haggart: Yes, and you also had a lot of them from business backgrounds, or small business backgrounds.

Mr O'Connor: Yes.

Clive Haggart: Which, you know, continued to...

Mr O'Connor: And the principal, yes, the principal there, the principal's position was much more administrative and the staffing structure was – well, what I'm trying to say is they had much more staff control and directive stuff without much – you know, what the principal said went, and then they had their departmental people closer to, I don't want to – like the wrong analogy, but closer to a traditional hierarchy, even military in some aspects.

Clive Haggart: You've also got the issue of large numbers of part-time teachers, casual, contract teachers in the organisation, many of whom who have got their own businesses or employed elsewhere, but I think, you know, we can look back and see people like Cassandra Parkinson and Keith Pantlin and others over the years. Kevin Peoples wound up as the national president of the TAFE Teachers' Association, so you know, they have – individuals have made a very strong contribution over the years, but yes, it was interesting that they had to come in on a different time scale from the rest of the membership back in the seventies.

Mr O'Connor: True.

Clive Haggart: And a very different culture.

Mr O'Connor: Different culture for sure. The president, Hugh someone, a big tall guy – a big guy, big personality. Just trying to think what his name was.

CPM Reviews
Job Name:
Date of Recording:

AEU History Project
6 September, 2019

Clive Haggar: **Well, Keith Pantlin was...**

Mr O'Connor: He was on the executive.

Clive Haggar: **Yeah, Keith Pantlin was on the...**

Mr O'Connor: Yeah, I remember Keith. Keith was much more demure. This other guy, Hugh someone?

Clive Haggar: **No, I'd have to check, because that's before my time. Alright, well...**

Mr O'Connor: Cassandra ended up in Byron.

Clive Haggar: **Oh, did she?**

Mr O'Connor: Now, how are we going? Have we covered everything?

Clive Haggar: **Well, I think we've covered pretty well the areas that I wanted to, except for one last element, in terms of the staff of the union over the time in which you were involved, many of whom went onto very long careers in the union office.**

Mr O'Connor: Yes, I remember, I mean, basically I only ever had the best of experience from dedicated staff, and we would come out of an executive meeting, the next morning, we'd take the minutes to Robyn.

Clive Haggar: **Robyn Fitzsimons, Sue Billington, Janet Bainbridge, Ros Tovey and others I mean, they all worked for the union for some 25 or 30 years, which is an extraordinary length of time for people to have...**

Mr O'Connor: It is extraordinary.

Clive Haggar: **And the way in which the roles changed as well over time, you know, they went from a paper-based typing exercise to office publications and a fully computerised journal and membership system, financial system and the like.**

Mr O'Connor: Yes, exactly, and it's amazing, the first person, Pat Brandon she, yes, she was wonderful too. So, you know, going back to what it was like working as a senior officer in the early days, we didn't overlook that. Well, I certainly

CPM Reviews

Job Name:

AEU History Project

Date of Recording:

6 September, 2019

overlooked it in my answer, but those women made the job so much easier, and getting out those bulk, you know, the newsletter to the Federation, I think was up to about 150 or 160 individual packages had to be made, put in the distribution system, some courier company, can't remember their name, but that – you know, we were very, very fortunate as an organisation, and me as an individual.

Clive Haggart: **Of course, you were there too when Rosemary Tilley was a research officer.**

Mr O'Connor: Yes. Well, when we spoke earlier on about the different contributions that Keith's personality and mine made, Rosemary Tilley had a very positive relationship, a very constructive relationship with Keith. Ideologically, they saw things very, very clearly and Rosemary had her research to back her up, and so you know, she made that, I don't want to call it behind the scenes, because she was always regarded as an equal contributor, but she had a strong influence, a positive influence for everything, and it helped shape our overall direction after things were discussed.

Clive Haggart: **Well look Peter, unless there's something else that you'd particularly like to make a comment on, I might bring the formal part of the discussion to a close. I'm very well aware of, you know, you're missing out on good cruising time where you are at the moment, so I'll...**

Mr O'Connor: Yeah, well I'm currently at the island of Lastova.

Clive Haggart: **Lastova.**

Mr O'Connor: I'm not very good on Serbian and Croatian. It's not an easy language. You don't recognise, you don't get the prompts that you get in Italian or French or Spanish, 'cause there's lots of Ks.

Clive Haggart: **Alright Peter, I'll just close off the recording and thank you.**

[End of Transcript]