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Full transcript of an interview with

TOM STOTT

On 31 July 1972

By Lynne Arnold

Recording available on CD

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A series of dots, **.... ....** indicates an untranscribable word or phrase.

Sentences that were left unfinished in the normal manner of conversation are shown ending in three dashes, **- - -.**

Spelling: Wherever possible the spelling of proper names and unusual terms has been verified. A parenthesised question mark (?) indicates a word that it has not been possible to verify to date.

Typeface: The interviewer's questions are shown in **bold print**.

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Interview of Mr Tom Stott by Lynne Arnold recorded in Adelaide on 31st July 1972 and broadcast on ABC Radio 5CL on 17th September 1972 at 10.30am as part of the series 'Now in retirement'.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

Mr Stott, you're very well much identified with the farmers of the Mallee. Were you born there?

No, I was born in St Peters, an Adelaide suburb.

And what sort of life – – –?

1899, if you want to know.

Was it really? (laughter) What sort of life did you have as a child?

Oh, a very enjoyable life. I attended the Norwood Primary School for many years, and my father had a business on Magill Road, St Peters, at that time. I went to Norwood Primary School. I was captain of some of the school football teams and, of course, following that I became an ardent supporter of the Norwood Football Club.

Well, then, how did you get up to the Mallee?

Well, my father bought a farm. He retired from business, the firm was dissolved and he bought a farm out in the Mallee in nineteen hundred and fourteen. Well, then I was privately educated for a while, studied Economics during that period, and then he subsequently shifted, removed to near Loxton, farming near Loxton.

What did you intend to do with your own life?

I was going to be a farmer all my life.

Did you in fact farm?

Oh yes, I did. Farmed on my own for a few years, and then went into partnership with my Dad. We finished up and had five hundred acres in the Mallee, and – – –.

Was this mainly wheat land?

Mainly wheat and – principally wheat, but we had sheep as well.

What were farms like in the Mallee in the 1920s?

Very rough. (laughs) You see, they – when they were taken up, allotted by the government in 1914 – yes, 19– (hesitation) – 16, the – '14 to '16, these places, they were just all scrub. We had to roll the scrub down by big rollers and then clear it up and burn it, and I burned hundreds of – *rolled* hundreds and burned hundreds of acres of scrub. And while I was doing that – we were driving the horses over – I was repeating economics and all that sort of thing to myself and getting educated that way.

How did this agree with your father? (laughs)

Never agreed with my father at all. I used to study long – read books and study long at night, and he used to say to me, 'Well, studying those darn books won't do you any good, only just a waste of time,' because he had the idea, you see, that I should go to sleep early at night and wake up early in the morning and get on with the farm work at five o'clock in the morning, but I had different ideas.

Well, what gave you those different ideas? Why did you read economics – – –?

Because I was – well, it was sort of in the blood, sort of thing. I wanted to study economics to be able to talk and understand them thoroughly. In conversations with your fellow farmers, they used to come to me in those early days, when I was quite a youth, you know: 'What's this mean and that mean?' So the average farmer, I must admit, was not very good at mathematics or economics, and even somebody could explain something to him, well, they were very grateful, and this sort of I suppose inspired me to, you know, to know more about the subject.

As you grew to know more about this particular subject, what, to your mind, was one of the greatest problems that farmers faced in those days?

Well, the greatest problem, of course, that came to my mind in early study of economics – I'd read Henry George and *Single tax* and all that – the greatest problem was the high tariff all round Australia, where farmers were forced to pay these high prices to shut out imported articles. You couldn't buy a cheaper tractor or a cheaper motor car or things like that that farmers had to had, trucks from Japan or anywhere else, the high tariff wall prevented that and the farmers had to pay these high prices. Now, according to Henry George and these people, well, then, the way to overcome that problem was to lower the tariff to enable the farmers to buy

machinery at a comparable price of the price he was receiving for his product overseas. Well, this was not practicable because the Liberal Party of Australia and the Labor Party wanted a high tariff for two same, sort of same reasons: one, our manufacturers shouldn't go out of business, and the Labor Party that – well, it created employment. Well, that was a logical argument. So then I began to study the question and came to the conclusion, well, now, we as farmers – wheat farmers, particularly – are the feeders of the nation. Now, you want us to pay these high prices and accept low prices overseas, why should we go broke in the process of feeding a nation? This was the prominent thought in my mind all the time.

So what did you do then, as a young farmer with very much of a self-education and desire to do something about an economic question that seemed almost unsolvable?

Well, it wasn't completely. You had to get sufficient support in Parliament to carry out your ideas. But, in order to carry out these ideas, you had to get the support of the wheat farmers throughout Australia, and so the first essential was to form a wheat growers' organisation, not only in the State but also right throughout the Commonwealth.

This was back in the 1920s when it was difficult to –

1927.

– well, 1927, when it was difficult to communicate. Did you yourself actually go around from pillar to post –

Oh, yes, travelled –

– talking to farmers?

– thousands of miles and knocking on the door, so to speak, of the farmers to get them to join the organisation. Plus the fact of, once I became known, of receiving many and hundreds of invitations to address meetings – not only in South Australia but all over the whole of the Commonwealth. Well, the first start was in 1927 when we decided, after a deputation to the Premier of the day, Lionel Hill, because of the drought in the Murray Mallee, we wanted financial assistance to carry on. Well, we held a big meeting in the Murray Mallee and I was appointed one of a deputation to wait on the Premier to get this drought relief assistance, and then we went back and

reported on this to the farmers out there and we said then that we should not lose this opportunity of trying to form a very powerful state organisation of farmers all over South Australia. Well, that was done and we – I was chosen to go to the West Coast, which we got wonderful support over there. Then, subsequently, a couple of years elapsed and we found that we had to influence the Commonwealth Parliament so it was necessary then to get a state-wide organisation through the Commonwealth. I was authorised to call a conference which was held in Melbourne in nineteen hundred and thirty, and I was elected as first Secretary at that conference of 750 farmers from all over Australia, and held the position from that day till nineteen hundred and sixty-nine.

There must have been a lot of men – – –.

Well, they must have been satisfied with me, or else they weren't game to debate against me. (laughter)

That's right. On March the eleventh, 1938, there was a farmers' march in Adelaide. Now, as a firebrand in farmers' politics, did you have any part in this?

I organised it all and led it.

Oh, did you?

Yes.

And how successful was it?

Oh, tremendously successful.

What were you actually protesting about at this stage? This was 1938.

Oh, the same sort of thing, that what – we go back to the economic part of it and the payable price. We were agitating then for a price of three-and-fourpence per bushel, which was considered by the Royal Commission under Mr Justice Gepp at the time that three-and-fourpence per bushel would be the payable price. Well, the first step was to get a charge on the Australian consumer flour to equal on about sixty million bushels of wheat at three-and-four a bushel, and we had placards demanding three-and-fourpence a bushel to get the – mainly, of course, to get the wheat growers security and prosperity. And this was my life-long ambition, to provide security and

prosperity to the wheat growers of Australia, which I think I can claim with every justification I accomplished it.

Right. Well, how did your part in international wheat meetings affect your views on world marketing? You know, after you got the Australian Wheat Federation established, you were involved in a lot of international meetings.

Yes, well, you've got to go back a bit here, you see. Now, you've got to understand that we – finally, I organised this plan, became the architect of it, of what's now known as the 'wheat stabilisation plan of Australia', which provided a guaranteed price for every bushel of wheat the farmer produced – worked on a C-series, sort of C-series indexed formula. If any items in the formula went up, well, then those items in the cost went up correspondingly. But then the Commonwealth – the grower had to contribute when the price went above a certain figure, the cost of production – if the overseas price or final realisation exceeded that figure, then the grower contributed to his own stabilisation fund. Now, when that fund became exhausted then the Commonwealth government had to come to the party through the Treasury to make up the deficiency. Now, quite obviously it couldn't go into many, many millions, and so the Commonwealth government then tried to arrange a minimum price on international wheat agreement sales, and so the Minister for Trade and Customs at that time, the Honourable Jack McEwen, requested that I should proceed overseas to attend these International Wheat Agreements, which was approved by the Australian Wheat Growers' Federation. First conference I attended was in London, but just prior to that I attended a conference at Solziebaden [?] in Sweden and was able to meet many of the delegates, wheat grower delegates, from Canada, Argentina, France and all those, and made very important contacts –

Did you find – – –?

– which became very valuable to me in the subsequent conferences.

Yes. Did you find that these farmers had similar sorts of problems that our farmers faced?

Yes, there were similar problems – mainly, of course, being the economic part of it, the low overseas prices and high internal costs.

And these farmers were just as concerned. Were there any who had the same sort of schemes in mind that you did?

No, quite different. America wouldn't agree to a scheme like I've just enunciated here because they're more private enterprise and they do their sales on the Stock Exchange, sort of business. Canada, yes. Canada works on an all-Canadian pool, which was like we have, an all-Australian wheat pool, but our plan is slightly different to the guaranteed price plan in Canada.

Well, by this time, you'd moved a long way from the farm. What had happened to your farm?

Well, I carried on for a while, and then my Dad carried on, and he got too old to manage it and he arranged for share farmers, and eventually share farmers weren't satisfactory and so we got rid of the whole lot.

Did you feel any pang at this?

Well, you see, I became so involved in working for other farmers and, as I said, my life became dedicated for their behalf. I never had time to even worry about farming, but it is the life I like, the free open easy life.

You still saw it as free and open and easy –

Yes.

– in spite of all these financial difficulties?

Yes.

Mr Stott, how interested have you been in the exercise of power?

Well, I don't know. It's been thrown my way, not with any design of mine, for many years – I don't know why. People always say, and quite rightly, even today that I'm one of the most controversial figures ever in the Australian political or public scene, and that's perfectly true. I don't mind being a controversial figure, it seems to be thrown my way. Now in the 1962 election, for instance, I had to decide who was going to govern. Well, that wasn't my fault, that was the electors' fault in South Australia, putting 19 Liberals in and 19 Labor. The same thing happened in the 1968 election. That wasn't my fault, I didn't design that.

You give the impression of a man very much on the defensive sometimes. Do you think you are?

Well, no – I'm forthright and aggressive, apparently.

But you feel – – –.

You've got to be.

Why do you say that? Why do you have to be?

Well, because you've got to convince other people that your thinking is right, and argue the point with them, and then if you can see their good points you've got to be broad-minded enough to give way to them that they've given you a good point.

When have you given way?

Everybody's not Mandrake, you know. When you can see a learned man can give you a good point, well, you accept it and then you frame the thing around following your talks accordingly, and then you get more convinced than ever that your plan is right. In other words, you've got to put up an infallible plan if you want people to follow you.

Has there been anybody in your life – either in the Wheat Growers' Association or in political life – who's had the effect on you so that you've felt it was wise to give way to them?

Oh, yes, I can recall Mr J. Maycock was the farmer not far away from me – a very brilliant man, Jack Maycock. Another great friend of mine, Mr Cecil Chapman from Moonta influenced me greatly. But one of the men, the greatest, had the greatest influence on my wheat-growing career was Mr Percy Stewart, the Federal MHR[1] in Canberra at that time.

Why was this?

Oh, he had a brilliant brain. He had a brain on farmers' side equal to Menzies on the legal side.

When have you felt most frustrated in your public life?

Well, one of the great frustrations I felt in public life was when I framed the *Bulk Handling Grain Act* in South Australia. When I placed this before the executive of the Wheat and Wool Growers' Association, I was given practically plenipotentiary powers to go on ahead and put the scheme into effect. The great frustration came

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[1] Member of the House of Representatives.

when the Premier at that time, Sir Thomas Playford, wasn't very keen. He was very cool on the idea at first, mainly because, as he knew there was a lot of opposition from his own supporters in Parliament. That didn't deter me at that time. Subsequently, the Premier wanted it referred to Public Works Committee. I said no, it shouldn't go to them, because at that time the plan provided for a guarantee – a fifty per cent guarantee from the state government to the Commonwealth Bank's advances to us. The Public Works Committee are only under their own *Act* entitled to make an enquiry when a hundred thousand pounds was involved. Well, there was no money involved, it was only a guarantee. The Premier laid down the law and he insisted and it went before the Public Works Committee, much to my consternation. And the Chairman of the Committee at the time was Mr Shannon, who was also Chairman-Director of South Australian Farmers' Union, who didn't like our scheme, our own Wheat Growers' scheme – they wanted to bring it in themselves.

So you were pretty frustrated in this instance?

Well, I started to be frustrated, but I became worse frustrated when the call – giving evidence before the Public Works Committee and the Committee were at last convinced by a majority that the plan was sound, and the Committee moved a minute that the Chairman sign the report to be laid on the table that day. When I went down to Parliament House at two o'clock that day there was no Mr Shannon and no report on the table of the House. And I asked the Speaker, and he said he hadn't received it, so then I became suspicious and I thought, 'By heck – this Chairman's not going to sign this report and therefore I'm going to lose this plan.' But then I went to the Deputy Chairman and insisted that he should sign it in the absence of the Chairman. Well, after a lot of persuasion, he did. That was the greatest frustration I had. I thought I'd lost the lot because the Chairman would refuse to sign it. But they didn't get away with it. I forced the Deputy Chairman to sign the report, it was tabled for Parliament and Parliament couldn't do anything about it but accept it.

So that became, in effect, your great – one of your really great triumphs.

No, that wasn't my greatest triumph, if I may just relate that. The greatest triumph was when the Wheat Stabilisation Plan was agreed to by all the respective state governments and the Commonwealth passing necessary legislation to implement it,

it was necessary to have a referendum of all the growers right throughout the states. And the final meeting came in Perth, Western Australia, where the executive of that organisation was not prepared to recommend to the rank and file members whether to vote yes or no, because it was a fairly controversial matter in the state of Western Australia. Because of their geographical advantage they would lose thruppence a bushel under this plan. They selected me to advocate the 'yes' vote and the late Sir John Teasdale, who was a very prominent figure in the wheat growers' matters in Western Australia, to advocate a 'no' vote. Well, when we started off, the Chairman said he was having trouble, that Sir John Teasdale wouldn't speak first, he'd walk out rather than speak first. And I said, 'Well, I've come thirteen hundred miles – I don't care what happens.' And then I had a brainwave and said, 'Why don't you ask the Convention to decide who's speaking?' That'd be a double-barrelled gun for me, because if they decided that Sir John should speak first he couldn't walk out very well, and secondly that if they decided he should speak first I'd be able to gauge the effect I was up against in the audience. Well, they decided by three votes to one that I should speak first, and I thought, 'Heavens, this is going to be a tough one for you, Mr Tom – you'd better get your best foot forward here.' So I started off, had to speak first and spoke for an hour, which was arranged, and Sir John replied.

And one of the amusing incidents was when the questions came, one chap got up and obviously was what we call a 'Dorothy Dix' question or inspired question that, even if we vote 'yes' for this plan, it'll be ineffective because Section 92 of the Commonwealth Constitution would make the plan ineffective. He addressed the question to Sir John Teasdale, and Sir John replied, and of course he said that was so. And then one of the young fellows down the front of the audience jumped up quickly and said, 'Mr Chairman, I want to ask Mr Stott the same question so as he'll explain it.' (interviewer laughs) That made everybody laugh. Well, I did. But the final point was, when the motion was moved that we advocate a 'yes' vote, it was carried by three votes to one. I'd turned the conference completely over. I think that was my greatest achievement.

And now, Mr Stott, you've retired from a great deal of this, but you told me that you still read a lot. What are the sort of books that you read?

I like reading biographies. I've just finished reading a biography of Sir Winston Churchill, a man I admired for quite a lot – he made mistakes; so do I. I suppose everybody does. And I also like reading high class detective mystery stories.

It seems very much in character for you.

(laughs) Well, I hope you don't class me as a mystery, do you?

END OF TAPE