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Full transcript of an interview with

DAVID WOTTON

on 1 February 2006

by Bernard O'Neil

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OH 754/3 AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY BERNARD O'NEIL WITH MR DAVID WOTTON, WHO'S CURRENTLY CHAIR OF THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MURRAY-DARLING BASIN NRM BOARD. THE INTERVIEW IS CONDUCTED AT STIRLING ON THE 1ST FEBRUARY 2006 FOR THE PROJECT ON THE HISTORY OF WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

[Square brackets includes comments and corrections provided by Mr Wotton in March 2006.]

Tape 1, Side A

David, thank you very much for agreeing to be involved. We've got a short period of time now just to trace your career and your involvement in the water resource area. Perhaps an obvious starting point is the fact that you were a Member of Parliament from 1975 and in that role had some involvement in environmental matters.

I became the Member for Heysen in 1975; went on to the front bench in 1976 as the Shadow Minister for Environment; and held that portfolio in government and out of government for most of the 27 years that I was in Parliament.

You had an interest in environmental matters before Parliament or ...?

Yes, I'd always ... I was pretty passionate about environmental issues generally, and so was delighted when David Tonkin, as Premier in 1979, asked me to take the Environment portfolio and also the Planning portfolio at that stage. They were the two old Departments of Environment, and Urban and Regional Affairs. With Keith Lewis's help, we brought the two together to create the new Department of Environment and Planning. That had a close working relationship with Water Resources. Water Resources wasn't part of the responsibility of the Minister, but Peter Arnold was the Minister at that stage. We had a very close working relationship.

That's in the '79 ...

That was '79 to '82. And retained that portfolio. '82 we unfortunately lost government. From then on I was Shadow Minister for Environment and I took on the Water Resources portfolio as Shadow Minister in about '91; came to government in '93 as the Minister for Environment and Natural Resources plus a few other things. Of course, water resources was part of the Environment and Natural Resources portfolio at that stage. The E&WS, of course, was still operating and they took care of that side of things, but I had the responsibility for the River Murray, for groundwater issues, etc. That continued on. I guess one of the things in talking about water that I've been able to note more than anything else is the significant rise in the priority given to water issues. When I look back to the mid '70s, certainly water was an issue and certainly the River Murray was an issue, but I'd suggest that it probably went from about priority G to priority A between '75 and currently. And that's been interesting to watch.

That's something that's happened at a State level and ...

Certainly at a State level. All of the States will have recognised that; and it would be recognised at a national level as well.

Before then, as part of its evolution, which is about 1974–75, there's a *Water Resources Act* [19/1976, 37/1990] that came in. Did you pick up on that in your early period?

No. [However, I obtained approval from Cabinet in 1995 for a major review of the *Water Resources Act, 1990* and in 1996 I introduced major amending legislation to Parliament (which became the *Water Resources Act, 1997*). In 1995 I had already introduced legislation to provide for the establishment of the catchment water management boards. The *Catchment Water Management Act, 1995* was repealed by the *Water Resources Act, 1997*. Both Acts brought a new look to water management in South Australia.]

I was going to make that comparison, the 20-year span between the Acts. So getting right into it, what were the changes there? I know I've put you on the spot a little bit, but there's a need to have a new Act and it's only 20 years after the previous one.

It was legislation that recognised the need for community input, for the community to be aware of issues and have an important part to play in water management across the board. Of course, at that stage we introduced in 1995 the first South Australian water plan, *Our water, our future*. That's been amended, added to, replaced, by water plans, of course, right up to the current day.

Two things come out of those comments, David. One is the emphasis on the community. That sort of suggests that before then it was more, what, a government or departmental type ...?

It was just recognised that it was a departmental responsibility. The *Water Resources Act*, along with the legislation introducing the water catchment boards and, of course, the levy certainly reflected the interest and the need for the community to be involved. When I look back, there was certainly some debate when we introduced the catchment levy. I know that the Opposition of the day continued to refer to it as a 'tax' and there was some opposition: really, it's been accepted very well, right through. It's interesting that now South Australia is the only State that has been able to retain that levy. I can assure you that many of the other States are very envious of that situation. Victoria introduced a catchment levy; then, just prior to an election, decided to get rid of it. I think they've regretted that. As I say, the other States have been very envious that we've been able to continue on with that. But the catchment boards really were effective because they really did involve the community. It was community ownership – and that's why the levy

worked so well – because people were prepared to pay a levy for catchment management because they could see that money going in to operations within their own catchment. That ownership was very important and was a big factor in the success of the catchment boards.

So they see a direct benefit coming back to them.

Yes. So often, if you pay a tax, or if you pay a levy, you're never quite sure where it's going; but in this case people could see that it was going to a local board, their local catchment board, and the money was being spent within their own catchments, and that was pretty important.

How closely involved were you in the process leading up to this Act in '95? Was that something working from you down, or ...?

I became Minister in '93 and it was pretty soon after that ... Some work had already commenced on the new legislation so I can't really say it was an initiative of mine. It was something that the agency had been working on for some time. I've obviously had a strong interest in it, saw the need for some changes, for some improvements and, of course, very strongly supported the legislation. For a very long time it was recognised as upfront legislation right around Australia in water management. That was recognised widely.

I asked that question about your involvement, David, because comparing it to the NRM situation, which has taken three or four years and so on to get the legislation through.

NRM's an interesting situation because in 1993 John Scanlon, who was then my chief of staff – and it's interesting that John has only just in the last month or so been appointed as the first independent commissioner for the Murray–Darling Basin Commission, and I went across to New Zealand to look at the natural resource management legislation, which at that stage was being introduced in New Zealand, and came back very excited about what we'd seen. I convinced my colleagues that that should become policy from then on and at the following ... It became policy that was introduced prior to the following election. Has been policy of both persuasions in Parliament ever since until, of course, the legislation being introduced in 2004.

Generally, would there be bipartisan support for things like NRM or the *Water Resources Act* previously?

There was certainly bipartisan support for the *Water Resources Act* and there has been for NRM in its different forms. The now Opposition, then government, introduced a bill that didn't get anywhere. Of course, that was at a time of an election. The current

government picked up on that, came in with a ... They were very determined to introduce natural resource management legislation. The current Minister had given it a lot of thought and was ready to roll with the new legislation.

There's always a little bit of to-ing and fro-ing on the fine points of detail, but generally ...
Yes.

The other question I wanted to ask you from your earlier comment, David, [was] about the water plan and the origins and development of that.

The water plan came out of the Water Resources Council of the day. I'm just trying to think of some of the people that were involved at that stage. I know that Ann Shaw Rungie was a chair for part of that time. When we came to government I sensed that the Water Resources Council was floundering a little bit and not quite sure what their role was, and was certainly in need of some direction. So we determined that it was appropriate that a plan, a water plan, should be brought down. That was instigated through the Water Resources Council. Of course, that plan of 1995, *Our water, our future*, has, as I said earlier, been amended and reintroduced and of course we still have ongoing revised water plans to this day.

It's interesting that we need a plan for water, whereas we survived as a ... State for 140–50 years before.

There were other plans. There were plans regarding land management, for example. It had not been ... I can't say that it hadn't been recognised, but nothing had been done about putting down on paper forward directions. So it was seen to be necessary. It was a very good plan and was very well received.

How difficult was it, in terms of forming legislation, preparing a plan and so on, when you've got such a diverse range of people and groups involved: the E&WS, you've got groundwater with Mines and Energy, ... issues?

I don't know about difficult; it was complicated because of that very reason. There were a lot of people to be consulted. It certainly took time because of the consultation process, because of the consultative process. But it was legislation well received, as I say, as was the water plan.

What about amongst your colleagues, your parliamentary colleagues, working with other Ministers and so on?

I think as people recognised the importance of water and issues relating to water management in South Australia, the more support was made available through Cabinet – particularly with the River Murray. When we came into office in 1993 there were huge

issues with the Patawalonga and the Torrens, for example. They'd been very controversial issues receiving a lot of media attention, a lot of negative media attention. We brought down a policy in the '93 election that we would immediately start to work on improving the quality of the water in the Torrens and Patawalonga particularly and the Onkaparinga. I guess that's really ... We set up a Torrens Committee and, of course, local government was involved. Then we brought all of the councils together in the Patawalonga catchment and the Torrens catchment. That was really the birth of the catchment boards.

I find the catchment board an interesting concept. We look at a State with a state border, whereas here you're talking geographical-type boundaries.

Yes. One of the things that the legislation, the *Water Resources Act*, picked up very strongly was total catchment management and looking at the entire catchment and working from the source down. That was a concept that, as far as I was aware, had not really been considered previously. Of course, the catchment boards fitted into that very well indeed.

It also had the soil conservation boards and the pest plant/pest animal boards and so on. There were some models to follow perhaps?

That's right, yes. I guess it was rather surprising, recognising the importance of water to this State in particular, that it took as long as it did for the first water plan to be brought down.

In the 10 years since that plan, of course, we've now got the State NRM Council and all these other boards, many areas coming into one: that in itself is an interesting process.

Yes.

Was it something firstly that you might have considered, back in '95?

As I said, in '93 we went across to New Zealand because we'd heard about moves over there to bring about the true integration of the management of natural resources: water, soils, animal and plant control etc. Of course, that was an opportune time for them to introduce legislation because they had just gone through a local government review, of local government boundaries. So they were looking more at integrated natural resource management within the new local government boundaries where the current government, quite rightly, John Hill stipulated with natural resource management being introduced in South Australia that it should be based on actual catchments. That was a very wise decision.

Don't take my question as an impertinent one, but how did David Wotton go on the learning curve with ... You're using terms now like 'integrated resource management', which is a 1990s, 2000 term.

I was particularly lucky because I had enormous respect for the vast majority of the staff that I worked with with[in] the agencies. When I look back, when we came to government in '93 I was Minister for Environment and Natural Resources (including water resources), Minister for Family and Community Services, and Minister for the Ageing, so it was a very varied set of portfolios – about as varied as you could possibly get, I would suggest. But because I'd always had a passion for the environment and a particular interest in water, water management, it made it pretty easy to follow the advice that I was being given and the directions that were coming out of our government at the time as far as policy movement is concerned.

Tracing that back, therefore, you say you had an interest in those areas: the origins of your interest ...?

I was brought up in the Hills on a fruit property. My father and Sir Thomas Playford were very good mates and both had a common interest in lots of issues. If you look at what Playford did with water and the establishment of the pipelines etc., he had a particular interest and very strong involvement at that stage. I'd always been interested in the land: I was chair of the Adelaide Hills Land Management Committee, way back, can't remember when but when I was in my early 20s. Then went overseas ... (telephone rings; break in recording) Went overseas and worked for the Overseas Farmers Federation while I was over there, again working particularly with land management issues (not so much with water issues, although I became very interested, even in those days, with the work that was being done to reclaim the Thames). In about 1995, as Minister, I [visited] England and had the opportunity to spend some time looking at water-related issues or water-management issues with the Thames and the improvements that they'd been able to introduce. Water and environmental issues generally have been a pretty important part of my life.

Just to clarify: the family property or farm – where was that?

At Uraidla in the Adelaide Hills. My father was always very conscious of the need to protect the catchment, because in those days there wasn't a lot said about it but he was very conscious of the fact that there needed to be proper management of the watercourses because they were all heading in one direction and that was towards the metropolitan area and it was a major source of water, of course, for Adelaide. He was chair of the local council for some 11 years and was involved in the council for many,

many years. That's one of the things that that council became very involved in – water management.

Do you recall any particular concerns amongst the community in the Hills about water, depletion of water, for example? When you say the water's going down to the metropolitan area ...

There've always been issues, as far as water is concerned, because so many have relied on bores through – particularly market gardeners, fruit growers and that sort of thing – right through the Hills. That's why prescription of both the eastern and western Mount Lofty's has been so important, because for as long as I can remember there've been those that have been concerned because their water levels were going down: the more bores that were put down, the more the water level went down, in many cases, and so there was concern about that. It's also brought other issues with it: I recall very vividly the measures that Susan Lenehan brought down as the Minister for Water Resources. She was in office just prior to our government coming in to office and me becoming Minister. She introduced very stringent controls throughout the Adelaide Hills. That was extremely controversial because there were some that strongly supported it and some that strongly (laughs) opposed it because of the impact that it's had on those properties and the livelihoods of so many of those people.

Of course, in more recent times you've now got that contrast between the people for whom the farm's a livelihood and those who are ...

The hobby farmers.

... hobby farmers.

Yes. Water has always been, and will continue to be, a very controversial subject in this State. But there are lots of promising things that are happening. As far as the River Murray is concerned, having been appointed the chair of the River Murray Catchment Water Management Board on my retirement from Parliament – and that in itself was an interesting situation because there aren't very many ex-Ministers of one persuasion that would be appointed by a Minister of another persuasion to take on a position like that. I very much appreciated being given that opportunity. I'd always had huge respect for John Hill as a Minister and as a bloke. I was thrilled to bits when he asked me to take that on. So the River Murray has been an important part of my more recent life. One of the concerns that I've had there is the fact that, as is the case in so many situations, it's so difficult to have the media recognise any of the positive things that are happening. We all realise the huge challenges that we've got with the management of the River Murray,

but there are some very positive things that are happening. But try and get them into the dear old *Advertiser* and you're really pushing it uphill. That's the case across the board.

MM. But the other positive thing is the amount of knowledge, the knowledge base, that we have now in water management. If you look at the co-operative research centres, for example. I was Visitor for the CRC for Catchment Hydrology: I was absolutely intrigued by the knowledge that was being built in that area, in the broader area. Last year I was appointed to the new CRC for E-Water, which replaces the CRC for Catchment Hydrology and the CRC for Freshwater Ecology. That's a marvellous initiative because it looks at water right across the whole nation and in the various forms of its management. There's an enormous amount of knowledge that we have now on so many aspects of management of our water supplies.

I suppose in one sense water's become a mainstream sort of topic.
It has.

It had been hinted at earlier, and 30 years on it's ...

It has, yes. That's probably one of the most interesting things about the whole water issue ... People have been saying for some time that priority in water management has gone from Z to A almost overnight, and that is the case.

The River Murray's a good example, as something that's been around for more than 100 years as an issue, yet we're still grappling with it. The CRC work that you mentioned, for example, trying to come to terms with these issues at research level and find solutions.

There'll always be challenges. Having had the opportunity to talk some little time ago with some of the Ministers from the countries that make up the Mekong, if we think we've got problems with a river that goes through four States, they've got real problems with a river that runs through seven countries, and with its source in China where they've no idea what's happening. You always have to look at things appropriately. But there are huge issues with the Murray: it's a matter of the management being transparent between the States, the support of the States. The Murray–Darling Commission has ...

End of Tape 1, Side A

Tape 1, Side B

Now, David, you just ran out there as you were mentioning the good work of the Murray–Darling Commission.

Yes. It is a great instrumentality. I was fortunate enough to be the lead Minister for South Australia on the Murray–Darling Ministerial Council for a few years. In fact, I

probably still am [one of] the longest-serving Minister[s, if not the longest,] that has served on the Murray–Darling Ministerial Council, but I’m not sure about that, what’s happened in the last 12 months or so, but that was the case. But that’s worked well.

NN.

OO. The other area of involvement, of course, that I enjoyed particularly was chairing the Select Committee on the River Murray in 2000. That came about as a result of the previous Minister, John Hill, who was then the Shadow Minister, introducing a private member’s Bill – no, introducing a Select Committee – to look at issues relating to the management of the River Murray. I was fortunate enough to be appointed chairman of that. When you look back, the then Minister, Mark Brindle, the current Minister, Karlene Maywald, and the Minister in between, John Hill, were all on that Select Committee, along with others. To this day we’re still the only State that has been able to bring down a bipartisan report on the management of the river. That was a great experience, being able to chair that.

PP.

QQ. There were a huge number of recommendations, most of which have been implemented by governments of both persuasions. One of the main recommendations, of course, was that we should look at, or the Murray–Darling Commission should look at, the structure of the commission and give consideration to the appointment of independent commissioners. With John Scanlon’s very recent appointment as the first independent commissioner, that was one of the things that came directly out of the Select Committee report.

RR.

SS. Thanks for your comments on that. Because we’re a little bit pushed for time, I might swap directions just very briefly: we’re talking about the River Murray and eastern States, obviously, and Adelaide, Adelaide Hills. What about the rest of South Australia? How much involvement would you have had in the water problems on the West Coast, for example, or Far North?

As Minister for Water Resources, or having responsibility under the portfolio for water resources, that does cover the State. I remember very clearly issues that we had and I guess to some extent are still continuing in the South East. Water has always been very controversial in the South East. I recall some pretty interesting public meetings that were called down there.

They have a different problem, of course: too much water.

Yes, totally different problem. That was to do with drainage etc. But yes, there wasn’t a part of South Australia where water management wasn’t of particular interest.

Did you get out, as Minister, to see these places?

Yeah. I tried to get out as much as I could. Having the Environment portfolio as well, Environment and Conservation portfolio as well, it provided the opportunity to be looking at a number of issues as you travelled around the State, and that was very worthwhile.

To bring us up to the current moment, we're swapping subjects again: NRM. You're serving on the Board.

Yes. I'm chair of the South Australian Murray–Darling Basin Natural Resources Management Board. Very excited about that. It's a great concept. As I said earlier, it's been one that we've been working towards for a number of years. It's a brand new structure, so that in itself will bring some challenges. But overall it's a very good move, it's very strong legislation. We just now need to make it work. All of the people that I'm working with certainly are committed to doing that. It's an interesting situation where the Act provides for the NRM Council to advise the Minister, and then underneath that you have the NRM Board, which is of a strategic nature, and then underneath that the various sub-regions or the groups, and it's a matter of bringing all those together, being transparent so that everybody knows what everybody else is doing, and making it work. There are some challenges but there's a lot of excitement as to the end result.

You sound optimistic.

Very optimistic, very optimistic.

Have there been teething problems in ... We're talking about a year or so?

Yes, yes, there have. The transition of staff, of staffing, has been a huge issue because a commitment was made when the legislation was brought down that all of those that were working in natural resource management would retain a position in the new structure. There were various awards and different structures that people were coming from, Soil Boards, Animal and Plant Control Boards, the Catchment Boards, the INRM groups etc. That took a little longer than we would have liked; in fact, it was only on January 9th of this year that all of those staff were transitioned over. But we have to realise that it is a brand new structure, we've not done this before and there's quite a considerable amount of interest being shown now from the other States to see how effective it is in South Australia, how well it does work. It'll only be a matter of time before you'll see some copycat action from some of the other States.

There are fully expected to be some nuts-and-bolts issues. You talk about awards and so on: that's par for the course, you'd expect that. But how, say, philosophically between the various boards and ...

No, there really hasn't been. There's been a move towards integration for a long time. I could be bold enough to say that even if the legislation hadn't been introduced we would have seen it happen. But for a long time now Water Resource people have been talking to Animal and Plant Control people, talking to Soil Boards, and there has been a lot more working together. Of course, this legislation will bring about a true integration and it'll take a while before we realise whether that's been truly effective or not, but there's every possibility that we'll be able to achieve that.

Well, perhaps finally, then, to take us almost back to where we started today, community acceptance of NRM: how are you finding that? Are people understanding or coming to grips with it?

Well, one of the biggest issues that we've got is communicating exactly what NRM is about. I found it a hell of a lot easier to be able to explain ... Or when I said to people that I was chair of a Catchment Board, people knew exactly what I was talking about; or if you were chair of a Soil Board or if you were a member of an Animal and Plant Control Board; people understand. You talk about natural resource management and you see their eyes glaze over. We've got a big job in explaining to people what NRM really is about. I try to make it as simple as I possibly can and just make it clear that it's just about the integration of those water, animal and plant control and soil and biodiversity issues generally. If you start talking about that, people understand.

TT. I guess the other thing is that, as is always the case, the questions that people ask: 'What changes will there be?' and 'What improvements will we see as a result of this?'. Because it has been quite a considerable upheaval for the day-to-day workers, and there are questions being asked: 'What improvements are we really going to see for the average person out on the land or the average person in the community as a result of all of this?'. If we can do it properly, if we can bring about that integration, if we can bring about a one-stop shop and if we can really improve the management of our natural resources in an integrated fashion, we've achieved our goal. But it's going to take a while to determine whether we've been able to achieve that.

What we've been doing today is a little bit of that process. We've been communicating a few things. I know I've pushed you a little bit for time ...

That's all right.

... so perhaps if I put a pause on it for now and you never know, we might be able to have a bit more of a follow-up.

Yes, yes.

I thank you for sharing some of your observations and thoughts about the water resource area and NRM.

Thanks very much.

I'll send the transcript through as soon as we can.

Good.

End of interview