

ABC – In Time

EPISODE 13

MIKE RANN ON DON DUNSTAN

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Its perhaps his pink shorts and long socks that Australians most remember Don Dunstan for. In our final story today, current SA Premier Mike Rann looks at the man who believed that leadership was about leading and not following.

GUY NOBLE: As Mungo says, whoever you vote for, a politician always gets in. While the wheels were falling off for McMahon, across the country in South Australia there was a popular revolution afoot. Premier Don Dunstan was setting the sartorial and social agenda with pink shorts and groundbreaking legislation. Here's current Premier Mike Rann with a personal recollection of the man he calls his mentor.

MIKE RANN, SA PREMIER: Dunstan, when I first came to South Australia -- I'd read a lot about him, but there was something extraordinary about the man. And I've tried to analyse -- people focus on incidents, or pink shorts, or what have you -- but the thing that really comes through is extraordinary courage. He was the maestro of the possible.

DON DUNSTAN: Thank you very much...quite senseless and baseless rumours -- Anybody facing the task of a premier cannot but be daunted by it. I've never believed in formality. We'll lose all the things that the whole Labor movement has been working for for the last 50 years.

MIKE RANN: In so many areas, the Dunstan Government was leading, not just nationally but internationally. There was industrial democracy, women's rights, equal opportunity. And so it was a time of extraordinary change. Don was different. I mean, he just stood out. He was different to other political leaders in Australia. He looked different, he dressed differently. Um, he spoke in a different way. He was very theatrical, and, er, and loved the theatre. I mean, the theatre and politics, the arts and politics, were sort of fused in the vortex of Don Dunstan's extraordinary life. So, whether it was reading on the back of an elephant, 'The Carnival Of The Animals' -- or whether it was holding back the tides at Glenelg when a mystic had warned that a tidal wave was going to engulf Adelaide, he went down, King Canute-like to the beach, followed by thousands. Or whether it was wearing the pink shorts in Parliament.

All of these things, Don loved doing, and I think he introduced an element of colour and personality into the very dull and grey world of politics. And it was that element of the theatrical, combined with his passion for reform, that made Don Dunstan special. So, in terms of the arts, in terms of social policy, in terms of changes to licensing laws and restaurants, in terms of multiculturalism, and Don Dunstan is, in many ways, the architect of multiculturalism nationally.

So, when you think about issues such as Aboriginal land rights, when you think about multiculturalism, when you think about issues of human rights and civil rights, the Dunstan Government was clearly the pace-setter, the ground-breaker, and when you look at the government, it was largely Don that did it.

Whether it was about equal opportunity legislation or anti-discrimination legislation, whether it was rights for people who were gay or lesbian, long before other States even contemplated these issues, it was Dunstan who was

setting the pace.

Don was very serious and could take himself very seriously, but he also -- when working for him, basically, the message he gave us was that he wanted us to work very hard, we'd be writing speeches through the night, because he was in constant demand around the country, but he also wanted us to have fun.

He took an impassioned interest in all of what was happening in our own lives. He was extraordinarily absent-minded. He was always pranging his car, backing into cars, losing his keys. Um, Don was a bit of a Mr Magoo. He used to, um, he had terrible eyesight, and -- but didn't like to actually wear glasses when giving a speech. Sometimes he'd wear contact lenses and glasses to read his Cabinet documents. And so there was many sort of -- you'd go down to the airport and you'd say -- he'd sort of -- like the Queen, he'd never have any money on him, so he'd pat his -- "Sorry, I've left my wallet behind, but I need to have 'The Age', 'The Australian', 'The Advertiser'." He'd go through a list of newspapers, and a list of magazines that he wanted purchased before he got on the plane, and then he'd ask for, sort of, 'Vogue' and 'Cleo', so there's this great big pile of magazines that you'd have to pay for. And on the plane, because his eyesight was so bad, which no-one really knew, he used to have, like, 'Vogue' magazine plastered to his face, like this.

The real legacy of Don Dunstan is not to look backwards with some sort of rose-tinted glasses to the 1970s, 'cause they were different times, and different issues. Don Dunstan's central legacy is for us to look forward, to actually lead, not follow, to fight above our weight, and to -- in our own ways -- become maestros of the possible in a different time and different age.