

1999 DUNSTAN ORATION

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Introduction

It is a great honour to be asked to deliver the Dunstan Oration in the year of Don's death. It is a particularly daunting task as the inaugural lecture given last year was delivered by Don himself, and Don is a notoriously hard act to follow-ask any recent Premier of South Australia.

In the light of the theme of your conference, 'If you can dream it, you can do it- Revitalisation of the Public Sector', what I want to do today is to examine a particular aspect of Don's legacy and consider how it might lead us to reconceptualise public administration at a time when the public sector is being downsized, outsourced and often derided.

But first, let me do a piece of advertising. Don was active in the last few months of his life in the establishment of the Don Dunstan Foundation at the University of Adelaide, which has as its primary purpose the continuation of his progressive agenda. The aim of the Foundation is to foster research and education on a broad range of issues concerning social development based on the following 'relevant areas': social and economic equity; the appropriate use of government intervention to secure socially just outcomes; the ability of individuals substantially to control their own lives; democratic and inclusive forms of governance; cultural and ethnic diversity; tolerance and respect for fundamental human rights and the rights of minorities suffering discrimination; respect for and protection of the rights of indigenous people; remediation of global maldistribution of wealth and income. Anyone who would like to be involved in the Foundation should write to the Don Dunstan Foundation at the University of Adelaide.

But returning to the main theme of my talk. In a year in which there has been a great deal of talk about the particularly Australian phenomenon of mateship, I observe there has

been no discussion in this land of the quarter-acre block of that equally well-known phenomenon, the next door neighbour. I was Don's next door neighbour. This, along with my role at the University of Adelaide, where Don was an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Social Inquiry, and where he chose to locate his Foundation, has meant that I had a special opportunity to consider what Don Dunstan was about and what motivated him. Indeed, I think Don was very keen for me to think about these things. In the last few weeks of his life he was most insistent that I view a large number of videos of episodes from his career, offering helpful interpretation of how they might be seen from a current day perspective. As I watched I was aware of certain central themes in the form of operating principles and underpinning values to which he returned again and again. It is his legacy of these themes and values I want to consider today.

A quote from Don reveals one of the keys to his approach to the world. 'From a very early age' he said, 'I started to question my own and other people's assumptions'. In particular he often described how his childhood experiences in Fiji led him to question assumptions about race. Another quote—'The experience of racism in Fiji burnt deeply into me'. His questioning of the assumptions underlying discriminatory treatment based on race led to some of the most progressive policies in Australia regarding race, minorities and multiculturalism. With Don there were no sacred cows, and he was aware that his questioning of basic assumptions was somewhat unusual. As he said, 'The average citizen does not question his assumptions, that is just the way things are'. Of course Don didn't only question assumptions—he also went on to look for alternative policies, and after due consideration he would develop what he considered a new and better vision of the future. And then of course he pursued the vision with vigour, showmanship, tenacity, and great cleverness.

In recent times Don was probably best known for his questioning of the assumptions underlying economic rationalism and the concomitant worship of perfect competition in the market place. Don had a whole raft of examples of why competition in the market place was perfect according to the theories of economic rationalism but often didn't work in practice because the actual practical situation was not one in which the assumptions underpinning economic rationalism applied. Indeed the example I like best is the one he told against himself in the Dunstan Oration in 1998. I quote, 'Perfect competition can lead to a serious waste of resources. I was responsible for the legislation, which made it easier to obtain restaurant licences to sell liquor with food service. The number of restaurants in Adelaide grew exponentially, and given conditions of work patterns in society, more and

more people demand and make use of facilities for eating outside the home, and outside American owned or franchised fast food chains. I refused to set limits saying this is a rare example of perfect competition-we will let it produce the results. But the results have been that over the years, many restaurants have failed. As a restaurateur I can recount that in the four years during which we operated on The Parade, Norwood, four restaurants opened and closed within two blocks of us. The waste of resources in setting them up must have run into \$1 million'.

I am not interested in discussing here whether Don was right or wrong in his views on economic rationalism, but I strongly support his approach of questioning basic assumptions.

What I want to highlight here is that his approach of questioning assumptions-one's own and everyone else's-can be most useful in the service of the public. If the government of the day is to have the very best advice it is important that it regularly go back to the basic assumptions in which its policies are based. The thinking, and the essential homework that must be carried out will be undertaken, of course, by the public service. It is very important that any portfolio return to these basics again and again. In many ways there could be no better service to a government minister than to highlight basic assumptions, and to provide a structured way in which policy may be analysed or approached differently by the simple device of changing one or more of the assumptions. For example, in these times where there is a great deal of government emphasis on economic indicators it might be appropriate to question whether GDP is the very best indicator or whether other more complex indicators, or a vector of indicators, would be more appropriate. Should economic indicators be expanded to include measures of education, of the environment, of social welfare, of the cost of crime and so on, as advocated by those who construct the genuine progress indicator or the indicator used by the United Nations development program? What should be the main indicators that a government uses to measure progress? Should there be a prime indicator? If there should be a prime indicator should it be one of political stability, one of economic progress, of social progress? Should it be a mixture? Can you mix all the indicators? Of course one can simply go on endlessly questioning. The important thing is to work out how to be constantly questioning and how to be moving forward at the same time.

As we move into what is becoming known as the knowledge age, it is possible to find out more and more about the assumptions underlying any given theory and policy. It is also

possible to ask who else is asking these questions. What other governments are questioning their assumptions? It is possible then to see where such questioning led them. What were the solutions they used? What new theories did they adopt? The challenge here for public servants is to know how to use all this knowledge, how to keep it up to date, and then how to present it to policy makers and the government of the day. It needs a discipline of knowledge searching, knowledge integration and regular presentation and regular questioning sessions. Working out this discipline is a challenge in itself but a very necessary one. Just as we have well-developed annual planning processes, we probably should have annual assumption-questioning processes.

Highly connected to this issue of dealing with new knowledge is another theme of Don's. I quote 'Some carry on as if there is nothing intellectual outside what they know. They are wrong!' It is always wise to be aware that there are things we do not know. It is very easy to think one knows everything about a particular topic, yet the constant searching for new knowledge is very important, and made easier these days with technological developments in the areas fast searching on multiple knowledge sources and automatic indexing and data fusion.

Of course knowledge is not only gained from experience or from searching the web! One of Don's major themes was the need to 'Take the lessons of history'. Don had many examples of how a lack of knowledge of history led governments to repeat mistakes that had been made many times before. This of course also sends a very strong message to those recruiting for the public service. It is very important to recruit people with the ability to understand history's lessons. And it is a very important skill for those in public service to be able to bring to the attention of government the relevant lessons of history, lessons both good and bad. Good lessons, which are often referred to in management jargon as best practice, can often give heart at a time when one is pondering the way forward. The lessons of mistakes can give one pause before racing ahead with the policy, which in some other context has not worked too well. Indeed, Don wished people had taken the lessons he gave a little more seriously as he said 'I wished some of my colleagues nationally regarded my own book about what we did here in changing the social, political, and cultural life of the state for the better in ten years were treated as a piece of useful history rather than as a provincial memoir.'

The next theme of Don's that I want to discuss is 'The necessity within the community of there being a ginger group' or an egalitarian elite which provides the creativity needed

for improvement and progress. As he said 'Relying on the creativity of the masses is like relying on the market place to tell you everything. It doesn't!' Of course these days when we talk about change management we are encompassing Don's notion of the ginger group. This is a concept that I think is particularly important in the public service as it is easy to get bogged down with the problems of managing the day to day. If a government is to move things forward and to address its problems it needs to establish appropriate ginger groups. Don had a lot to say about such groups. He pointed out that it was important for them to be flexible; and he felt that they had to rely heavily on people being well educated. He believed that they should be given responsibility for creating the ideas and the policies for change, and developing campaigns by which this change might be effected. Explicitly encouraging creativity is important in public administration and is closely related to the notions of questioning assumptions, of learning the lessons of history, and being open to the fact that there is much we do not know. But it is even more significant, central to the mechanics of actually creating change. A government and its public service must value ginger groups and ensure that they are able to interact effectively with their communities. Indeed, the conditions necessary for the establishment of effective ginger groups has become an area of study in the academic domain.

Another theme of Don's was leadership. He believed leadership was very important because, as he used to say, 'You can't carry the public with you without leadership'. When asked if you can lead without leading ideas he most emphatically answered no. There are various lessons here. One is that leaders must have ideas and this draws together what I have said before about the notion of assumptions, about learning the lessons of history, about being open to new knowledge. But what is a leader leading us to? And in this too Don showed, dare I say it, leadership. He was extremely good at articulating a very clear vision and very clear goals. Let me quote from an interview early in his third term of office- 'My goal is to make this South Australian area the best urban environment, the best total environment to live in- a balanced, effective, workable community which is secure and at the same time gives the opportunity for people to develop'. He wanted to do as 'The classic Greek city did in their time and region and subsequently'. It is a great goal. Adelaide doing for its greater region what the ancient Greek cities did for theirs. It is a clear goal. On many issues Don had an extremely clear goal, whether in great political campaigns or later in his life as a businessman and restaurateur.

At a time when the public service is under great criticism it is important that its goals should be very clear, both to those within it, so that they have a sense of purpose and also to

those outside it, so that they can evaluate it and understand its service to the community. It is also important that the public service help government to articulate their goals effectively and clearly. Of course Don Dunstan's political goals were based in a very strong set of values and beliefs. It is increasingly important that we encourage our governments to spell out the values underpinning their programs. It is also important that the public service should help government articulate these values. Don had a strongly held set of values. Let me quote a very small selection of his statements on his values-'I always try to relate to people as genuine human beings'. This sounds almost silly but I have often heard Don say it. However the more I reflect on it, the more sensible it becomes. It is very easy to see the people en masse as a problem, as a difficulty one has to face, rather than as a collection of human beings with the needs, aspirations and problems of individuals. Another quote-'I believe in a tolerant, inclusive multicultural society. I believe in protecting the rights of minorities. I believe in protecting human rights as a basis from which people may have some effective influence on their own lives.'

The idea that government should provide a secure base on which an individual may fulfil his or her own aims and ambitions is central to Don's thought. Don valued education highly, particularly for its role in, as he put it, 'Pursuing social and economic equity'. He also valued the rights of the individual. As he said, 'Freedom is about liberty, about the ability to act within a social context'. If you deprive people of the economic basis that allows them this ability to act, you effectively deprive them of liberty and freedom. It is powerful stuff.

Thinking about protecting the economic and social status of individuals in a society leads us to one of the matters which most preoccupied Don in recent years, these years when there has been a definite move towards small government, and that is, as he phrased it, 'The appropriate use of government intervention'. As governments move to outsource a range of activities, it is important that they retain powers to intervene as necessary. In this governments need the very best possible policy advice from the public service.

Finally a word about the public service and the global experience. Don used to say, 'We need to be tolerant also of other peoples rights in the world, pursuing economic justice on a global scale, helping people to help themselves'. Don of course lived out this value, heading Freedom from Hunger and later the merged Freedom from Hunger/Community Aid Abroad. There is a lesson about the public service here. Typically most public servants work either at the local level in local government, at a state level in state public service, at a national level in the Commonwealth public service, or internationally with groups such

as the UN or the World Bank. It is increasingly important that we think of staff development in the public sector in terms of staff experiencing a range of different work situations, of exchanging jobs at the different levels and between different countries. If we are going to encourage in the public service the sort of operational principles that Don espoused and his values emphasising tolerance and celebration of diversity, then I believe we need to be truly globally-oriented in developing our top public administrators. They must know through work experience how to operate effectively and in a highly-principled way in the global world.

Conclusion

I have tried in this address to extract from the very rich tapestry of Don's interviews and sayings the themes that recur in his thinking. In particular I spoke about the need to question assumptions, and use new knowledge to find new ways forward. I spoke about the need to take the lessons of history, to learn from the good and avoid the evils of the past in developing public policy. I spoke of the necessity of encouraging creativity through the concept of a ginger group. Generally such groups grow out of the public sector. It is important that we nurture them and incorporate them into our structures. I spoke briefly about how impossible it is to be a leader without ideas. I spoke of Don's strongly held beliefs and well-articulated values and goals. I spoke of the need to look at the international dimensions of public activity. What I have not commented on at all however, is Don the showman. In many ways Don was an intensely private person and yet when he wanted to achieve one of his well-thought-out goals, he not only spoke about it, he made good use of attention-getting activity. As somebody said to a prominent person who is sitting here today, 'If you want to be effective you should get a pair of pink shorts'. I think it is necessary to think about the medium as well as the message. Good use of media is often something that is very necessary if a message is to hit home. Helping government to make effective use of the media is another mark of an effective modern public service.

In conclusion it is worth acknowledging just how lucky we have been here in South Australia to have experienced the phenomenon that was Don Dunstan, that very special human being that was Don Dunstan. His policies were fascinating and effective, his achievements as a state and national leader were impressive. But to me his greatest legacy is a principled approach to life that can be summarised in a series of themes that I think from the basis of very clear reconceptualisation of the role of the public service in the modern world.