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Transcript of an interview with

Helen Hodgson
b. 1961-

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INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Helen Hodgson for the Parliamentary Oral History Project and the J S Battye Library of West Australian History.

Helen Hodgson was born in Bristol, England, on 19 August 1961 and came to Western Australia in 1964 when her family emigrated. Her parents were both teachers who were keenly interested in social and political issues and Helen believes it was largely her father's influence which stimulated her interest in politics. During the first part of the interview, Helen Hodgson reminisces about her family life, her education at Perth Modern School, and her decision to study for a business/law degree at Curtin University. She also discusses her work as a public servant with the Australian Taxation Office.

In 1988 Helen joined the Australian Democrats and subsequently held the positions of Western Australian treasurer, national treasurer, and national executive representative for Western Australia. During the interview, Helen provides insights into the internal organisation of the Australian Democrats, at both state and national levels, and gives her personal impressions of the Party's leaders and prominent personalities. She observes how the Democrats' political philosophy has had to adapt over time.

Following her election in December 1996 as MLC for the North Metropolitan Region, Helen Hodgson and Norm Kelly became the first Australian Democrats to be elected to the Legislative Council. With the Greens, the Democrats also found themselves holding the balance of power. In the interview, Helen Hodgson provides her personal views about issues which were of particular interest to her and with which she became closely involved in parliament. These include: native title legislation, abortion law reform, anti-discrimination against gay, lesbian and transgender people, and rehabilitation of offenders. She also gives her impressions of major political figures such as Richard Court, Colin Barnett and Geoff Gallop.

On a national level, Helen discusses the significance for the Australian Democrats of leader Cheryl Kernot's defection to the Labor Party in 1997, and the extent to which the Democrats' support for the Howard Government's Goods and Services Tax accelerated the Party's decline.

The interview was conducted by Ron Chapman on 1 December 2008 in digital format and extends over 2 hours and 3 minutes.

My name is Ron Chapman. It is Monday, the 1st of December 2008 and I am carrying out an interview with Helen Hodgson in Gooseberry Hill, Western Australia. This interview is part of an oral history project which records the recollections of former members of Western Australia's Parliament. First of all, Helen, I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.

HODGSON Thanks very much.

RC Just to start the interview, Helen, I would like to ask you about your early family history, if you don't mind giving me your date and place of birth and where you are working at the moment.

HODGSON I was born on the 19th of August 1961 in Bristol, England. Currently I'm working in New South Wales at the University of New South Wales where I'm lecturing in taxation law and policy. The reason why I was born in England, my father was actually an Australian citizen who fought for the British Army during the war. He met and married my mother while he was in the UK. We stayed there for the first few years of my life. It was a cold winter, the winter my brother was born. It was the coldest winter for 50 years, they said, and he decided that he didn't really want to put up with English winters any longer, so he brought us back to Western Australia when I was three.

RC Could you just briefly tell me about your mother and father's background and their employment?

HODGSON My father has had a very diverse history. He actually passed away a year ago. He spent a long time as a professional soldier while he was in England. He joined up during the war and he fought through Palestine and Korea. He went then into civil employment as a draftsman in a car tyre manufacturing company, I think. When they came back to Australia, he got a job with the railways. We spent a bit of my childhood living in country towns, Narrogin, Morawa. Then at about the time of the Whitlam reforms he decided that he wanted to ... He'd always been self-taught. He read a lot, he listened to music but he decided he wanted to formalise that and went on, got his degree, ended up lecturing at WAIT as it was at the time, and then into the teaching sector. He had a very diverse history. My mother was born and raised in England and she also was trained as a teacher. Of course she didn't work during my childhood but she did return to work when we came back to the city. I would have been about 11 or 12 then, I suppose. I always think it must have been really challenging for my mother to come from England, where she lived in a village where she knew everybody, to live in Narrogin, where she knew nobody, it was quite remote, she didn't drive, and when dad was off on the trains, as he often was for

days at a time. I didn't know at the time but, looking back, it must have been quite challenging for her.

RC Brothers and sisters?

HODGSON I have one sister and two brothers. My sister's older than I am. I have two brothers who are a couple of years younger.

RC What prompted your move to Western Australia in 1963?

HODGSON That would have been after the cold winter that dad decided he wanted to come back to Western Australia where it was warm. He couldn't take the English climate any longer and at that time migration was being encouraged so we came out then.

RC You were young at the time. How did you adjust to life in Australia? What are your first memories?

HODGSON I don't know what my first memories would be. There were things that I've been told about, like catching the bus into Perth and catching the ferry across to South Perth. You don't know whether they are actually memories or whether you'd been told them and so you think you remember them. Probably my first clear memories would be primary school.

RC What are those memories of primary school?

HODGSON My first schooling was at Morawa Primary. I remember going into the kindergarten class and then into primary school proper. At the time the Morawa school had a connection with one of the brass bands. They used to come up and teach us music, and so dad having a musical background himself got us involved in that program, so I remember being in this primary school band.

RC What are your recollections of early family life in Western Australia?

HODGSON Again, it's really only snippets, but I do remember at Morawa we were in a railways house, so it was your classic two-bedroom plus sleep-out, but in the kitchen there was the big old wood-fired stove. I remember getting up in the morning and getting dressed in front of the stove with the porridge that had been cooking overnight, one of mum's English habits that she brought with her, those sorts of memories. With my mother being a teacher as well, both of them were always keen to expose us to ideas and experiences. For example, I could read before I went to primary school because it was just part of our life; books, music and so on was all around us.

RC Which of your parents taught you to read? You said you could read first.

HODGSON It's hard for me to be specific about that. I know that mum as a teacher had a hand in it but I know that dad was also an influence, because he used to, for

example, subscribe to *Reader's Digest* deliveries of records and books and things. At that time I don't think we even got radio in Morawa, let alone television, so this was the way that we as a family ... that was part of the way the family operated. I can remember as a child ... of course on Christmas day all the kids are really excited, but we weren't allowed to have our presents before we went to church, except for one book, because they knew that if they gave me a book that would keep me quiet; so I was allowed to have a book first thing in the morning and then after church got the rest of the presents. That was just the way it was. We were surrounded, I suppose, by books and by music. Dad, during his time in Europe during and after the war had basically discovered this love of literature and music and he carried that through.

RC What was your father's profession in Western Australia?

HODGSON When we got back to Western Australia he joined the railways, where he was a guard and then a stationmaster. In the early '70s he went to teachers' training college, then he went to university, and he actually taught Australian literature at university for a while. But then when he remarried he and his wife went teaching in some of the Aboriginal communities. So he basically went back to being a primary school teacher.

RC And your mother?

HODGSON She passed away when I was 16. That's why in a lot of respects my memories of her are limited, because I haven't had the chance to talk over and confirm anything that I think I remember.

RC That must have had quite an impact on your life at the time.

HODGSON I always say that there's a stage that a lot of kids go through in their late teens, which I skipped because I had other things on my mind rather than going out and partying. But it was just one of those things. There were other people in similar circumstances.

RC It sounds as though both your parents had a considerable impact on your early life. Would you say that it was equal between both parents or did one have more of an influence than the other one?

HODGSON I'd say my father had more of an influence in forming my views. Obviously my mother in terms of the care side of things. Even then because of her illness, because she had cancer, that affected the last few years there. I'd say it was my father who exposed us to new ideas. For example, when he was studying his Australian literature course, I would have been in year 7, year 8 at the time. When he'd finished reading *For the Term of His Natural Life*, he would just say, "Oh, do you want to read this now?" So we were always exposed and surrounded by that sort of thing.

RC Schools you attended. What schools did you go to?

HODGSON I started primary school in Morawa, and then when we came back to Perth, I would have been about year 3 or year 4, I went to a local primary school at Osborne Park. Then I sat the music test for Perth Modern and was accepted on a music program to Perth Modern School.

RC Have you any interesting recollections of your school days, particularly at Perth Modern School?

HODGSON Obviously it's another formative period. The thing with Perth Modern School is that I went from being a big fish in a little pond at primary school to moving among my peers. While that might sound very condescending or whatever, the fact is that at primary school I was always performing at the very top of my class, which doesn't give you the stimulus to keep pushing yourself. Whereas when I went to Modern School, most of my classmates had been in that same situation and so we formed a cohort where we were average amongst that cohort. It was only when I finally got my TEE results, and they were very respectable, that I sort of thought, "Oh, so I'm not just average then; I have actually achieved and accomplished something." Whereas if I had remained in the same sort of cohort that I was in primary school with, I don't know whether I would have realised that I needed to push myself.

RC What were your favourite subjects at school?

HODGSON It's interesting seeing as I've ended up working in the area of tax, but I remember I always avoided doing maths. They encouraged me to take on the double maths subject when I did my TEE, and I said, "No; I'd rather keep doing my language subject, thank you", so I did Italian and music. The others (chemistry and single maths and so on) were there but I did enjoy the Italian and the music.

RC How do you think the subjects you chose at school and the education stream you took, how do you think that influenced your future career path?

HODGSON At the time I was at school, to get into university they looked for a particular cross-section of courses, of subjects. That's the reason why you were required to take English or lit; you were required to take at least one maths course; and if you did a science course as well, that increased your options of getting into courses. So at that stage I didn't really have any career plan. It was more or less, "what's the combination where I can keep my options open?" After I left school I still didn't know what I wanted to do. My father was in the university system, he said, "Look, if you don't know what you want to do, you may choose the wrong thing and you may not succeed at it", because he had seen so many students doing that. So he suggested that I take a year off and work for a year and try and decide what I really wanted to be doing. In that period of time I took the public service test. They looked

at my school results, the fact that I had, in spite of not doing the double maths, got into the top two per cent in the state in single maths, and they said, "Well, if you'd like a job at the tax office, we can give you a job at the tax office." So I said, "Oh, well, that's as good as anything else", took the job, and that sort of has framed my career path since then.

RC You've actually partly answered one of my questions; that's fine. I was going to ask what were your ambitions at school, and you partly answered that. So you didn't always think that you were going into the area of taxation?

HODGSON No.

RC What were your ambitions while you were at school?

HODGSON In one way I suppose one of my ambitions was to go into teaching, and by ending up teaching tax at university, I suppose to that extent it's been fulfilled. But I think that was more a case of that's what my parents are doing so that's a good thing to be doing, rather than I have a burning desire to become a teacher. I know people who have that real career ... that burning passion. I enjoy what I do and I'm good at what I do, but I would never say that I had always thought that I was destined to be a teacher.

RC You studied business law at WAIT, or Curtin. How did that occur? Why did you decide on that area?

HODGSON The job offer I got to go into the tax office was if I undertook accounting studies. At the time the tax office was quite supportive of its employees, where you could do some study during your own time and some during work time. So I took up that opportunity, and as my career evolved within the tax office, I learned it wasn't the accounting side of it that I enjoyed, it was the legal aspects. It's the human nature. It's the way that the nature interacts with the law and the way that people respond to circumstances. So that is why I found myself more drawn to the legal aspects of tax. So even though my initial qualifications were initially in accounting and then with business law added on to it, it's the legal and the policy aspects of tax that I find myself enjoying.

RC When were you at WAIT; Curtin?

HODGSON I would've started my studies in '79 and I would've finished them in the mid '80s—about '85, '86 with my undergraduate degree, and then I went on and did a postgrad diploma in the late '80s and I did a Masters of Tax in the early '90s.

RC Had you formed any political beliefs during this time?

HODGSON Yes. This is one of the areas where I do credit my father's influence. Even though he always used to say, "What are you doing as a Democrat?", I don't think he ever understood that it was because of what he taught me that I was a

Democrat. We were always questioning things, and conversation over the dinner table at our place would go into politics and current affairs. It wasn't just a case of, "What did you do at school today?"; it went beyond that.

RC So the stimulus was from within the family?

HODGSON Yes, the stimulus and the background was there, so I always had this interest in what was going on around me. Why the Democrats specifically? Because I believed that the two-party system needed to be shaken up. Obviously within myself I agreed with the thrust of the philosophy, which is the small "l" liberal; the participatory democracy. I also believed that the way to influence change is not to have the confrontation of two parties, but to have a third voice working at it and to say, "Look, you two have either agreed on this or you have disagreed on this; have you considered an alternative approach?" That's why the Democrats, as the third voice and as the balance, appealed to me.

RC These political views that were in your family, is it true to say that these political views were formed early in your life?

HODGSON Yes. I can't point to a particular turning point where I said, "This is what I believe." It's just that when I started to learn about the Democrats, they seemed to represent everything that I believed. My father was left wing; further left than Labor on some issues. I remember him going to the protests about the ... the ones in Forrest Place to do with the gatherings (more than three people) and coming home and telling us about the police.[Section 54B of the Police Act] At that stage there were instances where the police had removed their numbers, and him coming home and telling us about that sort of thing. I remember when we cleaned out the shed I still found some of his old posters from that. He was always politically active and aware and we became politically active as part of that.

RC During your university days, Helen, were there any political issues that you felt strongly about?

HODGSON I can't remember anything specific. Remember, I was a part-time student, so I wasn't part of the campus life where you have the opportunity to join the debating club and to go to protests and so on. For me at that time I was juggling work and study and trying to pass my exams. I was also involved in theatre at the time. So although I was watching and aware of politics, I wouldn't say there was any one issue that I found particularly defining at that point.

RC Was this in the early 1980s?

HODGSON Yes, this would have been the early 1980s. Remember, too, I went through university before they started to introduce HECS and fees. I would say that I was watching that very closely when that started to come in, which was about three

or four years after I finished. If that had happened while I was a student, then I'm sure I would've been part of any actions to try and limit that. But that wasn't one that impacted on me, and at the time although I was aware and watching what was going on in the world around me, I wasn't actually active in those sorts of issues.

RC I would like to move on to talk about your employment, Helen. Again, you've partly answered this question, but what appealed to you about a career in taxation?

HODGSON Even though I was offered it because I do well at maths, it was actually the legal side of things that appeals to me, and looking at the way human nature and the law interact and how you can design tax laws and tax policy to try to get the outcomes that you need whilst not ...yes, balancing what people need with what society needs and so on. Obviously while I was working in the tax office you don't have any say over policy at all, it's more the administration of it, but it's that aspect that I find interesting.

RC You worked in the taxation office from 1980 to 1988. How did you find that work and what were the circumstances surrounding your employment there?

HODGSON Okay. At the time I was at the tax office there was a reasonably well defined career path. You joined at a certain basic level and as you progressed your studies you were eligible for promotions. At that time you still had people who actually vetted tax returns; who assessed the tax returns. I went through those stepping stones. I ended up after about four or five years in the appeals section. At that time there were still quite a few of the tax schemes from the 1980s that were still being resolved, and that probably is where I started to become disillusioned, because whilst I had my share of real cases, where there were people who had genuine issues who had made mistakes and so on, I also had more than my share of these tax schemes where you could see that somebody had gone out and simply sold these arrangement to people who were manipulating the tax laws. After about three years of working with those sorts of cases I did find that I was getting quite disillusioned and didn't really ... you start to lose your faith in human nature when you deal with those sorts of matters all the time.

RC On reflection, how do you feel that your job with the taxation office helped your future career path? Did it influence your future career in politics?

HODGSON In the sense of learning to deal with people, I suppose it had an influence. It also helped ... that's where I learned the skills of reading legislation, reading documents and finding the real issues in the documents fairly quickly. It developed those skills, which did come in useful while I was in politics.

RC You decided to take up a lecturing position at Curtin University and also Edith Cowan University. Why did you decide to do that?

HODGSON After I'd reached the point of finding I wasn't enjoying my work at the tax office anymore, a position was advertised at Curtin and I applied for it. At the time I felt that I didn't want to go out and work in practice because I'd dealt with too many people negatively. I was disillusioned. I didn't want to jump the fence and join that side, so to speak. Whereas going into academia meant that I was still using my knowledge and what I had learnt. So the job at Curtin University was advertised and I applied for it. It seemed to me to be sort of still using the skills that I had developed and getting me out of an environment that I was no longer enjoying. It also fitted in with the idea that ... I mean, having come from a family of teachers, teaching was always seen by me as something that's a very respectable career path. The life there suits me, the life in academia was ... I fitted into it, put it that way.

RC I would like to move on now to your first introduction to the Australian Democrats, Helen. How were you first introduced to the Democrats?

HODGSON I can say I'm of the generation where the Democrats were always an option when I was voting. I mean, from the time I started to vote, Don Chipp was around. So to me they were always viable. We had heard a fair bit of what they were talking about, and we had decided to write away and to get some information to find out about it. It was actually my husband and I were exploring this around the same time together. There's a bit of a story there. Allan filled in the forms and sent them off and the membership cheque and then, two days later, on the news headlines there was a story erupting of some difficulties within the Western Australian division of the Australian Democrats. We just looked at each other and said, "Have we done the right thing here?" That was a particular problem within the West Australian division which was resolved. That was just before Jean Jenkins got elected to the federal Parliament.

RC What were the problems?

HODGSON A bit of factionalism, as I understand; the old guard, and some other people with other ideas. In the end they resolved it by nominating a midway candidate, who was Jean Jenkins at the time.

RC Just digressing slightly there... you mentioned your husband. For the tape, I wondered if you could tell me something about your husband; when you first met and when you were married?

HODGSON Allan is actually my stepmother's nephew, so that's how we met. My brother always confuses people when we meet by saying, "Oh, my sister and my cousin, and they're married!" We were married in 1984. We met about a year or so before that. Obviously over a couple of years Janice tried to get us to go along to things together and it wasn't until afterwards that we looked back and we could see exactly what she'd been doing. She'd decided that we suited each other before we had worked that out. We started going out together in about '83 and we were married in '84.

RC What does your husband do?

HODGSON He's trained as an electrician. He spent quite a few years working with Telstra, and at the moment he's working for an electrical manufacturing company where he manages the customer support area.

RC Going back to your first introduction to the Democrats, it seems that your husband and yourself were politically both, shall we say, on the same wavelength. Would that be correct?

HODGSON Yes, definitely. When you get down to the micro, we may have different, diverging views to a certain point. On the big issues, we do see most of this stuff alike. That has never been a point of conflict for us.

RC From what you said earlier in the interview, Helen, it would seem that your attraction to the Democrats' philosophy grew early in your life; in other words, the party's philosophy seemed to coincide with your early political views or your early political awakening. Would that be correct?

HODGSON Yes. As I said, we were always encouraged to think for ourselves and surrounded by what was going on in the world; it was always available to us. As I watched it and as I saw what was happening, and then as I saw the Democrats I sort of thought, "Yeah, they coincide." It wasn't a case of me needing to go out and look, because they were there at the time that I was developing my views.

RC You joined the Australian Democrats in 1988, which was at the time when you left the Australian Tax Office to take up lecturing at Curtin University. Was this coincidental?

HODGSON Yes, it was just a coincidence. I think it might have been one of those points in my life where, because things weren't going well in my workplace, I was restless, and so perhaps I acted on something at that point where I may have been thinking about it for a couple of years. It wasn't a driver in either of those decisions.

RC Did you become actively involved in the party's activities?

HODGSON Pretty early on, yes. Anybody who is listening to this who is an accountant will know that if you have got accounting skills, there is always a job for you. I started by taking on the West Australian treasury position and it sort of moved on from there.

RC I am going to ask you about some prominent Democrats' leaders over time. First of all, when you first became involved in the Democrats, can you remember some of the Western Australian people who were actively involved, like yourself, at the time, if you like in the organisation of the party?

HODGSON In the West Australian division there would have been Brian and Jean Jenkins, Richard Jeffries, and Jack and Margaret Evans. They were probably the key people at the time that we first joined. Other people have come and gone. Jack has remained with the party from its very first formation; he is still a member of the party. Jean and Brian became disillusioned and left. I think Richard Jeffries has left as well.

RC Why did they become disillusioned?

HODGSON That had a lot to do with the handling of matters when Janet Powell was leader and was dumped as leader.

RC When you first became involved with the party I think you said you were treasurer?

HODGSON Yes. It wouldn't have been immediate but it wasn't long after that that I took on the West Australian treasury role.

RC At that time how well do you think the party was organised in Western Australia?

HODGSON They had had a dispute in the mid '80s. It did need to become more coherent, I suppose. But it was a fairly small, tight-knit group of people that were working together, and it did end up having a senator elected, being Jean Jenkins at the time, in a double dissolution.

RC I want to ask you now about some other Australian Democrats' leaders over time. If I could just mention some names to you, and just ask you to make a comment, if you could. First of all, the Democrats' founder, Don Chipp.

HODGSON I didn't have anything to do with Don while he was leader. I did meet him a few times at functions and so on. Of course you've got to have a lot of respect for a man who gives up a secure position in the party, in the Liberal Party, to follow his ideals. I think it was a case of the nation being ready for a new message, and he was the person who was the messenger. I have a lot of respect for Don Chipp.

RC Janine Haines?

HODGSON Janine was leader when I joined and I did meet her a few times. Again, she was such a charismatic person that she was able to sell a message. She was on top of her issues. She was an excellent leader. I think that she showed a lot of integrity when she stood for the lower house seat and lost it. She could have gone back and reclaimed ... stood for the casual vacancy and taken her seat back in the Senate, but she said, "No. I'm not going to do that." I've got a lot of respect for Janine Haines as well.

RC Janet Powell?

HODGSON There were a couple of weak leaders after Janine Haines. Janet Powell was ... again, I didn't have a lot to do with her. I was on national executive at the time so I knew what was going on, but I wouldn't say I knew Janet Powell very well. But I think it was a case of not being able to measure up to the previous two leaders to some extent and some silly decisions in her personal life that had massive flow-on effects.

RC Are you able to say what those were?

HODGSON I think it's pretty much on the record that she had a relationship with one of our other senators. It created factionalism ... division within the party room. I think that if you look at the various problems the Democrats have had at the federal level, it has usually come down to factionalism within the party room.

RC John Coulter?

HODGSON He was there because somebody was needed to take over after Janet Powell. At that time, if I remember rightly, we'd just had a turnover of

senators and so there wasn't really anybody else with experience and so John Coulter got the nod. But he was probably too academic, too theoretical, to really take on the role that the Democrats had had up to that time, because, remember, under Chipp and Haines we had been in there negotiating. Where the ground had to be held, they held the ground, but there were other issues where they went in and they would say, "Okay, so this is where we see the problems are; this is how we see they can be fixed." If you get somebody who is an idealist in the role, they are less likely to be willing to negotiate. I think that was a big part of the issue with John Coulter.

RC Cheryl Kernot?

HODGSON Cheryl Kernot was a return to the mould of the charismatic leader, and it's really interesting to see that when she came back in, again it coincided with a time when Australians were looking for something else and our vote went way up, and you have to admire her for that. But she was a difficult person.

RC How was she difficult?

HODGSON I was never on her staff. I think enough has come out following her defection to the Labor Party that some of the people within the Labor Party found her very difficult to work with, to be able to get her to follow an agreed position.

RC Meg Lees?

HODGSON Again, I do actually have quite a bit of time for Meg Lees. No matter what people say about the decisions she made, she made them in good faith. I actually think that some of those decisions, which are strongly criticised, were necessary for Australia. I mean, the GST is the one that everybody points to and they say, "Well, Meg sold you out on the GST, and that's why the Democrats declined." As a tax "expert", if we hadn't had a GST we would be totally out of step with most other countries; there would be a huge gap in our tax base; it would create a lot of other economic problems. And at some point it was going to happen. They'd been talking about it since 1975. I think that she went in and she tried to do the best that she could, but I think that people misunderstood the position and that's where things went wrong. I also think with Meg that to some extent she was so committed to what she did that she didn't see the danger signals attached to it.

RC Danger signals? What were they, do you think?

HODGSON Right to the very end, she defended what we did, but she defended it in a way that suggested there was nothing that could be done better. Sometimes I think that happens when you have a difficult decision to make, you convince yourself that you are making the right decision, and you don't see that perhaps there were other things as a part of it that could have lessened the impact. For example, I think the Liberals were able to make it look as if it was because of the Democrats that the GST came in, and therefore deflected a lot of the blame on to us, and that could have been managed better. Part of that was her advisers, part of that was Meg, who had convinced herself that this was the right path, and I'm not denying it was the right path, but there were possibly some aspects of it that could have been managed better along the way.

RC What is your opinion of Natasha Stott Despoja?

HODGSON Natasha was interesting because she was probably the first career politician to come through the Democrats. It's a well-established path in the other parties that if you're a student with an interest in politics, you get into student politics, then you get a job as a staffer, then you line yourself up before pre-selection. But up until Natasha, the Democrats hadn't had anybody who'd really taken that path, because people rose to the top. There weren't the jobs. People just rose to the top because they were committed to what they were doing. Now that's not in any way to say Natasha was not committed to what she was doing, but it did mean that there were other strategies and things that she would use that were not what we were used to. For example, she reactivated the Young Democrats, and that created some level of imbalance because we had a lot of young people, who may or may not have really understood the culture of the party, who were mixing with the ... when I say "mixing with", they were part of the party with an equal say relative to the older members, some of whom had come through the Liberal movement or the Australia Party, but they didn't mix enough to cross-fertilise the views. When you've got a small party, those imbalances can create problems.

RC Andrew Bartlett?

HODGSON He was more sort of thrust into it in a sense after Cheryl's seat became vacant. Again, he came through as a staffer but he did have a good

understanding of the basis of the party because he'd also been active through the national executive, so he knew the way we did things, he knew some of the background better than Natasha may have done. But again, he was still quite young at the time he took on the leadership, and I think that contributed to some of the mistakes he made.

RC What were these mistakes? What do you think the mistakes were?

HODGSON There were issues like the problem he had with alcohol that became a public scandal, and the way that he handled that. Actually, he handled that one reasonably well. Once it became public, he did manage to deal with it, but that did threaten his credibility as leader.

RC Lyn Allison?

HODGSON I've got a lot of time for Lyn as well. She had a very difficult position at that stage because by that stage we had a divided party room and she had to try and hold them together at the time when everything was crumbling around her. Part of the problem is that once you start to lose resources, you start to lose the ability to cut through with your message. So it was very hard for Lyn to then come back and rebuild when all of the tools that you need to do that were no longer available because the resources of both the party and of the parliamentarians' offices were reducing. So even when they did something really good, they couldn't get the message out. That really, I think, was a significant issue in what has happened in the last few years.

RC A prominent feature of the Australian Democrats has been the role played by women in the party's evolution and development. Why do you think this has happened?

HODGSON I think it's because ... well, for a start it came through from the Australia party and the Liberal movement, and the Australian Democrats came out of that, and those movements were forming at around the time of women's lib and the women's movement, so women were finding their voice. The other thing is that the Democrats didn't come through a paid power structure, a hierarchy. They essentially formed branches and worked at base ground-roots level, and that's the sort of thing that women are good at. They will pick up local issues, run with those issues; they'll form their protest groups and their community activist groups; and it was from that, that their political skills were refined. They joined the Democrats, and they rose

through the systems, because there weren't the male hierarchical systems in place which operated to keep them down.

RC The Democrats have been variously described as social liberals, quintessential liberal Democrats, the thinking person's party and the conscience of Parliament. How would you best describe them?

HODGSON I think that the conscience of Parliament is probably the view that I take of the role of the Democrats. I used to say that there were three types of issues on the table in Parliament. There were the ones that you knew that Labor and Liberal were going to vote together, and you didn't hold any really strong views one way or the other, okay; so those ones were fairly easy to sort of say, well, yeh, that's okay. There were the ones where you knew that Labor and Liberal were going to vote together, but you did hold very strong views, and those were things like some of the law reform issues, the three-strikes stuff, the gay law reform. So on those ones, you could get up there and you could shout and scream and carry on, and you could basically raise ... put the matter on the table. You could say, "Well, we know that you guys are going this way, but we think it's wrong", and you effectively gave a voice to the people who were less empowered by doing that. So that's the conscience of Parliament. Then the third role, and this is the one where we tended to get more flack, and it actually was the most time-consuming type, was where you were knew that Labor and Liberal were going in different directions and your vote was the one that would make the decision. Now sometimes that was something that we did care about. Sometimes it was something that it wasn't part of our core portfolio, but our vote was so essential that we still had to know those issues and be across those issues. If it was one that we cared about, that's where we would go in and we'd say, "Okay, from a pragmatic point of view, you want to do this. We think it's on the right track, but you've got some weaknesses in what you're planning to do, so if you will agree to strengthen these areas, strengthen these aspects, then we will approve the bill. If you will not agree to strengthen those aspects, then we will not approve the bill." So those sorts of negotiations were relevant to how we handled those balance of power issues. So, there again, it's the conscience coming through. It's saying, "We can see what you want to do, and we sort of agree with what you want to do, but you're not going about it the right way."

RC The Australian Democrats founder, Don Chipp, famously described the role of the party as being to keep the bastards honest. Do you think that this best described the party's main task?

HODGSON I would say it was more about raising alternate voices, giving ... I mean, keeping the bastards honest is a part of it, where they've made

commitments and they're reneging on those commitments, or implementing them in a way that doesn't fulfil what they should be doing. But I would say it was more about giving voice to the disempowered.

RC So are you saying that since Don Chipp's statement, the dynamics have changed, in other words, over time?

HODGSON Yeh, I, think so, and remembering that Don Chipp, at the time that he made that statement it had essentially been a two-party Parliament for so long. I mean we had the DLP in there as well, of course, but it had essentially been two voices for so long that once they were elected they could go on and do exactly what they wanted. But I think things evolved since then, and the watchdog role of the Senate has been recognised, and you can see that now, the number of times that the voters elect a split Senate, when they will firmly give government to a particular party but they will vote differently in the Senate to make sure that you don't have the rubber stamp. We saw what happened in the federal Parliament in the last Howard government when they did just have a rubber stamp, and people really did, I think, react against that, and that's why we've gone back to having a more balanced Senate.

RC What do you think made the party attractive to voters?

HODGSON I think it was that thing of having someone else there to moderate what the other parties wanted to do. I'd say that role is what made it attractive. Now, at the time that the Democrats emerged, and up until the mid '80s-early '90s, the Democrats really were the only party sufficiently well organised to undertake that role. I think from the early '90s, other parties have emerged which are also able to fulfil that. That's one of the reasons why that has contributed to what's happened with the Democrats in the last decade.

RC You mentioned other parties. Are you thinking of the Greens?

HODGSON Well, the Greens, who when they first were formed people saw them as environmental fragment, left wing. That was not helped when you had the two West Australians, Chamarette and Margetts, who made some decisions in the federal Parliament when they had the balance of power which were ridiculed. The decisions were ridiculed. I'm not saying anything against the people. So that was a part of it, I think. But since then they have become more mainstream and seen as a more viable alternative. But you also find this pattern: almost every election there is a party that people will trust for this time round, but next time round they haven't fulfilled that trust and so they don't do so well next time round. We saw it with One Nation in WA. There was Grey Power. They didn't actually get any seats but they were really big in one election and then they disappeared again. Family First didn't

get any seats in the ... they've got Steve Fielding, but they're not fulfilling; they're not pushing any further ahead with that. So it is a pattern, I think.

RC I just want to ask now, Helen, how you think the Australian Democrats were viewed by the other parties? First, the Liberal Party. How do you think the Liberal Party viewed the Democrats?

HODGSON We were a nuisance. Remembering that when we were first elected in the Parliament in Western Australia, the conservatives had had that house forever, basically. All of a sudden, instead of just having to deal with the Labor Party, where they could out-vote them, they actually had to talk to us about it. So that took quite a culture shift, and a couple of them managed to do it; a couple of them never really got used to talking to the Democrats. In terms of where we stood on things, I mean I do remember a conversation with a senior Liberal who basically said, "Why aren't you one of us?", because at the time I was agreeing with them on some economic issues, and yet there are other things, like the crime and justice issues, where we were a real thorn in their side. So, yes, I think it was a real culture shift for them to have to talk to other people about their program.

RC Are you able to tell which senior Liberal said that to you, about why aren't you one of us?

HODGSON It was at a social function, so I probably shouldn't say.

RC That's okay. That's fine. How about the Labor Party? How do you think the Labor Party viewed the Democrats?

HODGSON They welcomed us with open arms when we first arrived because they saw finally between us we've got the numbers to actually defeat some of the Liberal legislation. They were hoping that we would more or less form an alliance with them, I think, but of course we didn't; we still continued to assess things case by case. They were always willing to work with us. They always wanted to know where we were on issues so that they could respond appropriately and be prepared, but they tended not to ... they recognised after a while that we weren't another faction of the Labor Party.

RC Right. How about the National Party?

HODGSON The Nats, we didn't really have that much to do with the Nats, I suppose, because most of the coalition dealings were handled through the manager of the house and the ministers. I think on a social level ... I mean, I think they did understand that some of the things that we were arguing for were along the lines of what they wanted. I mean, we've all heard the Nats referred to as the agrarian socialists, and in some respects there was an overlap between our goals, but I wouldn't say we formed any particularly close relationship with the Nats.

RC You briefly mentioned the Greens earlier. How do you think the Greens saw the Democrats?

HODGSON That was an interesting relationship, because whilst we had common ground on our policy views on a lot of things, often our methods of doing things were quite different, so that inevitably caused some tension. There was also that issue that you're always going to find that there's a healthy competition when you're competing for the same type of vote base; there's a competition between getting your message out. You could never denigrate the Greens, because the same group of voters were attracted to both of us, and our policies were very similar, but somehow you had to differentiate yourself, and that did create a little bit of tension from time to time.

RC One Nation?

HODGSON One Nation wasn't in when we were in Parliament, and we're on record as running campaigns against One Nation, because we totally disagree with where they came from on immigration policies and the small "I" liberal issues. We felt that they were big "C" Conservatives .

RC You held the offices of Western Australian and national treasurer and national executive representative for Western Australia. How was the party organised in Western Australia?

HODGSON Okay. Well, we'll start from the top, because the Australian Democrats are a national party; they're not a federation. So essentially the national executive sets the direction across the whole country. So the representatives of each division are then elected to national executive. It's sort of like a board of directors. You're not there representing the views of Western Australia. You are there making decisions for the good of the party as a whole. Within Western Australia there is an executive as well, and that executive has its own office bearers. Some of its function is, in a sense, delegated from the national level, like national campaign strategies and so on, where you're implementing the strategies on the ground. There are other things that are managed, that are divisional matters like running a state election campaign. So there is an executive at the state level, but they are more or less seen for most things like membership and so on. They're more or less a delegated function from the national executive. There have been some recent changes to the whole structure; as a result of the reduction in resources that we've got, a lot more things have been centralised; so I'm really not up with what the current divisional executives are doing about.

RC When you held these positions, Helen, how well do you think the party organisation worked?

HODGSON There was a period in the late '80s to mid '90s, I'd say, where there was a really good team. That coincided with the time when we hit our peaks. At the time our campaign director was Stephen Swift and our national secretary was Sam Hudson. I was the treasurer. We did have a couple of different presidents and vice presidents over that time. But when it comes to campaign organisation, they are the three key roles (the campaign director and the treasurer) and there has to be a really good working relationship between them. So Stephen would dream up ways to spend the money, and I would tell him if he the money there to spend, and he never went over; or, if he did, he always checked first. So there was that trust, a really good working relationship. He had really good ideas. I trusted him to implement those ideas without going over budget. I found the money based on that relationship. But as always in these things, people move on, they move on into other careers, and that team naturally fell away. Other people came in. It does take time to build those relationships to the point where you've got that really good strong core. This was also coinciding with all the other problems that were going on, so I think that ... I wouldn't say that the loss of that team resulted in any of the problems. I think it coincided with those problems and it meant that one of the mechanisms that could have helped to resolve it wasn't there

RC What motivated you to try to enter Parliament?

HODGSON 1996 I had reached another point, sort of, where my career was feeling a bit stale, and I felt I needed to change. I could also feel a ... there was a dissatisfaction with what was happening in Western Australia in terms of the politics, and I could feel that, and I thought ... I mean previously I had run for a couple of seats in a supporting role but thought this time, you know, I'm ready to give it a go as the possibility of winning it. So I sort of said, yes, I'll put my name forward, and I was pre-selected and it all went on from there.

RC In 1990 you contested the federal seat of Curtin for the House of Representatives, and in 1993 for a Senate seat. What are your observations on those campaigns?

HODGSON 1990 was the campaign where .. that was sort of a pyrrhic victory in a lot of ways. We did really well. We got a lot of votes, yet we lost Janine Haines and we lost Jean Jenkins. Jean had been elected on a double dissolution ticket, so it was always going to be hard to get up her up to a full quota in her own right. Janine, of course, made the run for Boothby. It was really devastating to sort of see that we had got so many votes and to see that overall the team was going to be strengthened, but in Western Australia we'd lost our senator and we had lost the leader, and it was quite devastating. So, yes it was bittersweet, the 1990. 1993, that

was the campaign after Janine Haines, so that would have been the John Coulter campaign. I think we knew that there had been so much disruption that we were not likely to do as well in 1993. So I very much felt as if I was there in a supporting role, especially as number 2 on the ticket I didn't expect to get elected, but it was a case of building, of showing people that we were there, of actually going out and saying, "Okay. We are a viable alternative."

RC Just for the tape, Helen, you just said that in Western Australia we lost some key figures. Just for the tape, could you explain who they were in Parliament?

HODGSON Sorry. I was referring there, I think, to Jean Jenkins, who was the senator. She was the senator who was elected in '87 or '88, and she was not re-elected in the 1990 election.

RC Also in 1993 you contested the Western Australian seat of Glendalough. What are your observations on that campaign.

HODGSON Once again I contested that in more or less a supporting role to ... I had no expectations of winning the seat, so it was to support the Upper House candidate (who at the time, I think, was Richard Jeffries) in trying to make some inroads. Now I stand to be corrected on this, but I think that that was before they reorganised into the regional system and they still had double ... they still had two members per region, and the regions were smaller, from memory. So, again, it was ... we were hoping that we'd get somebody elected, but I was more doing the nuts and bolts on the ground in that one.

RC Helen, I'd just like to ask you now about your parliamentary career from 1997 to 2001. In December 1996 you were elected as a member of the Legislative Council for the North Metropolitan Region. How had your election campaign differed to previous campaigns?

HODGSON This time in Western Australia we were seen as being at a bit of a crossroads, where it was clear that people were fed up with the Liberal government but they weren't sure whether they were going to go for Labor yet or not. So it meant that we were in with a chance, a real chance. As part of this, the national executive was able to allocate a bit of funding, so we were able to be more professional in the way we conducted the campaigns, so that we actually had the input of an advertising agency and so on as part of the campaign strategies. I think that just made us look that little bit more professional, which meant that we were seen as a viable alternative, but it coincided with the feeling in the electorate. We'd had WA Inc. We'd had the Liberals in for a while as well, and people were just not ready to go back to Labor yet, but they weren't that rapt in the Liberals either, and so it was the right time.

RC What were some of the main issues that featured in your campaign?

HODGSON The main campaign theme was the “Watchdog” theme. It was: “Do you want Liberal to keep doing as it wants and are you ready to go back to Labor yet? You need a third voice.” That was the theme for the campaign.

RC How did you feel when you were elected?

HODGSON [chuckles] It was pretty exciting, especially when the numbers came through and we discovered that we were going to be part of the balance of power as well. It was overwhelming in a sense, because here we were, we were going to be holding the balance of power on core issues, and we had no experience whatsoever. We were well aware that we needed to train ourselves up pretty quickly so that we knew how the place worked, what we needed to do and so on. We immediately sort of put in place a strategy of learning about the standing orders, meeting the key figures, attending Parliament for, I think, most ... the upper house takes its seat in May and I think that the lower house, the new Parliament, was sworn in in March. For most of that time, we actually attended as observers so that we could see the way things worked and we could learn our way around the systems without being thrown in the deep end on the first day.

RC What do you think were the key factors that contributed towards your election?

HODGSON I think it was the feeling that people wanted a change. They weren’t ready to go back to Labor yet, but they weren’t fully trusting of what the Liberals were doing, of what the coalition was doing, and so they wanted this watchdog in place.

RC At the time of your election, what were the most pressing issues in your electorate; that’s the North Metropolitan Region?

HODGSON North Metropolitan, yes. One of the issues for us as Democrats was that it was hard to focus on electorate-based issues. We tended to look at issues that were pressing across the whole of the state, rather than focus on purely local issues; things, for example, like gay law reform. In a sense, it was relevant in my electorate because the suburbs that it covered included a number of areas where there was a high concentration of gay people, but that doesn’t mean it was any less pressing for the state as a whole. So we tended to focus more on portfolio matters rather than electorate matters.

RC Right. How did you feel you could best represent your electorate in Parliament?

HODGSON Basically, by being a voice for the people who weren’t being heard; yes.

RC And how did you feel you could make a difference?

HODGSON When we saw legislation that we thought needed to be improved or that didn't achieve what it was intending to achieve, or where it was going too far, we would stand up and we would say we think it's going too far or that it's not doing what you think it's going to do. We were accused a few times of tinkering for the sake of tinkering, but if we felt that something was inappropriate, we would say so.

RC With Norm Kelly, you were the first Democrats to be elected to the Legislative Council. How did you feel about this?

HODGSON Well it was a huge obligation, a huge responsibility. More important to us, I think, was the fact it was the first time that the Legislative Council had gone out of conservative control. The fact that the Democrats and the Greens had done that placed a huge responsibility on us, and then we had to make it clear that we were acting as Democrats and that we were fulfilling that role ... the faith that the public had placed on us of making sure that the government didn't go too far with what it was planning to do.

RC What were the main issues that you intended to raise in Parliament?

HODGSON I should have reread my inaugural speech for this, shouldn't I?

RC I'm actually going to come on to this later on.

HODGSON Okay; yes. I know that at the time I was concerned about Indigenous issues. I was concerned about education, gay law reform. A number of those sorts of issues would have been on my agenda, yes.

RC At the time you first entered Parliament, Helen, how were you received by other members?

HODGSON A fairly mixed reception. As I said earlier, members of the ALP tended to welcome us with open arms thinking that we would gravitate to voting with them on things. That was probably moderated a bit when they saw that we were going to be genuinely independent. A bit of mistrust from the conservative benches where they sort of "I don't really know how we're going to work this." Overall, I'd say that I did form some good working relationships, and there are other relationships that never really got off the ground.

RC Was there any open animosity?

HODGSON There was one instance where I did feel that I was being bullied by a minister at the time, and I said so in Parliament and it's recorded in *Hansard*.

RC Are you able to say who that was?

HODGSON [chuckles] Given that he's now the Premier of the state, yes, and it is recorded in *Hansard*. It was Colin Barnett. I'd been there less than a week, and he indicated that the Auditor General did not have the power to do something. I actually knew the Auditor General, because I was an accountant and I knew him through my

accounting affiliations. I phoned him and had a conversation with him and when I got back into Parliament I sort of said, "I can see no basis for what the minister has just tried to tell me, so I'm going to proceed with my proposed amendment." That amendment ... it was actually in relation to the Auditor General vetting major contracts before privatisation sales. That is now a standard clause in most of the sales that go ahead. But at the time, it was very intimidating to have a minister bullying you in the corridor on a proposed amendment that you're putting up.

RC What was Colin Barnett's position at the time?

HODGSON He would have been the Minister for Energy and Resources at the time, I think.

RC So what impression did this have on you?

HODGSON [chuckles] The downside of that is he was also the Minister for Education, and I think it did have an impact on our working relationship. Whereas there were things that needed to be done in the education portfolio, yes, he was always one of the people I found it most difficult to work with.

RC You said you formed some good working relationships. Who were they with?

HODGSON I always got on well with Kim Chance. He had the office just up from us and he was somebody that we could sit with and have a drink at the end of the day and talk over what had happened. A few others as well, but mostly from the Labor benches; not so many from the Liberal benches.

RC What were your impressions of the parliamentary staff?

HODGSON I found them very professional. I mean, I do know since then of the issue with the Clerk at the time. I think at the time they were very excited to have this change. To some extent, our agendas coincided because we would go to them for independent advice on things that we wanted to do, which, I think, as I say, it was a case of coinciding agendas, where they were able to give us the appropriate advice. It sort of strengthened the procedures and the standing orders and the rules that run Parliament. They were happy to do that.

RC When you first entered Parliament, Helen, who did you see as your mentors?

HODGSON That was one of our difficulties, because we didn't have any mentors from within Parliament. Normally, if you're elected, there is somebody there who can show you the ropes. I would say I relied heavily on Jack Evans, who, during his time as the senator, at least had some understanding of how the Senate systems worked. As a strategist at the time ... he was an excellent strategist. He would've probably been the person I would point to as a mentor.

RC What did you see as the role of the Legislative Council at that time?

HODGSON Before we got there, they didn't seem to have much of a role at all. After we got there, we made sure that we were vetting the legislation. We made sure that what the government was proposing was actually fulfilled in the way the legislation was written, and if we felt that the legislation was unfair to certain people, we would try to remove that unfairness.

RC Again, you've partially answered this question, Helen, but when you were elected, the Democrats and the Greens found themselves holding the balance of power in the Legislative Council. How did this affect the activities of the upper house?

HODGSON [chuckles] It meant that they actually had to consider and re-debate things, whereas previously they would go through on the numbers. The type of debate had to become a reasoned debate, rather than simply an argumentative debate. There were a number of instances when we were there where bills were rejected and had to go back to the Legislative Assembly for review. The native title legislation's an example of that, where it was rejected twice, and it was only after the defection of Neville that they actually got it through the upper house as well. It did change the role of the house.

RC Just for the tape, Helen, you said "the defection of Neville". Could you explain that?

HODGSON He was one of the members for the Mining and Pastoral Region, and when it came to the native title legislation, what was happening was Labor was not going to support it, we didn't support it and the Greens didn't support it. As long as Labor was onside, he basically had the numbers to reject the legislation. But he was never that happy with the rejection of the legislation. He felt that it was redeemable; that there was good in it as well as some issues that he wanted addressed. In about it would've been '99 or 2000, I suppose, he left the Labor Party and he sat as an Independent for the rest of his term. It was during that period that the coalition put the native title bill up again and he voted for it so it passed.

RC And this was Neville, did you say?

HODGSON Yes. I can't remember his first name. [Mark Neville]

RC Yes, that's fine. How crucial was the balance of power on the capacity of the Democrats to exert their influence in the Legislative Council?

HODGSON It was the balance of power that led to some of the biggest reforms that we achieved. For example, I've already mentioned the Auditor General clause. That might seem really minor in the scheme of things, but it has had a lasting impact because it's always been there. Sorry; it's in all of the contracts from now on. One of

the other areas, and this is one that I copped a lot of flak for, but it was in relation to the prisons legislation. The government wanted to establish the private prison out at Acacia. At the same time there was a lot of concern over the way that the Prison Officers Union was behaving and the activities of certain prison officers in the government-run prisons. The government argument was that privatisation would put pressure on the government prisons and they would be able to deal with these rogue prison officers. Now, I never subscribed to that argument, but I was also conscious that they could have got through the privatisation through a back door, through regulations, rather than bring it to Parliament. I used that opportunity to help set up the office of the independent inspector of prisons (or corrective services I think he is now called) which basically meant that whether it was a government or a private-run prison, there was somebody there to ensure that everything was running properly and that the prisoners' rights were being respected. I think I was able to get as far as I was because the minister actually supported this to some extent himself, and so we were able to negotiate to set up this office of the independent inspector of prisons while not knocking back the private prison. I copped a lot of flak, because people say prisons should not have been privatised; that they're making profits out of the prison system. But I actually feel that the good that I did outweighed that. So that was an instance where it was a balance of power, and I think that that was an achievement that I would say is one of my biggest achievements when I was there.

RC In your maiden speech in May 1997, you referred to the fact that you were the first woman to lead a political party that was speaking for the first time in the Parliament of Western Australia. What do you personally see as the significance of this event?

HODGSON There were the two aspects, and the main one was that we had got the third party in there which had broken the stranglehold of the conservatives. That really was the significance of being a new voice in the Parliament. But I also wanted to make the point that the role of women in the Australian Democrats was different to what it was in the other parties. As we've discussed previously, it's a case of saying that a woman can do the job just as well as a man, and if that's the better person for the job, so be it.

RC During your time in Parliament, Helen, you were parliamentary leader of the Democrats. What was your approach to carrying out your responsibilities in this role?

HODGSON When you're the leader of two, it's sort of a relationship, really. There would not have been any occasion where I simply turned around and said, "I'm the leader; that's it" because it just would not have worked. What it sort of meant was

that if there was an instance where somebody wanted to talk to the leader or to invite the leader to something then that came across my desk rather than Norm's desk. We did try to work as a team. If there was ever an issue (and I can think of a couple) where we disagreed, then it was a matter of ensuring that you had a position that the other person could live with, because if they couldn't live with it and threatened to vote against you on the floor, to fracture two is a real problem. I actually think that's one of the issues that led to the problems that the senators had; that they became fractured within the party room, couldn't show a united face anymore, and that leads to a public perception of disarray.

RC So, in your view, Helen, how do you think you worked with Norm Kelly, the other Democrat in the Legislative Council?

HODGSON Reasonably well. As in any other really close working relationship, there are always points of friction. In some ways, I sort of think I saw more of Norm Kelly during those four years than I saw of my husband. It is like a marriage when you're working that closely together. There are points of friction, so you have to learn how to avoid those points of friction. But, on the whole, we worked pretty well together.

RC You were a member of the Public Administration Committee from June 1997 to January 2001. What were your impressions of the work of that committee?

HODGSON That was an interesting committee. Basically, we undertook a number of interesting inquiries, one of which was, for example, the rock lobster industry. I can't quite remember what the hook was that got it under the Public Administration Committee. It was to do with, I think, the licensing arrangements that fell in under public administration. It was really interesting to learn more about the rock lobster industry and how it's run and the problems that it was facing at the time and the sustainability issues; and of course we were able to work all of that into the final reports. We undertook a big inquiry into the sacking of an academic at University of Western Australia: the Rindos inquiry. That was one where my knowledge of university systems was quite helpful. As a team, again, we worked pretty well together most of the time. There was a friction point, though, when we talked about the industrial relations legislation. Essentially, there was no way that the committee was ever going to agree as a committee on the findings in that report, and that in a sense set a framework that meant that for that period the committee became a bit more confrontational and a bit less cooperative in the way we worked. If we could avoid those political hot buttons then, generally, we worked pretty well together.

RC Between June ...

HODGSON Mark Neville.

RC Sorry?

HODGSON Mark Neville.

RC Mark Neville; yes.

HODGSON Of course.

RC That's the name we were thinking of. Between June and August 1997 you were also a member of the Select Committee to Review the Legislative Council [Standing] Committee System. What did this committee achieve?

HODGSON [chuckles] I imagine it's all been completely reviewed again since then.

The purpose of that one was that we wanted to make the committee system a strong part of the work of the upper house, in the same way it is in the Senate. Given that we had balance of power issues, we had the Greens and the Democrats, we were no longer simply going to have bills passing on the nod, we needed to make sure that we had systems in place so that the right things could go to the different committees and genuine reports raising the real issues were brought back to Parliament, so that's what the function of that one was. But I gather that since then there have been a couple of other restructures, so it's not as it was when we left that, yes.

RC In December 1998 you served on the select committee on native title legislation.

HODGSON Yes.

RC What are your impressions of your work on that committee?

HODGSON That was a really fascinating exercise. I was not a member of the committee as such, but I was a participating member. What it came down to was in terms of the numbers they had space for either a Green or a Democrat, but as long as I could participate it meant that I had access to all of the evidence, had access to all of the information; it just meant that I didn't sign off on the official part of the report. To me that was really important because the native title ... in the background of the Wik legislation that the Howard government was putting through at the time, that was a really significant proposal, and I needed to get across the issues. So by participating in the committee I was able to hear all the evidence from both the mining side, from the Indigenous side, the pastoralists. We did a tour up into the Kimberley where we actually went and met pastoralists and Indigenous people, and we also did a tour to Canada where we looked at the treaty system in place in Canada. So that was a really interesting one to work on.

RC Just following on from that, what are your impressions of the Howard government's intervention in the northern parts of the state?

HODGSON That one's difficult because there are ... even among Indigenous people and among committees that reviewed it, there is mixed support and negative comment. I never like the idea of limiting people's rights. So to go in and overwrite the permit system, for example, I think is probably [going] too far. At the same time, it's clear that there needs to be more positive engagement from the government with these communities, so I think the intervention went too far, but I do think that something was needed.

RC On the 17th of March 1998 you took part in the debate during the second reading of the Criminal Code Amendment (Abortion) Bill. During your speech you said the debate was about choice for women and that the Democrats supported decriminalisation of abortion. Why do you feel so strongly about this issue?

HODGSON I think that it's a very difficult decision for any woman to have to make, but the reality is that women have been making this decision about their bodies, about their reproductive health, for thousands of years. There have been legal and illegal ways of dealing with unwanted pregnancy. The health risks, the psychological risks, all of that are such that you shouldn't be putting any burden on a woman by saying that it's a criminal act to do so. If it's the wrong time, if there are reasons why the woman cannot have that child, she has enough of a burden without going ahead and saying that she's a criminal as well. I'm thinking now, there may be cases where it's a very young girl, or there may be cases where it's as a result of an unwanted, you know, a rape or a ... but not even in those most dramatic cases, there may be cases where a woman already has as many children as she can manage and it's going to have a negative influence on the whole family if she has another child. It's a difficult decision, and she is the only person who can assess all of those factors, hopefully in consultation with the father if he is a part of the decision, but people shouldn't impose criminality in that situation.

RC On the 17th of September 1997, you spoke in support of legislation to overcome inequalities and injustices with respect to gay, lesbian and transgender people. Why is this issue so important to you?

HODGSON Again, it's a case of ... we're setting up people as second-class citizens if we don't recognise their rights, their sexuality and so on, and I do have (I mean, everybody says this) friends who are gay, but it goes beyond that. It is a fundamental right that people have to be able to participate in society fully, no matter what their sexuality is. While they're having to hide their sexuality, then you've got ... you know, there is discrimination, it's ... yes, it's just not a good situation for anybody. When you say I spoke in favour, I actually introduced a bill to try to provide equal opportunity protection under the Equal Opportunity Act, and I introduced it at

least twice and got it to the second reading stage at least twice, but it was continually adjourned. This one of the other things I consider a significant achievement of my time, that it could not be ignored in the next election. The ALP went to the next election saying that they would decriminalise, that they would introduce equal opportunities protection, and they went ahead and they actually did it. I don't know whether they would have given it such a high priority if I hadn't been working on the issue for the previous four years so that everybody knew that it was there; it was on the public agenda. They may have, but I don't know. But it was also, again, one of those very bittersweet moments. I went to the Legislative Council and sat in the gallery when they did the final reading of the bill that went through under the Labor government, and it's probably the only time I've sort of sat there and thought, "I should be down there voting on it", because it's what I'd been working for.

RC During your time in the Legislative Council, Helen, you took part in several debates about law and order issues, particularly truth in sentencing on the eighth of September 1998, and punishment and rehabilitation of offenders on the 25th of May 1999. What are your feelings about these issues?

HODGSON The problem with law and order issues is that it gets a reaction from the community. The community seems to think that if you punish people hard, lock up the offenders, that you will have less crime, but the facts and the statistics show that that does not work. What you should be looking at is prevention. You should be looking at rehabilitation when they're in prison, you should be finding ways to intervene to prevent the crimes from happening. That's where the money and the resources should be going. If you take a young person, like the three strikes rules, if you take a young person and lock them up, they're simply going to learn to be a better criminal. That doesn't do anybody any good. So that was one of the points of difference between us and the other parties. I do recall I introduced the bill that opposed the three strikes rules and sort of said ... asked that they be repealed, and I remember lobbying with the ALP, and I was able to get the left on side, but the rest of the ALP took a very pragmatic approach: "We're not going to get elected if we go round looking as if we're soft on criminals", so we never got anywhere with that particular proposal. But it's not going soft on criminals if you introduce the right proposals to try to prevent the crime, to address the psychological issues underlying it. There are very, very few people where you can really say they need to be locked up forever because they can't be rehabilitated.

RC Just going on from that question then, Helen, [for] what categories of crime do you feel that people should be locked up forever?

HODGSON I said there are very, very few people. It's not really a category of crime. There may be situations where someone has killed in cold blood and the psychological assessments are such that they're not willing to participate in rehabilitation in any positive sense, and perhaps some of the worst sexual crimes would come into that category. But that would only be where you have already shown that rehabilitation is not going to be possible in this case.

RC Which do you see as the most important issues you debated in the Legislative Council?

HODGSON I have probably touched on most of them. There would have been the sexuality law reform, there would have been the abortion bill, native title, the prisons bill in setting up the inspectorate. They'd probably be the main ones.

RC How do you think the Legislative Council worked in practical terms?

HODGSON Most times they worked okay. I mean, you sort of have to ... the business managers have to make sure that people are working together and that you've got a rough idea of what's going to happen. Surprises can get nasty. There's always mistakes, like when the vote is taken at the wrong time and pairing arrangements get stuffed up. Most times you can work around those. The problems were when emotions got engaged too much and people would get so involved in the emotional side of the issues that the fact that we were there with a business job to do became secondary. Sometimes that's acceptable, but sometimes it just becomes a bit of a problem. I'm not saying there were not improvements that could be made. For example, the system with disallowance of regulations, they always used to be left until the last thing, because if you didn't get it dealt with, the regulation lapsed, and if the government knew that it was not going to be approved anyway they might as well just let it lapse. So in the terms of the running of the business there were issues like that, but on the whole we managed pretty well.

RC You just mentioned that there was a difficulty when emotions got in the way. Can you give me some instances of when this actually happened?

HODGSON I can't really think of any specific instances, but I mean while I was there I don't think we actually had anybody ejected from the house. But it's that sort of situation where people lose sight of the goal because they're just so involved in the heat of the particular issue. Often it comes from the heart, so it's hard to be too critical when that happens. But when it becomes anger and when it becomes abusive, then it's not appropriate.

RC How did you view the relationship between the Democrats and the other parties in the Legislative Council? I'm talking here about a practical day-to-day working relationship?

HODGSON Not too bad on the whole. There were times when particular ministers used to be a problem. Generally, when you knew a bill was coming up, you would let them know whether you were going to agree or disagree, and if there were negotiations that needed to be entered into, then it was up to the minister to basically initiate those negotiations. I do recall when the workers' compensation legislation was being debated, the minister was in the lower house and basically she did not want to engage in negotiations until the very last minute. I was supposed to be in the chamber listening to the debate and instead I was traipsing up and down the corridor to her office and she would say, "What if I do this?" and I'd say, "Well, I'll go away and think about it." In the meantime, the ALP was keeping the bill alive on the floor of the house because they knew that the negotiations were still going. So, yes, there were occasions like that, but on the whole I think the business managers in the upper house learned that if they wanted things to run smoothly, they had to talk to us.

RC Which members of the Legislative Council particularly impressed you?

HODGSON I've got a lot of respect for Cheryl Davenport, with what she did with the abortion bill, with the way she was always ... she had so much integrity that I always knew that I could trust her to go through with anything that she said that she would do. The President at the time, George Cash. He always dealt with us fairly. I mean I know he has reputation for being a very hard man behind the scenes and one of the Liberal wheelers and dealers, but he also recognised that you couldn't do anything ... you know, if they didn't have us on side that they were buying problems for themselves, so he was always good to deal with. I've already mentioned Kim Chance. I got on well with Kim. On the Liberal side, yes, there was ... most of them were okay when you were dealing with them on particular issues. Apart from the one I've already mentioned, there weren't too many people I could say that I didn't get on with, but it was very much a case-by-case thing there.

RC Who did you regard as your fiercest opponents?

HODGSON Again, that was issue by issue. It would vary. There were times when the people on the ALP benches would get quite angry with us. On the law and order issues, Peter Foss, who was the Attorney General, he could be quite arrogant and dismissive of what we were saying, and yet there were other times on other issues when we were able to sit down and talk. So, yes, it did vary.

RC What were your views of Richard Court as Premier?

HODGSON I didn't have a great deal to do with him personally because he was in the other house, and as Premier it was normally his ministers I was dealing with. But I think that there was a certain arrogance there, a certain right to rule that came through, yes.

RC How about Geoff Gallop as Leader of the Opposition?

HODGSON I had more access to Geoff Gallop, but, again, he was quite pragmatic in terms of what he needed to do as opposition leader to get elected next time, so when it came to issues like some of the law and order stuff, where a lot of the Labor members would say to me, "Look, we agree with you, but if you don't get Geoff Gallop on side it's not going to go through caucus." Of course, he was very aware that the public would see that as being soft on crime and that would affect their re-election chances.

RC What do you consider to have been your most important achievement during your time in Parliament?

HODGSON There'd be the two, one of which I probably can't claim as an achievement, because it was finalised by the Labor government. That was the gay law reform. It was something that I put firmly back on the agenda, and that eventually got through. The other one would be the independent prison inspector.

RC On the other hand, what do you see as some of your disappointments and frustrations during your time in Parliament?

HODGSON The story behind the native title was very frustrating. I mean, essentially we had three separate debates on the native title bill that the Court government was putting up, and we managed to stop it twice. But on the third time, because of Mark Neville's defection, it went through. I can sort of remember ... I didn't have any heart for the debate the third time round. The first two times I knew that we had a chance of actually saving it, and we did. But the third time the heart had gone out of it because you knew what the outcome was going to be. So that was one of the disappointments, yes.

RC Why do you think the Court Liberal government was defeated in 2001?

HODGSON I think it had just run its course. I think that there was a certain arrogance, and that was seen by the public.

RC Any other reason? You think it was mainly ... was arrogance the main factor, do you think?

HODGSON I think so, yes, yes.

RC On reflection, why do you think the influence of the Australian Democrats declined?

HODGSON I think there is the macro and the micro. The macro, as I've already said, there have been more parties come up that have been able to work particularly with particular groups with particular issues, whereas when the Democrats were formed, we really were the third choice. Over the last 15 years there

have been more choices, so that third-party vote has been fragmented to some extent. I think as part of that, we started to be seen as part of the establishment. So, “keeping the bastards honest”, well, are you part of the bastards now? So there is an element there, I think, where people have, sort of, moved on from the Democrats. Although we were the first of those third voices, they have moved on and they’ve sort of said, “Well, you know, we’ve gone past that.” Of course the GST issue was a part of that whole process.

RC How significant for the Democrats was the defection of the party’s leader, Cheryl Kernot, to the Labor Party in 1997?

HODGSON I think Cheryl Kernot was seen as ... I mean, she was very charismatic, and the public warmed to her, and she was seen as, you know, the face of the Democrats. But if she could go over to the Labor Party, did that mean that we were really independent or not? I think that that was sort of the beginning of that particular down-swing. Now, remember we have had a couple of others; after Janine Haines was not re-elected, we went through Janet Powell and John Coulter before Cheryl Kernot came in. It’s unfortunate, but it seems that the fortunes of many political parties is tied to a charismatic leader. You sort of see that with the major parties as well. The ALP couldn’t really get very far with Kim Beazley, but Kevin Rudd has been able to pull it out. It’s the presidential style which I do find frustrating. So Cheryl was the example of the charismatic leader who everybody had sort of seen her as the focal point, and then when she left they sort of said, “So are the Democrats simply an offshoot of the Labor Party after all?” and there was that sort of a feeling at the time, I think. The other problem is that when you have a relatively small group of elected parliamentarians, if there is any dissent in the party room, then that is going to become critical; it is going to tear it apart. In a larger group of people you can negotiate better solutions; you can hide them on the back bench. I mean, we are always reading in the media stories that are given out by disaffected Liberals or disaffected Labor. Within the Democrats when you only have the maximum, I think it was, nine people there, then that’s going to be very hard to hide and very hard to cover up; and Cheryl’s leaving sort of opened the door for some of that to happen, I think.

RC What impact do you think the Democrats’ support for the Howard government’s goods and services tax had on the decline of the Democrats?

HODGSON This is another one that’s quite a complex issue because, as I’ve said before, as a tax policymaker I do think goods and services tax was necessary. It was really interesting for me in the state Parliament as a tax expert watching my colleagues negotiate federally and having no input into it [chuckles], but on tax policy

grounds I can always justify (a) that there is a goods and services tax and (b) that the Democrats helped to make it fairer by removing some of the aspects that were going to hit the lower income earners hardest; but it was all in the message and the way it was sold. Before the election we put out our tax policy, which said, "This is what the Liberals are proposing, this is what the ALP is proposing. We will work with whoever is elected to make it fairer." That's not what the public heard. The public heard, "The Democrats, keep the bastards honest, they'll stop the GST if we don't want it." One of our people here in Perth actually, Brian Greig (he was not a senator at that stage but he was elected) picked this and he said, "The public is getting the wrong message." So we tried to shift the message here in WA (but it didn't really cut through) that we weren't saying "No GST"; we were saying, "Make it a fairer GST." So what happened then was we went into negotiations, we tried to make it fairer, the ALP was able to say, "See, the Democrats are giving you the GST, and they said they wouldn't." The Liberals were able to say, "Well, we always said we'd give you a GST. The Democrats helped us do it", and so they were able to shift the responsibility to us as well. You complicate that with an administrative agenda. There was actually the tax office and Treasury who designed the first BAS forms and GST forms that drove small business nuts, where they were trying to effectively implement an audit strategy by getting people to report so much information every quarter that small business couldn't cope with it, so that when the implementation came through and it looked really complicated and horrible and messy, that added to it. So we were the scapegoats, and that's where I said earlier that I felt that Meg hadn't handled some of the spin-offs very well. We should have seen (and I say "we", which would involve Meg, her strategists, the party strategists) we should have seen the way that we were being made the scapegoats and found a way of dealing with it, but we didn't identify it and deal with it, which meant that from then on we wore a lot of the brunt of the public anger against the GST.

RC In your opinion, Helen, what do you think the Democrats could have done to reverse the decline in their fortunes?

HODGSON I think some of the issues we had very little control over, specifically the change in the macro environment, when there's a lot more small parties coming up, a lot more fragmented third-party vote. I think that we would have suffered that decline anyway. I think another factor was the divisions within the party room which couldn't be hidden. That's something that could have been managed better. I think the other issue is that we should have identified the way we were being blamed for the GST earlier and actually managed that situation better, more strategically. They'd

be the three areas, one of which I don't think we had any control over; the other two we probably did.

RC Was an alliance with the Greens a possibility at any time?

HODGSON There have been discussions about alliances with the Greens a couple of times. They never really proceeded to the point of serious negotiations. John Coulter, for example, was a fan of merging with the Greens in some way. One of the issues there is that although we had a lot of policies in common, our party structures and our models and our way of doing things were quite different. So all of that would have needed to be worked through, and in the couple of times when overtures were made, it didn't get to the point of actually working it through.

RC How did you feel when you left Parliament in May 2001?

HODGSON I was devastated. I'd worked so hard for four years and the work hadn't been recognised in context, and instead I was being made one of the scapegoats for the GST.

RC What impact did your time in Parliament have on your family life?

HODGSON I've been blessed with a very supportive partner who was always there when I needed him. I do remember during one election campaign I was exhausted. I came home and I just lay down for a nap before going out to another meeting, and I got up and he'd laid out the clothes, he'd ironed my shirt, and he'd even got my bag there, and he said, "Have you got everything you need in the bag?", as well as getting something for me to eat. So he's always been incredibly supportive, and I couldn't have done it without him. But I will say I did make a decision after about 18 months that I would reserve one day a weekend for things that he could be involved in if he chose to. If there was a rally on, I'd ask Allan if he wanted to come to the rally, and if he didn't, then I'd decline, because otherwise you can work 24/7 and never see your family.

RC On reflection, Helen, what impact has your time in Parliament had on your own life?

HODGSON Immediately following my time in Parliament, I sort of went into a bit of a holding pattern. I took a job here in Perth at ECU, back teaching tax again, and I did that because I didn't know whether I wanted to return to politics or not. As things had evolved, I could see that I wasn't going to be going back into politics, and so then I did move on. It's a part of who I am, a part of how I think. I don't think I have any regrets, but it's not something that I'm going to go back to. I'll just add to that, though, that where I am now, the course I teach is a specialist tax course, and we do have a compulsory tax policy module, and I do find that having had the experience in politics it really does add a dimension to understanding the way that the systems work, the

way that policy is made. You can sort of be very cynical and say, "Well, you've got the administrators, you've got the politicians, and somewhere between them you do end up with some sort of outcome, but is it really right for the people?"

RC Just going back on that question, I was just wondering if you could give me some idea if you think of how you were at the time when you first entered Parliament and look at how you were as a person when you left Parliament. How do you think you changed over that time?

HODGSON There was a lot of growth. One of the things that I often say is: how often does an accountant get to participate in prison law reform? There are a lot of issues that I was exposed to that I had not ever really needed to confront before. So, in that sense, there was a lot of growth there. As an individual, as a person, there was also a lot of growth in terms of how I deal with other people. I actually have just participated in an outside project where it involved a consultation with a group of people. The leader of the consultation, when he sent his thank you through, said that he felt I was very good at listening and at being able to perceive people's real messages. I think that is something that you could not have said before I was in Parliament, because you need to learn those people skills.

RC Do you see a future for the Australian Democrats as a political party?

HODGSON That is very difficult to answer. I would like to say that I think they will come back, but I don't yet see the right leader coming forward to lead us back. I think, given the current environment, when there are so many other small parties competing for that sector of the vote, it would have to be a very special person who could come in and recapture the public imagination. The real problem is the baggage that is associated with the brand. Those items of baggage, the GST is the one people remember, but even more so, it was the squabbling in the party room after that. We could have overcome the one if we had not fallen into the other. I think as a party it will continue to exist, but whether it will ever reach the point where it can wield any power again, I don't know.

RC You indicated in an earlier question your intentions in this direction, but what are your political interests and ambitions these days?

HODGSON I've no intention of going back into public politics. I am directing those sorts of ideals and ambitions in other areas; for example, I'm involved with the Uniting Church Social Justice Commission, so those sorts of issues to do with standing up for the oppressed and directing in that sort of area. I'm currently doing my PhD in family tax transfer systems, so I'm hoping to have some influence on public policy through those sorts of academic avenues as well as through the church stuff.

RC Is there anything further; any further issues that you would like to comment on that we haven't covered in this interview?

HODGSON I don't think so. It's a long time ago now. It's, what, 12 years since I was elected and eight years since I lost the seat. There's a lot that I had to come to terms with after that, but, yes, I think that it's an important part of my life, but I'm not going back there.

RC If there's nothing else, Helen, I would like to thank you once again for giving your time for this interview.

HODGSON Thank you.