



The Greens (WA)  
**30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary History Project**  
[1990-2020]

An interview with:

**Ms TRISH COWCHER**



[Trish with the book outlining her roles in the anti-nuclear movement and People for Nuclear Disarmament in WA in the 1980s.]

**26<sup>th</sup> May 2020 at her home in Fremantle**

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We hold that First Nations peoples have a right to self-determination and political representation, and must be partners in the development and implementation of public policies, programs and services that affect them.

This interview was recorded on Noongar land and the Greens (WA) acknowledge that these lands were stolen and sovereignty was never ceded. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

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**INTERVIEWER**

**David Worth**, Greens (WA) History Project Working Group.

**TRANSCRIBER**

**Chilla Bulbeck**, Emerita Professor, The University of Adelaide, Greens (WA) History Project Working Group.

**NOTES TO READERS**

FULL CAPITALS in the text indicate a word or words emphasised by the interviewee.

Square brackets [ ] are used for insertions not in the original recording.

**INTERVIEW DISCLAIMER**

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## INTRODUCTION

Ms Trish Cowcher was born in Adelaide in 1955 and moved to Perth with her family in 1978. She became active with the anti-nuclear movement while teaching in Kalgoorlie in 1980, and was an active campaigner for People for Nuclear Disarmament and the election of Jo Vallentine to the Senate in 1984.

Trish was a foundation member of the Greens (WA), joining in January 1990, and has worked for three Greens' Senators, Jo Vallentine, Scott Ludlam and Jordon Steele-John, as well as for Giz Watson MLC in the WA Legislative Council.

Trish was awarded Life Membership in October 2017 and remains active in the Greens (WA). When interviewed in 2020 she was the Convenor of the Greens' Candidate Assessment Group and a member of the Administrative Working Group.

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## TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:44] DW: Okay. I'm with Trish Cowcher. It's the 26<sup>th</sup> of May [2020]...

**COWCHER:** It's Sorry Day today.

DW: Sorry Day. Yes. I didn't know that.

**COWCHER:** National apology.

DW: Yes, 20 years ago [Australians walked] across the Harbor Bridge. We're here to talk about her life with the Greens. So, Trish, thanks very much for talking to me this morning.

**COWCHER:** Pleasure.

DW: We want to start off a little bit, talk a bit about your early life and where you were born.

**COWCHER:** I was born in Adelaide in 1955 and just hung out in Adelaide until I was 16.

DW: And did you have any siblings?

**COWCHER:** Two younger siblings.

DW: And your mum and dad, how did they then moved to Perth, or did you ...?

**COWCHER:** Well, my father [Ted Cowcher] was a journalist and came over to Perth as a news editor here for the ABC. So there was always an interest in current affairs and journalism in our house. We were probably the very few people that listened to the ABC all the time, and only.

DW: I think my family did as well, that and the morning papers were all about the current affairs. And what year did they come over here?

**COWCHER:** Oh, they must come over in [19] '78, '79.

DW: By that time, had you started university?

**COWCHER:** No, no, I didn't go to university until I was in my 40s. I did have a Diploma in home economics and did a bit of travelling. And then I came to Perth in about '78, '79, following my parents. Basically for a holiday, but I never left.

DW: For the sunshine, you found ...

**COWCHER:** Well, my parents, everyone was here. My brothers had come over. And then I came for a holiday. And then I never left because I just got a life here.

DW: So what were your early memories of Adelaide, really growing up?

**COWCHER:** I mean, I love going back to Adelaide. I think it's the most maligned city. And it's great to go back. But, you know, I've got my life here in Perth now.

DW: Can you remember the name of your primary school?

**COWCHER:** Clapham Primary School.

DW: Clapham?

**COWCHER:** Yes, Clapham Primary School and Dawes Road High School, I went to. And then when I left Adelaide, I went to Melbourne in 1972 to go to Emily McPherson College, which is now part of the RMIT, to study food and food science, nutrition.

DW: Well, that would have been a very exciting move?

**COWCHER:** Well, I was only 16, so leaving home at 16 was fun, interesting.

DW: And you had friends who you stayed with?

**COWCHER:** I lived with my nana. And then I made friends. And some of the friends I'm still friendly with. So that's good.

DW: That's fantastic how you retained those bonds.

**COWCHER:** Yes.

DW: In terms of your early childhood and going to primary school and high school in Adelaide, was there anything in experiences you had that might have indicated you had an interest in the environment and saving the world?

**COWCHER:** No, not really. I mean, I think I used to notice what a lot of things were unfair, "that's not fair." You know, that kind of thing. But I wasn't really encouraged at home. My father was a journalist of the old school where, you know, you have both sides. You argue both sides. You don't take sides, that kind of thing. So if I said something, they would kind of have the opposite view. But I always felt that. And obviously, an interest in current affairs in the family, but not in ... There was no strong sort of social justice in our family.

DW: Just discussing the different sides of issues?

**COWCHER:** Pretty much, yes. I mean, my Mum [Margaret Cowcher] worked for a State Government Minister and my Dad was a journalist. So there was always like, they knew what was going on through the Don Dunstan<sup>1</sup> times and all that. So it was quite interesting. And they were, kind of very involved in all of that.

DW: And I imagine they'd probably talk a lot over the dinner table about their own events that day, if you've got a father who was ..

**COWCHER:** Yes, the politics and who's... what the ministers were doing. And obviously shared stuff that maybe, you know, was interesting. [laughs]

DW: [adjusts microphone] And do you think some of your values were then formed by those discussions with your parents?

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Labor Party Premier of South Australia between June 1967 and April 1968 and between June 1970 and February 1979. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don\\_Dunstan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Dunstan)

[00:04:49] **COWCHER:** Oh, it was, I think it was, I mean my parents were conservative, you know, pretty conservative, they were conservative voters pretty much to the end. So, umm, it's really the interest, but not any - they didn't really have any passion. I mean, I think they were living, I mean, they had three kids, they had to work hard. You know, they didn't have another life to do the kind of things that we did.

You know, it was very unusual times because my Mum put her kids in childcare back in the [19] '50s and '60s, which not a lot of people did, and went back to work. So, I mean, she would have been doing the housework, doing the working and looking after the kids. My Dad was quite good, too, but quite a different, unusual life. I mean, I was, you know, one of the very few kids that went to after school care as a kid, you know, even in high school.

DW: It is very unusual, because many women in those days would have had to give up their jobs when they got married and had a family.

**COWCHER:** Yes. So she did give up her job, and went back when I think my youngest brother was, I think, two or three. Yeah. And she really wanted to and it was, it was a bit unusual.

DW: The minister she worked for then, that would have been a Liberal minister?

**COWCHER:** Liberal, yes. Liberal in the State Government.

DW: And in 1972 moving to Melbourne, that's the beginning of the Labor federal government, it must have been exciting?

**COWCHER:** Well, it was exciting, I think. Yeah, it was exciting. I wasn't particularly politicized there but that was exciting being in Melbourne, there were sort of protests you could see, that kind of stuff.

DW: The anti-Vietnam moratoriums?

**COWCHER:** Yes, well, there were the moratorium things. And then when I went back to Adelaide after my course, I finished up working as a cook for Sir Mark Oliphant when he was the Governor of South Australia. And by that stage, he had kind of become more of a peace person instead of a person who invented the nuclear bomb. [chuckles] And that was quite interesting. He was a vegetarian and I'm a vegetarian. So they were very lovely people. And that was quite interesting.

And some interesting people came to Government House in South Australia. And I remember when Sir John Kerr<sup>2</sup> came to Parliament House after the dismissal. And it's interesting that some people found out which entrance he was going to go to so they could protest his arrival.

DW: Fantastic.

**COWCHER:** Yes.

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<sup>2</sup> Governor General of Australia between 1974 and 1977 who dismissed the ALP Government on 11 November 1975. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Kerr\\_\(governor-general\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Kerr_(governor-general))

DW: And in terms of those times and working for the government, did you feel - what was your own political thoughts at that stage? Can you feel something developing or were you still ...

**COWCHER:** Look it was the social justice, and it was, yeah. I mean, and, you know, my final year when I was studying in Melbourne was the first year you could get what's called TEAS, the Tertiary Education Allowance. So that did change a lot of things.

You know, I could move into a flat, whereas I was living with my grandmother and then I was living as a nanny for my free rent, too, because I didn't really have an income. So the third year did change things for students. And, you know, you could tell that, that was in the air. That must've been in '74, I think, when it came in.

DW: When you then moved to Perth in '79, you're coming over once again when there was a conservative Liberal government in WA. Did your mum, was your mum working still in ...?

**COWCHER:** My Mum became a legal secretary, so she was more doing that kind of work. My Dad was a journalist.

DW: For what paper was it?

**COWCHER:** He was working for the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Commission].

DW: ABC?

**COWCHER:** Yeah, he was the news editor.

DW: How did you feel coming to Perth with the, I suppose it was the Charlie Court Government then?

**COWCHER:** Look, I was, I was just like excited about something new and I was 20, 21 [years old]. And I was doing a lot of meditation then, and I trained as a teacher of transcendental meditation. So I kind of was a bit more of an inward, ... I wasn't so attached to what was going on, more sort of world peace through inner peace sort of philosophy and traveled overseas to train as a teacher. So I was kind of away quite a bit and then just coming back to my parents' place.

DW: With the meditation and the vegetarianism, was that something you sort of decided yourself or you stayed with a friend who was in that area and you wanted to do what they were doing as well?

**COWCHER:** I think... Well, it was interesting, when I was 20, I realized that there was kind of more to life than the common experience, as they say. And I wanted to kind of find out what that was and wanted to make sure that I went on a trajectory because, you know, when you're young, you can go on a particular trajectory with alcohol and what have you. And, and I decided I wanted to try if there was something, some other way of living, that was...

I mean, I don't know if I articulated it so much then, but I think. And it was a bit of a turning point because, you know, I stopped drinking and just had a different kind of more contemplative and meditative life, but not reclusive. I mean, completely out in the world.

DW: And you've maintained those values?

**COWCHER:** Absolutely. Meditation twice a day since 1975.

DW: Fantastic. Made you very calm. [Trish laughs] Come on, you can ...

[00:10:05] **COWCHER:** That's for others to judge.

DW: In '79, that wouldn't have been very common, was it, to be a vegetarian?

**COWCHER:** No, it wasn't common at all to be a vegetarian. No, it was very unusual.

DW: And not drinking alcohol?

**COWCHER:** Yep. And when I went to live in Kalgoorlie, being a vegetarian person, not drinking and not having a television, I was very in the minority. [chuckles]

DW: And what made you go to Kalgoorlie?

**COWCHER:** Well, I went there to teach home economics and I went there ... In 1980, my brother died and I was only 25 [years old] and it created just a whole upheaval in the whole family. And I just went out there for three years and taught school and lived up there and did something a little bit different.

DW: At what stage did you get interested in the anti-nuclear movement?

**COWCHER:** Well, probably up there a little bit because well, you know, there was a lot of mining going on up there. And there was a couple of people, Andrew Corbyn, and Sharma Peebles. Andrew Corbyn, [was the] brother of Jeremy Corbyn, the UK Labour leader, ex-Labour leader, and they were doing a lot of [anti-nuclear] stuff up there. I mean, you go to a meeting, there'd be three people there and they were umm, pretty ... I was on the edge for Kalgoorlie standards, but they were really, you know, in the margins.

But I mean, I was interested in those issues there. And then when I came back and there was all, all the kind of rush of, you know, the Cold War stuff. And so when I came back in 1983, I got involved with People for Nuclear Disarmament [PND] straight after that. So I think I got very interested in it up in Kalgoorlie.

DW: Did you feel much resistance, or even retaliation, in Kalgoorlie for having those views, whether they're your lifestyle views or your political views?

**COWCHER:** Not really. I mean, I taught at a school. It was a Catholic school, it was fairly conservative. I mean, again, you can just hang out with the [anti-nuclear] people in Kalgoorlie, there aren't that many of them. But, you know, you hang out with people that are reasonably like minded, yeah.

DW: Coming back and joining PND, that would have been when they were still at the Environment Centre in Wellington Street?

**COWCHER:** Yes, I think so, yeah. I joined the Western Suburbs People for Nuclear Disarmament because back in the day PND had a lot of regional groups. Well, local



groups. And so you could go to a Western Suburbs PND meeting and there were 20 people there, 25, like it was amazing.

DW: Had you heard about PND while you were in Kalgoorlie? Is that how you...

**COWCHER:** Well, I think through Andrew and, and Sharma Peebles. Yep. I'd sort of heard about them. I think they were the Goldfields PND group. So when I came back. You know, I don't know how I heard about it, but I finished up going to the Western Suburbs [PND] meetings.

DW: Joining PND, was that in terms of wanting to work on issues around nuclear weapons and as you're saying, the Cold War?

**COWCHER:** Well, I think it is the weapons and the fear of nuclear war ...

DW: Rather than nuclear power, you know, the [WA Government's] proposal to build a nuclear reactor?

**COWCHER:** Look, I think I mean, that had kind of happened before, you know, I'd come back. But I mean, understanding the whole fuel cycle and the WA and the Australian connection as well. But I think it was the weapons and the threat of war and all that kind of stuff.

DW: Being a member of the Western Suburbs PND, was that where you met Jo Vallentine?

**COWCHER:** Well, she wasn't in that group, but that's when I met that group of people, but really it segued very quickly into the 1984 federal election. And that's when, you know, PND, while it's a community organization, the aims of the Nuclear Disarmament Party were exactly the same. And so it was easy for those people to kind of get behind that.

And in a way, it didn't feel like you're in a party political situation. You were just using this election campaign to push your message out. I mean, obviously, that changed as Jo got elected, then we became a political party. But really, it just felt like this is just another excuse to talk about this issue and get a platform.

DW: I interviewed Annabelle and she mentioned her statement at the time of '84 that they'd done too well, to get Jo elected. So you weren't expecting [Jo] to be elected?

[00:14:32] **COWCHER:** No, I don't, I don't think we were, though the buzz was incredible and the ease of engaging people in the issue. Because we've had up to then, we'd had a lot of Palm Sunday rallies. And so there were those bunches of people out there. And I mean, when I look back, I don't know how we got so many people to those rallies because we didn't have the Internet, we didn't have mobile phones, we didn't have any money. But somehow we used to leaflet everybody's letterboxes and they must have read them and come along. So there was a network of people that actually cared about that issue. And so somehow they did absorb that message when we got out, you know, when Jo spoke.

DW: Was it much of a difference to do your work as PND coordinator to then working for Jo in the campaign in terms of your ...?

**COWCHER:** Well, I wasn't the PND coordinator there. I was working as a teacher and I was just a member of the Western Suburbs group.

DW: Right

**COWCHER:** And then Annabelle and the campaign said, why don't you organize an event and invite candidates and get the media? Because we couldn't get media and they'd never done one of those events and I'd never done one of those events. So I said, okay. And so we got, you know, Peter Cook [ALP State Minister] and a few other Liberals, I can't remember who they were, and Jo and somebody else. And then we got some media, someone from *The West* [The West Australian newspaper], and they had a panel. And we did it at the Social Sciences lecture theatre. And it was full.

DW: At UWA [University of Western Australia]?

**COWCHER:** At UWA. And that was the first one of those events- I'd never done it before. Obviously I didn't do it on my own, but I rang up and organized the people and all of that. So it was a pretty exciting event and it really did, ...put that on the agenda and the media were there, so. Because it was the only way to get the message out in those days, so that, I was doing that as a volunteer through the Western Suburbs PND.

And then at the end of '84, Jo got elected. So I worked on the campaign just in my spare time. I wasn't pivotal, but, you know, I was involved in it. Then after the election, I resigned from my job. And then the following year, I became the coordinator of People for Nuclear Disarmament.

DW: 1985?

**COWCHER:** '85, yeah, and organized the '85 rally and all those kind of things.

DW: The '85 Palm Sunday rally?.

**COWCHER:** Yeah. And by then, Jo was in, but she hadn't taken up her seat. She didn't take it up until ...

DW: There was a bit of a lag? Harking back to your organizing of the Palm Sunday rallies and this meeting at the UWA. You're talking about not having the Internet and emails and so on. What were your main organizing mechanisms to get people to attend meetings like that?

**COWCHER:** Well, I mean, we had phone trees and they were pretty effective for people ringing one person who then rang, two people that, you know, and then those two people rang two people and those two ... And by the time, you know, by the end of the day or the next day, a lot of people had been rung.

DW: Had they got the same message though, at the end of it? [both laugh]

**COWCHER:** You know, we had leaflets and we had structures and people didn't, like if you said in four weeks, at two o'clock, there will be this event. It would be on. And these days it's like people text and say, 'Oh, we're not going to do that now.' Well, we're going to do it later. Like, everything was a bit like we would make a plan. We would tell people and everybody would work towards that because they know that that would happen.

I know with organizing [now], it's a bit like, oh, let's do something. You know, on Saturday afternoon, we'll send an email out, but you couldn't do that. Like you'd have to have a mail, a mail going out for a particular event. People actually read their mail, you know, or you might leaflet an area. So those kind of stuff was actually the way that you communicated and people invited friends, and then you had networks like, you know, parents with kids who were interested and the doctors were interested. And, you know, those special interest groups would tell people. And I think there was an urgency at the time that people were willing to take action.

And the other thing is that we did have US warships coming into Perth, into Fremantle. Where you could actually see the [nuclear armed] cruise missiles from the main street of Fremantle, so it was pretty sobering. It was sobering for people that were awake and knew what was going on.

DW: And you were involved with those those protests?

**COWCHER:** Those protests, yeah, that was part of the work of PND. But, you know, the word just got out and everybody came.

DW: The women, I would imagine at the Western Suburbs PND and the supporters there and around Jo, did you find they held similar values in terms of your, you know, your vegetarianism, your meditation, your spiritual approach?

**COWCHER:** Look, I don't think so. I don't think it's something we talked about. The people that you became like more friendly with, maybe. But, you know, I think the values and the, it was the community values that people had, you know, the community values of working together and, you know, for a common goal. And, you know something you still see around you're friends with them. And you've got this very much a shared history, maybe not so much a personal history. But you're always interested in what's going on in their lives.

DW: You mentioned teaching at a Catholic school in Kalgoorlie. Has religion been a big part of your life?

[00:19:49] **COWCHER:** Not at all. No, no, I'm well, I grew up with, ... my grandmother was a Jehovah's Witness, so I was one of the original doorknockers when I was five.

DW: Where you learned your skills?

**COWCHER:** Yeah. When I was five, I was one of the original doorknockers. But no, not really. I used to go to church, my parents didn't, but it was not really an influence. And then once I ... I just went to a Catholic school because I got the job.

DW: At what stage did you join Jo's team?

**COWCHER:** Probably later in 1985. And I was there, probably 'til 1988, about May '88.

DW: How do you find the difference of having worked at PND on a campaign organizing events on a particular focus like the nuclear arms race, warships, to then being in Parliament and focusing on legislation and government actions and so on?

**COWCHER:** Look, when Jo was in, she didn't have the balance of power. And we used the office as an activist thing as well. And the project that I worked on was, *Lobby for*, what was it called? Something about *Lobby for Peace*. I'll have to look it up. And so what we used to do is we lobbied for peace. So it was really just an extension of the lobbying work that was done in the community.

So some people managed parliamentary work, Jo in Parliament and that kind of stuff, and that she, you know she went to Pine Gap<sup>3</sup> and did all the activist stuff. And I managed a thing called *Lobby for Peace*, where we would mail out to everybody every six weeks a lobby leaflet. This is the information about Pine Gap, write to this person, this person, this person. Here is a draft letter. Write a letter or ring their office. And then people would do that. And then I would read them and say, 'How did they go?' And we would encourage this community of lobbying.

[Telephone interruption].

**COWCHER:** Yes, so that was kind of a community engagement thing using the resources of a politician's party.

[interruption to put the dog outside]

DW: In your lobbying campaign at Jo's, you said it went hand in hand with other staff doing the sort of parliamentary legislative work. It sounds like you would have needed a pretty close knit group of people to break up that work and keep Jo advised of what was going on and so on.

**COWCHER:** Look, yes, we did. But, you know, in a way. She was a lone voice. It's not like now where you've got say, the Greens have got a party, and then there's all these independents and then there's all these other randoms and they can do stuff. It was very difficult for Jo to actually have a win. We could put up motions and we could do stuff and everyone would vote against us and then we'd tell the media, ah, Liberal and Labor are voting against us. Who knew?

So it couldn't, it didn't have to be so strategic, she could go on some committee things, but it was using the resources to go and talk. So Jo would go and travel and talk to people and inspire people. So it was a lot of community activism using the resources of that office, and holding ministers to account. And because Jo was so kind and she didn't mind, you know, you know, going into a press conference and questioning the Prime Minister or embarrassing people or standing in front of a warship. So it was community activism ...

DW: In Parliament?

**COWCHER:** In Parliament, and using those resources, which the movement never had.

DW: So that's also probably why she was so attractive in terms of the Nuclear Disarmament Party [NDP] trying to have her as part of that [organisation].

**COWCHER:** Yes.

DW: Did you join the NDP?

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<sup>3</sup> Since 1970, the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap has been jointly operated by Australia and the United States. It's located near Alice Springs in central Australia and is a key base that allows the US to plan to engage in a nuclear war with countries such as Russia and China. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pine\\_Gap](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pine_Gap)

**COWCHER:** Well, when the NDP was here, yes, we did.

DW: But did you actually have to join the party as such?

**COWCHER:** I think I would have been a member then. I'm assuming I was. I can't remember, but I'm assuming I was. I can't remember about the membership.

DW: Did you get involved in the negotiations around the NDP and whether to stay in or not?

**COWCHER:** Well, yes, because there were those bunch of people who were involved in that. But I mean, at the end of the day, Jo kind of had to make the call for herself because she was the one that was exposed to the stuff that was going on.

DW: You said you left Jo's office in 1988. In that three year period, what do you think was the greatest highlight in terms of a new part of your life working in the Parliament?

**COWCHER:** Look, it was incredibly exciting with great opportunities and having resources to do the activism that was important, like the rallies, like the warships stuff, like Jo went Pine Gap, you know, and having a platform to say this stuff. And I mean, I'm not a frontline person. People wanted me to... I never wanted to be a candidate. But being able to work behind the scenes to make it happen for somebody to say this stuff was very important to me personally.

DW: Did you ever go to Canberra with her?

[00:24:59] **COWCHER:** Yes, I went to Canberra. But that was really just to kind of make lobbying connections and to help out. And get research done.

DW: In terms of you leaving Jo's office in '88, what was the reason behind that?

**COWCHER:** I had got pregnant and had a family and I just decided to take a break from that.

DW: You had a daughter, Lucy?

**COWCHER:** Yes. Who I'm now very pleased to say works in a similar role that I do, for Senator Rachel Siewert. So that's pretty exciting because we're kind of colleagues now.

DW: How did your family feel? Because I imagine you would have continued your activist work or interest in politics while you're having a family. How did they feel about your involvement, your intense involvement in those issues?

**COWCHER:** Well, I mean, at home you mean? Well, look, it just carried on. My partner, Robert, was very involved in all of it. Incredibly supportive, and we all went to rallies and did stuff together. And I mean, that's how we met, because when I got arrested on a warship, Robert was the person giving free legal advice. And so that's how we met. So, you know, he was involved in CANE. Back in the day before I was involved. So, you know, look, we carried on as a family doing activism stuff and then the kids went their own ways and did their own things. And Lucy is now, a communications adviser and very involved in the party. So that's kind of quite exciting.

DW: And at what stage did you then go back into employment?

**COWCHER:** Well, I worked for Oxfam in 1994, as a community campaigner. And I also did a degree in politics and women's studies over that time.

DW: Where was that at?

**COWCHER:** At Murdoch [University], and I also got involved in the Sorry Day committee here and organized all the original events with, after being requested by Sir Ron Wilson. He rang me up one day and asked, 'Would I organize the first Sorry Day thing in Perth?' And I just said, 'Yes', because you can't say no to Sir Ron Wilson.

DW: And Sir Ron Wilson is ...

**COWCHER:** Well he did the inquiry into the Stolen Generations. And he was a High Court judge that retired and did that inquiry. And everybody was following that. It was the most... it was harrowing about the Stolen Generation. And so one of the recommendations was that a Sorry Day be held.

And among all that, you know, there were a lot of recommendations<sup>4</sup>. It's probably the only one that's ever really been done, that and a national apology<sup>5</sup>. And so I got involved in that. And again, that was like starting an event from nothing. I wasn't working. I'd left Oxfam by then to finish my degree, from my home without the Internet.

DW: It must have been into there by '94!

**COWCHER:** Not at home.

DW: Right, not at home.

**COWCHER:** Not at home, when was the first Sorry Day<sup>6</sup>? I'm not sure anyway. There was no Internet at home. There was a fax, if you're lucky. And there was no mobile phone. So I did get involved in that. Yes. So that's kind of what I did. And then in, in 2001, I went to work for Giz Watson, who was the member for the North Metropolitan region for the Greens.

DW: In the Western Australian Parliament?

**COWCHER:** Yes. And I was there for seven years, working half-time as her electorate officer. And you know, the Greens had the balance of power for part of that time. And that was a very exciting time in politics because it gave the Party a lot more resources.

DW: Very exciting because I think the Greens had five [Upper House] members?

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<sup>4</sup> The *Bringing Them Home Report* was published in 1997 and contained the findings and recommendations of an inquiry instigated by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 1995. See <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-report-1997>

<sup>5</sup> On 13 February 2008 Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a formal apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples, particularly to the Stolen Generations whose lives had been blighted by past government policies of forced child removal and Indigenous assimilation. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apology\\_to\\_Australia%27s\\_Indigenous\\_peoples](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apology_to_Australia%27s_Indigenous_peoples)

<sup>6</sup> The first National Sorry Day was held on 26 May 1999, to commemorate the anniversary of the *Bringing Them Home Report* and remember the grief, suffering and injustice experienced by the stolen generations. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Sorry\\_Day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Sorry_Day)

**COWCHER:** Five members. Yes. And that was a really an exciting time. And interesting because, people say, well, the Greens getting them into Parliament, and it will all be ruined, and actually it happened and we had shared balance of power, which we've done in the Federal Parliament too, and, you know, life goes on. And just good things happen.

Giz was an exceptionally good member of Parliament in that she really understood legislation. She really understood committees. She really understood how to get things done. Often for staff a little bit goes under the radar because you make a consensus decision-making with people from different views. And it goes forward as an idea. That's a success. But if you start talking about it, then everyone backs off from the other side. So she was very good at that consensus across parties and, and was quite inspiring because she would be a person who would say, 'Look I will talk to anybody, any issue, I will talk about it. I'll talk to people about it because we've got to pull it all together.'

DW: In that term, 2001 to 2005, with five members out of the six regions, did those members operate more as a party? You know like Labor and Liberal. You caucus together... you had a whip... you had a leader?

[00:29:59] **COWCHER:** Look, they did. And it was probably the most cohesive, you know, because, and they had a lot of staff.

DW: How many staff?

**COWCHER:** Well, I mean, when I first went to Giz's we had 1.2 full time equivalent staff, which is not very much. And then the Government changed and allowed people to have two staff members per MP, which is still not very much. But then they did give the Greens an extra staff member for the five of them to help with Parliament. So we were pretty busy with constituent work and preparing for Parliament and supporting our MPs.

But the MPs did work together, and the staff tried to work together as well. Yes. And the portfolios, with five of them, you didn't have to have so many portfolios, even though you could have between five and ten portfolios, which is a lot of work to cover. So you had to really pick, pick your battles because you not only had the portfolios, but you had your regions. So, North Metro, something happened in your region and constituents contacted you. You would have to assist that work as well.

DW: Did Giz have an electoral office in the region?

**COWCHER:** She had an electoral office in Leederville.

DW: In Leederville - and did she work from there?

**COWCHER:** She worked from there. And even now, there was no staff in Parliament House because there was no room for them. So Giz would go off and do her Parliament thing almost unaided, which doesn't happen so much these days. She was very self-sufficient, but there was no office there for staff. And, you know, there was nothing. There was barely a computer there.

DW: So, your staff, or her staff such as yourself, were in Leederville in the office?

**COWCHER:** Yes.

DW: The other four members would have had offices in other –

**COWCHER:** Other regional areas, yes.

DW: How did you then liaise with their staff in terms of working together?

**COWCHER:** Just mainly on the phone. We would have meetings every now and again and help each other and refer people and that kind of stuff.

DW: Along the way, working with the Greens from 2001, when did you join the Greens as a member?

**COWCHER:** Look, I was a member at the original Greens meeting on the 1st of January 1990, of which Lucy [and partner Rob] were also at that meeting. Right now she's just there. Yes, but she was only a baby. So I joined the Greens then and I was quite, quite active in that time. And then I kind of had a bit of a hiatus and left the activism.

I think somebody told me that they saw in the minutes that I resigned from the Greens, but I don't even remember why. And, rather than let it lapse, I resigned, so something must've irritated me. But I cannot remember what that was. Or I'd maybe irritated a lot of people. [chuckles]

DW: And you rejoined in?

**COWCHER:** Well, I rejoined when I went back to Giz.

DW: So 2001?

**COWCHER:** Yeah.

DW: And in that time when you were a member and you were at home with Lucy, did you go to meetings of your local group and –

**COWCHER:** Not so much. But I mean, I worked on the election in 1984, 1987 and in 1993 for Jo's election campaigns.

DW: As a volunteer?

**COWCHER:** As a volunteer. So basically, I went in to help. So in '87, I worked on it. And in 1993. I worked on it as well, and I had two children, yes, had two children then. There must be another one [election campaign] in there?

DW: 1990 was the one Jo won as a Green.

**COWCHER:** 1990. I did that one. ... But yes, so I would go into the office, and for that time work on the election campaign, which is in a way, back in those days is what you did. Like the election came, like you didn't know when it was coming. You got prepared. And then it was that six weeks and everybody drops everything and there's a little bit of planning beforehand and setting up. But really, you know, we came in and I worked on those elections.

DW: What sort of tasks would you do during that six weeks to help with the campaign?



**COWCHER:** Look, there were lots of different tasks. I mean, in one campaign it was getting booth materials out, you know, that kind of stuff. Another time, I think I was doing a lot of work on ringing groups up. And, you know, can you do this? Can you do that? There's this event or whatever, encouraging people to do local events. And then we did a lot of stalls and that kind of stuff.

DW: In 2001, when you rejoined Giz's office, what type of tasks were you doing in your half a day a week?

**COWCHER:** Half-time, no I was two and a half days a week. Look, I was in her electorate office, so I would deal with constituents. I would deal with letter writing, do a little bit of research, manage her diary and that kind of stuff. I mean, it would vary. You know, when Parliament was sitting, you'd help write questions. She had a research officer doing some, a lot of the parliamentary stuff. But like, I would write questions, some of them, particularly if it's a local constituent area matter, I could get the info and write the questions up and submit them, that kind of stuff.

DW: And did you help draft speeches and so on?

[00:34:56] **COWCHER:** Not so much, Giz was pretty self-sufficient with that. And also, she did have a, someone working two days a week and then five days a week on research. And they did a lot of that stuff, but Giz was very self-sufficient.

DW: So your skills, from what I hear, were that you developed at PND and in Jo Vall's office. You used those skills at Oxfam, or Community Aid Abroad as it probably was then, and then during the elections. But in Giz's office, it would have been a different sort of skill set you were using, was it, in terms of dealing with the constituents?

**COWCHER:** Well, dealing with people and trying to figure out, a lot of it is trying to figure out, how can you solve this problem or how can you make it important. And so sometimes someone's story could turn into an issue that you could talk about publicly or even make a change. So it's that balance between trying to solve people's problems, but then using that information to change things more systemically.

Because you know, electorate officers' jobs are very difficult and interesting but we're not social workers, we're not lawyers. We don't... we can't take on everybody's issues because we're not. We don't have the resources. But if we can help a few people that informs us to make systemic changes. Writing to the minister, "did you know this goes on?" Here's an example. Here's a case study. That's, I think, the skill of those jobs.

DW: At the time what was your Region? Were you in the Fremantle Regional Group?

**COWCHER:** Look, I guess so, but I didn't really attend regional meetings. I'm a bit more of an events and election person.

DW: Right.

**COWCHER:** I love a good election. So, I mean, in that time there were some State election campaigns that I worked on. But, basically when the election campaign was on, I just kind of kept the electorate office going and did a little bit of stuff. The party was doing the election campaign, but then I have got involved in subsequently some election

campaigns after when I was working with Giz and from then on. So I think I've done about 11 [election campaigns] in total.

DW: Yeah, that's fantastic. So you were saying you didn't really get involved with going to Reps [Representatives Council meetings], say, with Giz [Watson]?

**COWCHER:** No.

DW: Or any other [Greens] working group?

**COWCHER:** No, not really.

DW: And with Giz, she got re-elected in 2008?

**COWCHER:** Yep.

DW: But you decided to move on?

**COWCHER:** Well, what happened was that in 2007, the federal election came up and I was asked to take leave and work as a campaign manager/co-ordinator for the 2007 election when Scott was the [Senate] candidate. And so I took six weeks leave without pay. And that was in, I think, November, December. That all wrapped and then I went back to Giz's office because Scott didn't take his position 'til the 1st of July in 2008.

And then after I felt like "aahh, federal politics, that's very exciting". And so I told Giz and I applied for a job with Scott. And so I stayed with Giz until the end of June [2008]. And then I went to work for Scott in Federal Parliament.

DW: As a full time job or a part-time job?

**COWCHER:** Four days a week. And so that was very difficult to leave Giz, because you know, she is a great person. But when I left Jo's back in the day, I thought, I am going to come and do this again one day, because I was thinking about having kids, I didn't know what was going to happen, but I decided that this is something I'd like to do. And so I did. And so I went to Scott.

DW: Which is a very different role because he's representing the whole State...

**COWCHER:** Yes.

DW: Whereas Giz is one region. How did that impact on your work and the things you were required to do?

**COWCHER:** Well, we did have more resources, so that was really good. I mean, four staff and we could you know, because I was only four days a week, we could employ more people. And then there was a bigger party room federally. So we had more resources and the leader's office had more staff and we had the Internet and all that stuff there. So things were very, very different. And in a way, I mean, we had WA, but really it was the portfolios we were mainly interested in.

I mean, Scott was very strong on nukes and uranium mining. That was his thing and the IT and the Internet and security and global security and privacy, they were his really big

things. And he'd also had housing at some stage. So they were really the housing stuff and homelessness. That was very much in your face, in your electorates where people are at because -

DW: But some of that he would have known about through your electorate work with Giz.

[00:39:57] **COWCHER:** Yes. And so there were federal policies and state stuff. And then there was finding homeless people houses and that kind of stuff.

DW: I've been interested in looking at the MPs as they've been elected. Did Scott get much help from State MPs who'd been in Parliament about what to expect? Having been a new parliamentarian?

**COWCHER:** Look, I think he would have, he had mentors in Jo Vallentine and Giz, I think he, he used mentoring a lot. And I mean, he was considered quite young then. And I mean, he was very, I mean, I went to Scott's meet the candidates [meeting] when he was standing and I didn't know Scott then, and I came away and said to Giz, 'Who is this person? What's wrong with him? He doesn't talk. He just is very quiet.' I said I felt like I should ring him and say, 'Scott.'

Anyway, something about him got him preselected. It certainly wasn't his public speaking. And I think that was also his charm, that he was very quietly spoken and people had to listen to him to .. And he did command that attention and certainly grew into the job. And being young, I mean, that whole thing about being young and no one's taught you how to do it, you make it up. And so you can be a bit kind of out there. And even when he finished and he was in his 40s, people still thought he was, you know, a young Senator. And I used to laugh and think, wow,

DW: Because Giz faced the same situation to that, 2001, being new to Parliament, obviously there'd been a few other MPs before that. Oh, sorry, '96 she got elected didn't she? Yes. But Jim Scott had been the first MP, Giz comes in with Chrissie. So brand new to Parliament. And you're trying one to work together, but also work out what it is to be an MP.

**COWCHER:** Well, and what, and how do you want to achieve it? Because there's a lot of busy work that you can do. But how do you kind of, not rise above that, but try and figure out how you can make an impact and change while still helping people. It's quite a challenge.

DW: Did you find that the office that Scott put together worked differently to the one Giz put together?

**COWCHER:** Not really, because you still had the roles, you still wanted to do the community outreach. You still had to deal with the constituents. You still had to make Parliament work. But because you're in the Federal Parliament, you really have to pay attention because of the, you know, we're moving into the Internet and more of a 24 hour news cycle. And if you do something really dumb everyone's going to notice.

But there were particular roles. You know, someone had to do the research. And, you know, when you gave a speech, there was more people watching that. And you had to bring people along with you. So in a way, it's the same, there's the same elements of people. And then there's the party stuff. You have to make sure the party is happy with

you. And, you know, the work that ...because you're seen as a leader in the party as well as in the community.

DW: With Scott's nomination, how many people were nominated for that Senate position?

**COWCHER:** Quite a few, maybe eight?

DW: Wow. And you heard them all at meet the nominees?

**COWCHER:** Yes, I did. I can't even remember if I voted for him. I can't remember.

DW: I'm sure there's a record.

**COWCHER:** Well no, it was a secretive thing.

DW: In terms of that work, because the other thing about a Senator is all that travel back and forwards to Canberra. Did you do much of that travel with him?

**COWCHER:** It wasn't my key role. I do that more now, but it wasn't my key role. I was more like the office manager, the chief of staff. Sometimes we had people based in Canberra, so we didn't have to do so much traveling. Scott did a lot of traveling. He was away a lot. And I didn't go so much, because by the time we got into the Senate, it was very difficult to... if you were over here, to think, oh, I'm in the Senate and this is what this means and this is what a notice paper means. And this is what a ... like there are so many levers in there that it's really an art to know what they are.

You can't just kind of go in and be much of help. You're really just an extra pair of hands. Unless that's your role. And then you really know the parliamentary process back to front. And we did have the opportunity to use more levers because they were more people. So it was a bit more of an art.

DW: And you've already had that experience with Jo in the Senate.

**COWCHER:** It was a long time ago, yes.

DW: So things were a bit different?

**COWCHER:** Yeah, and we'd gone from the old Parliament House to the new Parliament House. So that was fun. So, yeah, I didn't have such a parliamentary role.

DW: And in terms of 2008 and Scott coming in, that's the same time when the GFC hit, there would have been all sorts of policy issues he maybe had to think about. Was there anything there, you noticed, that was a bit different. Or was it just the pressure of Greens having to come up with ...

[00:44:48] **COWCHER:** Look, I think, I think there was all of that going on, but we did stick fairly, not strictly, to our portfolios. So it was easy for him to talk about, you know, defence and peace and nonviolence and nuclear, you know, and the waste of money and all of that in a portfolio, in that context, you know. So we talked about those things through the lens of our portfolio. And, you know, you could save the world's problem by not spending so much time, money on armaments and war. It's not a complicated message, but ...

DW: No one picks it up though Trish?

**COWCHER:** It's been going on for, you know, it was ever thus.

DW: And as a Senator, did Scott travel within WA much to other regions?

**COWCHER:** He did. Between him and Rachel, they did, you know, do things taking turns you up North and what have you. But a lot of it was him going to speaking things, national speaking tours and that kind of stuff. You know, round an election campaign, we would go and talk to people and stuff like that.

DW: So by 2008, obviously, the media had a Greens WA Senator for quite a number of years?

**COWCHER:** Yes.

DW: Did you see that they responded differently to Scott as a Senator then than you did with Jo back in ... ?

**COWCHER:** Very much so. But, in WA media for the Greens is never easy, you know. I mean, in the 2007 campaign, I remember that *The West* didn't cover us at all until about a week before [the election] and someone rang up and said, "you know, we're standing." And they put in a story.

So, we would do all these events, these media events. We'd do stunts. We'd put out press releases, and in WA you could not get covered. You know, you might be able to get on the ABC. And if you got on any of the others, or *The West*, it would be in criticism. So, but nationally, there was much more interest in the Greens and in Scott. And then once we could make our own media through the Internet and had more of a digital-first focus, it was much easier to reach our people that are sympathetic because whether *The West* covers us or not, as we know, particularly now, hardly anyone reads *The West*. More people read *The Post* on Facebook than read *The West*.

DW: And Scott had a predilection for doing good social media.

**COWCHER:** Social media was his thing. And digital-first and talking to the people that are persuadable, that are interested and engaged.

DW: So you had to learn some new skills in that?

**COWCHER:** I did, yes, it was a challenge.

DW: No more telephone tree.

**COWCHER:** Yes, it was a challenge. But, you know, it is interesting because I feel like we have done full circle a lot in terms of the Internet. People started getting emails. It was all very exciting. And then people, I think, stopped reading their emails. And then we had to, who knew, ring them up, talk to people and we did, we started to do a lot more talking to people.

And that's when we started doing doorknocking in the Greens, and campaigning, and having smaller meetings and kitchen table meetings, and I think that's been really

interesting because I think in the way the world's turned and, not that we don't do digital stuff because it is a great - we can broadcast our own message. But the 'one on one' stuff with doorknocking, you know, when you look at the stats around election time, if you doorknock in an area, your vote will go up because people will talk to you.

Now, with Covid-19, we've kind of gone now back to the Internet. But in a different way, through Zooming and meetings and breakout groups and stuff. So it's quite been quite interesting, that whole communication thing. But I personally think that we use the Internet and then kind of people and emails, and then people stop responding. And now we're forced to be more communicative with people and talk to them.

DW: And you're with Scott up until around his inability to stand as Senator?

**COWCHER:** Yes, so he resigned on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July, 2017. And his office stayed open for a few months after that until the High Court ...

DW: Right

**COWCHER:** ...did its thing. Even though he'd resigned, the High Court had to make a decision because his office still stayed open. And we were an office without a Senator, actually.

DW: But still dealing with electoral matters?

**COWCHER:** Still dealing with the electoral matters and referring them on. And we had to do portfolio stuff for other MPs who'd taken up his portfolios.

DW: And then after that?

**COWCHER:** After that, a while after that, when Jordon Steele-John got preselected by the Party to take over that casual Senate vacancy, I moved to Jordon Steele-John's office as his chief of staff. And I'm there, still.

DW: Fantastic.

**COWCHER:** Yeah.

DW: Have you noticed much difference in terms of, obviously they're very different personalities, Jo, Scott, Jordon? Has that affected the environment you're working in, in their office, their approach and their personalities?

[00:49:52] **COWCHER:** Look, I think the personalities are different. And I think, I mean, I think personally, I have worked for, and I'm not just saying this, but four of the most outstanding members of Parliament because of their incredible vision and integrity and the way to connect with people, and their authenticity.

So, obviously moving from, you know, Jo, those people and then moving to Jordon, who was 22 or 23 [years old] at the time, a very young Senator who had been a student, never had a paid job. He became a Senator, like incredibly different and interesting. And in the beginning, you know, we set up a structure that would support that. And I mean, it doesn't matter who you work for, the elements of an electorate office are the same. You know, you

need the constituents, you need to be able to talk to ministers' offices, you need to be able to do Parliament.

You need to grow your people. You need to solve problems. All of those things stay the same. Different portfolio, different lens. And, obviously, somebody who is very young has an incredible vitality and unguarded and uncooked, but not in a bad way. Like, nobody told me you can't do this. And youth, they can do stuff. And it's, it's inspiring.

As somebody older can think, "Oh, okay, it didn't work before, but let's do it and see what happens." And the reception has been very different too, as somebody everyone was watching and someone with the lived experience of disability. It's been very difficult for the media to be mean.

DW: Okay.

**COWCHER:** I mean, they can be mean about some things, but it's been quite difficult for them to be mean. I mean, about him or ... Yeah, and that's why he achieved a lot of stuff, you know, with the Royal Commission into Abuse and Neglect of Disabled People. Like, he's telling the stories from lived experience. It was very difficult for people to say, 'You don't know what you're talking about. You know, you're just calling for another royal commission.'

And then when he did all that lobbying and took a bunch of disabled people to Parliament and then went into the House of Reps. And that kind of stuff, like I think if another member of Parliament or Senator did that, you know, about nuclear issues or about homelessness or aged care, all of those things ...if Rachel [Siewert] had gone and done that about aged care, it's not quite the same.

So he did get that honeymoon and that latitude. And now I think he's got respect because he does have that very good experience. So that's been exciting. It's been like, let's do something new and different.

DW: You talked about going back to the future with phone banking, doorknocking. It's a little bit different, isn't it? Because back in the '80s, you were talking to people, doorknocking, phoning people about the possibility of nuclear war, the end of the planet?

**COWCHER:** Yeah,

DW: Whereas now it's more, I suppose, about in terms of ensuring that you get somebody elected to Parliament, the Greens policies get raised in Parliament. How do you feel about the difference between the movement that you work for, and now a political party?

**COWCHER:** You see the message is just as terrible because it's climate change. And whether you talk about climate change through the lens of, you know, young people's future being impacted. I mean, to me, it's the same. I will talk about the end of the world with nuclear, which is still there. The same. But now it's the climate thing.

So when we do a lot of doorknocking, while you might be talking about some of the more local issues. But if someone says, 'I'm really worried about my kids and getting a job', it's like, we are too. And we want renewables. You know, we want to be, have action on climate change and give our kids a future or I'm worried about housing or I can't pay my heating bills. We want a future - so I see them.

I mean, I'm not doorknocking or talking, doing this to get a Green Senate person elected. I'm doing it to change public policy. And when we talk about people around election time, the message is to vote. But the work we do in between is building that movement so people care and understand about climate change. And I see them as being as urgent now as the nuclear stuff that we worked on in the past was. And, you know, the Doomsday Clock is very close [to midnight].<sup>7</sup>

DW: And there's still a lot of nuclear weapons.

**COWCHER:** There are a lot of nuclear weapons and a lot of waste and a lot of, yeah, devastation in communities around the world. So. It's just kind of the same story. I mean, you know, talking 30 years ago, people's future, young people's future was impacted by weapons and war and all that kind of stuff and famine and all of that.

DW: Have you maintained your resistance to get involved in administrative roles in the party?

**COWCHER:** Look, I am involved in more administrative roles. And so I was the co-convenor ... I've been involved in quite a lot of elections, 11 elections. And I became the co-convenor of the Election Campaign Committee. In 2013 I did that and I worked on, I think, the state election in 2013. The federal election in 2013, Scott's by-election in 2014, the 2016 election. There was also a Canning by-election in 2015. And another by-election in 2018 and a state election in 2017.

So I was the co-convenor of the Election Campaign Committee for about five years until people realized that we probably should not have one person doing the same job. And so now it is rotated a bit more. I was the election campaign, co-convenor and in my roles I've done, tried to do a lot of mentoring and getting people in. For example, Tim Clifford was a co-convenor with me and now is a member of Parliament and other people have done that. So I had that role. I am now on the Admin Work ... Administration Working Group for the party, and I'm also the convenor of the Candidate Assessment team. So I have been doing those jobs.

I was made a life member of the Greens a couple of years ago. And I think when they do that to someone, they put a terrible responsibility because you feel like you have to do these things more. I mean, I was obviously going to do that work. So that kind of administrative stuff, I mean, sometimes I feel I want to, Admin Working Group arguing about a particular policy or discussing, I think I just want to save the world, you know, one policy at a time.

So I try to keep that balance between the administration, which I know is really important to grow the movement, and talking to people and doing that stuff. And I see them both important and hand in hand. But I also see my role as mentoring younger people. And I do that for my staff. I mean, I'm by 30 years the oldest of the staff in Jordon's office. And I will be retiring at some stage. But in the meantime, I'm certainly mentoring the staff to take on roles and training them up and, and doing that with young people, because I feel like that's a really important role. And then I think, well, I don't mind taking on those administrative roles more because I'm not a frontline person anyway. I'm do not think, well, I can then go and give a lecture or go on council or whatever. It's more like I want to create a very strong

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<sup>7</sup> Currently 100 seconds to midnight. See <https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/current-time/>.



firm foundation so you people can go out and do that amazing stuff and you will have somebody behind you.

DW: One of the core values of the Greens since 1990 has been decision making by consensus.

**COWCHER:** Yep.

DW: Which was probably something I think that the anti-nuclear movement did as well.

**COWCHER:** Yes.

DW: How have you found that in terms of being in a Senator's office and having to make decisions? Are you comfortable still with -

[00:58:28] **COWCHER:** Look, probably one of the reasons that I left the Greens in the middle bit was because I think that consensus decision making can be very liberating or it can be used for ill. So, you might have an illusion that, oh, we've got consensus decision making and you've got a group of three people in a shared household making a decision, taking it to Reps and saying this group thinks this when you know it's just two or three people.

And so I think in the past while I think it is the only way forward, if you don't use it properly it can be manipulated. Whereas now I think the party uses it, everyone's been trained up. We don't have small regional groups of three people living in a shared house, making a decision and then putting it forward as if they had more people behind them. So I totally support how we operate. Sometimes I don't have the patience for it, but I don't have to go to those meetings if I don't want to.

In a Senator's office, it's a bit different because you have to make collective decisions, but at the end of the day, it's your Senator who is taking responsibility and the buck stops with them in terms of their accountability to the government, to the money they spend, how they travel- all that kind of stuff. So they have to make a decision with the best advice. And you have to respect that. You're only an adviser. You give your advice, they make the decision. So consensus decision making works in terms of discussing it.

But if push comes to shove, that happens, and I think you have to respect that. And the party has to respect that as well in that they're members of the party. But at some times, if they're in Parliament, or the party thinks they should do something, but it's not legal - or not illegal - but it's not possible, if there's a little bit of a tension, and you've got the Greens WA, you've got the Australian Greens, we've got our Senators who are members of the Greens WA, but they're Australian Greens Senators in an Australian Greens party room made up of people from different member bodies who have different rules and different levels of who they're answerable to. So I think we make a very good job of a very complicated system of governance and consensus decision making.

DW: When you joined the Greens back in 1990, January 1990, the Constitution then included the ECC, the campaign committee, the Reps, consensus, the four pillars and so on, and it remains today. So it's been quite a stable structure over 30 years.

**COWCHER:** Mmmm, it is. And I think you can thank a lot of people that stuck with us. Giz [Watson] is someone that's very committed and other people in that process. And I think

we have stuck to our principles really well. And if at any time, it's kind of gone a bit 'skew whiff', it's recalibrated incredibly well. And the numbers and the members have gone up and down, and up and down. But I think we've always got the membership.

There's so many supporters that wish the Greens well and will come and do election campaigns. And I think a lot of the stuff we're doing now is about movement growing, like we want people to become members. I'm a member of other organizations but I don't go to their meetings. I don't participate very much. I send them some money. I read their emails and I might go to a dinner or something. And some people in the Greens are like that. They pay their money, they love it. They'll come and hand out how to votes.

But we have got enough people, core people, that like to do the business of running the party. But as long as we have those supporters and the people that share our values and come out for us and will speak up for us and talk to their friends- that's its success. I don't think we need 10,000 members in the Greens, we need tens of thousands of people supporting our values and getting us elected and understanding that we don't want to get elected for the sake of getting elected. That doesn't interest me.

It's for the difference we make and we can only make the difference if we get elected and there's a lot of people behind us. Because you could get elected and if they're not there, you don't get the public. Like Jordon [Steele-John] wouldn't have got the Royal Commission just by being a Senator, a Greens Senator. It was only that he was there and there were so many people behind him and that's a model that I think that the Greens are very good at.

DW: In terms of being part of the Australian Greens, did you have any involvement in the discussions about Greens WA joining the Australian Greens?

**COWCHER:** Look, I was around on the periphery for some of those, yes for some of those discussions. And I know that we were reluctant to do it because WA is different, as we know. I think it's really good because it was a very considered thing that we did, and I think that as that terrible saying, that we do punch above our weight, we've had more Senators, our staff, people from the Greens WA and Greens members, staffers have gone over east a lot to help. We're considered quite highly in [Greens] movement because of the way we've operated, the consensus decision making- we've got a long history. Not that Tasmania doesn't as well. But I think we did consider, we consider stuff and work through those things. So, yes, we were a bit slow to join. And it's not without its issues, but I think it's kind of interesting.

DW: Did you support that?

**COWCHER:** Look, I think I probably did yes, I think I did. Yes, I would have supported because I knew that we have to be - particularly from WA, so isolated, you have to be part of the bigger thing. But we still have a lot of autonomy.

DW: In your movement history, then joining the Greens party, you've seen a lot of changes, especially in terms of the number of MPs, up and down - sometimes none. Now we've got six.

**COWCHER:** Yes...

DW: In 2020, what do you think the future holds for Greens WA, in terms of growing the party and also parliamentary representation?

[01:05:07] **COWCHER:** Look, I think we never take any election for granted. And it is so nerve-racking because the influences that come from the outside. Like in the last election and then Scott Morrison won and we're thinking, we thought we had communicated climate change and people cared about that and the climate strike and all of that, and you're thinking, so how did that happen?

When you're thinking a particular thing and I don't think it's let's blame ourselves. So the external is so unknown, but we are incredibly steady and like we've gone from, you know, zero to five to 10 to back. It doesn't stop us. You have an election, you don't do well, people get about a week off. It's like, I guess you can sulk for a week, and then you've got to get back to it. And so after the last election, I was like okay, what are we going to do? We can't give up. We can't give up on climate change in the next generation. So how are we going to reinvent ourselves? And I think the Greens will always, always do that.

And the problem is the forces that are against us, through the media, through the mainstream media, and money in politics. If you got money out of politics, if mining companies and banks and all those other people stop giving money to the major parties, then we would have a completely different scenario. And if that happened, I think, we'd be ruling the world. [chuckles] Until that happens, I think we will go up and down and continue going up. But I don't think we will ever, ever go away. And I think the time has shown that when we're down and we hadn't didn't have a Senator, we went down to two MPs, and then we've gone up.

And that's what I encourage young people to do. It's like this is your life's work. There's no point thinking, oh, at the next elections, next year. And then I'll go it's your life's work. And it's not just the election, it's all of the things. And they also encourage people to have a life so that you don't give up everything and then look back after 20 years and nobody cares. It's like you have a life, you have kids or whatever. You have your holidays, you have your family. You have your relationships. You don't forget your parents. And you do this work. And then you can do it for 20 or 30 years because it's a lifetime work, because the forces of darkness are not going to go away. And we know that because they're still making weapons, and we have Trump and we have all those other bad things.

DW: You've had an extraordinary commitment really, to the Greens in the last 30 years. Is there any personal achievement over that time that you're really proud of?

**COWCHER:** Look, I guess I think I'm proud of that I've kept it going. That it's a long-term thing, from and through Oxfam and all the other [groups]. I'm very committed to the work of Oxfam and to poverty activities on the ground because I think it's good to have that balance between this is a policy in Parliament, but then there are actually people on the ground that you can change, help change policies to assist.

So I'm kind of proud of doing both of those things. I think, I guess I feel like I've kept my commitment and my integrity. And I think passing it on to other people, the next generation and seeing them blossom, seeing my daughter work in that space is really a good thing.

You know, every time you have an election, and you win you're really proud. But even if you lose, you're really proud because you did a good job. I mean, I loved working for Scott winning the by-election. That was good after that kind of funny nonsense when we actually

lost the 2013 election. I mean we forget that. And the by-election, we won. But then by 2016 [stet], it was like we actually lost the last general election. Let's not pretend, and we worked very hard on that 2013 [stet] election, it was devastating and it was great to get Scott back.

Losing Scott again was a devastating, devastating, thing. And while I wasn't involved in the first time he filled out his election, his nomination, forms, I was involved in the others. So I was part of that losing Scott. So, interesting times. And they still let me work on the CAG [Candidate Assessment Group], yes they still let me help people. So I wasn't the only one. I mean, there was a bunch of people that were kind of very naive. But I mean, I think if we look back, we would find that most people have been in Parliament were not eligible either, in the past.

DW: Right. And all the procedures now are very strict.

[01:10:08] **COWCHER**: Very strict, very strict.

DW: Following the rules.

**COWCHER**: Very strict. Yes. That was a very hard lesson for everybody. Very hard lesson.

DW: We've covered a lot of ground over your 30 years. Is there anything I haven't asked you about, or you'd like to add in terms of those 30 years working for MPs?

**COWCHER**: Look, I think it's a privilege, it's a total privilege to be in paid work of doing what you feel passionate about. It's a total privilege. And incredibly lucky. And being able to do it through Covid-19 and through the ebbs and flows of the party. It's a privilege. And the volunteer roles as well. And I know that I will continue doing those when I finish in my paid role. But I mean, I don't think I could have been luckier, to be able to do all of the things I've done, including having two children [Lucy and Nicholas] and a relationship [with my supportive and committed partner Robert] and all of the things and doing this work?

I mean, I think being able to work and follow your passion is what makes life meaningful. And I have been lucky to be able to do that. So that's all I can say.

DW: And we've been very lucky to have you for the last 30 years. Thank you very much.

**COWCHER**: Thank you.

**END OF TRANSCRIPT**