Oral Histories: Molly Byrne

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CLEM MACINTYRE: Molly Byrne, member for Barossa and for Tea Tree Gully and for Todd, from 1965 to 1979, thank you so much for coming in and agreeing to talk to us today. We are really keen to hear about your time in the South Australian parliament and your life before and afterwards.

So I'm going to start by just asking you to tell me a bit about your childhood, where you were born, a bit about your family and early influences on your life.

MOLLY BYRNE: I was born at Hahndorf, South Australia, which was then called Ambleside, and I was born in 1928. My parents were Raymond John McGavisk and Veronica Jessie McGavisk, nee Lapidge. We lived on the River Road, Mylor, and were in a house owned by my mother's family. My great grandparents came from the south of England, and my great grandfather set up business on Hyde Park Road, Hyde Park. They had a shop there and a two-storey house, which I think is still there, and they also had a shop on Unley Road. Also, they owned properties and they let them. He was on the Unley council. My great grandmother, she had a shop on the ground floor of the house that they had and later they bought property at Mylor. It was a lovely property, actually. She opened the first shop at Mylor, and last time I was there that shop was still there.

I would also like to say that she had, of course, a large family and two of her daughters were nurses and they went to the First World War. One went to France and the other one went to India, because some of the wounded were being sent there from the Middle East.

My grandfather, he died when my mother was two. There were five children in the family. My grandmother, my maternal grandmother, before she married she was a dressmaker and her two sisters and her had a business in Angas Street, Adelaide. She was left a property which was a large orchard and they had quite a lot of land, as I said before.

Also, I would like to say that my mother never went to work for paid work. One of her sisters became a school teacher, so did one of her brothers. The other two stayed on the farms. One farmed the orchard and the other one had a vegetable garden at Onkaparinga River.

CLEM MACINTYRE: It sound like women are very important in that family history, strong women by the sound of it in the family.

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes. I would say that you can see that most of the women on the Lapidge side were very courageous. And they worked very hard. When my grandmother was widowed, as I said, she had this property and I was told that she had some of the apples picked and she drove through the Hills, in a wagon, and tried to sell some of the apples at the East End Market. They, of course, mainly lived off the land, and she told me the only way she managed was because two of her brothers were butchers and once a week they sent a bag of meat and goods on a wagon that came through the Hills delivering goods.

Two of my mother's brothers went to war. One went to the First World War. He got wounded, but he later became a schoolteacher. The other brother later went to the Second World War when they wanted older people. He became a prisoner in Japanese hands, but he survived. He said that he thought he survived because he came off a farm and he was used to hard work.

CLEM MACINTYRE: It sounds like a tough early life.

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes.

CLEM MACINTYRE: So, a pretty tough life making a living in the countryside, just outside Adelaide at that time.

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Was religion important in the family, church and so on?

MOLLY BYRNE: They were Church of England and I was christened as such.

CLEM MACINTYRE: But not strong churchgoers?

MOLLY BYRNE: No.

CLEM MACINTYRE: What about politics? Were they interested in local or state politics, your family?

MOLLY BYRNE: No. Well, I might have said that my great-grandfather was on the Unley council, but I think they would be Liberal Country League—LCL.

CLEM MACINTYRE: I was going to say, did you know how your parents voted? Would you have known how your parents voted at elections and so on?

MOLLY BYRNE: No.

CLEM MACINTYRE: But you suspect LCL?

MOLLY BYRNE: No, I never thought about it. I do remember my father saying to me that there was something wrong with the system where some people had so much and others so little—words that I remember to this day. Also, one election day I witnessed my father refusing an LCL how-to-vote card at the local polling booth. The LCL person was his brother-in-law, my mother's brother! There was no-one giving out how-to-vote cards for other parties.

CLEM MACINTYRE: We are told your father started the ALP sub-branch in Tea Tree Gully many years later.

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes, but I believe he wasn't as interested in party politics when I was a child.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Not in your youth?

MOLLY BYRNE: Not that I recall. My father's family lived at Bradbury, which is a town near Mylor. My great-grandfather migrated from Ireland via the Isle of Man, but his wife came from Scotland. When he came here, he was a jailer at the Adelaide Gaol. They also had a large family. My great-grandfather was a Catholic. One of my great-grandfather's male siblings was in the army and fought in the Boer War, another was a coach builder, and the others worked in the Broken Hill mines. I don't know what the others did, including the women.

My father's family could be described as working class and my mother's family as upper middle class.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Tell me a bit about your education. What primary and secondary education did you have?

MOLLY BYRNE: I first of all went to Mylor Primary School, then my father got a job at Berri. I didn't mention that he left school at 14. He was brought up by a maiden aunt and two bachelor uncles. When he turned 14, the schoolteacher of Scott Creek school said he was a good scholar and he should go on, but they couldn't keep him. He had to leave and go to work. We went to Berri, and I went to Berri Primary School. Then we came back, and I went to Mylor Primary School. Then I went to Scott Creek Primary School. It meant that I don't think I got as good of an education as I could have. Of course, now people would probably go to an area school to get a better education.

Later, I went to Adelaide Girls High School. To do that, I had to get up at quarter to six, leave home at quarter to seven, ride a bike to the Heathfield railway station then catch the train down to Adelaide. We were always late. There were two of us who went to Adelaide High School. Most of the students who came down on the train went to Unley High School and they got out at Mitcham. The reason I went to Adelaide High School is that my aunty and uncle had their education at Adelaide High School. At night, I would have to catch the train back and get out at 5 o'clock and then it would be dark and often it would rain and then I would get home about six and then do homework. I had to do that for two years and then we shifted to the city and my father was in the Army then.

For employment, I first of all worked at two private enterprises and I joined the clerks' union straightaway and then I went to work for two trade unions. I went to work for the ironworkers' union and the miscellaneous workers' union.

CLEM MACINTYRE: How old were you when you left school?

MOLLY BYRNE: I was there three years and I was 16 when I finished.

CLEM MACINTYRE: And then into work quickly and obviously a strong connection with the trade union movement, so tell me a bit about that early sense of political purpose. You are sympathetic to trade unions, obviously. You are thinking about workers' rights in relation to employment and so on. Where do you think the motivation for that came from?

MOLLY BYRNE: I think it was an accident because I joined the clerks' union and then I decided when I was working that—I gave notice—I did not want to stay there and the person who was the shop steward there said there was this job at the Trades Hall in the ironworkers' union and that is how it came about and then I became the shop steward for the clerks' union at the Trades Hall.

Also I worked for two Labor senators. I was asked to go to work for Senator Ryan and then Senator Ridley, so I had both an industrial and a political background. When we shifted to Adelaide, I joined the ALP at the age of 20, mainly because of their connection to the trade union movement, and I might say that I am a life member of the clerks' union because their policy was mainly to do with social justice and as a child growing up in the Depression I never saw much of that.

Where I lived at Mylor, we would quite frequently see men with knapsacks on their back, walking through the Hills looking for employment, but of course there was not any. My uncle, as I said earlier, had a market garden, a vegetable garden, near the Onkaparinga. He had a big shed there and they often used to sleep in his shed and take in vegetables. Other people would do the same. They would give them fruit or something.

CLEM MACINTYRE: I think lots of people in South Australia would have been seeing the same things, but not everyone was motivated to become active in politics as a result of that. Was there something—

MOLLY BYRNE: Also, I saw there was Crown land up there and lots of people couldn't pay a mortgage or rent in the city and they built shacks up on that land and lots of those children went to school with me at Mylor. It is interesting that we went back to school years later and most of them did well, probably because they had a bad start and they wanted to do better in the future.

I have not said a great deal about the Depression, but my family was fortunate because my mother's family had quite a lot of land and we lived in one of their houses, so we didn't have to pay rent. You got everything off the land, like wood, vegetables and fruit.

Of course, you didn't just go to a shop like a takeaway, you mainly made your own jams and did your own cooking. We picked mushrooms in season and blackberries in season. Of course, we kept fowls for eggs and made our own butter, so I am used to making a dough or making butter. I grew up in that era. Also, what we did do is my father would trap a lot of rabbits and that was mainly our meat, so since that time I have never eaten a rabbit.

CLEM MACINTYRE: It sounds like a very high level of self-sufficiency, looking after yourself and taking responsibility for things. You were a young woman in Adelaide working in a trade union. Were there other community organisations or activities you were involved in at that time? Like outside of work and membership of the Labor Party, were there other community activities?

MOLLY BYRNE: I played softball and had leadership positions in the club and the South Australian Softball Association. I was president of the Seacliff Mothers' and Babies' Health Association and later became president of the Tea Tree Gully branch of the association.

I studied singing at the Adelaide Conservatorium and took adult education classes in law, architecture, interior decoration, gardening and music appreciation.

As to the Labor Party, my father became secretary of the Colonel Light Gardens sub-branch and I was elected to state council and conventions. Later on I married and I shifted to Seacliff Park, near where I am living now actually, and I became the secretary of the Dover Gardens sub-branch there.

I did the usual things that most people do: gave out leaflets, put them in letterboxes and stood on polling booths. I did go out in the country at times when we were trying to win some of those country seats.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Do you remember when you were first on the state council of the ALP? How old were you then?

MOLLY BYRNE: I don't know.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Before being elected into the parliament and so on?

MOLLY BYRNE: I was from Colonel Light Gardens sub-branch, but I don't know how old I was, probably 23 or 24, something like that.

CLEM MACINTYRE: So pretty young.

MOLLY BYRNE: I found that at the sub-branches I was usually the only woman that was there. I did say I got married, didn't I?

CLEM MACINTYRE: You did.

MOLLY BYRNE: And I had a daughter. What happened then was that I was approached by the secretary of the party to nominate for the seat of Barossa. I haven't mentioned that in the meantime my father had shifted to Tea Tree Gully and he formed the sub-branch there. The only sub-branch in the seat of Barossa was at Williamstown. I would like to say all the places that were in Barossa. Do you want me to read it out?

CLEM MACINTYRE: This is a list of places in the Barossa?

MOLLY BYRNE: I wanted to say how big it was. The Barossa electorate consisted of the outer suburban section, which contains the suburbs of Highbury, Hope Valley, Dernancourt, Holden Hill, Modbury, Clovercrest, Valley View, Fairview Park and Tea Tree Gully.

The electorate also contained the country towns of Houghton, Paracombe, Inglewood, Hermitage, Chain of Ponds, Kersbrook, Mount Torrens, Birdwood, Forreston, Williamstown, Lyndoch, Rowland Flat, Greenock, Marananga, Seppeltsfield, Ebenezer, Freeling, Fords, Daveyston, She-Oak Log, Roseworthy, Wasleys, Loos, part of Gawler—it really went around Gawler, around the Gawler River part—Sandy Creek, Rosedale, Sampson Flat, Yatala Vale and Golden Grove. It was huge.

CLEM MACINTYRE: A big and diverse electorate with a mixture of some suburbs coming out of the northern part of Adelaide with rural areas.

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes. What happened at the suburban end is that was originally vineyards and they had been cleared and spec houses were being built there. Lots of people who were moving in I think were predominantly Labor supporters. On Sundays, I went with my father, mainly, down to Holden Hill and other places and we put people on the electoral roll because they weren't putting themselves on the roll. We also put them on the Legislative Council roll. Mind you, most of them didn't even know what the Legislative Council was. That was if they were eligible, because of course there was a restricted franchise. I think that helped me when the election came around, putting those people on the roll.

CLEM MACINTYRE: And the electorate was changing. If we go back and look at the elections before you, the ALP didn't run a candidate in the previous two elections.

MOLLY BYRNE: I believe that a communist ran.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Yes, a communist in 1962, but the LCL member was elected unopposed in the previous election, so it was not an area that Labor was looking at.

MOLLY BYRNE: I haven't mentioned that the sitting member was Mr Condor Laucke, who owned a flour mill at Greenock. He was the Government Whip and he was well respected.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Yes, an important figure in the area and had been the member since about the mid-fifties, I think. Had many women been preselected for seats before you? Do you think you were the first woman who was preselected by Labor?

MOLLY BYRNE: I have something I want to mention. Although women got the vote in 1894 in South Australia, that was the right to vote and stand for parliament. It wasn't until 1959 that two women got elected: Joyce Steele for Burnside and Jessie Cooper for the Legislative Council. As I said, they got elected in 1959 and they were LCL ladies. I got to know them very well and we became good friends.

I wasn't the first woman who was endorsed to stand for the Labor Party; the first woman was in 1938. Her name was Marie Elizabeth Skitch and she stood for the seat of Thebarton. I don't know whether this is correct—it should have been a safe Labor seat—but I heard, whether it was true or not, that one man in our party stood against her and got her defeated. In 1956 Patience Howard stood for Burnside. In 1959, Doreen Pattison stood for Torrens. For the Legislative Council, in 1962 Margaret

Scott stood. Then, of course, in 1975 Judith Anne Levy then got elected, but that was 10 years after I was elected.

CLEM MACINTYRE: So you were one of the earliest women preselected for Labor for a seat that is not a safe Labor seat but a seat that has changing demographics and so on. Were you daunted by that task? Did you feel honoured? Did you feel nervous? Tell us.

MOLLY BYRNE: When I was asked to stand, I might say I didn't have any ambitions at all to be an MP. I didn't think I was good enough, for a start, but I did think I would like to go on the state executive because I thought I could make a contribution there. As it was, I did get elected to the state executive, but that was after I got elected to parliament, and I was on that for about 10 years.

With the preselection, as I said, I had no political ambitions. I said to the party secretary I would go and see Clyde Cameron, who was the federal member for Hindmarsh. I was very friendly with him and his secretary, who later became his wife. The reason I got to know them was because when I worked for the senators their office was next to mine. At one stage I helped Clyde revise the party rules.

Anyway, I went to see him. I have a feeling that he was tipped off I was coming before I went around there. I told him why I was there and I said, 'What about my husband?' He said, 'No, we want you to do it, Molly.' I said, 'What about my father?' He said, 'No, we want you to do it, Molly.' I can remember Doris was sitting there and she said, 'You can make a speech at the drop of a hat, Molly,' but I didn't think so.

So I went home. As I said, my parents were then living at Tea Tree Gully. They didn't have a phone on but we did, so I wrote my father a letter and told him what had happened. He rang me back. Oh, did he tell me off! He said, 'Of course you will do it! You don't get offered much in this world, Molly. This is a good opportunity. You probably won't win, but if you put up a good campaign, they might endorse you for something else later.' So I went in to see the state secretary and I said I would do it.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Well done. Were there other people putting up for preselection? Was there a ballot to decide who the candidate would be?

MOLLY BYRNE: In the preselection, there were three men nominated, but they weren't prominent people in the party. They were three people who my father had joined up in the sub-branch at Tea Tree Gully. One wasn't eligible to stand because he didn't have the two years' membership that was required. Another one, he never turned up at all, when you had to address the convention. It's interesting that later he became a Green. The other one did turn up, but, of course, I won the preselection.

The first thing I had to do was sell our house at Seacliff, and then we moved to live with my parents while I had a house built at Ridgehaven. After that, of course, I had started my campaign.

CLEM MACINTYRE: You said it was a two-year campaign. You were campaigning over two years?

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes, it was about two years before the election. I would like to mention that I had Don Dunstan as my campaign director. Also, at the time we hoped to win the seat at Glenelg. Hugh Hudson, who was a senior lecturer at Adelaide university, was endorsed to win the seat of Glenelg. He had Cyril Hutchens appointed as his campaign director. He was a state member, and he was credited with being one of our best campaigners.

As I say, I thought I was very fortunate having Don Dunstan appointed. I already knew him, of course. I started my campaign by doorknocking. A state member, one of the senators, used to come out with me to start. One of the first things we did was I called at all the shops in Tea Tree Gully to let them know, because they would probably talk to people who had met me. I also went and met all members of the sub-branch, because they were the people who were going to help me.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Was there a sense of enthusiasm from that sub-branch that this was after a seat that Labor had not really looked at for a couple of elections? Was there a sense that this was something you could manage and win, or was it just, 'Give it your best shot'?

MOLLY BYRNE: They just took it. They didn't seem to say much. Of course, nobody thought I could win. Later, I went doorknocking on my own. I didn't have a car. I used to have to catch the bus and then walk around. I don't know how I did it all day in all weathers. I can remember one woman, I knocked on her door, and she said to me, 'How brave you are!' She said, 'Do you think you'll get back your deposit?' I said, 'I intend to win.' She joined the party—her and her husband—and helped me.

I was accepted by the men. Most people would have thought I wasn't, but I was just accepted. I did have one man that was rude. When I knocked on his door he said the only place for women was in the kitchen and in the bedroom. But later he changed his mind and offered to put an election sign up for me. Naturally, I had a lot of experiences knocking on doors. You could really write a book about them, I think. I found that overall everybody was pleasant. I occasionally got someone who was rude but not very often.

CLEM MACINTYRE: That's good.

MOLLY BYRNE: Later in the campaign I went with Don Dunstan up to some of the country sections and called at some of the wineries and of course they would want you to taste their wines. I used to say, 'Well, I can't drink while I'm going around like this,' but I didn't tell them I was a teetotaller.

CLEM MACINTYRE: That was a good call when you were in a winery. Do you remember what the issues were? Were they basically local issues relevant to the district of Barossa, or were you campaigning on broader state issues?

MOLLY BYRNE: I think the main thing was, when I used to call, some of them—especially at the suburban end, those were the people who had been there a long time—they used to say to me, 'What about Mr Laucke?' I used to say, 'Well, he's a very nice man,' which he was, 'but we have different policies,' and mainly said how we would build a hospital at Modbury, Modbury Hospital, and also about social justice and some industrial issues. Mainly, people weren't interested in that. Most of the people just wanted to talk about things. They weren't really that interested in politics but they were glad that I called.

CLEM MACINTYRE: On election day you end up winning the seat. Do you remember—

MOLLY BYRNE: I would like to say that prior to the election I had a written letter sent out to all the constituents saying we needed the hospital and that builders needed licensing because some of the houses that were built were showing defects. That was posted but I also had, and I don't know how it was distributed, what they called ‘Meet Molly's and it showed me doing various things. It was showing what we needed doing, like showing the land where the Modbury Hospital was going to be built. Also, at that stage, I used to speak on 5KA because we had a segment there and it showed me doing that. It was really quite good. It was very good actually and I still have a copy of all these things.

The Labor Club at the Adelaide University put out a leaflet showing the gerrymander and I think that was a great help to me because you could talk to people about the gerrymander but they didn't really understand what it was. I also arranged with the party office a week before for people to come out and help me. I gave them each a map, and they had a leaflet, I think. They knocked on the doors in the section to remind people that I had called and asked for them to vote for me.

Also, what I did was that I arranged, for the day of the election, for all the country booths to be manned. Most of them had never been manned before. I worked it out and thought that if I could get three extra votes at each of those polling booths it might help me to win. As it was, we only won two of them. I can't remember, but we got an increase in votes, and it certainly was a surprise to people to see someone there from the Labor Party.

On the day of the election, with the president of the sub-branch, I visited all the polling booths, including those in the country, and that was a surprise to them too, I might say. I remember, at one polling booth, I had this man arranged to give out the how-to-vote cards, but he wasn't there and all the how-to-vote cards were thrown on the ground in front of the polling booth. So we went in and we asked the returning officer where this man was, and they said that he was acting as a clerk at another polling booth at another electorate. I can remember, at one place where we called, they were supposed to have put up all sorts of signs but they hadn't put up any. After we left, you could see people in the room and outside running around putting up the signs.

Then, of course, by the time we got back it was almost time for the polling booths to be closed. Of course, I had a party at my house and I had a couple of men who were taking the votes over the telephone. By the end of the count I was, I think, about 610 in front. I remember that Don Dunstan was on one of the television stations. He rang me up and I told him the result, and he said, 'You've won, Molly. You've won!' I said, 'No, I haven't. There are still about a thousand votes to be counted, absent and postal votes.' Anyway, I was never convinced that I had won until the last vote was counted. I think I won by about 640.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Yes.

MOLLY BYRNE: I would like to mention that, on the night of the election, I had people—because it was more or less said that I had won—calling and ringing all night, and I never went to bed. I had one of my country supporters who rang me at 6 o'clock in the morning, and he said he wanted to be the first one to congratulate me. I didn't tell him that I had been up all night. Actually, strangers kept calling for about a week or so after that, because I think everybody was pleased to see a change of government. Also, I should mention that Hugh Hudson had won the seat of Glenelg. We needed two extra seats to win the government, and so we now had the majority.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Yes, ending a long period of Liberal Country League government. Did you get a sense, after that 1965 election, when you first sat in the parliament, that there was a change? That election was a bit of a watershed in South Australia—a long period of Liberal rule beforehand and mainly Labor since. Was there a sense at that time that things were shifting?

MOLLY BYRNE: First of all, I had to go to the caucus meeting. I can remember Hugh Hudson and I could not find the caucus room and we did not know then that you could get a messenger to show you. Then, on the first day of sitting, I had to give the first speech, which was the Address in Reply to the Governor, and Hugh gave the second speech. I have to say that the opposition looked very dour. I do not think they liked the idea of sitting on the opposition benches after 32 years. I don't know, they didn't speak to us much. Later, of course, lots of them left and new ones came in and they seemed to have a different attitude.

CLEM MACINTYRE: I have had a look at your first speech in the Address in Reply. It concentrates on, just as you were saying earlier, things like housing in the local area, and the Modbury Hospital also. You were one of the first people speaking in that new parliament. Did you have family in the gallery watching? Were you nervous? How did you feel taking the seat? You were the first woman elected for Labor and there was only one other woman in the house at the time.

MOLLY BYRNE: I suppose I just accepted it because I had to do it. I remember Hugh said to me, 'Are you going to ask any questions?' I said no, but he did. One thing I can tell you about it is that after I gave the speech and we rose, the Speaker came to see me and he said that one of the opposition members had raised the fact that I wore a hat and that I should not have worn a hat. The only person that could have his head covered was the Speaker, with a wig. Also, I found it very hard to leave the chamber because you had to bow to the Speaker, and I just felt I couldn't do it—I just couldn't do it. Eventually, of course, you did it and you didn't even know you were doing it.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Did it take a long time getting a feel for the patterns of behaviour in the house? Did you feel at home reasonably quickly or did it take a while to settle in and get your feet wet?

MOLLY BYRNE: When I was working for the senator—and he would be in Canberra—I used to go down there and often hear some of the maiden speeches of our members. People would have thought that I found it difficult being the only woman on our side, but I didn't because I knew them all before I went down there. If I needed any help, it was readily forthcoming.

Also, I used to sit in the house and listen to the speeches, and I can remember that early on I was listening to a speech—and I might say it was someone on our side; anyway, I was sitting on the edge—and up walked one of our members and asked me how I was going, and I said, 'I don't think I should be here because I can't understand what he is talking about.' He said, 'Molly, nobody else does either!' So after that I didn't take it so seriously.

One thing, I never concentrated on women's issues because I was representing men and women and children. I found that you could give a good speech in parliament, but most of your constituents didn't know you did, so I concentrated on questions of things that were needed in the electorate. When I got an answer I used to get it photocopied and I would put those in letterboxes in the areas of concern.

CLEM MACINTYRE: When you are the local member you have a fairly diverse area to cover—rural areas and growing suburban areas. This is in the days before there were electorate offices. How did you engage with the voters?

MOLLY BYRNE: I found there were hardly any facilities, like toilets for women.

CLEM MACINTYRE: In the house?

MOLLY BYRNE: You had to go up to the first floor. Also, we got allocated an office at Parliament House. I was exhausted after the election. I went to Canberra with Clyde and Doris Cameron; they took me. I had a man, one of the old members, allocated to be with me in that office and

when I got back he had gone. He didn't want to be in the office with me, apparently—I don't know for what reason. Later on, after Don Dunstan became Premier, we had an office in our electorate and had a secretary. At that time you had to share three typists with the backbenchers. It was lucky that I could type myself.

CLEM MACINTYRE: What about meeting voters when people in the electorate wanted to come and talk to you, and so on? How did you manage that?

MOLLY BYRNE: That was the part about being in parliament that I liked most: you felt you had the power to help people. People used to come to see me not only on state government matters but on personal matters as well. It is interesting that one of the first people who came to see me was the same person who came to see me at the end—they seemed to have a lot of problems. I had women come to me of course about abortion, about rape, domestic violence, incest, and things like that. I also had women contact me from other electorates. I used to say that they had to go and see their own member, but I never had any men come with any personal problems.

I found that, with the functions I had to attend, I can remember once attending five functions in one day and in certain seasons it was quite common to have three functions on a Saturday. Of course, there were church things, and later there was a lot of sport on Sundays. I was also on two state councils for high schools. I remember I visited jails—women's jails as well as the men's. There were demonstrations. Also, I got appointed to several committees associated with parliament.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Some of the standing committees?

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes. I will just say what they were. First of all, I got appointed to the Parliamentary Committee on Land Settlement. That was 1968 to 1969. It is interesting that at the first caucus meeting, I didn't realise that all these committees existed. Of course, some of them had already lined themselves up to get elected to certain committees. There was nothing left, and that's how I got put on that one.

Later, I became Chair of the Joint Committee on Subordinate Legislation. That was 1970 to 1973. That was one time I did have, I suppose, opposition from someone who was also on the committee. He went to see one of our ministers and said I shouldn't have been appointed as chairperson. He said, 'Well, we have appointed her, and she is staying.' Later, he said I was the best chairperson they had had. Also, I became a member of the Public Accounts Committee, 1973 to 1975, and a member of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, 1975 to 1979.

I did fail to say that I got appointed to the prostitution select committee. I remember I was sitting in the caucus, they were deciding who they were going to put on it. I sat down low. Then Don said, 'We will put Molly on this.' We visited a brothel in South Australia, then we went to Victoria and Sydney, interviewing people. I might say, when I got put on that committee, I was against prostitution. But after I heard all the evidence, I changed my mind and was in favour of it. When it came before parliament, unfortunately I had been defeated by then, so I couldn't vote on it.

Also, I will mention a couple of funny things that happened while I was in parliament. I can remember I went in and I had a fur coat on. Of course, it was not a proper fur coat. I was walking down one of the passages, and one of our members coming the other way said, 'Molly, what are you coming here dressed like that for? Don't you know the parliamentary salaries tribunal is sitting, and they will soon come out for lunch?'

Another time, it was Guy Fawkes Day. Of course, the Speaker's chair is there and the passage behind, and one of our members let off a cracker beyond the Speaker's chair in the passage. Anyway, I didn't know what it was at first and when I did know I laughed like anything, but, by gee, lots of the others didn't. They said that whoever it was should not have done it.

Another thing that happened was that when the abortion bill was before parliament, we had people sitting in the gallery, especially from churches, watching how we were going to vote, etc. We had one woman who used to come in every day and she would be in Centre Hall and she would lobby members as they came through. This day, she approached one of our members and he said to her, 'I know you. I know all about you.' Of course, he had never seen her before in his life. Anyway, she went and she never came again.

CLEM MACINTYRE: You have talked a little bit about various committees you have been on.

MOLLY BYRNE: I would like to say first how I voted with the abortion bill. I voted for the reform. I did not vote for abortion on demand, although that is what I agreed with. I didn't think the people in my electorate were ready to accept it yet.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Was it a big debate in the electorate before that vote? Was it a matter of much public interest in the Barossa before that vote?

MOLLY BYRNE: In my area, I had the Right to Life Association, I think, and the festival—

CLEM MACINTYRE: The Festival of Light.

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes, and some of their officers lived in my electorate and I have to say that what they believed and I believed did not coincide. When we were going to have that come before parliament, they organised a public meeting and they put out a leaflet saying that my opponent believed in the rights of the unborn. I forget what they said about me. They had this public meeting. Of course, it was all designed to embarrass me, but I was able to tell them that I had already accepted to go somewhere else, which was true.

I got one of our members here to help me and I drafted up a letter for them to read to the meeting as to what my opinion was and why. Some of my supporters went to this meeting. One of them was a scientist and he asked my opponent all of these questions. Well, he could not answer them and he was absolutely embarrassed, so by me not going I didn't lose anything.

CLEM MACINTYRE: It was a contentious debate in South Australia at the time and had a lot of the rest of the country looking, so it was an important thing. You talked about committee work. You didn't sit on the front bench. Did you ever want to be a minister or did you—

MOLLY BYRNE: I never put my name forward to be a minister.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Were other people suggesting that maybe you should have?

MOLLY BYRNE: Nobody did.

CLEM MACINTYRE: So you saw a role as a backbencher, just maintaining pressure and pursuing local interests as a sufficient sort of contribution?

MOLLY BYRNE: I think I worked very hard—that was accepted by everybody—because I had to work hard to keep the seat. I think it became more like a 'Molly Byrne seat'.

After 10 years, I just about had a nervous breakdown because I was doing two people's work really, because it was building up all the time with new electors. What with all these other things that I was involved in, it got too much and the doctor said I had to take three months off, which I didn't. But I went to stay up in Houghton in a house to get away from my house, because people used to call there after hours on weeknights and even Christmas Day.

I remember on Christmas Day I had a woman ring me up and say, for instance, that there was a snake on the block next door. I said to her that it was a council matter, that they hadn't had the block cleared. I said to her, 'But it's Christmas Day and you should contact your ward councillor, but I wouldn't suggest you did it today.'

Another day on Christmas Day I remember that my family was there for Christmas dinner and two ladies knocked on the door. One said that her husband had locked her out of the house. I didn't know what to do, and I rang up the women police. Anyway, they went and sat on my brick fence out the front. I don't know whether the women police came or not, but finally they left.

What I did earlier is I bought a shack out at St Kilda, and if I had a free weekend I used to go with my mother and my daughter and stay out there. I didn't mention that after I was in parliament for five years my husband died. My mother used to look after my daughter Jessie when I went canvassing and at other times when needed.

I don't know whether I said this: on the night that I got elected, Clyde Cameron came out to see me and he said how much I was going to get as a salary. I had never thought about it. I got equal pay and I thought, 'What am I going to do with all this money?' But I soon found out because I had to buy a car on an overdraft from the bank. I had to divide the front room of my house into two so I had a waiting room and somewhere to interview people.

I might mention that one night I had people sitting in the waiting room and others sitting in the kitchen dining room area, and my father came down to see me and he saw all these people there. He

said to me, 'Do you really want to do this, Molly?' Also, I found I had to get a new wardrobe because then there used to be a lot of balls, which meant that I had to receive debutantes. There were after-hours clothes.

I had to get a part-time housekeeper so that, when I had night sittings and I didn't come home for tea, there was someone there to put a meal on. Later, when my husband died, my parents moved in with me so I could continue my career.

CLEM MACINTYRE: You are painting a picture of a very demanding and a very busy time, certainly, managing that constituency and managing the area of the Barossa and so on. I want to just bring you back into the house for a bit and ask you a bit about the culture of the House of Assembly. You were one of two women in here when you were first elected. You said that the only lavatories were upstairs on the first floor.

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Did you feel that women were not as well respected and they were the interlopers, as it were? Was the culture of the house very sympathetic to you arriving as the first Labor woman?

MOLLY BYRNE: I think we were quite respected. I know you hear things that happened in the commonwealth parliament concerning women, but nothing like that ever happened to me. I was treated with absolute respect by both sides, and I am sure the other two ladies were too.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Did you form friendships across the house? Did you develop friendships with members of the Liberal Party as well as your own party?

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes. I would like to say that parliament is just like any other place. There are people you like more than others. I found I became quite friendly with some of the opposition members. Some people think that because we are in different parties we are not pleasant, I suppose, to people from other parties, but it's not the case.

I would like to say, regarding Mr Laucke, who I defeated, I kept in touch with him always. He of course got selected for the Senate after that, and I rang him up and congratulated him. I said, 'It looks as if I did you a favour,' and he said, 'Yes.' Later of course he became President of the Senate and Lieutenant-Governor. I received an OAM and he came to the ceremony to see me receive it. Also, I went to his funeral.

I can tell you there was a man in my electorate who was an ardent Liberal supporter, and he said to me once, 'Do you know so-and-so? He was the member over on Yorke Peninsula.' I said, 'Yes. He is a lovely person.' He said, 'Well, he said the same about you.' He seemed to think we would run one another down.

CLEM MACINTYRE: What about in your own party? Were there live factional battles that you had to work your way around?

MOLLY BYRNE: When I first started off, there weren't any factions. What happened is prominent members in the party looked around to get candidates to stand for seats who they thought would win them. But later on there were factions. I would be centre-left, more left than centre in some cases, as my daughter would say.

CLEM MACINTYRE: But relationships between you and other members of the Labor Party were reasonably good and positive?

MOLLY BYRNE: Friendships?

CLEM MACINTYRE: Yes.

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes, I was very friendly with all of them.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Who were the best performers in the parliament, the most notable speakers and so on?

MOLLY BYRNE: Well, it would have to be Don Dunstan—I, of course, voted for him to be the Premier; I think that's well known—it would have to be Hugh Hudson and then later we got Len King to come. Don got him to come to help him with legal legislation.

CLEM MACINTYRE: What about on the other side? Who were the best performers on the Liberal side?

MOLLY BYRNE: Probably Millhouse. Of course, while I was there they formed the LM—

CLEM MACINTYRE: The Liberal Movement.

MOLLY BYRNE: Of course, some of them went back but Millhouse stayed in it. That was the beginning of the democratic—

CLEM MACINTYRE: Yes, eventually the Australian Democrats.

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes, the Democrats.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Molly, you mentioned Don Dunstan. Were you here when he wore his pink shorts into the chamber?

MOLLY BYRNE: When what?

CLEM MACINTYRE: Were you here when Don Dunstan wore his pink hot pants into the parliament? His famous—

MOLLY BYRNE: When he wore the shorts?

CLEM MACINTYRE: Yes, the shorts.

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes, I was there. I saw that.

CLEM MACINTYRE: What was the feeling in the place when he came through the door?

MOLLY BYRNE: I don't know—just everybody stared at him, I think. But Hugh Hudson used to wear a safari suit in hot weather.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Yes. Different days in lots of respects.

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes, that's right.

CLEM MACINTYRE: I don't want to keep going forever, but I do want to talk about when you finished here. You lost the 1979 election. Des Corcoran took over from Don Dunstan and went to an election in September 1979. Were you positive going into that election or did you think that it was a problem?

MOLLY BYRNE: No, I knew I would be defeated. We should never have had that election. We had no good reason to have it. When I was knocking on doors, people would say to me, 'Why are you having this election, Molly?' and I couldn't give an answer that suited them because I didn't agree with it myself, but I couldn't say that. I knew I was going to be defeated. You see, people don't like to vote too often. I just faced up to it—I mean, it was decided by cabinet and we were just sort of told about it in caucus.

CLEM MACINTYRE: But you went into that election with the sense that you were in trouble?

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes, I knew I was in trouble. I knew I was going to be defeated. The Advertiser put something on the front page on the day of the election, if my memory is right, more or less saying it was a possibility I would be defeated. The night before the election, Hugh Hudson rang me up. I don't know who he had been in touch with, but he told me that both he and I would probably be defeated, because it is the people in marginal seats who go first.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Yes. In recent years there has been quite a lot of work done looking at the consequences for people who lose their seats—leave the parliament involuntarily, as it were. There are stories of some getting into really serious depression, others feeling a sense of relief and so on. How did you cope with the fact that you were out of the place?

MOLLY BYRNE: Well, I think it took me a year to get over it. I didn't get depression, but it was such a change in life. I felt that my defeat was unjustified as I had worked hard to win the seat and had consistently been an active local member to serve the community and hold the seat.

I was asked twice to stand again. I was asked to stand for the state seat again and I was also approached to stand for preselection for the new seat of Makin.

CLEM MACINTYRE: In the federal parliament?

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes, for the federal parliament. I declined both because I just felt I couldn't go out and knock on doors and start all over again. But as far as the federal seat was concerned, I think

I made a mistake. I think now I should have done it. I thought that afterwards. If I had more time to have a rest, I probably would have said yes.

CLEM MACINTYRE: So it was the timing? You were tempted but the timing was wrong?

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes. It is worth mentioning that for a while after my defeat people would ring me up or approach me at the shops to discuss issues and problems and seek my advice and help.

Some of the constituents' comments were interesting. A number told me, 'If I'd known you were going to be defeated, I would have voted for you.' Others said they were perplexed as I was 'the best-known person in the district'. One person said, 'Well, it doesn't matter. You will just sit on the Opposition side of the House!'

CLEM MACINTYRE: Did you keep active in the Labor Party after leaving the parliament?

MOLLY BYRNE: I became secretary of the Tea Tree Gully sub-branch. I kept my activities up. I eventually shifted back to Seacliff, where I am living now. Up until, say, the last federal election, I still stood on polling booths. I was standing on this polling booth down at Seacliff and a man, one of the Liberal people giving out the how-to-vote card, offered to get me a seat. I think he thought I was so old. Anyhow, that was the last time I did anything, so all I can do now is give a donation, really. I am still as interested in the party as I was when I first joined, and I am still a member.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Did you need to go and find employment after you left the parliament?

MOLLY BYRNE: No, I didn't. After I left parliament, I got appointed to quite a lot of committees and boards. I got appointed to the Power Line Environment Committee. That was to do with the Electricity Trust. Also, I think it had its name changed, because I have written down there the Electricity Reticulation Advisory Committee. I became the chairperson of that. The Controlled Substances Advisory Committee—I was put on that by the state minister for health. I was on the St Agnes health centre committee; I was chairperson of that. I unfortunately got put on the State Bank board, to my everlasting regret.

Another thing I did since I retired was I enrolled at Flinders University as an adult student, but I didn't finish the course. I was doing quite well, but because being on that State Bank board, it had a very bad effect on my health. It's interesting that in one of the reports—because there were two inquiries—it said, more or less, that even though you are not given the right information as directors, you are still responsible. I have told my daughter to be cautious about things she has been on.

CLEM MACINTYRE: It was a very difficult time.

MOLLY BYRNE: Also, I did quite a lot of travelling. I did a trip—I went to China. I did a trip through Europe which included Russia. I did another trip through Europe which included Italy, Switzerland and that section. I also went to South Africa and I went to Israel because my daughter was a diplomat and attached to the Australian embassy, so I went there twice. So I have been to all whose war areas like the Gaza Strip, West Bank, Golan Heights, Jordan and Syria and Egypt so I am interested in what is happening there.

Also, I have always exercised; I did tai chi and yoga and I did exercises at one of the aged care homes. But the only exercise I do now is walking the dog. I also joined the Port Adelaide Football Club and still attend matches when I can.

I also spent time helping with my five grandchildren, Fabian, Matilda, Clancy, Aretha and Huon. Now they are grown up, they help me.

CLEM MACINTYRE: That's pretty good. Let me finish with a couple of more reflective questions. You said you found one of the best aspects of being an MP was the engagement with the voters.

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes, because you had the power to help them.

CLEM MACINTYRE: What was the worst aspect? What did you like the least?

MOLLY BYRNE: The few people who were rude I suppose. For instance, after I was elected I remember I had a constituent come to see me and she was complaining about some house or some building. I think it might have been out Penfield way or something. So I was coming back from the country section and I called in there to have a look at it. I said who I was. I went back to Parliament House and the person that was apparently the developer, he rang me up and he said he was going to sue me, take me to court because I shouldn't have been there and it wasn't my electorate. Anyway, I

remember I rang up Don Dunstan and I told him what had happened and he said, 'Look Molly, don't take any notice of him.' He said, 'He can't sue you.' He said, 'I get told that all the time.'

I had another person who more or less threatened me. He claimed his wife was murdered by the doctors. I was at Parliament House and the messenger said that this person was downstairs to see me. I forgot to say he rang me up at 6 o'clock in the morning once and he said, 'I've got you now, and you've done nothing to help me.' Anyway, I thought it was somebody else and I went down to see this person and it was him. Of course, he threatened me and I thought, 'What am I going to do?,' so I got on the phone to the City Watchhouse and I said to one of the policemen that I had this person there who had made this claim. I said, 'I'm sending him around to you.' So, I rang a taxi. I put him in the taxi, off he went and I never saw him again.

People like that who upset you at the time are few and far between. You do get people ringing you over issues and they abuse you but they won't give their name. But I was never rude to anybody even if they were rude to me because you don't know what they would go and say afterwards that you said, but probably may not have said what they said to you. So what I am saying is that those sorts of people were very few and far between, but they did upset you at the time.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Yes, I can understand that. In terms of achievements in the house, is there anything that you championed, campaigned for, or supported that you are most proud of?

MOLLY BYRNE: I think, while I was there, the best thing that happened was to get adult franchise for the Legislative Council. I might have said before that the Legislative Council was five electorates electing four people. We only had four people on it, but we did build it up to six. Of course, it is like the Senate and can be obstructive, and it was at times. So how the people representing our house and in the Legislative Council were able to get that reform, I will never know, but I thought was the best thing that was done.

CLEM MACINTYRE: In the time that you spent here, you must have noticed some changes in parliamentary processes and reforms. Were there any reforms to things like sitting hours, or were you still sitting very late in the night when you left?

MOLLY BYRNE: Yes, we used to often sit at night because we had a lot of legislation to get through. I might say that the backbenchers weren't encouraged to speak because the government wanted to get it through as quickly as possible. I remember that some of those late sittings used to go into early morning sittings. It used to get quite cold in there, and I remember that I used to lie on the seat and put newspapers over me. Why I didn't bring a rug in, I don't know.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Let me think about the last question. I will move to the conclusion, perhaps, and just say: if you were talking to an aspiring member of parliament now, a young woman who was anticipating being elected, what advice would you give them on coming into the South Australian parliament?

MOLLY BYRNE: I would tell them to go for the Legislative Council or the Senate, because while I was there I had seven elections, plus doing the work for the federal election—you did that work in your electorate. I found that it was hard work. So I would advise them to try to get high on the Senate ticket or the Legislative Council ticket. It might be alright if you get into a safe seat here.

I would like to say this, though—and this is something different altogether—that while I was there we had to be very careful in what we did, and that we didn't have any business with any state government departments. I remember that North East Road, in front of my house, was being widened, and I couldn't have any contact with the government because they wanted to take some of my land, so they negotiated with the council and then the council bought the land in the first instance. Then someone, one of the councillors, came to see me and asked how much did I want for that land. I said, 'I don't know', and he offered me a certain amount and I said that's what it is.

CLEM MACINTYRE: So this was being cautious about conflicts of interest?

MOLLY BYRNE Yes, that's right.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Last question: it is a while since you left here as the member. I think the final seat represented was Todd, the name of the electorate changed and so on, in 1979. What does it feel like coming back and sitting in the chamber and talking about your life in parliament? How do you feel about reflecting upon the whole process and coming back into this room?

MOLLY BYRNE Since I got defeated I have gone out and spoken at different sub-branches and talked about my parliamentary experience.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Are they good memories or bad memories that you get?

MOLLY BYRNE I think I was very fortunate, indeed, that the Labor Party selected me as a candidate and I will be forever grateful to the party for doing so.

CLEM MACINTYRE: Let me finish by saying I think the Labor Party was pretty lucky to get you, too. It sounds like you were a very hardworking member of parliament and continued to work for the Labor Party for a long time. Thank you so much for turning up today and talking about your political life. Thank you.

MOLLY BYRNE: Thank you for being here and asking the questions.

CLEM MACINTYRE: My pleasure.

MOLLY BYRNE: Thank you.

The interview concluded at 12.51pm.