

## **Clem Jones Oral History Project**

**Interviewee:** Grant Tambling

**Interviewer:** Lindsay Marshall

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**Duration:** 35 mins 29 secs

LM: This is an interview as part of the Clem Jones Oral History Project. The interview is conducted by me, Lindsay Marshall, from the offices of the Clem Jones Group at Wellington Road, East Brisbane. And I have on the phone in Darwin former local, state and federal Member of Parliament from the Northern Territory, Grant Tambling. Grant, thanks very much for doing the interview and for your time today.

GT: It's one of those tasks that come back to test you on your memory.

LM: I thought you were going to say haunt you. No, and from our previous conversation you've got a very good memory of events from the time we're going to be talking about. Look the interest for this particular interview is on, obviously on Clem Jones and his involvement as Chair of the Darwin Reconstruction Commission after Cyclone Tracy destroyed the city. But if we can just start by just getting a little bit of background about yourself. You were actually born in Queensland in the town of Wondai.

GT: That's correct, in Queensland.

LM: And your parents were both teachers?

GT: My parents were teachers and in the Second World War my father was seconded back into the army and he was based as sort of an organising type captain in the town of Murgon. And so the hospital was next door when... so I was born during the war years and I don't have any memories of that because I came back to Darwin when I was about three years old.

LM: Right. And the family connection with the Northern Territory, how did that come about? Was it a family history there or did your parents move there?

GT: No, both parents were school teachers and the system in 1946 when dad was around was that they did move, they went because of the schooling was run by the Queensland state department.

LM: Oh I see, the Queensland Education Department ran the Territory education system.

GT: At that time, and dad was transferred. Dad had come here originally in 1926 as a teacher, evacuated out and served for a number of years in the Army. And that was the connection, dad was back as a commandant in the Murgon and Wondai areas.

LM: Right, okay. And then when the family returned to Darwin you then went to Darwin Primary School and Darwin High School and also...

GT: Correct.

LM: ... you spent time in Adelaide Boys High School. That was obviously...

GT: That was... that was my final year. Most of my primary and secondary education was at public Darwin schools and that was, and in my last year I went to Adelaide.

LM: Okay, and that was a boarding student?

GT: Yes.

LM: Did you enjoy boarding school?

GT: Boarding school, I boarded privately and so, but just so many years being let free in a community that on that occasion, the matriculation year was actually needed to be spent in Adelaide and I had a great year.

LM: And your brothers and sisters, you had, your parents had a few children to put through school, didn't they?

GT: There were three of us and my sister did her final education in Brisbane, and my brother, I think, was based in Darwin. So we had a smattering of influences.

LM: So you were born in 1943, as we mentioned, in Queensland actually. But by the 1960s, after matriculating and you were working then, as I understand it, for the AMP Society.

GT: My first employment was with accounting firms and then I, for various family reasons I went on to do other things. So after I, I then worked for accounting firms and then the AMP Society.

LM: And you married your wife, Sandra, in Sydney in February 1969 I understand.

GT: I tried to sell her insurance, that was the reason, that was the reason we got together. But it was a very good experience.

LM: Did she buy any?

GT: Well it cost me a ring of pearls this year for our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

LM: Oh right. So you came back to Darwin and then you started to become involved more in public life and politics in the Territory. What drew you to that?

GT: I think it was the nature of growing up, you either get involved in sport or you get involved in the arts. I got very involved in art, or Musica Viva, different organisations that had their

input in lots of arty type activities, bringing people to and from Darwin. And the local politicians at the time I think were impressed with my organisation skills and so I had a lot of experience with arty groups. And then from there I got involved in local government and was elected to the Darwin City Council as an alderman. So that led to being recruited a few years later in working for community organisations that had an art emphasis. So that was the reason as a pretty young naïve person, I'd say, when Cyclone Tracy happened I was recruited to help with the Darwin Reconstruction Commission and then was, after a couple of months was appointed to that body.

LM: Now you went on in your political career to serve at all three levels, local, Territory and federal level. And as you've just mentioned...

GT: I would say it was six levels because I had local government, the Legislative Assembly, an elected body, the House of Representatives, the Senate, and subsequently I was admitted as, appointed administrator of Norfolk Island. So I had quite a few levels until a bit before Cyclone Tracy hit.

LM: Yes quite a checkered career as they say and quite a unique career I'd suggest in Australian politics to have that spread of responsibilities and experiences. Now at the time of the cyclone, Cyclone Tracy, at Christmas Eve 1974, you mentioned there before the Legislative Assembly, it was sort of a very, hadn't been going for long and then it gets confronted by this huge natural and human disaster. In the immediate impact of that, the cyclone, did you think that the new system there, the new system of government there was coping?

GT: It was complicated because the people that were recruited to serve as servants, if you like, of the Darwin Reconstruction Commission were complicated because the Legislative Assembly came into being as a fully elected body just prior to Cyclone Tracy. So we had this complication of the Canberra political system wanting to do most of the running, because they were being asked to put up all the cash, and we needed a spread of people across local government to take the local component, part of it. The Labor [federal] government of the day, of course, wanted to appoint people from their systems and there was quite a heavy emphasis on regional development at that time by the Labor government in Canberra. And I was rather fortunate being appointed to the Darwin Reconstruction Commission after about the first six months or so the organisation had been going. And we inherited a lot of problems because you can imagine a population of 40,000 reduced down to 20-odd thousand and lots of families wanted to reunite, people wanted to build, lots of people wanted a lot more money. And the Whitlam government appointed a series of people, staffers and to take responsibility for the new Commission which the Labor Party set up.

LM: And do you know, did you put yourself forward to serve on the Reconstruction Commission, or do you know why you were selected?

GT: I think it was because they needed people who had been critical of them in the first six months that the Commission operated. There were changes at the top level. There was a top level but there were also a lot of local people who wanted to take some responsibility and I was one of those. I was very critical of the initial administration then. Fortunately from my point of view the Labor government appointed me as one of the commissioners. There were several public servants appointed and several [Darwin] city council and Legislative Assembly members appointed, I was one of those.

- LM: And just to backtrack a little bit here, we'll come back to the Reconstruction Commission but I'm just interested in your personal experience with your family on the evening or the night and the morning of the cyclone. When you went to bed that night, you know, Christmas Eve, looking forward to Christmas Day, was there any foreboding in your mind? Were you concerned about that cyclone off the coast?
- GT: No. There was a lot of conversation about it. We had a dinner party that night and foolishly, we didn't get round to sending people home until four o'clock in the morning and by which time the fury of Cyclone Tracy tested all of us
- LM: When you woke up the next, or when you went outside the next day when the dawn broke, how would you describe the first things you saw outside, the devastation, the destruction?
- GT: The first concern I think all of us naturally had was the extent of the damage that had been done, you just looked at your neighbours, you looked at the swimming pools you looked at, everyone knew our immediate neighbourhood and we jumped, about seven or nine, eight o'clock, eight/nine o'clock we jumped in the car and drove round as much as we could and it got, we knew that the experience had been catastrophic.
- LM: And there was a period there too where the outside world so to speak didn't really know the extent of what had happened, wasn't there?
- GT: Very much so, and you couldn't, most people couldn't make any contact anywhere with anyone privately. We were very fortunate that we were in a reasonably new home and our telephone connection had been put on underground and our house became a gathering centre for everyone that wanted to ring interstate and report to family and friends. So we soon got to know how extensive it was.
- LM: And you were essentially a public figure then being a member of the Assembly.
- GT: Yeah, I, yes I had just been elected in October to the Legislative Assembly. So we were looked upon as a group and we had to negotiate between the public service input and the community leaders' input, and it took a lot of wisdom by a number of people. Unfortunately some of the ones given leadership roles weren't the best we could've had and we had a series then over about a six month period we had a series of senior staff and people who stepped into the leadership roles, that all of them had different opinions about how to fix it.
- LM: So on that first morning after you've seen the destruction and you're a member of the Legislative Assembly, did you think to yourself, how on earth, what do we do now? You know, what's the first thing that needs to be done? There must've been a lot of confusion on the ground, and understandably so. Given too also the communication problems you mentioned.
- GT: It was basically, you know, the loudest voice was the one that was listened to last. And of course Prime Minister Whitlam was overseas at the time, Jim, Jim...
- LM: Cairns?
- GT: Cairns, Jim Cairns was Acting Deputy who saw the immediate evacuation of Darwin, 30,000 people evacuated in the space of a week or two. And then you had to, so you had to assist

all of that. There was just stacks of work for everyone to do, let alone get some sort of temporary accommodation.

LM: And on that question of evacuation, you mentioned the evacuation, most of the population was taken out. And there's been debate to and fro about that over the years, about whether that was the right thing to do or the wrong thing. In retrospect do you think that was the right thing to do, or could people have been settled out of the city somewhere closer so that... there obviously would've been emotional and mental health issues arising out of separating families in such a crisis.

GT: I think that's true. The community had never experienced anything like this in the recent history and we just relied on common-sense I think more than anything else. Darwin's not a community that's got a neighbouring town anywhere close by so you couldn't transfer your problem to a neighbour, and it took a lot of skill in them working out how they would plan for the new Darwin. And Canberra had formed, recently formed a Cities Commission which required very special skills of town planning and construction work. And we all got involved in that and there was a lot of criticism, particularly of the chairman of the day. There was, the first Chairman was one from the Thiess family, I think Brisbane-based. Then after [Sir Leslie] Thiess there was a series of senior public servants running around doing quite a lot, but not quick enough because of the sheer weight of numbers. And then subsequently there were, I think the next appointed person was a guy named Tony Powell who was a senior bureaucrat in the urban development area of the Cities Commission in Canberra. They just wanted to implement a new type of city without talking to the community. And so there were a lot of difficulties that local people weren't able to get their views heard and this is where you get to the point of the criticisms got paramount, politics emerged and thankfully Clem Jones was a natural sort of person to be appointed. He had surveying skills and he had just the ability to organise people extremely well.

LM: So prior to Clem's arrival there and the succession of chairmen, you mentioned starting with I think it was Sir Leslie Tse but then followed...

GT: That's right.

LM: ... then followed by essentially Canberra bureaucrats. Were they... you said that, you alluded to the fact that they were trying to more or less reinvent Darwin in some sort of academic sense. Is that a fair way to describe what they were up to?

GT: It's true that you couldn't get five or ten people in the room and not have a decent discussion, everyone was so torn apart by the structure of the new organisation. But the money wasn't the problem, Canberra bureaucracy gave us plenty of money to do capital works and it was a matter of coordinating the personal tensions of many families. But it wasn't quick enough or satisfactory enough to the local community who naturally wanted to bring their families back as soon as possible.

LM: Was there an element of paternalism from Canberra given that the Territory, you know, had, was still basically emerging from, you know, being run by outsiders?

GT: I think it's inevitable that we make that sort of criticism now. But at the time I've got to say that the fact that so much cash flowed quickly probably contributed to the criticism because it didn't hit the families trying to re-establish their homes.

LM: And so Clem Jones arrives in, he's appointed to take over in late-1975. Had you heard of him or had any dealings with him previously?

GT: I was aware of his role as Lord Mayor of Brisbane. Not many, I don't think many people in Darwin would have known him in a personal sense. But, yeah, he had a wonderful reputation in Brisbane and I think, personally I think we were very lucky that he was available and appointed to run, to act as the Chairman of the Darwin Reconstruction Commission. He was a man of great compassion and quite frankly a lot of, he was tremendously, a tremendous person to inject into the role. He got on with everybody.

LM: And it crossed, there was obviously no room for politics in the party sense there because, you know, Clem's a Labor Party person, you're a, and others are CL, Country Liberal Party essentially, CLP, on the other side of the fence so to speak politically. Was politics just naturally put aside in those circumstances?

GT: In the first year it was. The first 12 months the first priority was, how do we set the priorities and organise the contracts that were so needed? And I think there wasn't much, there was criticism of Thiess, there was criticism of Powell, but there was no real criticism of Clem Jones in my opinion. He just walked in, he threw his weight around, but any decisions he made I think we got them implemented. There was a bit of a caucus if you like between the Lord Mayor of Darwin, Dr Ella Stack, who was appointed to represent local government, myself as the Deputy Leader of the team in the Legislative Assembly. So the three of us looked after the special interests of the community. And then the other appointed people, I think there were another three, I'm not sure, were appointed to represent the government's interests, and this is where we constantly had tension. Clem was the sort of person that could demand and did get appointments in Canberra with the government of the day and he set the tone.

LM: So the three of you, you mentioned there Ella Stack, yourself and Clem Jones, the common denominator obviously there are you are all elected representatives, you're all political representatives of your local community.

GT: That's correct.

LM: So, and looking back, do you think the fact that the other chairs and the other bureaucrats involved, they had no experience of being responsive to a community? Was that one of the basic problems?

GT: I think the fact that the elected, there was a tension between the elected members and the local public servants, who were well-intended but they didn't have that constant criticism that they felt was needed to assess it.

LM: And how soon after Clem Jones arrived there to take over the chairmanship, how soon did you start to see changes in the process that was going on, and changes in what was actually happening on the ground?

GT: I think it would be fair to say that the first year was lousy. Things didn't work. And whilst everyone was committed to trying to get housing back in order it was the second and the third year, it took until the second or third year to get responsible decision making that could fit a normal plan.

LM: And the tensions there, you mentioned earlier on the bureaucratic bodies that were involved, the Cities Commission, that was a new federal body, and the, not long before when Whitlam was elected they created the new Department of Urban and Regional Development. Do you think, the bureaucrats in those bodies who were sent to Darwin, do you think they saw it as a bit of a test bed or, you know, the city was a bit of a guinea pig for their policies?

GT: I'm sure that the pressure, the government pressure of ministers in cabinet making decisions, essentially money direction ones, was complicated because they were trying to run - how can I put it? - they were trying to run a government using its resources in Canberra were either in the Department of Urban Development or were from the Cities Commission. And it didn't allow for the local community voice to be heard on matters of priority. So I think that's where Clem Jones was able to put meetings together which gave us results in that second or third year.

LM: Now in a speech you made in 2009, March 2009 to a National Young Planners Conference in Darwin you mentioned about Clem's approach and that the previous priorities showed that there'd been sort of a preoccupation with planning rather than actual constructive or reconstruction efforts, but that changed once Clem got there. Is that a fair way to summarise it?

GT: He was certainly the influence that got competence in terms of the decision making, whether it was by federal cabinet and the financial commitment that was needed. And I think, as I said to you earlier, I'm trying to remember how long before the locals were able to stand back and see results, I think it would've been in year three or four. It took a long time to get decision-making properly done. And Clem was, he was a community leader because of his background but on the locals' needs he enabled lots of groups to have their say, and I think that was important.

LM: I've referenced another speech but this one was by Clem Jones himself in 1990, in March 1990 to some former state members of the Queensland Parliament. And he, you know you mentioned how he got things done very quickly and knew how to make decisions and get others to make decisions. But there was, but he was actually wedded to a structure and process for decision-making, wasn't he? He didn't like the idea that the previous Chair didn't have any minutes and more or less sort of divined the mood and decisions at previous meetings, he actually wanted to have a structure for decision-making. Is that a fair comment?

GT: That's right. That's a very fair comment. Clem certainly encouraged the... there were, importantly there were representative groups that were called residents' committees for particular suburbs and he encouraged them to start expressing themselves. You felt with Clem that you were being heard when you opened discussion with him. He was always available. But he was, you know he got the show going. That's the best way I can put it.

LM: And in terms of your own political career since being involved in the reconstruction, how did those days affect your outlook in terms of public policy and public administration?

GT: I think I just copied Clem. I have to say I copied Clem even despite our political differences. I would say he certainly mentored me in my first term in the Legislative Assembly and I, all I can say is I copied a lot his style that he brought to bear and enjoyed many of the debates and public servants that we subsequently had, I copied.

- LM: And, you know, we shouldn't give the impression that he was a one-man band because yourself and others were around him making all these decisions and helping get things back on the road in terms of Darwin's reconstruction and Darwin's future. But where do you think, how do you think things would've panned out if he hadn't been appointed?
- GT: Oh it depends who the substitute would've been. There were many public servants who made a very important contribution to the reconstruction of Darwin. It was a time where there were many others that were also mentored who, either particular occupants of the get them to, the sessions of authority in the public service in the Northern Territory.
- LM: It's been, as we're recording this it's been 45 years thereabouts since Tracy, Cyclone Tracy struck Darwin. There were cyclones before and since but that's obviously the one that stays in peoples' minds, or people of a certain age obviously. Do you think, as generations go on do you think the lessons are remembered or forgotten about what went right and what went wrong in terms of the reconstruction?
- GT: I think in terms of reconstruction Clem Jones engineered the changes that were necessary and he was the person who took responsibility for the changes. I think there were, and there were many others in the community that made an input but didn't have the cheque book. So it was a matter of getting the leaders of the community to express the style of government and the way in which a commission like the Darwin Reconstruction Commission would operate. And that area is got to always come back to acknowledging that it was Clem Jones who made the major input into the way the decisions were changed.
- LM: So you'd say he was the right person in the right place at the right time?
- GT: Very much so because in effect the major decisions that were so critical were made in that first six/12 months and it wasn't till the subsequent decision making really represented the community. And I think Clem Jones was essential because of his contacts with the federal Labor Party at that time.
- LM: Okay, look thanks very much for that. I think we've pretty much covered a lot of the history and the characters there from that period so thanks very much for taking part, Grant, and thanks for your contribution and for sharing all your memories.
- GT: Thank you. It's good, no, I'm pleased to know it's being done.
- LM: Okay, thanks again.