

Interview: Colin Snell (CS)
Interviewer: Rod Mickleburgh (RM)
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Transcription: Warren Caragata

RM [00:00:06] Colin Snell, it's great to see you, buddy. You're looking good for a guy your age. So let's go way back. Right to the beginning. So tell me about your boyhood, where you were born, your upbringing, your parents. What was that like?

CS [00:00:23] Oh, well, it—

RM [00:00:23] I can tell you weren't born in Canada.

CS [00:00:27] And I've probably lost my Geordie accent. Because someone from Newcastle is classed as a Geordie, and everybody in the British Isles knows what a Geordie is. And if you talk Geordie, like my wife, who watches Vera, she's got to have the—

RM [00:00:52] —subtitles.

CS [00:00:56] Anyway, that's where I was born, and I was born in 1940, right when the war was going full blast.

RM [00:01:04] Did you say you were born in Newcastle?

CS [00:01:06] No. Well, I wasn't born in Newcastle. And you don't have to be born in Newcastle to call yourself a Geordie, because it wasn't very far away. So I had the misfortune of not ever seeing my dad. My dad was a seafarer, like a lot of the guys in South Shields. My birthplace was South Shields, just on the very entrance of the Tyne, which is the River Tyne. And it was a very, very prominent target for the Germans, because they had coal mines there, they had steel mines, and they also had shipbuilding, which I found later on in my life that it was going to be my choice of being a tradesman in the shipbuilding industry. And I did that, and I started my apprenticeship in 1956.

RM [00:02:16] You were 16?

CS [00:02:17] 16, and I was out of my apprenticeship at 20.

RM [00:02:23] And was that in the same place?

CS [00:02:25] Yeah.

RM [00:02:25] Your hometown?

CS [00:02:25] It was a very famous shipyard. And it was very—that was an important thing for the war effort too because they were building ships like you wouldn't believe. And so I finished my apprenticeship in Wallsend-on-Tyne. And I apprenticed as a shipwright. And part of you, when you're a shipwright, you get the advantage of laying the ship, and we built big ones, like the last ship I worked on was an oil tanker, and it was 750 feet long, and over 75 feet wide. And I went on sea trials with it because I'd taken all my four years

apprenticeship was not on the one ship, but I had worked on that ship. And I had the benefit of—the apprentice shipwright could go on sea trials of the ship, and I did. And the thing that I tell people the most about that is when you go on sea trials, and especially in a tanker, they fill all the tanks. And I can't remember how many tanks it had, but it was big, and they fill it all with water. And then you're out onto the North Sea, go all the river down the Tyne, and you're out on the North Sea, and the pilots aboard. And the guy who's going to be the skipper of it is on board too, and they fire the engines. Huge, huge turbines are in there to push this thing. And they wanted to get it up at full speed. So they got it at full speed. But it could only go 10 miles an hour. And it took about, oh, I can't remember what the figure was for, when they turned off the engines, they would have it full blast, and everything's shaking, and full blast. And the pilot would say, cut the engines, cut the engines, and about five mile or six mile down the way, it would finally come to a stop.

RM [00:04:53] Well it tells you what oil tankers are like and why they're a hazard if they're near coastlines, right, because they can't stop. And this was early on.

CS [00:05:03] And when they're full with oil, you know, it's a little heavier than water.

RM [00:05:08] So tell me exactly where this is. This is Scotland, right?

CS [00:05:14] No.

RM [00:05:15] Where's the Tyne?

CS [00:05:15] The Tyne is in the County of Durham. And it's right up against the last county, which is Northumberland, and then you're into Scotland. So I had a close relationship with Scotland because I like to go to Scotland on my holidays at Easter time, and I could go skiing there. And I did get a job as a ski instructor in Scotland. And people say to me, I'm full of BS, but I've got pictures of it.

RM [00:05:54] Ski instructor in Scotland?

CS [00:05:55] In Scotland. And the reason I immigrated was I wanted to be a ski instructor in Vancouver. Because my buddy who I met in Chamonix, France, when I about 18, he says, 'Come, when you're out of your apprenticeship, why don't you come over to Vancouver? You could be a ski instructor there.' So I did.

RM [00:06:25] Okay, I'm going stop you though. First with a couple of questions. So you're born in 1940, do you have any memory of the war?

CS [00:06:33] Yes, I do, and I tell my wife this, and she has difficulty believing me. I was raised by my grandparents because my father was torpedoed in the Irish Sea. He never saw me, and I never saw him.

RM [00:06:51] He died?

CS [00:06:52] He was a cook on the ship, and the torpedo hit midships, and he was gone. So I never saw him and he was one day out of the port where he was signed on the ship. One thing that I remember about it is, the odd time, and I was only about four years old. I used to sleep in the same bed as my grandparents. And when the air raids come over, and they come over just about every second night, we could walk out of the bedroom door right

into a concrete bunker. And we couldn't come out. We couldn't have a fire on in case you could see the flames and that's my most vivid memory.

RM [00:07:58] Well, that's pretty dramatic. And so you were an apprentice at 16, which meant you left school early.

CS [00:08:05] Yes.

RM [00:08:05] Why did you want to leave school to become an apprentice?

CS [00:08:09] Because I always had an inclination that I would like to be a seafarer, because a lot of the guys in the town had fathers that were seafarers, and the carpenter, the carpenter on a ship, has got a pretty easy time, because he's responsible for dropping the anchor. They always had the carpenter go on the windlass and operate the windlass. The carpenters, when you're in the shipyard, you lay the bed for which the windlass sits on, and you have to caulk it, you have to caulk the—these were timbers—this by about this, you know [moving his hands to show the size]. So anyway, that was a thing I wanted to do, was be a shipwright. I was pleased they did it because the whole ship, I said it was 700 feet long, but when you build a ship, you have to lay the whole ship out on the floor of what we call the lock. And you scribe all the shapes of the— I'm losing the words for the—I can't get the word for the—

RM [00:09:36] Don't ask me. Keep going.

CS [00:09:41] OK. The other thing I wanted to qualify—I told Natasha before I started—a couple of years ago, Rod, I was diagnosed with the minor—

Natasha [00:09:57] —cognitive.

CS [00:09:58] —cognitive impairment, which is one or two steps before Alzheimer's. So it bugs me right now, because it's coming on, it gets worse.

RM [00:10:09] Well, it's a good thing we got you now.

CS [00:10:11] Yeah. Because next week I might not know—

RM [00:10:13] Exactly who are you? I don't mean to make light of it but, no you're doing great.

CS [00:10:19] Yeah, but what's happening, too, is when I have a conversation at home with the kids or whatever, I'll start a conversation and I get into the first part of the story. And then I have to ask people, what's the right word?

RM [00:10:38] And what's the story about? All right, so that's a four-year apprenticeship.

CS [00:10:44] Yes.

RM [00:10:45] And so, finished when you were 20. So then what happened?

CS [00:10:50] Well, after I finished my apprenticeship, I still went skiing. I went up with a bunch of—

RM [00:11:00] Let me stop you there. How did you get into skiing?

CS [00:11:03] Well, I was in a climbing club before that, in the northeast of England. A lot of guys were climbers, good climbers, too, rock. And the guy I teamed up with to go up to the—it's in Cheviot Hills, which separates England from Scotland. And you know, I just had the urge to follow this guy. And he was crazy as a cut cat, you know? And if I tell you his name after the interview, you'll probably recognize his name. But he was really, really left. And anyway, Les said to me, Colin, why don't you get out of this place and come to Vancouver, he says.

RM [00:12:03] He's the guy that got you into skiing?

CS [00:12:05] Yeah. He says, come to Vancouver. I said, well, jeez, I'm only an apprentice. I'm not getting big money. He says, well, I'll send you the money. So sure enough, he sends me the money.

RM [00:12:18] And he was in Vancouver at that time?

CS [00:12:20] He was in North Van. And he was an electrician by trade.

RM [00:12:25] And you knew him back, he was from your—

CS [00:12:29] I didn't know him long, because I would meet him when we skied in Europe, you know? So we did skiing and there was one ski run in Chamonix, which is on the Mont Blanc.

RM [00:12:41] I know where that is.

CS [00:12:43] And the Mont Blanc—

RM [00:12:44] So I didn't think working class people were there.

CS [00:12:46] No, I saved all my money for the trip, and we would go once a year and spend it all in Chamonix or Val-d'Isere. So I met Les for the first time in—because the club, we were always talking about this guy called Les, who had red hair, and he was quite a character, in Vancouver too, everybody knew Les. Anyway, so I came to Canada, because Les helped me get here. I flew over to Canada, and—

RM [00:13:31] You were 20?

CS [00:13:34] No, 23. Anyway, so that's the only way I could get over here, was getting some help. So anyway, I got it, and I decided to come via—fly to Montreal, get on the train and come five days to get to Vancouver. And when I got to Vancouver, my buddy Les was there to pick me up. And Roddy, the first thing he did just to make it clear, he drove me, I got off the train, and the longest I'd ever been on a train was six hours to London. This sucker, five days, five days to get to Vancouver. It was just great, you know, and I had a couchette.

RM [00:14:42] Oh, those are great.

CS [00:14:43] Oh, and you know, I was living like a king for five days. Anyway, got to town, and here's Les. He's waiting there with a nice Yankee car. And so the first thing he does,

he takes me from where the CN station is to the famous place on Hastings and Main. And I—this is a pretty rough place. There were people would kill you—it wasn't as bad as what it is now.

RM [00:15:27] I know, it was a real meeting place, Main and Hastings in those days.

CS [00:15:31] Yeah, but there was people that, you know, they say they weren't sleeping on the streets, but they were, lying in the gutter, you know, they would come in and spend all their money, the loggers.

RM [00:15:41] Loggers, yeah.

CS [00:15:42] Lying in the—

RM [00:15:43] —And First Nations people.

CS [00:15:44] And my eyes were like saucers, you know.

CS [00:15:46] I said, Jesus, what the hell have I come to? Anyway, I found out. Because I lived with Les for only a—and Monique. She was a professor at SFU, his wife. And they put me up there. And then my first job—they had phoned Les—I left it with the UIC [Unemployment Insurance Commission] that I was coming into town and this was when I would like a job in the shipyard. So they phoned up and they said, oh, there's a job here for a shipwright in Burrard Drydock. So I said, Jesus, I haven't got any tools. My tools were coming in the box and they're coming up through the Panama Canal. So, I got here and they said, can you go to work tomorrow? I said, no, I've got no tools. He said, well, go and see Joe Matsumoto. Joe Matsumoto in Deep Cove, he says, and if you haven't got tools, he'd probably find you some tools. So I go and I meet Joe, and Joe says, Colin, have you ever caulked a boat? And I had caulked on a ship but never on a boat. This was a yellow cedar hull, and it was his last wooden boat that he was going to make. He was very famous of making aluminum seine boats. The truth of it is that the fishermen didn't like the aluminum boats because it was like a tin can. So I said, well, yeah, I can caulk. But I said, jeepers, I've got no—they call them caulking irons, you know, three or four different shapes and sizes. I said, I've got no tools. He says, well, I want you to caulk the hull of the ship. I said I haven't got my tools with me. They won't be here for about a month. He says, we'll get you the tools. So he got me the tools and I helped caulked his last ship.

RM [00:18:08] Wow, isn't that something.

CS [00:18:10] He was a super guy, too. All his kids were—

RM [00:18:14] He was legendary because he lost everything when the war—in internment—and then he came and built it back up again. So that's something.

CS [00:18:23] Yeah, and I found something else out that, because I had neighbours who were Japanese, and they were taken up to the Okanagan, and a lot of them were able to work in the vineyards.

RM [00:18:45] So, go ahead.

CS [00:18:47] That's the end of the—no, but the other story was, I had to go to work, I was up on—Les lived where the Upper Levels was. To get there, from there to Deep Cove with

your toolbox. I said, Jesus, it'll take me a week to get to Deep Cove. Anyway, so I did. I stayed with Joe—oh, I worked there about year, I think. Then I looked around and I thought, jeepers, you know, I had to work on these bloody big ships, you know, and I thought I'm going to starve if I'm going to get money from the shipyards, you know. It would have been good money, but it was nothing like the work that I was doing in England. So anyway, I went in and I went to the Carpenters' Union and I said, look, I'm like a peg in a round hole, square peg in a round hole. I said, I can see I'm not going to make a living if I depend on shipbuilding. So they said, well, you've got your certificate for your—because I had a diploma from the shipyard. And I said, will you give me some credit if I take my apprenticeship? Well, I don't know, you know, they were saying they weren't too sure, and I said, well, you know, I've done four years of working with the tools, you know, surely I'll get it. So I got a good deal out of the Vancouver local and they said we'll give you a union card, but you've got to take an apprentice again for two years, and then you'll, know the bare bones of the construction trade. So I did. And when I went to my trade school at the Burnaby—it used to be the Vancouver vocational school in Burnaby. And I had to go there two nights a week and the Saturday morning. But then after about six months into it, they then decided that, oh, it's not working out with these guys in night school. They fall asleep in the class. So they said I would have to take a month a year and finish up. So I did another 18 months in going every day for five days. And then I got my trade card here.

RM [00:21:46] And then you really made money.

CS [00:21:48] Of course, yeah, because I was making—I remember the first job I got was on Robson Street in Vancouver with a Jewish guy. And he was a super guy. And he wasn't the builder, but he was the pick—there were people who wanted him to be the superintendent from the ground to the roof. So I worked for that guy and sure enough he kept me on until the roof was on.

RM [00:22:28] Okay, I have one more question about back home. So were you conscious of the union then? Were you part of the union or—

CS [00:22:35] I was on my first strike. We had a strike of the apprentices.

RM [00:22:42] Wow.

CS [00:22:43] The apprentices went on strike, and it was a big company. And then I got the job. They wanted somebody to be the shop steward, so I said, yeah, I'll do it. I don't know a lot about it, but I'll take it on. So we went out on strike, and I think the strike only lasted two weeks. Then they made a deal. I can't remember, Rod, how much I made as a first-year apprentice. Well, I wasn't a first-year apprentice. Yeah, I was, a first-year apprentice. You went through the stages and I think I made about two and six a day.

RM [00:23:26] We don't know what that means. What is it, four bob or something?

CS [00:23:29] Two shillings and six pence.

RM [00:23:31] Well, is that a lot? It doesn't sound like very much.

CS [00:23:35] Anyway, it was a good company. All the stuff in Tyneside, everything was union. There's not such a thing as a non-union. But they had the odd strike, you know, in the shipyard.

RM [00:23:49] What was it like being on strike for a young fellow?

CS [00:23:54] Because, you see, you had to organize the apprentices, and some of them wouldn't want to walk the line, you know? But we said, look, as long as we stay together, and I had to join the—they had a special name for the guys that worked in the shipyard. Anyway, I've lost it. Anyway, but it was tough. I had to cycle on my bike from Marsden, which is right on the edge of the Tyne, before you go through the Tyne, to halfway up to Newcastle on the river. And I went on my bike every day for four years. And I had to go under the Tyne in a tunnel. And every day, rain or shine, I went there.

RM [00:24:59] So why did you want to leave all that? Was that just because you wanted to be a ski instructor or you just thought Canada might be a land of opportunity?

CS [00:25:07] Yeah, you know, I could see in England, you know, if I had to depend on working my butt off and not getting that much money. So he says, Les—

RM [00:25:20] It's not Les McDonald, is it?

CS [00:25:23] It's Les McDonald.

RM [00:25:26] IBEW.

CS [00:25:27] They used to call them in the 213, the Red— what was it? I'll have to think about that one, too.

RM [00:25:37] But he was Red. So did he have an influence on your politics?

CS [00:25:42] Yeah. he really did.

RM [00:25:45] And you know he became a big triathlete and everything like that.

CS [00:25:49] Won in Whistler, not in Whistler, he won in Hawaii three times in his age group.

RM [00:25:58] Yeah, amazing guy.

CS [00:25:59] Oh, he climbed—he had me on the bloody Chief in Squamish, you know. I'd never climbed a mountain like that.

RM [00:26:11] So I didn't know you knew Les McDonald.

CS [00:26:13] I lived with him until I got on my feet.

RM [00:26:17] Did you remain friends?

CS [00:26:18] Oh, right until he passed away. And I tell people, Les, he was one of the smartest guys I've ever met, because he didn't just deal with trade union stuff. He was on the World Olympic Committee.

RM [00:26:38] He's in the Triathlete Hall of Fame or something like that.

CS [00:26:42] Oh, he was an incredible guy. When he was in the forces before the war in England, he taught himself to getting on the ski team for the British entry into the games. I cannot remember what year it was, but he was amazing.

RM [00:27:04] And so, just to clarify here, we're talking about Les McDonald, who was very heavily involved— was he president of IBW Local 213?

RM [00:27:15] No, he was too left to be president.

RM [00:27:16] Well, I don't know, but they had a lot of communists then in the IBEW, George Gee and people like that and they were also involved in the Lenkurt strike.

CS [00:27:17] He did.

RM [00:27:17] The wildcat.

CS [00:27:17] And Les was right into that one. But he wasn't working for Lenkurt. He was in the 213, had a very, very long record of being really—

RM [00:27:42] Communist.

CS [00:27:43] Yeah, Communist.

RM [00:27:44] So I didn't know that you knew Les McDonald. He's kind of a famous guy in the labour movement, for good and for bad. All right, so you joined the Carpenters' Union, you were getting work and so on, and did you get involved in the union right off the bat?

CS [00:28:02] Right away. Right away.

RM [00:28:04] Is that Les McDonald's influence or just do you have some working class—

CS [00:28:08] Oh no, I had working class from yeah. My dad died, but I had a stepfather who was a miner, and I played soccer for the Woodburn Colliery Welfare. Every mine had a soccer team, so I played soccer with that.

RM [00:28:34] Okay, before we get into the union, I just want to ask you one more thing about—like what was construction like in those days? Did you like going to work? Did you like doing the work? Did you like being a carpenter?

CS [00:28:44] Oh, I loved it, yeah.

RM [00:28:45] What did you like about it?

CS [00:28:46] Well, when you're outside, you know, you're up, and I was always crazy about working outside and, you know, and doing hard work, you know, and I fitted right in there. And I didn't just do work on the heavy stuff. You know, I went through it and did dry wall and all that stuff that the carpenters have to do anyway. But there's some heavy work involved. And I enjoyed it. And the Vancouver local, I don't know how it came about, but it was one of the best unions for the working guys. You know, they were put on the trusteeship during the McCarthy era. And I never met anybody that had been an officer then, but we had a good two dozen people that were in the party.

RM [00:29:53] Were you in the party?

CS [00:29:53] I never signed up in the party, but I was always doing stuff that the party wanted.

RM [00:30:00] Was that good for the union, do you think?

CS [00:30:05] Yeah.

RM [00:30:05] In what way?

CS [00:30:05] Well, because if someone wasn't getting treated in the manner that you would expect, you could get somebody at the union to come out and straighten them out.

RM [00:30:19] So they didn't just follow the party line or anything, they were good on the job?

CS [00:30:23] No, no. But there would always be—they were very popular for it—if they were having peace marches, we would make the banner and all that stuff, you know.

RM [00:30:34] And so, you were just a shop steward, or did you run for office?

CS [00:30:38] I was the shop steward and then I run for the executive board and then—I'm not sure about what year it was—but after being on the executive for about three years, I run for office, which was unpaid, for another, at least another two or three years. And then I got elected as a business agent. And so you're on the executive, but you're also the guy who has to go out onto the job sites and check them out.

RM [00:31:25] Did you like being a business agent?

CS [00:31:27] I did, I did, because, you know, you got, the guys were—looking after the contract, you know. We had a contract, and our union went on strike quite often. But finally, when the building trades started working as a unit—at one time, each union had their own. And we had 27 locals in the province, one of the most, we were recognized as one of the biggest unions. We weren't the biggest numerically but we had 27 locals. We used to have guys go out and work on the dam sites and all that, you know. When they were building—I never ever went on a dam site, but there was a lot of work for carpenters for building the dams and the mines and all that stuff. So it was a busy time, and—then what happened after I was a business agent for about four or five years—

RM [00:32:51] When was that, Colin?

CS [00:32:52] I just can't remember, Rod exactly—oh, I can, because my daughter was born—the night my first daughter was coming into the world. I'm lying there and Peggy says Colin, I think I've got to go. I think the baby's coming. I said, oh, you've got to go right now. She says, yeah, we've got to go right now. So the first one was born, and she's over 50 now. So it had to be—

RM [00:33:35] So that's in the early '70s then, mid-70s. Well, do you remember those confrontations with the Social Credit government?

CS [00:33:44] Oh, yeah.

RM [00:33:44] Do you want to talk about that?

CS [00:33:46] Sure, because strangely enough, one of my times in the union moment—the BC Fed had asked the Carpenters if I could go on and organize a rally in Victoria. So sure enough, here's me, I had to organize the buses and go to the different locals and get the—that was quite a deal actually, because the bloody ferries, the ferries were stacked with people. You know, we were making a big deal of it. I can't remember exactly what the, it wasn't related to the peace movement and all, it was all about our contract, but they used our contract to, you know, bring the labour movement into the struggle, you know, and it worked out, but there was some—people probably don't realize it, but even at that time, there was—people that were more radical, or they claimed to be more radical, than the Communist Party.

RM [00:35:18] Oh, those guys.

CS [00:35:20] At the time, they called them Maoists, because they—

RM [00:35:23] Yeah, that's right. But anyway—

RM [00:35:24] But they never played any significant factor.

CS [00:35:26] They didn't, no.

RM [00:35:27] They were just out there yelling away. But there was incredible legislation passed by the W.A.C. Bennett government.

CS [00:35:35] Oh, yeah.

RM [00:35:36] Which gave the government the right to impose contracts and impose binding arbitration and all that and there was a real fight by the construction unions against that, including doing some illegal action, and you were threatened with jail. And do you remember that?

CS [00:35:52] Yeah, and at one point, there was—I remember Homer Stevens—Homer Stevens went to—I was going to say Essendale, but it wasn't Essendale, it was where the—

RM [00:36:09] Oakalla.

CS [00:36:10] Oakalla. And the reason why was the fishermen were on strike and they wouldn't go along with the legislation. And the labour movement got behind them and it helped to settle that dispute.

RM [00:36:30] It was quite a wild time, eh?

CS [00:36:32] Oh, yeah. Every second week, there was somebody going on strike. No, you know, they say—but we had some terrific unions. Just, you know, they were solid as a rock.

RM [00:36:48] It was really a big help when you got the Building Trades Council, right? Because craft unions, as you know, can cause a lot of problems because they're not unified.

CS [00:36:56] Yeah, you know, they would argue about who's going to do what and all.

RM [00:36:59] Who's going to pick up the hammer. But the Building Trades Council really helped, right?

CS [00:37:06] Oh yeah, and we had a really good leader in the building trades at that time, Jim Kinnaird, and he ended up being the president of the BC Fed, and he's also from Scotland.

RM [00:37:20] I really liked Jim Kinnaird. Do you want to talk about Jim Kinnaird a little bit?

CS [00:37:23] Well I know a couple of things about Jim Kinnaird because I played soccer with Jim Kinnaird and Jim Kinnaird was a good soccer. He wasn't as good as me.

RM [00:37:32] I didn't know that.

CS [00:37:35] So the big guys, you know, the little guys can run rings around him. He was a decent guy, Jimmy Kinnaird.

RM [00:37:44] Yeah, it was sad when we lost him.

CS [00:37:51] He was the key for the BC Fed, but the Fed grew really strong. They had a good organization. I was working for the Carpenters but I got hired by the Fed when we were unemployed—

CS [00:38:41] The BC Fed was terrific, you know, they would get right in there and—

RM [00:38:47] They had these unemployment councils or something like that. Is that what it was?

CS [00:38:55] The other thing, Rod , while I was in the Carpenters' Union, I also was active in the Vancouver Labour Council, which was recognized as one of the strong parts of the BC Fed. But we always could depend on help from the BC Fed. And the Lenkurt thing was one of the ones that they were involved with and pushed, you know.

RM [00:39:24] Well, Paddy Neale went to jail.

CS [00:39:27] I think he went to jail because he was part of the labour council and he wouldn't back down and say the guys should go back to work.

RM [00:39:37] Well, because that was a big fight with the International. Do you want to talk about the relationships with your international union? Because the Vancouver local of the Carpenters' Union was very much opposed, where they had all this conflict with the International. What was that like?

RM [00:39:52] Yeah, well, our Carpenters' Union was part of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America. And they were, in my opinion, they were really right wing. And I was just talking to Peggy the other night when we're talking about Trump and

all that stuff, I was saying, you know, I'll put money on it. They moved our pension plan, for Christ's sake, to head office in Las Vegas. Anyway, I did get hired by Ray Haynes, and that was how we worked the deal to Victoria. That was part of the unemployment campaign against the government, both the feds and the province.

RM [00:41:10] And did you stay as a business agent or did you run for president or anything like that?

CS [00:41:16] Yeah, after I finished with the Fed and I had my job still at the—I didn't ride two horses—I went back to the Carpenters and then we had a great president for the province — this is before Bill Zander, who's probably the best president we ever had.

RM [00:41:47] Bill Zander.

CS [00:41:50] Solid as a rock. And he didn't make any bones about it. You know, they would try to say that was a Red and all that stuff. Maybe he was.

RM [00:42:02] Well, he was.

CS [00:42:05] But we had twenty-seven locals, and Bill helped to really make it a good union.

RM [00:42:13] Did you stay as a business agent?

CS [00:42:16] No, I first ran as the secretary treasurer. So we had the Provincial Council of Carpenters who had a office in Vancouver, but they coordinated the union on a provincial basis. We would represent all the twenty-seven locals in one contract.

RM [00:42:45] So, Colin, you became a pork chopper, I guess.

CS [00:42:49] A pork chopper, yeah.

RM [00:42:50] And did you miss working on the job?

CS [00:42:53] Oh, at one time I asked for a leave of absence to go and work on the tools again. Only guy ever to do that, I think I was, anyway.

RM [00:43:06] And did you do that?

CS [00:43:07] No, the local gave me the OK, and I went back and pounded nails.

RM [00:43:14] What was that like?

CS [00:43:16] Well, it was good. You know, the guys would kid you on. You know, you just come to get the good jobs and make some money.

RM [00:43:25] Probably made more money as a carpenter than you did as a union guy.

CS [00:43:29] The union reps, they got the best rate that the guys got.

RM [00:43:37] It was tied to the top trade rate.

[00:43:40] They didn't keep me on apprentice.

RM [00:43:44] And so, all right, let's talk a bit about the Bentall Centre, because that was a big one.

CS [00:43:55] It was big.

RM [00:43:55] Do you remember when you first heard about it, when you first got the news? That's when the four carpenters died in this terrible fall when their fly form collapsed and down they went.

CS [00:44:07] I think, if I'm not mistaken, I think I was back working on the tools then, and I had worked for the company where the disaster happened, and in fact I had worked on the same job, because they did about four Benthalls.

RM [00:44:25] Yes, this was Bentall Tower Four.

CS [00:44:27] Four. And I don't think I worked on Four, but I think I worked on Three. And they were one of the best organized companies to work for. They had been involved in strikes, but they always would be prepared to pay the full rate, you know, once the contract was, and if they were prepared to work through the strike, they wouldn't be—they would sign a document with the provincial council that they would pay the rate that was expected to get. But when I worked for them, I don't think I was ever a shop steward with Dominion.

RM [00:45:28] Do you remember when you first heard about the Bentall Centre?

CS [00:45:31] I'm not that clear on what, if I knew, I meant to look and see if I knew what the—what was the year, do you know, Rod?

RM [00:45:42] I think it was a '81 or something like that.

CS [00:45:45] I brought a book and it'll be in there.

RM [00:45:49] I think it was 1981, wasn't it? Or '79? Anyway, keep going.

CS [00:45:55] If it was '81, I would probably be [sounds of rustling through papers]. That's what the building trades put out.

RM [00:46:09] 1981.

CS [00:46:11] Eighty-one. Yeah.

RM [00:46:13] Did you know any of the guys that died?

CS [00:46:17] No, I don't think I did. If I saw the names, but I'm pretty sure I didn't. But the employees of Dominion were always solid with the union. They were good. But the key thing about that tragedy, too, is—it was horrific enough that we put the pressure on the government to have a—

CS [00:46:58] Industrial Inquiry Commission.

CS [00:47:00] —an inquiry. But the other thing that is vivid for me is that I was asked to sit on the inquest. I think four guys from the union sector that were sat on it. I cannot remember all their names now.

RM [00:47:27] What was that like sitting on that inquest and hearing that information plus the survivors, the widows, and so on talk? Can you talk a bit about that?

CS [00:47:38] Yeah, it was really, really heart-breaking, you know, because the widows were in for it. In fact, when they had the inquest, someone had taken a—no, not someone, the company had had a camera 24/7, you know, and you were sitting there—these guys—this big slab, big slab. And it was made up of this—it's called a fly form.

RM [00:48:33] A fly form, right.

CS [00:48:34] So the fly forms were all sectional, put on. And it just speeded up the work.

RM [00:48:42] Because they went from floor to floor laying the concrete.

CS [00:48:45] They could pour a slab, I think it was from the ground to the roof, they could pour a slab every couple of weeks, have them pull this fly form out, pull it up and move it, you know. They had—this form here was not like the one that went down, but it was similar, but much smaller. When we were watching the movie, you saw the guys, the four that went down with it—I don't think there was anybody that didn't go down with it. The corner of the building, Rod, is over here. They built a form or somebody designed a form that would stand in the corner and the evidence was that they always tied the form to one of the stanchions. But they hadn't tied it off at the time of the accident. But at the end of the inquest, it was evident that the form that went down couldn't stand on its own.

RM [00:50:34] It was badly designed.

CS [00:50:36] It was very, very poorly designed. And you know, for a company that size, it was not expected, you know, because they were streamlined. They've got the work done fast, but they didn't push the guys. But these forms, you know, it was evident that—you could sit and watch the thing and you could see the guys walking out the edge. And then the equilibrium disappeared and it just went down right to the 35 floors.

RM [00:51:20] Yeah, it's terrible.

CS [00:51:21] Just unbelievable.

RM [00:51:23] Go ahead.

CS [00:51:22] Well, the government couldn't do anything better. They said, look, we're going to—

RM [00:51:37] To the government's credit, Social Credit government.

CS [00:51:39] Yeah, yeah.

RM [00:51:40] Jack Heinrich.

CS [00:51:41] Yeah. Yeah.

RM [00:51:42] To their credit actually.

CS [00:51:43] And then, they said, oh no, we've got to find this out. I mean, you can't have people going up there and having to work on stuff that hasn't been designed enough to hold the concrete and all that stuff. I can't remember either, Rod, how long the—well, I know the inquest went about six days. I don't know, but the reason why I brought this [holds a paper] is our union—

RM [00:52:19] There's a picture of Roy Gautier in there.

CS [00:52:25] Put the pressure on. We hired this guy.

RM [00:52:33] Craig Paterson.

CS [00:52:34] Craig Paterson.

RM [00:52:35] I know, Craig. He just died last year. He was a good friend of mine.

CS [00:52:38] Yeah.

RM [00:52:39] And he was good, wasn't he?

CS [00:52:42] He was a good lawyer.

RM [00:52:45] You know, I've never seen this before. I'm gonna take a picture.

CS [00:52:52] And anyway, we [unclear] and it was tough, you know. A lot of people don't realize that if the jury isn't united, it's got to be a hung jury. So anyway, there was guys who I had negotiated with in the negotiations with CLR [Construction Labour Relations]. CLR had come on, it was a new thing. But they were in business when that happened. And they had appointees, and for all they were from employers, they were good and skilled people, which we relied upon in the inquest to come out with, you know—if things weren't broken out the way they—what had happened. It wouldn't have brought out what had to be done?

RM [00:54:04] You know, that inquest, I remember this, is it may have been one of the best inquests there ever was because the recommendations that came out were very strong and they were unanimous—the recommendations—and they had a huge impact. I mean, you know, coroner's inquest recommendations. Okay, take it very seriously, and then they're ignored, right?

CS [00:54:29] Yeah.

RM [00:54:30] But those recommendations were not ignored.

CS [00:54:32] It made a big difference, a big difference because it was obvious that, you know, you just cannot have guys working on things like that without even a safety belt. At the time of that accident, you didn't have to tie off. Right now, you know, I was on a job. Guys would say, oh, yeah, we've got to get the job done. And they'd say, hey, we've got to follow the rules. And we had good stewards on the job. They knew what was in the

workmen's compensation because— At that time, too, the workers compensation wasn't that strong for the guys. And somebody had to kick the butt, you know?

RM [00:55:32] That's very true.

CS [00:55:33] And they did. Somebody went in and kicked the butt, and they made all kinds of changes to the regulations.

RM [00:55:40] They did. So I've asked you this again, but I'll ask, I've asked you this already, but I'll ask it again, because I remember that afterwards, and especially after the survivors, the widows testified, one of the hardened people in the court, he was a sheriff or somebody like that, said it was one of the most emotional inquests he'd ever been at. Do you remember that kind of feeling and those emotions?

CS [00:56:07] It was tough.

RM [00:56:09] Close to tears at any point? Of course you're a hard guy, but—

CS [00:56:16] I don't recall. If I had broken down, I wouldn't have thought anything less of myself.

RM [00:56:25] Do you remember their testimony though?

CS [00:56:33] Oh yeah, year. And the surviving widows, you know, they were—

RM [00:56:45] Terrible. So once the inquest was over, can you talk a bit about, I mean, you guys disappear and you go and deliberate, you know, and make your recommendations. And do you remember those meetings and how long it took and whether there was disagreement? Can you talk a bit about that?

CS [00:57:05] I just cannot remember, even the other guys from the trade union movement, they weren't from the local, you know, that the guys were in. It was my local that they belonged to, you know.

RM [00:57:28] They were good recommendations.

CS [00:57:30] They were good. And we got them because we would go and meet. And I'd say, look, that's not going to fly. It's not going to fly. We're not going to sign off on that.

RM [00:57:45] When you look back, I mean, are you, what are your thoughts on the role that you played in that whole situation and in it, which actually did have an impact on improving on-the-job safety? Do you want to talk about how you feel about that looking back? You're proud of the role you played?

CS [00:58:08] Oh yeah. I wouldn't like to have gone through it again, you know. It's just, you go home after the day and hearing the stuff and then you say, Jesus, we cannot have this again. It cannot happen again.

RM [00:58:24] And it actually didn't happen again. There hasn't been a fly-form accident because you made sure that there were tougher regulations for the design of fly forms.

CS [00:58:35] Yeah.

RM [00:58:37] And since then?

CS [00:58:38] We made it specific for that one form that was on the corner. If it had been stable in itself, it would never have gone over, even the weight of the guys, but it wasn't so much the weight of the guys. You can see by that photo, Rod, how much, how heavy it is, it's like a bloody—

RM [00:59:10] It's on the cover, I think.

CS [00:59:14] Look at how much steel is there. Bloody ton of steel right there, you know, and then you just need to, if it's not stable—

RM [00:59:29] Well, it was interesting, too, is because, I mean, it was the same fly form that had been on all the floors right to the top. Then the top was a little bit different because there was something for the window washing, I don't know, there was something about the top floor that was a little bit different because it didn't topple over like on the 30th floor.

CS [00:59:51] No, no.

RM [00:59:52] And so it survived that and then up on the top floor it went over. Because I guess, I don't know, something might have been different.

CS [01:00:00] And we had, I remember now from, there were some very good, there was a couple of engineers on the—and they were very, very good, you know. They just didn't try to make excuses for how it happened, you know. So they were—I just don't remember. I haven't kept in touch with the guys, but they were solid. And the guys from the CLRA, they were right there.

RM [01:00:32] And just to be clear, that's the Construction Labour Relations Association, which is the bargaining arm of the employers. But you guys were united. They were united with the union.

CS [01:00:42] They were united, because they were guys who we used to negotiate with and all that. And they knew that with the evidence that was given, that the government had to get their WCB in line to make sure that it didn't happen again. And it looked like it's proven. There's one thing, and I'm not in a position to say anything about it, but currently, right now, there's been at least three or four crane problems.

RM [01:01:30] Yes.

CS [01:01:31] And I don't think there was no people killed with the collapse, I don't think.

RM [01:01:41] Well, there was in Kelowna.

CS [01:01:42] There was?

RM [01:01:43] Five.

CS [01:01:45] Five guys.

RM [01:01:46] Four on the crane and then it fell into an office and one guy—I think, it might have been non-union and the guy in an office that it collapsed on was also killed. Five in the Okanagan, in Kelowna.

CS [01:02:01] I know the building and there's still, there's still, there was another one.

RM [01:02:09] Dunbar. In Dunbar, there was one. I mean, why are these all happening?

CS [01:02:18] I haven't got an answer for that.

RM [01:02:21] But it just shows you how unsafe construction still is in spite of everything else.

CS [01:02:26] Yeah, they've got to be, if they're going to do things to make changes to speed it up, they can also make changes to the design and that before anybody goes to work.

RM [01:02:44] One of the things I always remembered from the testimony at the inquest was one of the widows, I think, Gunther Couvreur's wife, said Gunther was always safe and he would have been convinced 100 per cent that when he went out on that fly form it was safe. You know, he trusted it and down it went. Terrible. And to the credit of the building trades, every year they have a ceremony.

CS [01:03:22] Yes.

RM [01:03:23] Do you go to that?

CS [01:03:25] I went to the first couple, but then sometimes I'm not there in town and I haven't been to all of them.

RM [01:03:34] Yeah, but that's good. Did you always feel that when you were going to work as a carpenter that it was dangerous? Or did you feel safe? Or how did that, what was that like?

CS [01:03:45] And I'll say about the company that that accident happened with. And I worked for Dominion for quite a while. And they always made sure that they had a safety committee and that the safety committee had the responsibility to say look, you've got to change that, you know.

RM [01:04:10] Which reminds me, you mentioned the Workers' Compensation Board.

CS [01:04:13] Right.

RM [01:04:14] They were criticized because they were not inspecting these sites very often. You know, they didn't bother. And that changed after that too.

CS [01:04:25] Yes.

RM [01:04:25] They had to do a lot more inspections.

CS [01:04:28] No, they didn't—and there's been a change in the industry. At one time, we had way more jobs unionized. And I think the way the industry went—it may be slowing

down a bit now—but there's a lot of big jobs that don't have unions for the crew. And if they're not following the rules, it didn't matter whether they're union or not union. It's the law, and they should follow it right to the last letter.

RM [01:05:14] That reminds me to get into this. I mean when you started in the construction industry as a carpenter just about all jobs were union.

CS [01:05:22] They were.

RM [01:05:23] Up until about the 1980s. And then it changed. You took a big stand at Pennyfarthing.

CS [01:05:29] Pennyfarthing was a good one.

RM [01:05:30] And Expo 86. And those were defeats for the construction unions.

CS [01:05:35] They were.

RM [01:05:36] Do you want to talk about that, how it happened and your reaction to it?

CS [01:05:40] Yeah. And I think when CLRA come around, I think as far as safety's concerned, they always would have their representatives come and try and listen to the workers on what was going on. But some of the companies that are not union, if they don't have to do it, they don't do it. And our union, as an example, one time we had 14,000 guys signed up, and I'm out of touch with the numbers now, but we did at the height of our existence, it was 14,000.

RM [01:06:39] And it's not that today.

CS [01:06:41] No. Not even 50 per cent of them.

RM [01:06:44] Were you involved in the fight at Pennyfarthing and at Expo 86?

CS [01:06:48] Mm-hmm.

RM [01:06:50] What do you remember about that?

CS [01:06:54] I remember it very vividly, because the job—the company building it was the central credit union. And a lot of the unions had their dealings with that. But this one, for some reason, it got away. Until they started digging the hole, they had made up their mind that they were going to use a company called Kerkhoff. At the time, it was probably the biggest non-union company. I don't know whether it was the first high-rise construction. But they made inroads, and I think it hasn't been to the benefit of the working guys.

RM [01:08:06] And Expo 86, too.

CS [01:08:10] Expo, yeah. Again, the Socreds were behind that. And one, I remember clearly, too, that I had to deal with a very well-known guy in the province. He was on the board.

RM [01:08:43] On the labour board?

CS [01:08:44] No, on the—

RM [01:08:47] Expo board, yeah. Not Jimmy Pattison?

CS [01:08:47] Yeah. Jimmy Pattison.

RM [01:08:51] Did you deal with him?

CS [01:08:52] Yeah, I dealt with Jimmy Pattison.

RM [01:08:55] What was that like?

CS [01:08:58] He was a decent guy to deal with, and there was one company on the Kerkhoff job that weren't paying their guys what they should. And I phoned up Jimmy and I said—I think I called him Jimmy—I said, Jimmy, it's BS, they're going to get a lot more in their pocket, the company's going to have more money in their pocket because they're taking it out on the guys. And he says, well, I'll look into it and if they're not paying fair wages, he says, I'll make an effort to change it.

RM [01:09:45] And did he?

CS [01:09:48] He did. But that would be only for our trade, you see.

CS [01:09:53] I mean, I think everyone would agree that in the mid-80s, it was a bad time for the construction unions, which had dominated construction before, and now they weren't dominated. So how did the union react to that? I mean, these were big defeats for the unions. They lost a lot of their clout. You know, what was that like? People going around depressed all the time, or what?

CS [01:10:19] Well, by that time, Rod, I'm trying to think now. I retired in '93. I retired because I had—

RM [01:10:35] At 53?

CS [01:10:38] Fifty-three, I had to retire, because I had [gestures to heart].

RM [01:10:41] For health reasons?

CS [01:10:46] Yeah. And it was, and I found that it was, you know, you couldn't leave, when you're working on construction, you can forget about it, and if you're heading the union, you can't leave it.

RM [01:11:02] You feel it.

CS [01:11:05] But I got lucky. Got six bypasses, and I'm still alive. And kickin'.

RM [01:11:14] Well, you still—

CS [01:11:16] And skiing.

RM [01:11:16] Yeah, but still spilling water [laughter].

CS [01:11:19] Oh, yeah.

RM [01:11:21] So when you look back on your time in the union movement and your time as a carpenter, I mean, good times, bad times? I mean, things you're proud of?

CS [01:11:29] I try to have the power of positive thinking, that's what I like.

RM [01:11:36] What's positive about it?

CS [01:11:37] What's positive, if you can look back and say, look, at one time I used to take on most of the WCB cases for the union, and when you read some of the decisions from the board, it would drive me nuts. You'd have to go and kick butt with the—but there was good people in the—it really improved once the NDP come and made changes to the board, too. That's got to be recognized for sure.

RM [01:12:18] You mean under Dave Barrett?

CS [01:12:20] Yeah, Dave started it.

RM [01:12:21] And Bill King. So did you—what was it? I mean, people have this image of the Communist Party and its role in certain unions and stuff, did that get in the way of the union's effectiveness? Did you have to be on the left to get anywhere within the Carpenters' Union?

CS [01:12:48] Not in later years, but in earlier years, after the trusteeship and all that stuff, you know, it was—Some of the guys would say, you know, it's because of the commies and had nothing to do with who was leading the union.

RM [01:13:08] There was a lot of red-baiting that went on.

CS [01:13:10] Not so much in our union, but other unions would maybe give us the odd kick in the butt.

RM [01:13:19] The international reps were—the road men, isn't that what they were called?

CS [01:13:21] Yeah, the road men, yeah.

RM [01:13:22] The international reps, what did you think of them?

CS [01:13:28] I couldn't even—I could hardly talk to the guys, you know, because you knew that they were saying the one thing to you and then going out the door and doing another thing. But I remember one thing about those early years that we had the—and you'll remember this Roddy. There was a hall in downtown Vancouver, and it was the Boilermakers' Hall. And what was the name of the hall, can you remember?

RM [01:14:05] I think it was the Boilermakers' Hall, wasn't it?

CS [01:14:07] No, no, it had a name.

RM [01:14:08] Pender Street Auditorium?

CS [01:14:09] Pender Street Auditorium. And one thing I always remember, because we paid a little bit in it, but we had the Longshoremen Union. They had a big mural in the Pender Auditorium, beautiful. And it was done by, I'm pretty sure the guy was a Communist.

RM [01:14:35] Fred Wilson.

CS [01:14:37] No, no, it wasn't Fred.

RM [01:14:38] Fraser Wilson.

CS [01:14:39] Fraser Wilson.

RM [01:14:40] And he was a Communist.

CS [01:14:41] Yes, he was, and the son of a gun, he did a beautiful mural. I think it was the Vancouver Labour Council put money into the pot, and the BC Fed did, and they paid a guy from back east to come in and peel 4x8 sheets, peel the mural off and place and then put it into the Longshore Hall and what's the street it's on?

RM [01:15:25] It's the Maritime Labour Centre.

CS [01:15:26] Maritime Labour.

RM [01:15:28] Yeah, it's off Victoria, I think.

CS [01:15:32] Just not so long ago, I have a good friend who I used to be neighbours with and I chummed around with. He was with the—in the longshore, they have an umbrella organization, and they do the negotiations. And he said to me, I said, how are you doing? He says they're thinking about taking the mural out of the hall. And the guy's name is—

RM [01:16:12] I don't know the Longshoremen guys anymore.

CS [01:16:20] No, but you'll know this guy. I'll try and—

RM [01:16:26] Not Brother Garcia, who's left us. Don Garcia.

RM [01:16:31] Don was a good guy too. You've just about got—

RM [01:16:36] One of their heritage guys. He's a retired guy.

CS [01:16:41] He's retired, yeah.

RM [01:16:42] I think I might know who you mean but I can't think of his name either. Maybe we should get some young people in here who can remember something.

CS [01:16:51] But I'll walk out the door, and as soon as I'm driving home, I'll be—

RM [01:16:56] We'll start again.

CS [01:16:59] Anyway, he went after them. Because he was still—they have a good seniors group.

RM [01:17:07] In their pension organization, retirees. They're very good.

CS [01:17:11] And Dan, Dan, Dan's his first name, I've got the first half of it.

RM [01:17:17] I know exactly who you mean. Never mind. We don't care. Anyway. It doesn't refer to you.

CS [01:17:23] He went in and he rattled their chains, and they didn't drop it.

RM [01:17:32] No, it's a beautiful mural. Yeah, so a good life, Colin? In the union movement, as a worker, you know?

CS [01:17:41] Oh, no, I've enjoyed every bit of it. I've met a lot of people. I haven't met a lot of what I would call bad people. And one of my favourites was the Vancouver Labour Council.

RM [01:17:59] With Syd Thompson?

CS [01:18:01] Syd, he was—I'm trying to come up with some other word here.

RM [01:18:13] Loud. He was loud.

CS [01:18:15] He was loud, yeah. Oh, yeah. But you see that that union at one time, I mean the IWA was something else.

RM [01:18:28] Well, you had some confrontations with the IWA sometimes, right? The Carpenters would try to organize the same—

CS [01:18:35] Well, a section of the provincial council was the mill workers. And they were really cabinet makers and that kind of stuff, but that section would say that all the people at work for the company are doing our work. And that was—we didn't ever got that understood.

RM [01:19:08] Were you a big fan of the craft unions and so on? Better to have industrial unions.

CS [01:19:16] I would think so. I guess what's happening with the Carpenters now too, I think they've lost a lot of members because they're not operating in the districts. They're not full bore with the same locals and that. It's having its troubles, I think.

RM [01:19:44] Ever arrested?

CS [01:19:45] Eh?

RM [01:19:45] Were you ever arrested?

CS [01:19:49] I wasn't. I'm one of the few guys that wasn't.

RM [01:19:53] We were on a lot of picket lines.

CS [01:19:55] Well, I was on my first one when I was 16.

RM [01:19:58] I know, that was great. All right, Colin, anything else you think we should talk about?

CS [01:20:06] No, I'd like to say that Bill Zander, he was the one that made our union what it is, in a good way. And Bill didn't get elected because he was a lefty. Bill was elected because he was a smart guy. I've never known a guy, (well, I've known a few) guys that reads as much as Bill. I still keep my tabs with him because he goes to the Century House in Westminster where I sing and he's at the Seniors' and they have discussions about how they're treating the—

RM [01:20:54] Who are you singing with?

CS [01:20:55] I sing with the—we have a choir. Well, I sung 13 years with the Maple Leaf Singers, which were started in New Westminster. And they're still going. They've been going over 50 years. But this one here that I'm singing with now is just a regular seniors hall. And every Monday, we get seniors—men and women— we'll go, we've got 50 in the group, and we'll go and sing in seniors' homes, you know, as the Maple Leaf Singers used to do.

RM [01:21:40] So this isn't a labour choir.

CS [01:21:43] No, it's not a labour choir.

RM [01:21:44] You don't sing Solidarity Forever.

CS [01:21:46] Oh well I guess I could get them to do it.

RM [01:21:51] All right, you mentioned Bill Zander, but what about Roy Gautier? He wasn't a member of the Communist Party.

CS [01:21:59] No, no, but he was one of the best guys I've ever run across. And I spent a lot of time with Roy, I spent a lot of time with Roy because we got involved with the business agents. And he was a business agent and I was a business agent, but he's a super guy. I miss Roy probably the most, yeah.

RM [01:22:23] Yeah, he was special, wasn't he?

CS [01:22:24] He was. There's only one Roy Gautier.

RM [01:22:29] All right.

CS [01:22:31] Yeah, and there's only one Rod Mickleburgh too.

RM [01:22:36] Thank God. I don't think the world could take two of me. And there's only one Colin Snell. All right.