

Interview: Al Blakey (AB)

Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN) assisted by Al Cornes with technical assistance from Lesley Harrington

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[00:00:10] KN: We're here to interview Al Blakey, who was BCTF President from 1979 to 1981; and today's date is July 21st, 2016. The interview is being conducted by Ken Novakowski and Al Cornes, with technical assistance from Lesley Harrington. Good afternoon, Al.

[00:00:34] AB: Good afternoon.

[00:00:36] KN: Al, I want to start the interview by asking you some questions about your early life, before you got involved in the BCTF; and start off by asking you when and where you were born, and where you were raised.

[00:00:51] AB: I was born in Winnipeg; and Winnipeg, Prince Rupert and Victoria were the various places that I was raised in, particularly going to elementary and high-school.

[00:01:06] KN: And can you tell us a bit about your family background, were your parents progressive, were they in the union movement; anything you want to say about that; number of siblings you might have had?

[00:01:21] AB: I was an only child; my parents and I. When I came into existence it was a depression issue; my dad had come from England, in 1923 I think it was; my mother—five years later. They met in Winnipeg. My mother had been a subsidized immigrant, because she was supposed to go to work for the rich as a maid, which she found detestable, so she talked her way out of it, and went to work at a hospital, which her idea was, she was going to work across Canada that way. She got stuck in Winnipeg, when the depression hit. My father was a shipyard worker from Jarrow, in the North East of England; across the river from Newcastle, roughly. He was, I guess you could say, well, definitely a labour party supporter, with a tinge of full socialism sneaking in there. He came to Canada to work on the harvests, so he spent the first couple of years working on harvests on the prairies, and doing construction work up around Hudson's Bay. And then, he got caught, while he was in the Manitoba part, for the depression, and became active as an unemployed activist at that point in time;

[00:02:55] AB: and my mother was, sort of, involved by circumstance, that she was married to my father and she found what he was doing, interesting; so she became an activist as well.

[00:03:05] KN: Can you talk a bit about when you came to Vancouver?

[00:03:12] AB: Well, I should also include something else, there is that background. My father, in 1937, I think it was, joined the Communist Party as a part of his unemployed activity. My mother didn't at that time, I guess she was what would call, a fellow traveller; and she did in 1941, when

they moved to Prince Rupert. Where, as she put it, they tried to stop her, as they (communists) were illegal, but they couldn't stop her so she's got in. So, they were active Communists from that point until the point at which they died.

[00:03:47] KN: So, you actually did a lot of your schooling in Prince Rupert then?

[00:03:54] AB: Grade 1—and there was no Kindergarten at that time—through half-way through Grade 5. And, from there I went to Victoria, and the only notable thing of my schooling in Victoria in one sense, was that the principal at the second school, when my mother was registering me, told her that it was a very good school, no “coloureds” there. So, that gives you an idea of the atmosphere in our school system at that point in time.

[00:04:25] KN: Can you tell us anything about your school experience?

[00:04:29] AB: I was, at best, a C student in many of the subjects. I did well in History and I did well in English. I did C- and in math and the others I barely passed out of Grade 12 onto High-school graduation, because my math test, which I busted my rear end on, but they gave the wrong test in terms of content; and so, I only knew the answer to about 50% of the questions. And I got 51% on the exam. I found out afterwards, by the grape-vine that the test had been so bad, that they added 25 points or marks on. So I really failed with about a 25% or 24% passed; and I got through by the skin of my teeth, by fluke and luck.

[00:05:29] KN: And where did you take your Grade 12?

[00:05:33] KN: What school?

[00:05:35] AB: Victoria High School. Which was, in those days, Victoria High School considered it a bad year, when the top three scholarship students didn't include a Vic High graduate for the province. And, one year, they had three, out of the three. So, it was a school that was looked upon as one of the elite public high-schools in the province. And I had a ball. I didn't do much work, the principal was Harry Smith, grandfather to Charlie Smith, presently with the Georgia Straight, which we found out at a meeting we were working at. And usually, when he was a teacher, he taught English and he was magnificent. Best English teacher I ever had. And he actually, taught as a high-school principal.

[00:06:29] KN: So, out of your whole school experience, he was the one that you remember? Are there other teachers that really stood out to you?

[00:06:36] AB: Well, it was a short period, as they bloody well re-organized at the beginning of the year and our class got shifted to some other teacher. The most impact on me had two: Rudyard Kipling—and that was his name—he was the principal of North Ward Elementary. It was Victoria's equivalent of Strathcona. It was the poor people's school, and he was the best teacher I ever had. I think. And at the same school, Norma McKillican; and she is an honorary life member of the Federation, by the way, since 1931. And how, I don't know, she did it, but she was the only teacher, who would ever thank me for a test. It was History, and I got 97%. So, she

and he, both at the same school, which I think is the best school in Victoria, as far as I thought then, and still do; all were the outstanding teachers, as well as Harry Smith.

[00:07:39] KN: When you finished high-school, what did you want to do?

[00:07:44] AB: I worked at a bakery for one week, at 60 hours a week and I earned \$20. I shifted because I got a job at a Five and Dime store; and I worked in the stock room there; and I was paid \$32.50 for 55 hours, I think it was, a week. And then I went to work in the shipyards, which was a union job, and it paid \$60 a week. So, I worked my way up, but none of them had any option to think about in the long-term. Shipyards were not booming in Victoria. My dad used to work in them, but he was black-listed for being a communist when I was given a job there. The union was hoping I would help to break the black-list. And they didn't fire me, so I, obviously, did help to break the black-list, but that was why I ended-up in the shipyards. And then, I was reading the paper one day, after a year and a half of that, kind of thing, and I found a little article saying, that the government would pay \$900 loan to anybody, who went to Normal School for one year and then, went out teaching.

[00:09:09] AB: And there was a terrible teacher shortage; this post-war type of thing, because it was in 1954 and then 1955. So, I thought, what the hell else am I going to do? —I don't have a clue, so I took the money. And I went to Normal School. And at first, I had no desire or keen ambition to be a teacher, I never even had thought about it; but after my first practice teaching, I knew I was going to do it. And the courses didn't provide me with anything that was useful, once I got out and taught, so I didn't pass with the highest marks on earth, but that was consistent with my regular school, anyway. But I passed, opened the paper the next morning, and found one page filled with ads for teachers. I applied to one district, three days later I got a telegram offering me two jobs. So, I flipped a coin and went to Wardner, in Cranbrook district; it's on the edge of the Thompson River, I think. Or is it the Columbia one? I forget which now.

[00:10:33] AB: And I had a ball. I had Grade 4,5,6,7; I had 25 kids, and I ran into my first special needs kid, who had Down Syndrome, dwarfed stature and epilepsy, all in one kid. And I, in fact didn't know the term "down syndrome", because at that time most people in social chit-chat, didn't talk about it; and "mongoloid" was the term used to describe the condition. And, even my mother, whom I could usually rely on totally, who'd be up on things and not use things of that nature, she hadn't heard it. Down Syndrome, it was just when that term was coming in. And the student turned out to be lovely, and I learned a hell of a lot. I am not sure if she got as much from me, as I got from her. It was an exciting experience; her parents—and she had four full-grown brothers, she was sort of, a later thought in the marriage, but her brothers—the whole family was wonderful with her. And it gave me an idea of what a life of a Down Syndrome kid could be with a supportive family and a supportive school.

[00:12:08] KN: How long were you teaching in Cranbrook?

[00:12:11] AB: One year. The salary was \$2,350 as a principle over at that school, a year. Prince George offered \$3,000. I went to Prince George. Again, one letter, and you got the job. It was at

a superior school, which was a school that had Grade 1-10, and I had Grades 5, 6, and 7. The kids weren't as completely supportive, and there was the odd discipline problem. And I had an unfortunate experience of one of my kids, who went off hunting on his own, shot himself. And that was the first time I'd ever come into that type of contact—with that kind of event, which was deeply upsetting, needless to say. And then I went to university for another year, which I had to do under the conditions of my \$900, and that's where I met Jim MacFarlan, and later we both got a job—him in Burnaby, and me, in Vancouver after we finished that year. He was finishing his degree there at that time. And, then I got a job in Vancouver, he got a job in Burnaby; we worked together within the Federation, but then, our political activity initially was the anti-war movement. And so, we were involved in demonstrations, and sit-downs and all kinds of things of that nature in the next number of years, while we slowly found ourselves sliding into the Teachers' Federation work. Not by a conscious decision to any great degree, but just for something to do.

[00:14:09] KN: You got active in your local?

[00:14:12] AB: Not right away. I got active, but I questioned it, too. I got on the bargaining committee and then slowly worked my way up through the Executive positions. But I never considered it active. Vancouver Elementary Teachers' was one of the traditionally conservative locals in Vancouver, or BC, and the introduction of new teachers, was about the biggest event they put on during the year. And new teachers at that time—we, I think, inducted about 200 a year. The school system was expanding, there was an enormous demand for teachers. But, we didn't do much other than that – and that's when I met another person, who I began to work with, and that was Denis Ottewell, who was also

[00:15:02] AB: in my local. And we did the things we needed to do as an Executive, for eight years. And on the eighth year I ran for President and got beaten. And I found out by the word of mouth, that my politics had something significant to do to that, and that was in 1966. And so, for 1967 I was then only Vice-president, but as a consolation prize they've elected me as the member of the Rep Assembly. And then, in the fall of 1967—or 1966, I guess, it was, the government brought in a construction freeze. And the BCTF said, "Tsk Tsk, you shouldn't do that". And me and my local raised hell at the January RA, got a lot of support, but were not able to get stronger action out of the BCTF through the RA. So, a guy from Victoria, Ray Wunderlich, and me, got together and we decided we would do something at the AGM, to see what we can do. I got together with Jim, and we talked, and came up with a strategy; that when the AGM was open for registration, we had put up a big black-board sign about a caucus meeting in the room, and so on, to organize action on the construction freeze.

[00:16:43] AB: We got about... 20 to 30 people showed up, and then we went onto detail, working out the plan. What we had to do is pretty much change the agenda, right off the bat, because the education finance report had nothing in it on the construction freeze. So, we went in; Denis, as I remember, I think, moved the change of the agenda, we succeeded. And I've got the minutes here, but I don't know if I've got them all, because I remember, one of the votes we

had was, I think, a tie. And we challenged the chair, because he wouldn't let us put them (motions) on—that was Bob Buzza; he had just been elected from the previous year and he was finishing his term; and he ruled our motions out of order. We challenged that, and won the challenge to the chair; and then we went on with challenges and other things, going back and forth. The minutes make it all look nice and quick and easy, but it wasn't. I think, I organized the floor, but the key speaker was Jim MacFarlan, who, as it's what you'd want when you've got the right issue, can be a very impressive speaker at a microphone. And I think we didn't have any real problems, once he's had, I think, two speeches by that time, getting it carried.

[00:18:21] AB: And, with that amendment it strengthened it by adding political action to our resistance, which was the first time, I think, that had come up at a BCTF AGM. And we didn't even think of adding that—that was from the floor, so that gives you the kind of mood of the convention that was developing. This was in Penticton. First time that we ever met outside of Vancouver.

[00:18:47] KN: The 1968 AGM?

[00:18:48] AB: The 1967 AGM. I forget myself it was 1967. The next September was 1968. This was at the 1967 AGM.

[00:18:59] KN: Bob Buzza was President in 1967–68. If he was the President, it would have been 1968.

[00:19:05] AB: I know... I'll have to look up the papers, but, I was wrong. I was saying 1968 all the time, but Moira corrected me when I asked her if she could find the minutes. And I've got that portion of the minutes, and he's in the chair, and it is 1967 AGM. So, I was of the same view you are.

[00:19:05] KN: Yeah.

[00:19:05] AB: And I found out that I was wrong, and it's not really vital issue, anyways.

[00:19:35] KN: But that was the very first time, that there was an organized progressive caucus open, so that's very significant.

[00:19:43] AB: Yeah, I think, that's very significant, and I think, you have to look at it in context of something else. The year—or maybe the year after—but when Jim and I first came into Federation, to our first AGM, or maybe the second; and the major issue at that AMG was the membership plan, which now has disappeared, and you can't find it, even in the BCTF history. But it was the plan which would have taken all the members of the Federation, and there would be categories of members—a full-degree person would be Category 1, three years of university would be Category 2, and all the rest, down to the poor old people like me, who had only one year, that's we'd be Category 4 or 5, or whatever the number we would have been. And it's interesting for a couple of reasons. My local, Vancouver Elementary, I need to say, voted unanimously, opposed, because most elementary teachers didn't have the degree at that time.

But the convention, overwhelmingly endorsed it. And one of the things that I found hard to explain was, that one of the key people on that committee was a guy by the name of John Prior, who, in a document, that you may or may not have got—I got it back in the 1980s or something; it was by John

[00:21:12] AB: Sutherland... So, see, he was the leader, and at a later point I got to talk to him on a number of times. The left of the Vancouver Secondary teachers, who had united with the Rural Teachers' Association, which was a radical rural teacher organization. And they had begun to have some significance in the Federation, and that lead to the affiliation with labour in the mid-1940s. John Prior was part of that. A big part of that. He was a major part of it. He was also—from reading John's (Sutherland) thing, and that part I hadn't known; a leading figure at the Youth Congress Movement in the early 1930s, which was a youth movement that was part of the social movements of that time, which mobilized all the youth organizations, except for the conservatives, into a mass movement of significant proportions.

[00:22:32] AB: It also, at that time, had a tinge of communism to it that people ignored because of the times. And John Prior was one of the leaders of that, and I saw him speak on a big issue at the BCTF convention. (On) Irene Rebberin, she had been at UBC, a faculty member, who was fired for some political... I've never heard of her before, nobody I knew had, but... We were sitting at the AGM, and at that time it was all in Vancouver, we didn't have tables, we sat in chairs theater-style. No place to put our papers or documents, it was as if you were all in a meeting, where they all spoke to you; which was part of, I think, the structure at that time, which, I found, at that time, not very happy with. But John, and another guy, who later who was well-known also, another one of the same group; I think he was a left-wing NDPer. So, he got up, and each at the same mic, in the midst of the hall, delivered a speech getting the BCTF to protest and act against the UBC for doing that. And, it was two superb speakers. And he was wonderful to listen to.

[00:24:01] AB: I eventually got to know him by happen stance, shortly thereafter. And I had found that he was also very much on the left, let's say. And I am surprised, I lost track of when, but he died in 1966. But I think he's one of the outstanding people along with John Sutherland, in that history, but we weren't really too much aware of that. And your comment really comes in, Ken, because nothing had happened to any degree, except the year before the AGM adopted the "No Class Over 40" campaign, which was a very militant thing at that time, where we said that if any class has any more than 40 people, we'll pull the teacher out. Now, there are more teeth in theory, than in fact, because we didn't use that very much. It did happen on a couple of occasions, and it was used as a pressure tactic to get school boards to be alert to it, and there's no question that it did get some impact. And it did begin to frame mental attitude of teachers away from simply looking at compulsory arbitration as the solution for all their problems.

[00:25:28] AB: So, that was significant too. And then the challenge of the political action—and that came in effect during a by-election, and the NDP won Vancouver South at that time, because of a leaflet that we put out, the BCTF did, attacking the government school construction

freeze, and ed. finance policies. Now, the next election didn't make any difference, because the Social Credit still won. But it was still a very significant development. Because, the tide had turned from what I considered a retreat to the membership plan of the mid-1940s politically, and it was a beginning to shift away from the more conservative point of view again. And, in Vancouver that reflected itself in the fall of 1968. We got into bargaining, and you know how it was, we got in, we bargained; if we didn't solve anything, we went into the arbitration. And, you could only bargain salaries and bonuses. We had already started taking in other things like, class-size and so on, and having them on the agenda. But the board had always said no, and then they wouldn't want to talk anymore. They hired, to their dismay, I think, afterwards, a new person to do the bargaining. By the name Art Guttman.

[00:27:06] AB: Now, he came in and he didn't say, no and then forget about it and so on; he spent as much time as he could denigrating us as a bargaining team and VESTA as a local, for daring and presumptuously putting this kind of crap on the table. That's the kind of language he used. And he was extremely personally insulting to our whole team and to our members. So, our bargaining chair was a woman by the name of Frances Worledge. And I was President at that time. And, we went back to the Executive and urged strong actions, and the Executive said, ho-hum, and we talked them into having a general meeting. We had the General Meeting and there were no empty seats—over 600 people showed up. We sent out an appropriately worded document to tell the people what was happening, and we had this meeting. And I, and Frances were the chair, and later on, to our surprise, actually, people were getting up and not even going to a microphone, but shouting from the audience, that they weren't going to stand for their representatives being talked to this way. That we can't just let this happen.

[00:28:36] AB: And the whole place was just chaotic with angry teachers. And then somebody, I am not sure who got up and got to the microphone, and moved that we tell the boards that we're going to work-to-rule if they don't agree to sign working and learning conditions contract with us. Well that was... we hadn't plan on that, hadn't been the strategy we had in mind, but... what the hell? We went with it! And during the debate people said, when will this letter go to the board? And this was not planned, but this was a matter of circumstance: there was a board meeting that night. And so I said, that there is a board meeting tonight, we'll deliver the letter there, and if anyone wants to come along to see us do it, yeah, that'd be fine. So, we toodled off after the meeting, got the letter written up, went to the board meeting and we couldn't get in at first. Because the boardroom at the old building had two landings with the stairs up, and sort of like, series of landings...

[00:30:01] AB: And sitting on all of these stairs; and sitting on all of the empty spaces in the boardroom were about 400-500 teachers. And, one of the things that impressed me the most about when I looked around was, overwhelmingly female, and overwhelmingly middle-aged. And all of those teachers—through my own mind—I had begun to think of as people who'd never get bid into about anything... You know, in VESTA, (they've) proved me wrong in the most effective possible way, and it was one of the biggest lessons, I think, I ever learned in my time of working with the BCTF, is that: Count on the women more than the men; and Never count out

people because of their age. And I relied on that in the future, and it served me well. So, I got the chair of the board aside, told him what we were doing, what had happened and so on, and I said that we wanted to make a presentation. So, he said, we'll have a special general meeting and so on, which was called, and what we did—we didn't want that big a crowd, but we told every school. We worked out a representation for our RA in VESTA,

[00:31:31] AB: and we sent a memo to each school, saying, you're allowed this number of people. And, you can't have anymore, because we don't want too many people there. And every school eventually sent the exact number of teachers that we asked for, and all the seats were filled, and everything looked good, and things were going pretty nicely. I think the day after we had our meeting with our members, I was on Jack Webster radio—it was the time of radio—debating with Fred Raul, NDP trustee, and it went well. And the thing that I found amusing—it was a private joke—Jim MacFarlan, who had got elected to the board in the previous election as a trustee, had taken that day not knowing anything was going to happen... He was out doing some political work in some part of his constituency, in Vancouver, but he missed the whole thing! And after the meeting, I went over to his place and teased him about it, telling him, you'll have to start attending more regularly and so on; but we were both delighted. We came back a week later on the date that the board had said was the meeting.

[00:32:52] AB: Frances and I presented it, and Frances did most of it, as the bargaining chair... And she never raised her voice. But one of the newspaper persons, who were there, afterwards said, I would never want to have that woman mad at me. And she just destroyed them—in her amicable way. Now, it went really well. As soon as she was finished, Jim moved that we negotiate working and learning conditions contract, and it passed, unanimously. The only problem was, it took us a year to negotiate it. And by that time, Burnaby, who had invited to me to talk to their staff reps, had got the same thing. But they had negotiated faster, so the date on theirs is before ours. And VESTA and Burnaby had debated since, in a humoured way, as to who actually had the first one. But that was experienced as the first learning and working conditions contract in the province. That was also a memorable and important step along the direction of ebb-and-flow of bargaining rights—because we proved it could be done. In a big district like Vancouver, it was another major step for the Federation, into a more politically aggressive and assertive kind of activity.

[00:34:21] KN: Can you tell us a bit what was covered in that working and learning conditions contract?

[00:34:21] AB: We would now look at it and say, oh my god! If I was at the bargaining table, or in some of those committees I was working with, and Ken brought that language to me, I would have reamed them out! I mean, it was weak. We had class-size in it, too, but the numbers were... well, considering that 40 was the campaign thing, mid-thirties to forty were... we had something like 36 in it. So, the numbers were not very good. If we had a grievance the grievance went to Superintendent for solution, and I have to say, that isn't as bad as it looked. Because, Sharpe—Dr. Sharpe is what he was called—was what a Superintendent was supposed to be. He

was a principled educator, who did things that in some cases weren't even legal, for teachers, or individual teachers, when things came to it. So, he was well-respected and we weren't going to get anything else, so we still figured, having the contract and such, with all the stuff in it, with all the weaknesses, was a major victory.

[00:35:58] AB: And it was. And, working and learning conditions contracts became the thing that all locals started going for. So, it immediately gave us the initiative in that whole campaign. And it also had an enormous impact on our members, because they were feeling pretty good about themselves. And that was important, because VESTA, I think, from that point on became one of the leading locals in the BCTF in terms of, well, pretty much everything. If you look at the number of Fergusson winners, honorary life members, VESTA, I think, has more than any two other locals put together. And, that was the beginning of it.

[00:36:47] KN: So, that would have been about 1968–69?

[00:36:47] AB: 1968.

[00:36:47] KN: So, in 1969 the Federation had, what is historically called the Apple campaign. Can you talk a bit about that campaign, as I think its genesis was in what you have already talked about—where it began to look for some kind of political action.

[00:37:12] AB: And I hadn't even run into it, looking at the BCTF history. And I had forgotten about it—now that you've mentioned it, I remember it. In connection, particularly, the by-election, where we elected Norman Levy, that was our early involvement. And we used the apple, and the bite out of an apple, and that kind of thing. We actually did some pretty good things, in terms of the Apple, but I don't remember the specifics of it. We got people involved in that campaign, but it didn't resolve itself in terms of making bigger gains.

[00:37:54] KN: So, what happened between 1969 and 1972, when things started to change?

[00:37:58] KN: Can you talk about that period a bit?

[00:37:58] AB: 1972 was, I think, also another major situation that happened. Adam Robertson was the President of the Federation, and he went over, and, I think, what happened was that he was told that there was going to be a (salary) ceiling brought in. And, Adam, who is soft-spoken, conservative and could be described as a nice guy; someone, who'd be nice to have for dinner, but he was not perceived as anyone who would do what he did, and he just simply said, publicly: "We won't live with it". And, I know, Jim and I talked about that, and we were flabbergasted that that had come from him; and Jim had got to be at that time, Vice-president. Little thing there—when you ran for office in the BCTF at that time, you had a little blurb under your picture in the BCTF's newsletter; which said, that you went to Normal School or UBC or whatever, it gave your professional history. There was no political platform allowed. You couldn't have one. And so, he and Gary Onstad from Burnaby, ran, and because they didn't agree on the political

platform, they were refused to publish the professional stuff. And so, there was their picture—and nothing underneath their name.

[00:39:51] AB: And at the convention that became a big issue. That was the last year that that happened. Next year, you could put in political platform. Again, that was a little step, but it was a significant one. And then, Adam coming along; and then, we were going to take political action. AGM passed it by a big majority, and that kind of thing. And two teachers, I think, it was, from New Westminster, took us to court, saying that we were going beyond our rights under the law and that, as it pertained to our Constitution, etc., etc.

[00:39:51] KN: It was the levy, at the AGM...

[00:39:51] AB: The levy. Yeah. The one-day pay... And, so we lost that one, to our surprise, and I remember sitting in on the sessions in the courthouse. I thought our lawyer, (I think it was Pentagher, who argued the case)—I thought I could have done a better job. But, that's the way it works. And then the idea came that we should go it alone and forget about that kind of thing. And so, it was very carefully talked about; but the Executive came together, the more conservatives with the more radical, and agreed on a tactic, which was that there would be an organization called, Teachers for Political Action, set-up by people, whose names were associated with the BCTF. And they would put out an appeal for the members asking for voluntary donations for the election.

[00:41:50] AB: We did and John Uzelac as president of secondary, and myself as VESTA president, we took on doing it, and running the campaign. And we collected \$80,000 of which \$25,000 we spent on the best radio campaign in the elections of BC history, up to that time, and ever since. It wasn't just... it had scenarios of ads. Like, the best one we used to talk about was Little Sarah. And what you would hear, would be, a little girl, who had a language defect, very noticeable language defect, and then there would be a voice-over: Little Sarah has a speech defect. Thanks to our Social Credit government, she'll never get it attended to. And it went very big! And, I think a lot of the media considered it as one of the biggest things that defeated the Social Credit government in that election, which is what happened. However, even though, we had had to fight for it—we had chased Dave Barrett around, because we wanted to meet him, to see what they were going to offer. We caught up with him in Richmond meeting, Gary and I went and saw him for a private meeting

[00:43:14] AB: the next day in his office in Victoria and Hastings (streets). And Gary and I spent three hours of arguing with him, and we eventually had an agreement to run something in their program about more money for education, and stuff. And they gave us something to take to our teachers, and we did, and as I say, we got the \$80,000 dollars, and we distributed it. We didn't give it to the NDP, and I think that's something that the BCTF should think about in the future, that, I think, the NDP has just come to expect the BCTF to be on its side and to ignore anything it has to say in the process. I think, the only way they'd wake up is if you... maybe... started turning that around a bit. We gave out initially in \$500 dollops, money, we tried to give it to every

opposition party, but the Conservatives in Peace River North—or South, I forget which, wouldn't take it. I phoned the Liberals in Point Grey, where they had three sitting members, and spoke to one of the candidates, I forget who; and I said, we have to give you some money, who do I give it to? And he said, the candidates in our party don't have anything to do with that.

[00:44:36] AB: So, I said, well, who does? I think it was the publisher of The Sun, or something like that—so, we got them the money. And we were sending members into various constituencies, where they thought—or we thought—the chances of winning for the NDP were good. And I remember about that constituency, they said, the guy, who you most likely, all know—Dennis Rankin—who was a VESTA member at that time; he was so angry, that we would send him to work in a Liberal riding. But we said, we needed somebody in there, who's very sophisticated politically, to be able to handle it, and he was, and he did a fine job, and all that kind of thing. Mike Harcourt was working in Vancouver Centre, where Gary Locke was one of the candidates, and Barnes; he had me out twice during the election campaign to drive me around the constituency; and each time he wanted money, and that was the reason for the drive, and they won the seats. Generally, every morning John and I would go to the post office and open the box, and piles of cheques would come out in envelopes.

[00:46:01] AB: So, this was just wonderfully exciting and successful campaign. It's hard to say which was the best. But it was a fantastically successful one. I think, however, in hindsight, and this is only something I could think about during my retirement; is that we got too much, too soon. And I think we stopped thinking of the best way to do that in the future. And I think, that the standard-type thing that we had been doing for the last little while, doesn't work. And, I think, there should be some serious look before the next election for a better way to be more effective. Because, I think, that one is past its best date. But that was just something, as I say, I thought about in retirement.

[00:47:02] KN: So, just backing up on a few things here—you had identified the ceiling that the government placed on a possible salary increases for teachers, through the arbitration process. What other issues were there—there were some other issues—do you remember what some of the other issues were that were about teachers that got us involved?

[00:47:25] AB: Not so much, because most of that happened when I was not involved in the sense... There weren't any other big things. And I already went through the things that I was there present for, the items that were really significant. Well... there was a messy intervention before some of those things came up. What happened, was internal to the BCTF to some degree. Jim MacFarlan got to the point of being President; and by just the way the ballots went, his first year as President, we were up at Naramata for the Summer Conference. And we began to find out that six of us there found themselves in a lot of agreement on issues. Jim, me, Gail Tyler, Don Walmsley, Cliff Bolt, Don Kelly. And, at the Summer Conference we began to sit down and talk over things; and then, during the year we began to talk over things. What had essentially happened, we coalesced into a caucus. This was not Viewpoint; this was earlier than

that. We coalesced into a caucus, and for the next period of time we were able to essentially, pass what we wanted. And

[00:49:10] AB: one of the things that became a political issue, was this 6/5 votes, as an attack on us, because this was... and then there was the suggestion we had a caucus, and we said, yes, we have. That didn't go down well with a lot of members. And, we also had put out a paper on educational directions, etc. and we got some people from UBC, and some staff members of ours, and some teachers. And they put out what was... what became widely known as The Triple-E paper. And it just regurgitated to a great degree, what this big capitalist-oriented organization in Europe had put out. But, the people who were writing it were, in some way, used to using Marxist terminology, which they did freely. I mean, this was the document, that Frances Worledge was the chair of the Committee. And she was hardly a, what you would call, radical, particularly, at that time.

[00:50:50] AB: However, all of these kinds of things came together to create an unstable, as you might say, kindly, political situation. And our Executive majority was open for threat. And in order to maintain it, I remember, a big meeting we had of people who had been supporting us in general from around the province, at one RA, and what we had proposed to do for the next election, we thought we needed one more person, who we thought, might win. And through a string of events, which were complex and I don't think any of us had any idea how it happened, we got to the point where Ross Regan, who had been and was a SoCred supporter was looking for allies to get re-elected. And, we were looking for an ally to get re-elected. And the people we had, which were a caucus without a name, or anything—yet—we got into a hairy fight about whether we were being opportunistic in supporting Ross. The majority decided it was OK to support Ross. And I was part of that majority, and I think it was wrong. I think it was fatal mistake, because it made us into opportunists, which is what we were. And, we were on display in that sense, for everyone, to take a look at.

[00:52:33] AB: And, I think we had success go to our head with the previous majority, and we got a little carried away; and I think, it was a mistake. And, in the next couple of years we had Don Walmsley trying to replace him, and fights between them... and for three years those persons were the majority on the Executive. And it was a conservative era. And, a major retreat from where we had been going. And, I don't think it has ever been discussed among the people, who were involved. I've arrived at my own conclusions, I felt nervous at the time, but, looking back I thought that was something we should never have got caught in doing again. I think, most though, who voted in favour, including myself, supported him. But I think, it was wrong. So, it doesn't matter at this point, anyway, except, what comes next. And what came next, is, as the other people were in the majority, was that things were not going well, and we were not doing well at the AGM elections. And so, in 1980, we were looking around for a candidate to run for President. And we had a caucus meeting at Julia's house, I think...

[00:54:23] KN: Julia Golden?

[00:54:23] AB: Right, yeah. And, we were not getting anywhere. We were all trying to persuade Julia to run. And Julia said something like: "I will run if you guarantee I won't win. But if I win, I won't stand, I won't do the job! Because I don't want to do it". But she was a powerful person to be a candidate. So then—and I don't know who came up with this idea—so somebody said, well, why don't we run Julia for President and why don't we run Al for First Vice-president? And then, they'll go shooting all their guns at Julia, and Al can sneak in through the back door, and get elected as Vice-president, which would have been a major victory. And it worked. In fact, it worked so well, that we began to wonder what we were going to do, because we thought she might win! And, Pat wasn't looking too good...

[00:54:23] KN: She ran against Pat Brady?

[00:54:23] AB: Yeah. So, we didn't know what was going to happen on the day, and Roger Englebracht from Kimberley was the person in charge of the committee counting the ballots.

[00:55:54] AB: And so, Julia—well, she didn't get elected, but she got about 42% of the vote, so it was a pretty good showing. Because we still didn't have, across the whole thing a majority, at the convention. And then, he reported the First Vice-president. And, Roger was a friend of mine, and he had a little bit of fun with us. So, instead of announcing who won in any particular order, he announced Peter Minshull vote first. And so, we still didn't know who had won, unless you were an expert enough to know how many votes you needed. And then he announced mine, and I beat him 346 to 301 or something, it was. And, so I won. And, that was a big victory. And we were still a minority, but we had a full-time officer in the Federation, which made a difference. And it made a particular difference, because Pat and I, unlike Don Walmsley and Bill Broadly, who detested each other openly and publicly, and constant fights—Pat and I sorta got along, personally. And we worked together very well that year. Now, I fought for different things than he did, but on a personal level I was looked upon, not like Don Walmsley, in a sense, because I wasn't too crusty and nasty and the debate was on.

[00:57:37] AB: And also, I visited nearly half the locals in the province. And, while I was President, and Vice-President, I only missed nine locals that I didn't go to. Because I thought, the main thing to do is to get into the locals, that members could see you and could discuss things with you, and you could remove the images they had that weren't accurate. And, that worked. And, when we went into the year I ran for President, I knew before the election that we had the votes in the convention for me to win. And I got about 400 votes, I got something like, I think, 55% of the vote. And, our slate won all total, 5 out of the 6 positions. And we were back as a majority. And I got an even greater percentage the year after that, I was at 64% of the vote, and we got another big percentage when I was stepping down and Larry was coming in. So, that turned it around for a number of years in terms of the direction of the Federation. And it was another major kind of event. I had a ball as President; and, again, carried on going out to locals, and speaking to locals and finding that locals were getting uppity.

[00:59:05] AB: And it was the year in which a whole number of things we began to bring out. In Langley—or was it Abbotsford? Class-size, threats of work-to-rule and all kinds of other things going on; battles between boards there. Surrey—the present Executive Secretary of the BCTF was in charge of a committee on class-size number. And she approached me and asked for help; so I, a whole number of times I went on and met with her committee. And what I saw, my job was as President was to go and do things like that, to meet with people who are getting ready to do things, and act as an organizer that would involve people, give them the chance to learn how to do things themselves. And, they did a wonderful job. And we eventually got to a point where we set-up a commission, which was a tactic we used on a number of occasions. And Dean Scharf was the head of it, on Kindergarten class-size; and he brought in a wonderful report, which resulted in significant reduction in Kindergarten class-sizes in Surrey.

[01:00:30] AB: So, that kind of thing was beginning to pop up in Courtenay. A guy by the name of Bob Wyley was President there, and I forget what the issue was, but they got into a confrontation with their board, so I went in and spent a few days assisting the local, mainly building a leadership core. Because a lot of times it was simply the president—you got a good guy in, or a good woman in, although at that time it was still, mainly a good guy, unfortunately; but when that person leaves, you may have nothing to continue on. So, what I was teaching was, mainly, to build a core of people. The local will not succeed over the long-haul if there's only one person—you have to organize an, in fact, an activist core in the local, which is what we had done in VESTA and what a number of other locals had begun to do. And that's what I saw my job as well, when I was visiting, was to get people to do that kind of thing. And, without that at all, in Revelstoke... Well, this one is a little awkward, in a sense... (laughs).

[01:01:44] AB: I was sitting at the coffee room at the BCTF headquarters, the nice one that you're not in anymore. And, I got a call from Ralph Sundby. And he said, in Revelstoke, all hell is breaking loose here. He said, people here are so pissed-off at the BCTF it's not funny. And so he explained, that they had been organizing a work-to-rule over an issue, I think it was class-size, and the BCTF staff member responsible for that area for the bargaining division, or back then it was called the agreements division; had advised them to shut it down and not do it. That the Federation wouldn't support that kind of thing. So, I simply went to Revelstoke, I think, the next day. And I sat down with the people there, and apologized. And later in the day a motion of apology was adopted by the Executive as well, and said to the local, because they were doing exactly what we've been asking them to do. And out of that came, and Bill MacFarlane, and

[01:03:17] AB: I think he's got an honorary life-member award two or three years ago. And really, the people and the Federation got enormous results from the work they had done since—which came out of that issue. Initially, a defeat, because one of the problems was the leadership politically had changed for a certain direction, but our agreements area was used to a different order of things, which was non-confrontative, essentially. And changing the mental attitude, or psychological attitude of some people in that division was slowly happening. And that's what created that problem. But, things were hopping all over the place. I even ended-up,

and to my interest, because I've never been there, in Stewart, which... Do you know where Stewart is?

[01:04:25] KN: Yes.

[01:04:25] AB: Oh, good. I didn't when I went there (laughs). Got a map and found it. But it's at the head of Portland Canal, there was a school there, in Northern BC, actually, it was part of the Terrace District. There is a road of sorts, winding through the mountains through to Terrace. I never did go that way, Instead I got on a "goose", what they called,

[01:04:51] AB: a sea-plane type of thing, in Prince Rupert harbour, at Seal Cove, and flew in... And there's a little stranded bit of the United States, down the road from Stewart, there's a border; and Hyder is the town. And I found out, that anyone, who arrived in Stewart, had to go and get Hyder-ised. And what that meant, is they took you to Hyder. And Hyder was one of those towns, there wasn't anything to do there, except work in the bar; so, we had a street of bars, and your job was to be taken from one bar to the other and see if you can still stand up at the end of it. I quit before I got to the end, but I thought it was an interesting thing and went back to my hotel, which was quaintly named, The Naked Spud. And I enjoyed the visit immensely. The principal was a bit weird, but I guess that's all they could get into Stewart; great staff and we had a lot of fun. And I had a great lesson on what it was like to teach in Stewart, and what it was like for teachers, who were in places like that.

[01:06:13] AB: I'd been, for a bit, like, in a two-room school in Cranbrook, or Prince George, but they were still near civilization. Stewart wasn't. And, it was a new experience to know how teachers there felt. And I had a similar experience when I was in Nisga'a. I was delivered by helicopter in January, from Nisga'a down to Greenville, I think, it was called. Two-room school, or three, it was winter, there are no roads there. So I got helicoptered in there for a day's meeting of the local, the staff and so on. And then got helicoptered out that evening. And all I could tell you—snow when you're in a helicopter, going through those mountain valleys, the view is just breath-taking. And I got there, and they were neat people, but isolated. What's life like for a teacher in those circumstances, on a day-to-day basis; and what should the Federation be thinking of in terms of that? It was great education. Because I got myself in a situation, where I had a clear understanding of what it had meant to be a teacher in many parts of the province that nobody thought about.

[01:07:41] AB: And I think, Jim did a similar thing at the end of his presidency. People joked about it, but I think it was... He got on a number of planes, he went up and toured all the districts in that North-West part. He visited them all! Essentially, for the same kind of reason, to know what it's really like among the less-fortunate people, who—in terms of civilization—that were teaching there, and doing a great job. And I went up there, I never went to those ones, but I attended two conventions of that local, and they had their annual meeting in a convention in Whitehorse. And it was an experience, I'll tell you—I learned a lot about what it was like and what they were like. And they were wonderful group of people, albeit, they produced an MLA,

Al Passarell, Landslide Al. And the last evening before I was leaving to come back to civilization, I had about 5 of us that started to have little poker game. And they decided, my room was most likely better, than everyone else's but the hotel didn't have a card table. And so,

[01:09:19] AB: the people from the North knew how to solve that, they took the bathroom door off, put it on the bed, as we sat around it, and the door was it. And we'd play poker till 2 or 3 in the morning, and then I'd put the door in the morning back on. But then, something was missing—and I can't remember what was missing, that was part of the room, but I can't remember whether somebody stole it, or whatever; and I had to leave, and would have had to pay for this damn thing... And I went back to my room cursing, and I happened just by accident to look up. And they had those lights that hung down, and they had a white bowl on the bottom of them, and I see this shadow in there. Al Passarell had been working, he had stowed this thing in the bowl. And I found it therefore, and I turned it back in. Before that, when the first maid came in, she got out the door and she yelled at the other maid: "You know what they bloody well did? They took the bathroom door off!" So, it was an interesting time.

[01:10:38] AB: But that kind of thing was one of the more interesting parts of... I don't think presidents do that kind of thing very much anymore. But I thought, that's what presidents should have been doing, and I think they still should—more of that kind of thing. Anyway...

[01:10:58] KN: All, this might be a good time for a break. [...]

[01:11:00] KN: And, we'

[01:11:07] KN: re ready to go. So, Al, I want to go back a few years, because you talked a lot about the formation of this progressive caucus, and actually, ended up running a slate of officers. Where in this time frame did the Teacher Viewpoint get formed, and what was the Teacher Viewpoint's mission?

[01:11:39] AB: Well, first of all the group that I had mentioned over the Ross Regan's thing that was an informal gathering. It wasn't organized in any way, shape or form. And after the convention, I am not sure which it was, but we lost. I remember that. I think it was in...

[01:11:39] KN: It was in 1978.

[01:11:39] AB: I remember being in some room at the BCTF crying in my beer like everybody else was, when somebody came along from another room and said, Don Walmsley was talking about setting up an organization called Teacher Viewpoint to get ourselves back together again. First time I heard of the name and anything associated with it was that point. I remember saying, well, that sounds like an interesting idea. And that was the start of it. Now, what went before Don or if he talked to someone else, or whether it was simply him, or if he was... quite likely I would not be surprised if he and Jim talked a bit. And that would have made logical sense, because we were all so close, that sometimes I can't even remember who you were talking

[01:12:51] AB: to sometimes. But, that was where it started. There was a big fight in the beginning of it, over whether it would be public. And there was a big fight, and some of us—and Linda (Shuto) and I had debates over this one—I maintained that I supported making it public, and Linda thinks that it was she, who... but... I thought she was on the other side, where I was surprised she was. Anyway, the majority voted to make it public, so then the meeting of the Viewpoint should be public, to anyone who'd come. Now, you see, it's a fine point, but the candidates were never Viewpoint candidates. In fact, there's a letter I got from the Viewpoint steering committee to the BC Teachers' newsletter, pointing that out and criticizing the guy, a teacher from Maple Ridge, who is always a pain in the rear end, but who had attacked Viewpoint for being a slate of candidates. And, actually, they weren't, I mean, the Viewpoint was public, but some things weren't public, like when it came to candidates and who is going to run. Viewpoint never made that decision. They might have suggested, let's suggest so-and-so or so-and-so to run, but not more than that.

[01:14:20] AB: Although, the people who were nominated, did get together and talk over each other's speeches beforehand and work as a unit in running the election part. But there was a line drawn, and it was very strongly defended by Viewpoint, that these people weren't their candidates. Now, that was in place... I'm not sure if it was in place when I ran for Vice-president—but I think, it was. And then, while I was President it was there, but the Executive caucus was an Executive caucus (separate). We would go to Viewpoint meetings; if people in Viewpoint had questions, or wanted to criticize, or whatever the case might be, they were welcome to do so. And I think it was a good dichotomy, because it meant, that as an Executive member I had to answer to people who weren't sitting at the executive table, who might have thought I or others, had not served well due to some issue, or whatever. I think, that was very helpful thing. I know that as an elected person I felt that Viewpoint was a good sounding board and a good place to hear what the feeling out in the boondocks was.

[01:15:56] AB: So, I think that division was good. But, let's not kid ourselves that the practical reality of it was a pretty fine line. But, it was enough to be useful. As there were problems. The year I got the presidency, there was a big kerfuffle, because when it came to Member at Large we were faced at a certain point with the need for somebody to drop out in order for us to get full numbers elected. And Maureen got bounced by that because Terry Eastman didn't drop out as he should have done. That was just an understood thing, what you did. He didn't. I don't think a lot of people ever talked to him again. I mean, there was really, really hard feeling about it, because it was just one of those things that everyone did, who knew about how the BCTF worked. And Terry—you never saw very much of Terry after he finished that term. Jan—and I don't know if they split up, I assumed that they did, but I don't know...

[01:15:56] KN: They're still together.

[01:15:56] AB: Still together? Oh well, good for them then. But Jan got involved to a greater degree.

[01:17:17] AB: But Terry backed-off, because he... people let him know very clearly, and I think, it was unfortunate, because I think it was too sharp. I mean, he made a mistake. But I didn't get as upset as most people did, because those things happen. And I liked Terry, and I thought he'd done good things. And so, I mean, one boo-bah and you're out? I thought it was little much. But, you know, that's the way it was.

[01:17:54] KN: Hey, Al, we, just before the break, we talked about, your presidency and some of the issues that were developing, and in particular, some of the locals, that were beginning to heat-up on a variety of issues. So, we talked a bit about 1979, you were President from 1979 to 1981. Could you talk a bit more about some of the things that begin to happen while you were President that you had to deal with?

[01:18:20] AB: Well one of them, which was interesting, was that there was new minister of finance appointed. A guy by the name of Brian Smith. And of all people that we got out of that government, that was the most interesting one.

[01:18:20] KN: Minister of finance, or education?

[01:18:20] AB: Minister if education. If you look at the BCTF newsletter you will find that there were—at least for the first few months—there were positive remarks about the BCTF coming from the Ministry of Education. And I was making positive things in response. And, eventually, the chickens came home to roost and it was still a SoCred Ministry of Education. But, what I found out, after he got elected, he invited me to lunch, or dinner, at the Union Club in Victoria. I ended up going there for some of these guys a lot—I didn't like the food that much either. But, he and I got chatting. His father was a teacher in Victoria High-school, when I was there. He was a SoCred, but he wasn't. He was really a conservative... a left-wing conservative, if you want to put it that way. He was a rational human being, and not simply, a hack.

[01:20:00] AB: He and I got personally along very well. I liked him, and he liked me, I think. And, I've resisted some of the nastier comments I made about others. I would disagree with him, and he would disagree with me, but I didn't find the degree of sharpness and nastiness involved, as had happened with other situations. Another thing—Terrace, which I will be getting to later, they went on strike and overall total, I think, was 6 days. And he refused publicly, to order them back to work. Now, I know we were out on a clearly, illegal strike. And I wondered at the time, how come we're not getting the usual thing, which would always be a court order, back we go. He never did that. And he discouraged anyone else from doing it. So, I think, that while he was still a SoCred minister of education, he didn't look upon us as the devil. And he thought we were rational in our position, even though he didn't agree with our position. Another interesting and sort of half-amusing thing, I don't even remember what it was, but Executive, we were getting on an airplane from Victoria to come back to Vancouver after something, I think, with the government we've been at;

[01:21:40] AB: and who should appear at the Victoria airport, but Brian Smith! And we were all wearing buttons, slugging Vander Zalm. I think it was Vander Zalm...And he saw our buttons, and

he said, you got one for me? And so when we were looking out of the airplane window, we were sitting just outside the door, there was Brian Smith wearing this anti-Vander Zalm button. So, he had a sense of humour. And it wasn't when you were dealing with him, it wasn't that you were dealing with somebody, who was looking to stab you in the back. So, I had always had a less-than-hostile feeling in the long-term, that we could have had worse. About him, and so, that was an event that was, I think, a surprise. The other thing that it did, it meant that we went for two years, essentially, where I wasn't only seen "attacking the Ministry". And it began to make us look more reasonable, if you will, for those in the public, who thought we were always "attacking". So, I think, the net-impact of his Ministry of Education, could have been seen as not a bad thing.

[01:23:05] AB: If you're going to have some, he was better than some of the others. You can get away with things with him that you couldn't with some of the others. So, it's well to keep that kind of thing in mind too, because, I think, he tried, but he eventually realized that given his mandate, he couldn't do what he might have wanted to do if he was in power. Anyway, I think that is worth mentioning for historical purposes, although I don't imagine he's alive now. Another one, that was internal, was the re-instatement of Ralph Sundby, and I'm not sure exactly when each of you had been involved. Ralph had been dismissed by the right-wing Executive, it was I thought... I mean, he was just shafted completely... It was a political dismissal. And I was surprised in the couple of cases. I was surprised that Mike (Zlotnik) participated in it. Because I was getting along with Mike and I never had any... I had a lot of disagreement with him on politics, although we weren't too different on many aspects of it, but he did a lot of stuff in the bargaining division and on his own,

[01:24:47] AB: in terms of his research. The "Under 40" campaign he had the whole class-size data (collection) started that we had together, and we had a good data on class-size. He got most of it. Now, he did the research that got it for us, and he did his own initiative, that kind of thing in many cases, that was really helpful. I knew his step-father, I knew his sister, there were connections there—we got to realize that six degrees of separation in the movie had a lot of truth to it, because I was finding a lot of that kind of thing, where somebody has a connection and eventually you find out that you weren't so far apart on this, or that, you know. Which is, I find, interesting. So, I was surprised at that, and I wasn't surprised they were out to get him. My experience with Ralph was that he was the best field worker we ever had. I got lots of my knowledge of what was going and in some cases, on very dicey things. I would get a call, and Al, I'm with so-and-so; there's a problem here. And whatever he ran into, someone with the local was having a problem, he would phone me. And then I would go ahead with the seed.

[01:26:22] AB: That Terrace (issue) was the best example of how we, sort of, worked as a team. And he made it possible to a great degree, for a lot of those things to happen. He had a sixth sense for sniffing out issues, that were going into a local, talking to people, and getting the issue that was creating a problem. He was superb at that. And that's why I think some wanted him—Mike wanted him for personal reasons, I think, that were between him and them, you know. And they just got off on the wrong foot at some point. Ralph was not always the easiest guy to

get along with either. But he and I got along. In fact, when my marriage broke up, he allowed me in his apartment for 6 weeks or something like that, while I got my shit together to get my own. And Jim did the same thing prior to his. And so, I liked Ralph. And I thought he did good things. But Ralph was someone who was not, if you want, strictly, by-the-book. And that, to my mind, served us well. So, that was another issue, that became a big one in the Federation,

[01:27:52] AB: and it was a big one in our re-election, in my election. Because there was a lot of anger out there about his dismissal, because he was really well-liked in the field. People liked him, and so that was a really big issue in the time of my election, and the election of all of us at that 1979 AGM. So, that was a big issue and it worked out well for Ralph, and for us. But one of the things, and this is just for... a number of us when we started at the BCTF, one of the basic things we were in favour of, was staff employment should be temporary. All. Except maybe, finance or something like that. And everyone was in favour, in fact a lot of people, who were in favour, got appointed to staff, they didn't favour it anymore. I just found that interesting and I can understand the temptation. Because, look, when I was on staff, I had a ball! I was really doing things I enjoyed doing, and I felt like I could contribute something, and

[01:29:13] AB: so I can see the appeal as to why people did that, but I still think, it was wrong. And the BCTF has backed-off to a great degree on a lot of that and I think that's unfortunate. But, anyway...

[01:29:13] KN: Can you talk, Al about the whole idea behind the four-year-term?

[01:29:13] AB: Well, particularly, and I have to pin the tail on two donkeys here, McFarlan and me. We had seen the Canadian Trade Union movement become essentially a movement of unions, which were led by guys, who never gave up their job. For a long... I forget who they were, it was so long ago. But, staff appointments to unions became permanent. I'm just finishing a history book I'm reading about some guy, who worked for the United Electrical Workers, which was then looked upon as the Red Union. And he, I think, by the time he retired, or quit, had been working for the UE for 25–30 years. I don't think that's healthy. I think there were other people in that union, who could have gone in and done the same kind of job. And the overall turn-over is healthy for the overall organization in terms of the leadership being in touch with the membership.

[01:30:47] AB: And that was the reason. And Jim and I both came from a political background where that was big issue. And we both agreed with it, and we both fought for it; it got eroded in reality. And I know I had an interesting time on that one. I was at a conference in York University, on BCTF leave for professional development. And it was put on essentially by a left-wing group in the academic circles in Toronto. Leo Panitch was one of the main people involved in it. And Sharon Yandle was there as well. And we got onto this issue in one of the discussions. And I propounded my point of view, and so on. But then a little later I was driving back to the airport, with a guy from Sudbury and we were talking about this—a really nice guy—and he said, well, you know, this thing you got about that, he said, I don't know... look, if I get a union job

and I don't have to go down there and stand in front of that furnace, then you want me to give up that union job and go stand in front of that furnace, he says, that's not an easy thing to do. And I thought, well, you know, teaching's fine.

[01:32:14] AB: But you look at some jobs, and maybe it's a little utopian, to expect that a person is going to be pure in my sense; that caused me to think again about it. Didn't change my mind, but it made me think and look at how it works a little more. Because, god, I wouldn't want to work in smelter in Sudbury. You know, and I could understand it. So, you have to learn and understand what the view is on the other side of some of those things, too.

[01:32:55] KN: Al, I'll ask you a question about another policy the Federation has—and I think you talked about it a bit—and that was to try and reduce the differences between the administrative staff salaries and the teachers' salaries, make them more in-line with each other. Can you talk a bit more about that?

[01:33:16] AB: Yeah, I, in fact was a strong supporter of that point of view. And, same reasoning as for the previous one that we were talking about. My father was president of his union in the mid-1950s, he was a public communist in Victoria. I was surprised, when I went to work in the shipyards, because, you know, what a teenager and his father frequently are—at odds. So, I wasn't really wildly enthusiastic about my father at that time, but I go into the shipyard, and all these guys are telling me what a great guy he is. And, I thought, what the hell, which guy are you talking about? But I learned, that a teenager doesn't always have the right view. And I saw what kind of respect my father has held in the time when it was not easy to have the respect of the industrial workers for a well-known communist. But that's what there was. He could have been, if he had wanted to, be a full-time president of that local. Or, staff-member, whatever. Uh-oh (shakes his head)—you got a little bit more money, and you're a trade-union pork-chopper, was his favourite name, and he didn't agree with that.

[01:34:47] AB: And he thought that there had to be a shorter distance between the average union member on the shop floor, and the full-timers. And that was the fundamental part of his opinion, and I came out of that and agreed with it. And, I don't see why people who have a full-time union job should get paid significantly more, than someone, who have to do the job—other job. So, that was just a principle that came out of my father—it was one of those that turned out to be right, and I was wrong on most of them. And, that was where that one came from. And, in fact, I found the same issue in my studies, and I've done a lot of them in reading on labour history in the US and Canada. And that's been a big issue on the left—to reduce the differential between the staff—and when you take a look at some, they're just out of this world. And so, that was a trend I didn't like. Now, that was something we inherited, because it came under existence of an Executive that were essentially, a staff-controlled Executive.

[01:36:18] AB: Before we all came onto the scene, most of the officers were full-time workers. And the salaries went up, because when the staff came to them, those were the guys who were doing the work on the job, so they reached for them. And they were capable in achieving them. I

mean, the staff we had, even in the days, when I think they were conservative, there was nothing wrong with their competence, basically. And, they could, undoubtedly have got jobs and had bigger money elsewhere. So, that was another factor to consider, so that's where it started. We inherited it, and there was nothing, essentially, that we could do that could ever change it. The bargaining structure just didn't make that possible. So, it created rancor at some times. But, we're not going to always agree on everything,

[01:37:10] AB: no?

[01:37:10] KN: Going back to your presidency then, could you talk a bit about what was going on, basically in your second year as President,

[01:37:20] KN: I think.

[01:37:20] AB: I haven't divided them up that way, but... one of the things that I remember, is, that I think, should be mentioned. When I got elected, there was a perception, and an inaccurate one among the members that every time they pick up a newspaper, we're getting bashed, or teachers were being bashed. Not necessarily the BCTF. But everyone was dumping on teachers. They were the favourite picking person by the media. And the BCTF said nothing, and that was the big issue in the election, too—that teachers wanted someone in there, who'd start shooting back. So, in fact the rating of educators and teachers in the education, was way down. Because we were like in a shooting gallery, where we were taking all the hits. So, people in the classroom were getting really upset, and the public was thinking, what the hell is with these teachers? You know? They're useless. So, our image was down, it was a bad time in that respect; and that was another big issue from the members' point of view; they felt they were doing a damn good job, and I think, no question, they were; in really hard conditions, and we were getting no respect.

[01:38:40] AB: And their professional pride was being assaulted. And, that had changed, you see. Back when I started, teachers didn't have that professional pride. That was one of the things that we gave them at the beginning, was that we didn't have to take shit. And that was really important... One of the reasons why we were successful overall, was that we did stand up, and shoot back. Sometimes, maybe we over-did it, maybe, I don't know, but overall, people were pleased at that. And, so I think politically, that was a major issue in the teachers' caucus and all the rest. That was a big issue. And Viewpoint became... Viewpoint had been on our newspaper, which was given out readily, and the place for people to talk about things, and argue about it. And all of that put them in the position of centre of ownership, and this was a good thing to be part of. And that their profession was worthy of respect. And that is a nebulous kind of thing; but it meant a hell of a lot to the average classroom teacher. And you found that out when you entered the schools and listened to people in the staff-room.

[01:40:11] AB: So that became a big issue that year—I've got some news clippings; there's one of me, I think it was at the end of my time, comparing me to the old-timed radical labour union leaders. Because of the fact, that I was in the media, shooting back, which is what the unions

used to do. And I thought that kind of publicity was great, and so did the members. And so, that was important. Some of the things you get are not hard issues – they're just perception, and giving people a sense of pride in the work they do, and that's really important. And, I think, it is something that is a big issue with teachers right now. Cos I was on the picket line at every strike since, and what I was hearing this last time, I was surprised at how strong people were. I thought they were a hell of a lot more militant than teachers used to be when I was in the game. And education, with them in the schools, is way ahead of what it was when I started,

[01:41:45] AB: and they got a reason to be proud. And they don't get the attention and the praise that they should. And the government's action has had a big impact on their morale. I always found, that in VESTA, if I wanted to make a point, I really used to pick up the educational issues, where they felt strongest. It wasn't money. In Vancouver, it was interesting, because the day we two separate locals and we bargained separately. In Secondary, the biggest issue at the bargaining table was money. First, last and always. In elementary, it was questions of education. You'd get more militant response over that, than you would over money. And I think it's true to a great degree province-wide. I think that's one of the greatest things I have the biggest admiration for teachers about. And, also I don't think the Federation does, as it used to, when we were working, push what kind of an educational system they want for kids, as much as we used to. That was one of the things that really helped us, was that we were always front and centre when it came to getting a better deal for kids.

[01:43:22] AB: And, I think the Federation needs to pay more attention to that in the kind of stuff it does. Because, one of the problems, and I was going to mention this one anyway, when I was talking about my time with the admin staff—it was fun, and then, I say, it was too much fun, because we forgot to do the other things we did well. Now that we have bargaining, we can solve all our problems from bargaining; and there became a reliance on that. And the fact is, we used to mobilize the community around an issue, because we didn't have anything else to do—we couldn't go to a bargaining table. And we did—we had all kinds of successful campaigns by doing that. I don't think we do that in Federation much anymore. And I think, that's a loss, because, I think, that is something that teachers are, in some situations, more interested in, than simply, the money. And I think it is also something that politically takes them into a direction that goes beyond where they're at now, in challenging the system. Not just a bigger bargain for the price you'll take for functioning in the system, but to change the system.

[01:44:47] AB: And, I think that changing education to something that's different than what it's providing for kids now, is a noble and positive thing—and I think there needs to be much more room to do that kind of thing, as well, I think, as the simple bargaining. So, nowadays the only time people see the teachers in the media it's when they're bargaining and battling with the government. Not much else. And that's unfortunate, because I think something has got lost in there that the BCTF needs to look at in the future.

[01:45:23] AB: Anyway.

[01:45:23] KN: Ok, so let's go back to the presidency: and the issue that were heating up quite a lot was the pensions issue, and in those days there were quite the number of locals actually, taking off and protesting in Victoria, some protesting in Vancouver, or in their communities across the province. Could you talk about that?

[01:45:46] AB: Just one more item I want to mention before that, which I think, is important; and Larry particularly deserves credit, because he was the one who raised this. We had a feeling that Executive at the BCTF all too often would raise an issue; then come to the RA and make recommendations, and that would go out to the membership and so on. Larry said, that what needed to happen to a greater degree is that we needed to discuss these things before they became policy, and engage the membership in them, so that part of this process was to make the membership part of the decision-making to a greater degree. And, we did that. And, it's not a sexy topic, but yet some of the newsletters from that time is where you'll find that kind of thing beginning to come up, and to be part of my decision-making process, which we initiated as well. And I think it was very important part of the way in which the Federation began to operate. Now, I think, it also didn't last as long as it should have, because it was so much easier for the Executive to make a decision, and then pass it on.

[01:46:59] AB: But, I think, the idea of getting the members involved before the decision is made is something we need to do more of. I will not say anything about it in terms of last 20 years, I just don't know what's going on in that regard, but in our time, I think, what Larry brought forward in that regard was an important issue. Now—go ahead, you want the pensions! Actually, we were late getting on the boat. At the 1979, I guess it was, convention, there was a big fight on pensions. Burnaby, led by Betty Griffin, who had raised pensions of indexing and other things, in 1979. And generally, we were told by the pensions committee, it said, there was no problem, and so on and so forth. And I remember, at Teacher Viewpoint we weren't paying much attention to it. So, I think, we missed the boat, in the sense that we should have done it then. We didn't. And we didn't do it till really, the next year. And I think, and I don't know if you remember, but in that time we had inflation,

[01:48:35] AB: and that's one of the reasons this became a big issue. I remember in one year they were bargaining in VESTA, and I think we got 16.5% in one year; and that was pretty well the going rate around the province. And if that was the case, what was going to happen, was all of those people come out with all kinds of salary figures, where there haven't been the same kind of money going into the pension fund. And therefore, the government announced that we're going to just cut it off, that they couldn't allow that kind of thing to happen. And so, that was what spurred us on. Next year, that was when it began to sink-in... And people began to get going, particularly, Surrey. And so, Surrey started pushing that issue, and other locals began picking it up; and it became a big issue. You're right—we had damn near the whole island go on strike one day, and come down to Victoria for demonstrations in front of the legislature. In Vancouver we had Vancouver Elementary, Vancouver Secondary, Burnaby, Coquitlam, New Westminster, Surrey, all take a day off, I might have missed one in there...

[01:50:01] KN: Langley and Delta.

[01:50:01] AB: So—we had quite a few involved. But, we had a problem. We had used up most of our bullets. As I said, I was traveling the province, and I was going to places like Prince George, and I was going to places like Kelowna, and they weren't up in arms. So, we had a situation where we had a divided membership in terms of what they wanted to do. And then, the government came up with the proposal of setting-up some sort of a commission, or a committee, or some discussion, to find a way out of the whole thing. And, the Executive agreed to that, we did do that. Now, a whole lot of people got angry as hell with some of us, and I took a good part of the flack; and that's fair and all... You're doing it, you're making a decision, if that's going to happen, you will get shot at—well, fine, that happens. But I felt that that was the best we could do in the existing circumstances. And I have to say, that I note in the future, that no teacher lost because of failure for it to be indexed at all, because there were never any cuts. Because the inflation rate —surprise, surprise—didn't stay at 16%.

[01:51:29] AB: It soon went back to the normal kind of figures. And therefore that kind of an increase, that was going to screw up the pension plan, never happened. And secondly, if you check, and this was something you wouldn't notice right away, but one of the things we arranged at the strikes was that the government was spending most of their money in the pension plans on public expenditures and bonds. That stopped, and they started investing in the market, and the rate of return increased significantly. But it didn't happen in one year, it was a slow progress. And to that effect—and I'm not criticizing those who wanted to go on strike, but we didn't lose anything, and it was a matter of finding a way out of it, that got us somewhere, maybe, and not losing in a way, that would hurt us in the longer term. So, that was the reasoning for that kind of decision. The Executive was in agreement. One of the things I found and one of the RAs, and I don't know which, people were getting up and we were getting some rip-snorting, fire-breathing speeches, pretty much by everyone who got to the mic.

[01:52:59] AB: But when I went to the locals—some of their locals—I couldn't find that kind of response, so RAs at times can have a certain kind of breed of cattle, if you will, who is more prone to take action. And sometimes, not as prone to consult the membership. And I think, there was a bit of that involved there, too, because I knew that when we adopted those things, we were going to have trouble. Because I had been in (the locals) and I knew it was going to be a problem. But—there it was, you just have to deal with it. And we came out a bit, I would note, it was a Viewpoint Executive, and, we gained a seat, in fact. So, the feeling afterwards, at the next convention was not hostile to the decision-makers. So, I think, looking back, I'd still say, we did the right thing; it wasn't nice, some of us got mud thrown at us, but that's what you got to do sometimes, and you have to take it—and that's it. So, that was the pensions thing. And, I didn't like it, for sure, but you're in the spot, you have to make some decisions that aren't easy, and that's what we did.

[01:54:18] KN: Could we move on to the Terrace then?

[01:54:22] AB: Are we in a time-squeeze?

[01:54:22] KN: No. OK. I would like to deal with the time on the admin staff. I was going to deal with Terrace as the very last thing.

[01:54:22] KN: OK – that's fine.

[01:54:22] AB: I already alluded to it—I found the four years on the admin staff to be—well, not so much the first year; the first year was pretty much, standard bargaining—but after that all hell broke loose with getting first contracts negotiated. And I found that to be three unbelievably exciting and enjoyable years.

[01:55:13] KN: That would be which years? Was it till 1988-89?

[01:55:20] AB: Up to 1990. Because, to start with, my experience on the island was that we never bargained before, for the whole thing. And people got in, and there were things on the table they've never heard of at the bargaining table before. That was power behind them, like you could go on strike. So, up until the end of June, I was worried, because a lot of my locals were signing up on things that they shouldn't have been, that they were agreeing to readily, as they weren't experienced enough. Anyway, I think we did a bang-up job at the summer conference, and by the time they came back in September, they were good. And the whole thing turned around. I remember, one local, I think it was Nanaimo, had already agreed to no prep time. And then, everybody else was getting prep time. So, they said, what do we do? I said, well, you bargained it, can't do anything, you can't put it back on the table, that's not bargaining protocol. I said, however, if you're interested, you could tell the board that if you don't have prep time, like others, your members might not ratify it. You could do that.

[01:56:52] AB: That might make the board want to re-consider it. Then you could talk about it. And so, everywhere, where I had that kind of problem, that's what I did. And I think, everybody else, throughout the province, we all did the same thing. And the people, who were in the bargaining committees, in most cases did a wonderful job. And our people were handling lawyers just fine, and were doing just a wonderful job. But, not all. I had one local that gave away the store on damn deal, and everything. That was Campbell River. And, I thought it was fine, because the head of the bargaining committee was the guy I had known for a while, he was a good union guy, NDP or something, and they thought they were doing a wonderful job. And I would go in and try to find out that Nanaimo had done this, and Cowichan had done that, and there was one guy there, who had just hated the left-wingers. I, personally, got along (with him) fine, but he was hostile, politically.

[01:58:10] AB: And whether he had something to do with it, because I took it up with the membership on the floor of a meeting, and they just ignored me. And, it was also awkward in another sense. Rina was...

[01:58:10] KN: Rina Berkshire?

[01:58:10] AB: Yes. (She) Was on the BCTF Executive, was elected on a conservative ticket, we could say, and I was there. And there was the perception by many that I was on the other side politically, and therefore I had to take a look at things and step carefully. And so, when I got there, the first time, I took Rena out for lunch and talked to her. I simply said, look, we may have political differences here at the BCTF, but I am here to help your local get a good collective agreement. If you find that I do anything other than that, that you think is untoward, you tell me about it right away. And so, that's got her to soften a good foot. And I am not to do you any political harm. And she was a nice human being, and her health was not good. And

[01:59:27] AB: I felt sorry for her. And so, maybe I didn't hit as hard as I should have, but I didn't want to put her in an awkward position. And, nothing I said was going to go anywhere, it was obvious. That one—they didn't get as good a deal as some of the others. On the other hand, and you might want to read this afterwards, Cowichan took a good position, they were a good bargaining team, yet we ended-up in a strike. It lasted two weeks, we got a good collective agreement. And this (shows a clipping from a paper), which got a little bit shop-worn, was in one of their trade bulletins. And it was a re-writing of John Lennon's "A Working Class Hero" to fit their strike. And this guy, Herb Hady, I never knew who he was, he wasn't on the Executive, he was just an ordinary classroom teacher in the district, who sat down and penned this one night, and the newsletter committee grabbed it and published it. And I kept it, because I was really moved by this. And you had Nanaimo—among pretty much all the other locals—and the odd one, not doing too well... But, couple of interesting things—the

[02:00:55] AB: Vancouver Island West, when I went there, they had been involved for two years in a battle, because the school board had cancelled all the learning conditions stuff in their collective agreement. And they've been fighting to get it put back in. So, I sat down with them and I had two people, Linda Werklund, who later became a BCTF staff member, who was a real pro; that was enormously helpful; and Jessie Smith, who's a little old lady, who was president, and was as tough as nails, and she was deep. And, Vancouver Island West was not the number one choice of many teachers looking for a job. Gold River, Tahsis, a couple of other were even further in the boondocks schools. You drive up there through the upper Campbell Lake and all the rest. I got through four years of driving in without going off the road. Nobody else beat that record. You go into Tahsis, and think, oh, it's a really nice little cove and it's really attractive; then I think, as we're going through the day's meeting, shit, but if I had to live here for a year—no, OK.

[02:02:18] AB: But the people, who were teachers, were good; the principal in Tahsis was the former chair of the Vancouver School Board, Ian Kelsey. So, that, I thought, we'll see—because also, the second year, he got out, because he was principal, so he was banished. So, I had to take him aside, and we'd always got along reasonably well. And we had a chat, and we got along fine, and he was a damn good principal; so I had no troubles with him. And, during the year, we got people up and ready to go on strike. And the first day of the strike, we went to picket the secondary school—some of us stayed and some went to the other schools. It was... Have you been on the West Side of Vancouver Island when it rains? It dumped! We were out there and

we were just awash in water coming down on us, and down the road come all the guys, going to work in the mill. They all pulled-in and they were so happy to see us that our picket lines started really feeling good, because of all these people from the community, and they supported us, and things were going very well.

[02:03:28] AB: We were out two days, and then we got ordered back to work, but it just picked people right up. And then we started putting on more pressure on the board; and, eventually, they just said at the end of that year: "We'd like to bring-in a mediator". And that was the time we were having troubles with the government, and there was no provincial mediation body. So, Vince Ready is the one we hired. He comes in, and we get together at the Hotel Vancouver. It was Linda, Jessie and myself. And, he says to me, do you have any other locals around that have these kinds of clauses? I said, yeah. He said, get me them. So I phone the Federation, and they just send the stuff down. And I said, but this doesn't matter—everybody else has it better, than what they threw out here. And he said, that's fine. So, he went off, and about an hour and a half later he came back and said, they agreed, we can put these ones in instead of the ones they took out. And I said, why? And, he said, I know! But, they saved face. You made it so difficult for them that they needed to save face. And this is the way they can save face, and they can't say they gave into your clauses. So, that was done.

[02:04:48] AB: And the interesting follow-up to that was, in Saanich, where we negotiated a real collective agreement, we couldn't get through the class-size stuff. They would agree to it, but not in the contract. It had to be a side-bar type of thing that had no standing in the contract sense. And it went back to the board, and [...] it was also an awkward one, as this was Elsie's district, and Stewart Kirkpatrick was the president there. He was a really nice guy—so, with him, when I first got there I sat down and I did the same thing as I did with Rena; and I said, anything that you have—let me know and I will work it out. And Stewart was a nice guy; he and I worked well together. I worked well together with their bargaining team. Elsie, obviously didn't have any problems, because I never heard from her; so, everything went well, and the frictions at the Federation level did not extend in the main, to the local level. And so, we have this thing, and the board suddenly takes a look at what we have agreed to, and they refuse to ratify.

[02:06:07] AB: Now, and we already got a 94% strike vote. So, Vince, c'mon back! And so, we got him in there, and I got this stupid idea... I said, go and tell them, we'll make a concession to help them to get to the point where they can agree to the contract. We'll move the class-size stuff into the contract. Then Ready said, but that's better than what you got! I said, just humour me for a little. He went up and five minutes later he got back, and he says, they agreed to it. And why? Face! They were facing us. They couldn't go and have a strike with a 94% strike vote that they were in, so they had to find their way out. And, that was another good lesson to learn. It was a good year in terms of not having the Labour Relations Board people doing things, because the others were getting things with Vince Ready and Allan Hope. He solved Courtenay, because he came and the board rejected the mediated package, until the next day. And then they agreed to it. So, I found it was a very helpful year, we got a lot of progress, and it was so much fun, that

that's why it attracts some of us away from some of the harder slogging, and political mobilizing that we used to do.

[02:07:57] AB: And, it's captivating. And I had a ball! But, that's a danger for our organization to get too much down one street and not continue that political mobilization it needs to do, particularly in the public sector. But, so, from my point of view, I think, our members were proud of the end-result of that bargaining year. Because we were taking on lawyers all over the place, and our people were out bargaining them. And—not everywhere, but in the main, our people did themselves proud. And it just says, what can happen when you don't have entirely—and I stayed out of it; there was only one local that I got a little bit involved in doing any bargaining, and that was Vancouver Island West. And they got into it the next year, too. Vince Ready went in and resolved—Linda Werklund went down and bargained with the “idiot” from the board, who interestingly enough used to be in the mine mill union. And Allan Hope had mediated a contract for mine mill somewhere up in Yukon with this guy; and said he was a nut bird. But, Vince Ready knew him, because Vince Ready, I don't know if you know, he was once a trouble-shooter for mine mill. And

[02:09:42] AB: the guy who he was working with, who was out of Trail, who wrote a book—if you've not read it, you should get that book...

[02:09:42] KN: Was it Al King?

[02:09:52] AB: Al King. That book is loaded with lessons.

[02:09:58] KN: Yes, it's a great book.

[02:10:00] AB: It's a great book, and, Vince Ready was one of the team that Al King organized, of about five of them; who were trouble-shooters in the union, and they took on all of the places that were difficult. So, they were good. I almost liked the Vancouver Island West (situation); I enjoyed that one because they were in trouble and they needed to find out how to get out. And I enjoyed those; that was just what I thought I was there for. But, otherwise, I was to stay out and give them their hand in terms of doing their bargaining. So, that was one on the admin staff. Any questions on that one, or further comment?

[02:10:43] KN: It was a good summary of your experience there.

[02:10:48] AB: I should just mention one thing in passing. After I retired, I was Past President and Solidarity broke-out. Now, because of our division of labour, Larry ended-up taking the public role and the dealing with Operation Solidarity, with the unions. The dealing with trade unions, I think, in the Federation was under-estimated as to the complexity of it.

[02:11:32] AB: Now—you'd have to read some of the literature, that's come out since, to find out as clearly, as you need, to the resistance of private sector unions to anything, which created all kinds of problems. And, I think it was a big part of the reason for the defeat of the situation. I mean, there were some minor gains in some ways, but it was pretty anti-climactic in terms of

the end result. I worked mainly with the Solidarity Coalition; which started off with a bang; but in the end, the attendance at meetings was not as sharp as it had been; but people were still at it. And the end—and I just re-read Crawford Killian's "School wars" —the end process of the two-to-three days... I mean, I can't see how anyone can read it as a trade-unionist and not shake their head in dismay. Because from the trade union point of view, Jack Munro was a disaster. And the private sector put the whole thing into a place that, from a solidarity there was no win. They got to a point where they had nothing new to do, and the pressure was on them to make a quick decision;

[02:13:14] AB: and, it's unfortunate. And it also created confusion all over a lot. It is still one of the most frequently commented... there are so many books been written on Solidarity; and, particularly, the ending period, and have many different stories. I think, from what I've read, Killian summarizes it fairly well. And it got, in a way, of a problem within the BCTF too, because we had two solutions. We had a situation where there was a report back of what people thought was being accepted, wasn't the real thing; but that was not only us. And from what Killian says, he points out that what they thought was one set of agreements, Jack Munro went out up to Kelowna, and what came out of there, wasn't the same thing. But, he's up there, all the rest of the people, who are dealing with the teachers are down here. They have one set of—this is the way I've re-constructed some of it—one set of settlement package, and that's the one BCTF Executive got. And Larry asked me to take it to the Solidarity Coalition the next day, and I did, and Jean Swanson was already there, doing it. Except it wasn't the same one I had.

[02:14:44] AB: So, confusion reigned. And I know there was a lot of people on the Executive who felt—and I take it, many unions, who felt what the hell is going on, I don't know which end is up. And, I think, it left a lot of bad taste in people's mouths. I don't think there was any choice—once Jack Munro got into it, it was over. And it was just a matter of how long, and when, and what—you know. He was determined to get out of it—there was going to be no general strike, period. And he had gone and tried to stop that. Now, I've had one little other side-experience. At the RA, just before the teachers went out, Larry had asked me to go to a meeting with Kube—to some meeting that he was going to, and we needed a teacher there to sort of observe it. So, I went, and Larry had to stay for the BCTF and something that was on the agenda that night. I will say, it was as fascinating experience. We had trouble finding a place to meet first, you know, driving around all over the West End, and

[02:16:05] AB: finally we ended-up at the IWA headquarters. At a meeting room outside of Jack Munro's office. And there's Munro, Jim Matkin, who was then from...

[02:16:24] KN: Business Council.

[02:16:27] AB: Yeah, but one of the big power brokers in the business community... Stephen Kelleher; Ed Peck, Jack Munro, and myself and Art Kube. And I'm not really sure why I'm there, or why, or what's going on. But then it opens up, and Kube sits there and he throws the whole pile of collective agreements onto the table, and he said, we want an exemption for all of these

seniority clauses in all of these agreements. And, the teachers don't have them, but they want them, and that should be exempted too. And so, that was why I was there, so I could say, we did get put on the table. And, Ed Peck came across, and said, well, you know, the legislation is pretty clear, I can't do that. Now I might have this out of order a bit, but then Ed went back and someone says, well, Ed, I think there is some flexibility in the language. I think you could come up with the way whereby you could exempt these things.

[02:17:45] AB: What do you think Stephen? (Stephen Kelleher, Labour relations Board). So, this discussion gets going, and they're all going through this discussion; no one really coming out and drawing the line in the sand, or anything. It's just... philosophising. And I'm sitting there, listening, starting to get fascinated. And I was invited to come along and listen. So, I kept my mouth shut, I didn't figure it was my place in that circumstance to say anything, but I was interested in what was happening. Then, we adjourned for phone calls. Now Art (Kube) and I didn't have anything, so we just sat there, and everyone else went out to phone somebody. Then they all came back, and there was no agreement made, but it left there—we all left in somebody's car to where our cars were; there was a jovial attitude, and I got the definite feeling, that the exemptions were off the table, as a problem. And that was a few days before the teachers went out, that the government was going to agree to that. Because, Matkin, I assumed was speaking for the government, essentially, at that time. But, none of the other stuff was talked about,

[02:19:05] AB: but I found that the process that I had just been involved in, was interesting. But I think, that, you know, "the radicals", or the left that had started the whole kerfuffle, they didn't know what to do. So, it wasn't going to go any further. But the way it ended, it left a bad taste in a lot of mouths, which is unfortunate. Anyway, I've just got Terrace, and have I taken too long?

[02:19:05] KN: Sure—

[02:19:42] KN: let's go to Terrace.

[02:19:45] AB: Any more on that?

[02:19:45] KN: No, that's good.

[02:19:48] KN: That was a meeting I hadn't heard of.

[02:19:51] AB: No, I don't think I told anyone, generally, about it. Because I didn't figure it was going to do anything good to anyone. But, anyway. Terrace—I think it is an important thing. We were having coffee again, in the BCTF and I was near the end of my term, and everything. I was looking forward to taking the summer off, and someone comes in and says, there's a phone-call for you from somebody named John Shen Wing in Terrace, he says, it's really urgent. And John—he was Terrace, in those days. Nobody knew anybody else from Terrace, but John was Terrace. So, I get on the phone, he says, Al, I think we're going on strike. Oh, I say, and when John says that, there is a pretty good chance that this is what's going to happen; that he doesn't

make statements without a very well-considered judgement. Anyways, so I said, well, I can get a plane out here a little bit later, and I will be there. And so, I went in. And there were settlements, there were break-downs of settlements,

[02:21:05] AB: over a period of about a month. They did a one-day withdrawal, another work-to-rule, people were calling out to the minister to shut it down, and order them back to work; and every time I would leave with a settlement of some sort, I would come back to Vancouver and it would be broken-up. So I was heading back and forth and took that plane a lot of times in that month. And Wayne Wyatt, who was the president and Glen Greave who was the bargaining chair; two principals got fired—well, they didn't get fired, they got demoted in a way that the general gist was, they were out; and they were popular principals, and so their staff said, we're not going to let them be fired, and at the same time...

[02:21:05] KN: And they were our members!

[02:21:05] AB: Yeah, they were our members, the principals were at that time. And, at the same time, Glen and his committee have been working like hell on their working and learning conditions contract. And, that was on the table, as well. And there were other things of that nature, so, it was a matter of getting all of them together and agreed to in one place. Because it looked like if one was agreed to, and it looked like it could be over, then, the other one would fall apart.

[02:22:25] AB: And it was comedy of errors, if it wasn't so serious, essentially, but it was funny. Everybody thought it was funny, all those teachers thought it was funny. And, they did do things differently. I'm coming back in for this final negotiation, and a strike vote is on the agenda. I get into the car at the airport, let's say, what we're doing—and they tell me all the things they've done and all the rest, to make the strike vote go well; they said, oh, and we've invited everyone in Terrace to come. And I said, you're going to have a strike vote; and you're going to have the public in a strike vote for the discussions that go on there? I thought, oh my god—and then I thought, keck, they've been doing this kind of thing all the way... And they had excluded Hazelton and Stewart, because they weren't involved in the nastiness, and they didn't know what was going on too; because it was a problem in Terrace. And, you could see some copies, here, I got lots of copies of the papers in Terrace.

[02:23:36] AB: So, what happened was, they invited a goodly number of parents, and media. Yeah, you've got a strike vote, you're discussing it and the media is sitting there, invited by the union! But, the way they had operated, right from the beginning, was to do everything in front of everybody. They started off on relatively non-controversial things, but the public in Terrace knew what was happening about everything. And, every time the board made a stupid move, which they were good at, everyone knew what the teachers would say and do, and were on their side. And it was an unbelievable environment in Terrace for that period of time. And the union guys, who had never done anything union-wise in their lives before did everything beautifully. All these members, if you had told them at any time they were going to go on

strike—and a lot of them were very conservative—they never thought they'd ever in their lives go on strike; but now they had become militants. It was an unbelievably exciting situation to be in to see the silent masses revolt. And, that's what that amounted to.

[02:24:57] AB: And you're trying to give leadership to people who are going 20 directions at the same time, and the slightest little misstep could create problems. And the local people were right on top, and they were brilliant in their decision-making. And I was just there, basically, as a cheer-leader and to help here, there and everywhere, but they were great! And so, then we get this "yo-yo" that the board hires to settle it. I can't pronounce his name, I think it's Hungarian, but it's beyond me. He comes in—slicked-down hair, mustache, he looks like he would be selling cars. And, he's supposedly a pro bargainer. So, he says, immediately, to me, get your crew up here, we'll settle this in no time. I said, the teachers here, they decide who bargains for them, and I think it's them who are going to bargain for them. He was quite dismayed about that, but OK, and of course, Glen and Wayne just grinned, and said, yeah, we're bargaining. And they invited Ralph and me to sit in, but we were there not as speakers, but we were there to sit-in as observers; a

[02:26:25] AB: clear indication, that the BCTF was behind the teachers. And, it was over in 5 minutes. He came in and he gave us everything. We had six issues by that time, and class-size, and the kind of contract... a real contract kind of thing, it's what it was all about. And, they've been on strike to get it. And the government had let them stay on strike to get it, which I was pleasantly surprised at. And the guy came in and offered us 5.5 out of the 6 items we wanted. So, we settled. He looked at it, and I guess he; I don't know what happened inside his head. Maybe, he figured, even if he didn't do a good job for the board, if he did a quickie, he would get applauded. And some did say, well, he must have been pretty good to get a good agreement that fast. But he gave away the store to get it. And we weren't going to give it back. And, that's what closed it off. The party that night was just the best experience you could have been in! People were so pleased with themselves, and rightfully so.

[02:27:48] AB: But it set the tone. This would be the story of the BCTF's successes. It's not any one person, one local or anything like that: you'll get something happening here, then someone will pick up on something there, and it's the fact that teachers have always been picking up from each other and because they do that, it has made a more significant change. It's been not something where everything changed at once, but it's been an erosion of the government position. And, you know, it is a wonderful story, somebody should sit down sometime and write it. Because, I think, it is a great story. And, the Terrace thing really kept—I was just finishing my time as President, and that to me was the perfect ending.

[02:28:46] KN: Alright! Thank you, Al—I do have one more question. Do you have any thoughts, or any advice, or any message for young teachers, who might be entering the profession at this time? What would that advice be, what would you tell them?

[02:29:07] AB: You know, I haven't thought of that question, but I had said that, what needs to be done, because I think... let me put it this way—when we started out, we had an objective. A two-fold objective. The first was, we wanted a union that could bargain properly. We wanted to have a trade union that would have full bargaining rights. That was one thing. We also wanted to change the nature of education. So, we had those two things, and we organized in the Federation around those two things. I mean, at one point it would be a little thing here, and a little thing there, but those were the two recurrent themes. I don't think there are any now, right, with the Federation. I think, that right now what the teachers need to do is sit down and decide where they want to go. I don't think they've got a strategy anymore. Ahead, to work towards. We did—not because we were brilliant, or not, we didn't have any choice. And, I think they're back in that position, and I think it is going to have to take a new set of people to come along and start doing it all over again.

[02:30:26] AB: I do not know the people there now, I don't know anybody, who's on the Executive; were they the ones who'll do that—I don't know, but I think, that needs to be done by someone. And, I think, the fact that we did it, tells you, it can be done. But they have to solve that. I don't think anything I could say, or anyone could say, really—I can't tell them what to do. That's their problem to work out. But, the trade union movement in this province—in this country—is no longer something that people look at as role models that attracts a lot of people anymore. That's one of the problems that any group has got. Because, I think, the trade union movement, I think, is sadly lacking as well. But, I am not of an age where I am going to get involved with all that crap. Someone else (should) now.

[02:31:36] KN: Well, thank you very much, Al.

[02:31:38] AB: Thank you—I've enjoyed it!