

Interview: Ken Novakowski (KN)

Interviewer: Dan Blake (DB), Al Cornes (AC)

Assisted by: Lesley Harrington

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Note: This interview is presented in two genuine parts (Part 1/Part 2), recorded on separate days in May 2015.

[00:00:10] DB: It's morning, it's May 28, 2015, and present with us is Ken Novakowski, who's President of the BCTF from 1989 to 1992. Also, present is myself, Dan Blake, and Al Cornes, interviewing, and technical support been provided by Lesley Harrington of BCTF staff. First question, Ken—can you tell us a bit about your origins, when and where you were born, and the type of community you grew up in.

[00:00:42] KN: I was born on May the 9th, 1944 in a small town, about 40 miles East of Edmonton, called Mundare. It was a farming community, it was predominantly Ukrainian, overwhelmingly Ukrainian. If you walked down the main street in Mundare, English was a second language. Most people spoke Ukrainian. It was a thriving community in the post-war period in the 1950's, when I basically grew up in the town, and it had a very strong religious community— the Greek Catholic community. There was actually a seminary, where they trained priests within the town, a huge, huge catholic church that drew people from a large region, and there was a nunnery, and a convent. All of those were part of the Catholic presence in the community, and a significant presence it was. There were historically some very large community organizations that were involved in the politics of the Ukrainian community; there was a left wing and a right wing and they thrived up until the post-war period and then, pretty much disappeared. But it was a rural community and farms all around it.

[00:01:29] DB: How was your family itself,

[00:02:16] DB: who were your parents and what did they do?

[00:02:23] KN: You want to know something about my family?—basically, my father was a communist, he actually ran for the communist party. And, nearly got elected in 1935 in the provincial election in Alberta, and was well known in the community as a communist, which was sort of a problem in a lot of ways, because it was such a religious community, right wing community in many ways. He operated a small business, he was a garage owner. But my father was also a very conservative person in terms of his... you know, he didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't gamble, worked 7 days a week, so people trusted him, and so, his business thrived actually. He did very well, and so I grew up with that kind of progressive understanding of how

the world worked. In spite of the fact that I grew up in a family of ten, I had nine siblings, I was the only one of the ten that actually really picked up my father's politics to the degree that I did. And I shouldn't say, my father's politics only, because in my mother's side of the family, I had a first cousin, who had actually been a leader in the progressive Ukrainian movement in Canada, by the name of Bill Repka.

[00:03:41] KN: And, so it was very interesting that I actually had it on both sides of my family, and grew to be very proud of that heritage. My father's father was a socialist as well, so I've always consider myself a third generation socialist. But I do want to talk a bit about of the significant focal points in my young life—my dad had lots of books in our house, and every once in a while I used to go through them, looking for a book to read, and I came across a book, when I was 12 years old, called "The Scalpel, The Sword". It was about (laughs) Norman Bethune, of course, who became famous since then,

[00:04:25] KN: but at that time I never heard of him. I read the book, and boy, was I impressed. This guy, you know, he went to Spain to fight in Spanish civil war, he was to China, to help Mao, he died there; but he was a real soldier of fortune, in a way, he lead quite a glamorous life, and he actually was... women were very attracted to him too, which was (laughs) an interesting

[00:04:52] KN: point

[00:04:59] KN: of it. So, I read this book, and I said: "Wow! When I grow up, I want to become a doctor, and go fight with the revolutionaries in South America". That was sort of, my 12-year-old plan. But, of course, that never came to be.

[00:05:06] AC: Could you tell us a bit about your school experience?—and what, in a way, that stood out for you at that

[00:05:13] AC: time...

[00:05:15] DB: This was a Ukrainian Catholic school, wasn't it?

[00:05:17] KN: It was.

[00:05:19] KN: In Alberta, schools were public schools, whether they were Catholic, or non-Catholic. So, it was actually not an officially Catholic school, but they did have Catechism every Wednesday afternoon, and I, and a couple of other kids who were of the Orthodox faith were exempted from the Catechism, but yes, that was a predominant part of the community. So in terms of your question, Dan, wanting me to talk a bit about my experience in school—I had a very shocking experience in Grade 1, because I had a nun for a teacher, sister Louise, and she had a flip chart. And she went through this flip chart and showed us pictures of heaven, and hell, and, you know, how you got to heaven, and why you went to hell (laughs)—you know, we're just six-year-old little kids, watching this, right? And then she talked about purgatory (laughs), and I made up my mind at that time, I was going to be a very good boy, because I wanted to get

to heaven. And then she told me, I couldn't, because I haven't been baptized. The best I could do is get to purgatory.

[00:06:39] KN: So, I spent the rest of my life, hoping I could get to purgatory. It was a very formative experience, and made me confused about my father's and mother's atheism. And it took me three or four years after that, before I embraced their atheism, and said, that, yeah, I think they're right—the Catholic faith is not for me. And, I had another experience in Grade 7—my social studies teacher was a CCF—CCF is a pre-cursor to the NDP—a CCF MLA. There were only two CCF MLAs in Alberta at that time: my teacher, and another man in the adjoining riding. Which was interesting—because of the conservative Catholic nature of the community, we had a progressive member of the legislature. And, he was my social studies teacher, and he had a huge impact on me in terms of interesting me in, you know, political developments, and things like that; in addition to my father, who was very prominent in influencing me, he was another one. And, the third incident I would mention, occurred when I was in high-school, I had an English teacher, who was a very good English teacher,

[00:07:56] KN: as you know, English teachers can be, and she noticed that I had a talent for writing, and contacted the people she knew, who were putting out the community newspaper, which was a weekly newspaper, the "Mundare Mirror". And she convinced them that I could become editor of the "Mundare Mirror", and I did—when I was sixteen years of age (laughs). I became editor of the "Mundare Mirror". And it was a great experience, I made some money, it was a weekly paper—not very political, you know, lots about curling bonspiels, and weddings, and things like that, about what's happening in the community, but, nonetheless, it gave me an opportunity to write. I also became a stringer for a number of other publications, the Vegreville Observer, and the Edmonton Journal, all of which I got paid for, so by the time I finished high-school, I had a nice bank account from all the writing I had done. It was neat experience. So, those are the three experiences in terms of my schooling that stand out for me.

[00:08:29] AC: How did you reconcile—

[00:09:02] AC: I mean, this is quite a demanding job, to be a journalist, and also, to be a high-school student is pretty demanding...

[00:09:10] KN: Ah, well I found, I never had... School never really challenged me enough, I found that I was doing... I did well in all my subjects, right across the board, except for Phys Ed (laughs), and every other subject I excelled in. So, it didn't matter—it came easy to me.

[00:09:31] DB: Well, let's move onto the university then. What eventually prompted you to become a teacher?

[00:09:37] KN: you want to know why I became a teacher—that's a bit of a trek to get there, because, I started off my university career in science, because my oldest brother, who was sort of a mentor to me was a scientist. He had a PhD in biology; he thought science was the way to go if you want to get a good job, you have to get a degree in science, and then a post-graduate

degree, and so forth, so he convinced me to go into science. And I did OK, in terms of my marks and stuff like that, but I wasn't really enjoying it, I wasn't getting any pleasure out of it, I thought I should be, learning. And so, after a couple of years I took a senior political science course as an option, and I loved it. So, I switched to political science, ended up with a BA in Political Science and Philosophy. And then, of course you ask the question, well, what do you do with a degree in political science and philosophy? You know, not very much. In the meantime I've got a job with the Canada Land Inventory, as a land use planner.

[00:10:44] KN: And I'd written this fabulous report—took me a year to do it, for the Provincial Parks Branch on why they should put a park at Moose Lake, near St. Paul in Northern Alberta, and it was all documented with all the right inputs and everything else, and supported by the Parks Branch, and everything else; and it came back stamped "Confidential". So, here was a year's worth my life, and it had no impact on anything, and I wanted my life to have an impact on something. So, that's why I went into education. I went into education, because I thought, being a teacher, I can have an impact on the students I taught, as teachers have had an impact on me. And that was why I chose education. I went and did a degree in education.

[00:11:32] DB: So, what university were you in? Was it the University of Alberta, right?

[00:11:35] KN: That's right.

[00:11:36] AC: Did you get involved in any extracurricular stuff, while at university?

[00:11:39] KN: Yes, while I was at the University of Alberta, I got very involved; I ended up being the leader of the NDP in the Model Parliament contest, which was an experience in itself, because the students had elected a minority liberal government, and we held to balance the power in the NDP, and we persuaded them to pass a piece of legislation that would provide students, not only with free tuition, but with a stipend, and so, not only that, but we had them write to the Prime Minister, and the Premier, saying that this is what the position of the Model Parliament of the University of Alberta was. And it was a real coup. I also ran a campaign for the student council on the pro-CUS slate, for an entire slate of officers in student government elections, and the only person who got elected was the vice-presidential candidate, who was a red Tory, and it was David King, who became the minister of education in Peter Lougheed's government.

[00:12:49] KN: So, I did get very much involved in student politics and in the life of the University of Alberta.

[00:12:53] AC: So, now you started to teach, and

[00:12:57] AC: where did you begin your first teaching job?

[00:12:59] KN: I got my first teaching job—I should go back a bit and say, that during my life in Edmonton in the late 1960s, when I was 23 years old, I was also elected President of the Federal Young New Democrats, which was an incredible thing for me, as a little kid from Mundare, to

take on this huge challenge of leading a national youth organization. I travelled to Ottawa virtually every second month, and, on the bright side one of the things that happened, was, I got to know Tommy Douglas, because he was the leader of the party at the time, so I even did an entire TV program once with him, it was a national program on the Vietnam War, because I was very active in the anti-war movement as well.

[00:13:48] DB: Any special memories of Tommy Douglas?

[00:13:49] KN: Oh, yeah... Lots. We hit it off right from the beginning, in terms of connecting and when I ran federally in 1972, Tommy was no longer leader, he was still the MP from Nanaimo, but he came to speak in my riding—it was the only riding he agreed to speak in, in Burnaby/ Richmond/ Delta, and that was one the most memorable things for me, that he would do that. And that was because of the relationship we had established when I was the President of the Federal Youth Movement. He always thought I was a bit too radical, but he understood, that that was OK, so... It was a great relationship.

[00:14:41] DB: Now, you're teaching in Langley, and what kind of stuff are you getting involved in, apart from your regular classroom stuff?

[00:14:47] KN: Well, in terms of teaching, I got involved in... I got excited about doing curriculum work. I was very much into finding materials that spoke to all aspects of what Social Studies was. So I remember using materials in my classroom on the Winnipeg General Strike, on labour, on labour movement generally, on women's rights, which was just a fledgling movement at that time, not a fledgling, but it was an emerging movement at that time; on poverty. I can remember actually, showing in my classroom—and this is in Langley, where I was a teacher, remember, it is a farming community. I mean, Mundare prepared me for Langley, meaning, it was a farming community at that time, it was also very conservative, very religious oriented, in many respects, and I can remember showing a film "A Time To Rise", which is the film, that was created about the farm workers' union, and how it was organizing and forming, and one of the fascinating things about it is that, one of the farmers, who was featured in the film, was a guy by the name of George Dreidiger, who was mayor of Langley municipality, and also happened to be President of the BC Social Credit party.

[00:16:15] KN: And, so word got back to my principal, that I had shown this film, and he called me in and said, you know, he's had some complaints, and I said: "Are you going to tell me, I can't show it?" And he said: "No."

[00:16:33] AC: So, we're curious, Ken. Why didn't you teach in Alberta?

[00:16:38] KN: Good question. I didn't teach in Alberta, because... that's of course, where I lived, and that was my first choice, and, so it was Edmonton. I liked Edmonton, and I'd done a lot of things there, built a lot of friendships and connections, but one other things I did, was we used to go and distribute leaflets at high-schools, to try and form NDY clubs, New Democratic Youth clubs in high-schools; and it became a big issue—the superintendent banned that, he said you

can't do that, he tried to cut us off and said: "kids are too young for politics", and stuff like that, and, of course, we disagreed. Then the Edmonton Journal, the very conservative Edmonton Journal came out with a huge editorial, saying, kids should have the right to belong to political youth groups. You know, the superintendent is wrong! He never forgave me for that. He let it be known. The social studies co-ordinator in Edmonton wanted to hire me. He said, I was on the top of his list to hire; he said: "Ken, you won't get a job in Edmonton". So, that's why I came out to the coast, and applied to a number of communities, a number of school districts on the coast, including Langley.

[00:17:56] KN: I got a call from Langley, and was offered a job there, which is why I ended up teaching in Langley.

[00:18:03] DB: You said, when you were teaching in Langley, you mentioned your interest in curriculum and the resources you're using. Outside of the actual classroom, what other kind of involvement were you doing with teachers of Langley?

[00:18:18] KN: There were two or three things I was doing. One, I got immediately involved in the BC Social Studies Teachers' Association, I eventually became President from 1980 to 1982, and organized a huge provincial conference in Langley, in February of 1980. It was a way of expressing my professional growth, and what, I thought, teachers in Social Studies should be doing. I should go back a minute, and one of the things I did get involved in while I was teaching, is I applied for a job in the Ministry of Education in the Research and Development Branch. Remember, we had a NDP government elected in 1972 and I should say that I did work hard to get that government elected, and I spent my whole summer working for Harold Steeves in Richmond during that election, as part of the Teachers For Political Action Committee initiative, to get a change in government in 1972, and that was very successful. But we were trying to get, a number of us, myself included, we were trying to get the government to institute some progressive educational reforms. And I got this job at the research and development division,

[00:19:40] KN: and along with the other young people, like me, they called us "The Young Turks", who were, or I was, thirty at the time, and we were wanting to make changes from within, you know, to get the minister to bring about these changes. And there was an old established bureaucracy in the Ministry of Education like most other ministries, because the SoCreds have been in power for so long, they were entrenched. So, the NDP cabinet ministers had to deal with that, they had to take that on. Well, some of them took that on, they got rid of the entrenched bureaucracies, and appointed new people, progressive people, but the minister of education, Eileen Dailly didn't do that. So, our division ran head-on into the old established bureaucracy, and we had problems. So, the minister's solution was to fire us—instead of firing them, she fired us, the people, who were progressive and supportive, and it was a very big news item, and I think it hurt the NDP, because they had done that, because, here were people, who were supporters getting fired, and for no reason. And I think,

[00:21:01] KN: the record of NDP in education, aside from doing away with corporal punishment, and that's something we will talk about, I think, further on in this discussion, they didn't do, in a way, to bring progressive changes to education.

[00:21:19] DB: Did it prompt you to get involved in local politics at all?

[00:21:23] KN: It did. I actually, living in the community of Langley, we had a very conservative school board, it was called "Back to the Basics" school board, and a very conservative municipal council, so we formed, a political organization, I think in 1976, I initiated it, of course, and it was called Ideal: Independent Electors Association of Langley. And it was intended to be, and was the first real progressive political organization in the community at that level, at the municipal/school board level, to take on local politics. And we ran candidates—at that time there was an election every year, and candidates were up every year, so we ran for a number of years, and we attracted quite a number of votes, but never got anyone elected. In the meantime the school board had become so bad, and I can remember to this day, in my living room, I'd called a meeting of all the different elements in the community. We had George Preston, who was the car dealer and the former mayor of the municipality, a big L Liberal, he ran federally for the Liberals;

[00:22:51] KN: in my living room we had a guy by the name of Ken Robinson, who was actually a SoCred, who was in my living room; we had Dennis Rankin, who was an old CP'er, who was also from the BCTF staff, who was living out there, who was in my living room; we had myself, an active New Democrat ; we had a real cross-section, a political cross-section, a coalition of people, who had one objective in mind, and that was to get rid of that "back to the basics" school board, it was so bad. And in 1980 we succeeded in doing that. It was a coalition victory, and we had progressive people all of a sudden in a majority on the school board, and that made a difference, when I subsequently became President of the Langley Teachers' Association, and worked at that.

[00:23:42] KN: But I did want to mention one other thing that happened, when I was a teacher that was very, very significant, and had a lasting impression on me and the way I think about education. And that was in February of 1974, when the NDP got elected, and they got support from the Teachers Political Action committee, and one of the things they pledged to do, was to deal with the issue of increasing class-sizes. And by 1974, a couple of years into their term they had done nothing. And so, the Surrey teachers (I had nothing to do with this, but I was a very passionate observer), the Surrey teachers under the leadership of their President, Lloyd Edwards, took a day off from school—unprecedented for locals to do that, but they did that, and they went to Victoria, to protest. There's been no action on this question—what's going on? We're having huge classes; Surrey was a growing district, huge class-sizes; they had other issues as well, but that was the prominent issue. And, Dave Barrett, the premier, didn't like the idea of teachers on the lawn of the legislature, protesting against an NDP government.

[00:25:05] KN: So, he met with Jim MacFarlan, the President of the BCTF, and said, you know, “How do we get these people off the lawn of the legislature?” And he says: “Well, we have to reach a deal here on reducing class-size”. It was amazing, because the result and the outcome of that negotiation that happened at that time, was a three year plan to reduce class-size, and the way they did it, was by reducing what was then called “the pupil-teacher ratio” over those three years. It had a phenomenal impact on class sizes, I think we had 20,000 teachers in the province at that time, and as a result of that agreement, 4000 new teachers were hired, Bennett honoured that agreement after he took office in 1975, so we implemented the second two years of that agreement. And as a teacher, I could tell in my classroom, how different it was, all of a sudden I had fewer students, I could do more with them, it just made teaching and learning so much more enjoyable. And it was remarkable what had happened. And, I became a life-long advocate of reduced class-sizes, because of that experience.

[00:26:24] KN: It was first-hand experience to know the difference: the “then”, and the “now”. And what difference it made in my ability to teach. So, that was a great moment.

[00:26:34] DB: So, Ken, during that same time, were you also involved in federal politics?

[00:26:39] KN: I had run, yes—earlier, actually, before I got involved in teacher politics, my focus was on the NDP, and so shortly after I moved here in 1971, I got involved in the Burnaby/Richmond/ Delta Federal Riding Association, and in 1972 I was their candidate federally, for a member of parliament. And it was the David Lewis’s first election, it was the “corporate welfare bums” election, there was a lot of momentum behind the NDP. And that was the seat that we had held before—the Liberals won it in 1968, but Bob Prittie, the mayor of Burnaby had been the MP before that, for the NDP. So, it was a riding we could win, and I gave it my best shot, but again, I was very young, I was 27 years old and I get teased to this day about one of the slogans that we had in the campaign. I had been involved in the “waffle” movement, and one of the things about the “waffle” movement, was, we wanted Canadian ownership of Canadian industry, which was predominantly controlled by the Americans. And, so, we came up with the slogan: “End foreign domination!”,

[00:28:06] KN: and, you know, most people didn’t understand that. And I can remember when I came in canvassing, in particular, in Tsawwassen, which is right by the American border, they asked: “What do you mean, end foreign domination?—with a name like Novakowski, you want to end foreign domination?”, you know? I was getting all kinds of reaction, I think, I don’t know whether that slogan really hurt me, but I lost the election by less than one percent of the vote. I came very close to being elected, and I often wondered whether that slogan was what did me in. Anyway, in many respects my life would have been quite different had I been elected,

[00:28:40] KN: but

[00:28:41] KN: I didn’t get elected.

[00:28:43] DB: So, you’re back in Langley now, and you’ve become Local President?

[00:28:47] KN: Yes. I initially decided to get active in the local after I went to 1974 AGM. It was my first AGM, and Jim MacFarlan was the President, and he was running for re-election. So I was, you know, standing there, and watching him speak, and I hear this guy say he's a self-proclaimed Marxist, he says it to the teachers, "why I am a Marxist", and I thought "Holy cow!", you know? And he gets elected! So, I thought, there's got to be something about the politics of the union that allows them to elect someone as progressive as that. And so, I made up my mind then that I would get involved, and I went back to Langley and organized a slate to run, for, you know, President and other positions—I wasn't going to run for President at that time, but we had a candidate, a person, who was willing to run. And then, at the same time, almost, within weeks of that I got this inkling to go and work at the research and development position at the Ministry of Education in Victoria. And so I took that opportunity, which meant I didn't run for the Executive.

[00:30:08] KN: But the person I supported, did become President, Brahm Sahadeo, and so, it was a few years later I kept going to AGMs, but that was the extent of my involvement. In 1979 I ran for what was then called Geographic Rep, and went to the RAs and became involved, and a year later, in 1980 I became Local President. And it was a full-time position, but we didn't have an office. The President before me, Terry Eastman had operated out of his home. But we now had an office, which I set up and got established, and a whole bunch of procedures. And I can remember taking this job on July 1st, 1980, and, immediately, I was still involved in the community, civic organization, because it was that fall of 1980 that we changed the school board, finally got rid of the "Back to the Basics" bunch.

[00:31:21] KN: They were not a very good group for education.

[00:31:31] DB: What was your first big issue?

[00:31:32] KN: Actually,

[00:31:33] KN: the first big issue was a provincial issue—it was the pensions issue. You might remember that on March the 19th, 1971 we had a day, where the whole province—all the teachers in the province—walked out on pensions issues, and that was more mainly, to support, the retired colleagues, who were not getting the benefits of the new deal that we had worked out with government. And, this is 1980, and there were still a number of issues around the indexing of the pensions. And Surrey, and VESTA, I think in November had gone to Victoria—they'd taken a day off and gone to Victoria to protest, and, so they were ahead of the game in that sense, but Langley, Coquitlam, Delta, New Westminster and Vancouver Secondary—five locals in the Metro, decided, they would walk out on one day in December in protest. And we paraded on the streets of Vancouver, and had a rally at the Art Gallery,

[00:32:47] KN: and it was a significant protest, and for me it was, you know, leading teachers out on an action like that, was a challenge. And it was a very successful demonstration, but that was the first one I faced. There were many. Another one that I'd tried to deal with, was our special services department in Langley, was a growing department—Langley was a growing district, and

we had a lot of speech pathologists, and hearing pathologists, psychometricians, psychologists—people, who did not have a teaching certificate. So, they were not members of the Langley teachers Association, and they had a whole bunch of grievances—

[00:33:44] KN: not that we had a grievance procedure at this time, but, they had a whole bunch of grievances, in terms of their salary, how they were paid, and everything else. And they wanted me to represent them as a Local President. So, what I did, was I consulted with the BCTF staff lawyer, David Yorke, and we eventually came up with this notion, that, if we could get voluntary recognition from the school board, that I would represent these, as in the BCTF and LTA would represent these people, that would be OK. And the BCTF subsequently created a position, called Associated Professionals, where people, who did not have a teaching degree, but were working with students in very supportive ways, like the one I've identified, could become members of the BCTF—and did. So, I did represent them, and without the procedure of grievance I managed to persuade the school board to make a lot of changes, because, remember, we had a change in school board for a more progressive school board. So, we made a lot of changes, gave them some satisfaction in terms of their treatment and their wages, and their other benefits. So, that was another challenge,

[00:35:03] KN: but the main one, and the one that was the most fun and exciting, was in 1981—the BCTF had engaged in an expanded scope of bargaining campaign. That is, the BCTF had decided, that—you'll need to remember, that the school board bargaining was very limited at that time. The government required school boards only to negotiate

[00:35:29] KN: salaries and benefits, with salaries and bonuses and benefits with their employees. And we were on a one year cycle, we've had agreement for one year, and if we didn't get a deal, I think, it was by, November 30th, it went to binding arbitration, and by December 31st we had an award from the arbitrator, that determined what are salary and benefits were going to be for the following year. But the BCTF wanted to be able to negotiate, teachers wanted to be able to negotiate working conditions, other terms and conditions of employment, so this expanded scope of bargaining campaign was, basically, teachers would take to the table items, other, than salary and recent bonuses, and try to convince the school board, by whatever means, to put these provisions into the agreement. That was the expanded scope campaign. And we felt, that if we did that over time, that we would expand our scope of bargaining, that we'd get enough school boards, we'd get a centre of gravity, a critical mass, who would agree to negotiate a range of things with us. So, that fall, I can remember structuring the bargaining team. The bargaining team before this was always called the Economic Welfare or the Agreements Committee.

[00:36:53] KN: It was just concerned with salaries and bonuses. So we had an Agreements Committee in Langley, we also had a Working and Learning Conditions Committee; we also had a Professional Development Committee. So, we put all the chairs of those three committees, plus, me, as President, and we had a negotiator, Dale Lauder, and the five of us, we constituted the bargaining team—this group of five, that was reflective of the interest of teachers' at that

time. This is 1981. And it was a very unusual structure, given structures that existed before then. And we took a number of items to the table, but the one I want to zoom in on, is the lunch break. Teachers used to have to supervise during lunch break, and so we made a big issue of this: we had buttons that said: “Even teachers deserve a lunch break”, we did a huge, massive advertising campaign, where we talked that every other teacher group in Canada can bargain their conditions of employment, every other work group in BC, every other group of employees in BC can negotiate their terms of employment,

[00:38:05] KN: why can’t teachers? You know, we made a big issue of that, and the biggest thing we did, which was significant, is, during the height of bargaining, we held a day, where we invited all the teachers in the district to come to a chilli lunch during the lunch break, and we had three sites around the district, where we served chilli, and buns, and

[00:38:34] KN: pop, and stuff like that, and the local paid for it. So, every teacher in the district came, during their lunch break to this chilli lunch... they were huge, they were incredibly successful events. At that time the administrators, if you remember, were members of Federation and of the local. So, the administrators stayed back in the school to make sure that the students were OK, and looked after, that their health and safety wasn’t endangered, and the teachers all came to these chilli lunches. And that, actually, very much impressed the board. The board was convinced, that teachers wanted a lunch break! You know, this was a demonstrative action that made that point. And, so we got the provision in the agreement, in that round, that provided teachers with 25 dollars an hour for doing the noon our supervision, which was a lot of money in those days, and we knew that eventually, that provision would lead to the duty-free lunch hour, because it would be cheaper for them to get people at a lesser rate to do the supervision, than the teachers. And, so we thought that that was a foot in the door, and it was a big foot in the door for us.

[00:39:52] KN: We also got a grievance procedure, model clause language from the BCTF in our agreement, we got leaves of absence in our agreement; we got professional development clauses in our agreement; we got a number of things we were very happy about.

[00:40:09] AC: So, Ken—looking from the provincial perspective, and at the time, looking back on it, what were the factors that made it such a successful campaign, not only in Langley, but also, around the province?

[00:40:26] KN: I think, the feeling was that... I mean, teachers themselves have been wanting to have a greater impact on their working conditions—basically, and I think that the campaign highlighted all that, and highlighted the discriminatory aspects of us being denied those rights to bargain all terms of employment, when you looked at other teachers in Canada, other workers in BC—those are the things that, I think, stood out. And the BCTF did an extremely good job of co-ordinating that campaign and giving support to locals, where they needed it to make that happen. The BCTF actually had a grant that they provided to locals, and in our case, we got one of those grants that helped us with paying for the advertising in the newspaper, and things like

that, that were very important. The big thing in Langley itself that worked, was that chilli lunch. Who would have known that a chilli lunch is actually a political action—

[00:41:31] KN: today that kind of action would be viewed as a strike, but in those days it was simply a political protest, and a very effective one.

[00:41:40] AC: So, wasn't there a strike during this period as well?

[00:41:42] KN: Yes. That action was one of the things that stimulated local leaders, like me, in June, 1981, which preceded the fall campaign. Terrace teachers actually had a strike, it was called the Personnel Practices strike, because it was the personnel practices that they were trying to influence and impact, that they couldn't negotiate, so they went on strike and they actually reached an agreement with their board on a series of provisions that provided personnel practices. And, that was ground-breaking—to actually have in the agreement, provisions, that governed things like how promotions were done, hiring, firing, all those practices that go with teaching. So, that was a significant break-through, and everybody used that as a wedge, when they talked to their school board, saying, this is what happened in Terrace, we don't want to have a strike here, but,

[00:42:56] KN: you

[00:42:57] KN: know. That was very significant.

[00:43:01] DB: Ken, sounds like you have accumulated a lot of experience and skills working on local bargaining issues in Langley, and so it seemed only logical that you have an opportunity to share that experience with those around the province, so you've become an Assistant Director of the Bargaining Division of the BCTF?

[00:43:21] KN: Yes. I became Assistant Director of the Bargaining Division in 1982, but before I go there, I would like to mention one more incident, that happened during our expanded scope of bargaining campaign, if I might, because it was very significant in my life. And that was, I had a cross burned on my lawn during the expanded scope campaign, and this gives you an idea of how conservative the community of Langley was. Here was union in Langley, the teachers, who were in the news—we were headline news every week in the Langley Advance, doing this, and doing that, and everything else, and advertising, so we had a high profile. I had a high profile, so, one night in the midst of the campaign, I was awakened by a phone call in the middle of the night, and went to check on my daughter, and looked out her window, and there was a burning cross on my lawn. It was just horrible—it horrified me, I was scared to death, because of what it symbolized, and I phoned the police, and they never did find out who did that. Dennis Rankin organized a... rally outside my house, the next morning, very supportive rally,

[00:44:48] KN: there were 50 people there, and the BCTF Executive came to my place that night, because they were having an Executive meeting, on the Saturday night, to be with me. Very

supportive, but it was a traumatic experience, and I tried to keep it out of the news, because I didn't want to draw attention to my family.

[00:45:11] DB: So, what was the outcome, was anybody ever charged?

[00:45:14] KN: No, nobody was ever charged, you know, they tapped my phone, they tried to find out, but no, they were not able to...

[00:45:28] DB: was there any reaction in the community?

[00:45:42] KN: Well, there was, the editor of the Langley Advance, Bob Groenveld, at the time, knew about it, and he was outraged; he was upset that I didn't allow it to go public, but he was outraged over something like that to happen in our community. And the people who knew, administrators, school board, other people, who knew were all very supportive and very outraged by what had happened. They did not like it at all.

[00:45:56] DB: OK, so, now—to the Assistant Director of the Bargaining Division.

[00:46:01] DB: This is the time of the Solidarity campaign,

[00:46:05] DB: so, out of the frying pan into the fire...

[00:46:10] KN: In many respects, the Solidarity experience was a life-changing experience, again, for me personally, but also, I think, it was for the BCTF. I was assigned to work full time with the solidarity coalition, and it was a real education for me, to work with these community groups, to realize what a profound commitment they had to their issues, whether it was human rights, anti-poverty, women's groups, whatever it was, the profound nature of their commitment was really, really, instructive to me in terms of what the coalition was all about. And, of course, the Operation Solidarity brought the BCTF into the labour movement through the back-door way: we, and the nurses, and others, who were not part of the BCFED, were all of a sudden in this umbrella labour organization, called Operation Solidarity. So, it was huge. But Solidarity, the cause of Solidarity being formed, it was a result of a reaction of the Bill Bennett government bringing in the 26 pieces of legislation. And it wasn't really just sort of a one-off that was happening here, in many respects BC had become a test case for the Milton Friedman right-wing economic agenda. Milton Friedman had actually come out to BC to meet with the premier Bennett and the members of his cabinet.

[00:47:50] KN: The Fraser Institute, which was a very right-wing think tank had profoundly influenced the Bennett cabinet. So what this legislation was, including the budget that went with it, a huge restraint budget, cut-backs in education, in all public services; it was an attack on human rights, an attack on a lot of the things that the NDP had brought in, like rent controls, and things like that; on labour legislation, it was a major setback for the progressive agenda, which had been in the ascendancy since the Second World War. Progressive agenda had been moving towards establishing a progressive state, where people were able to rely upon services and programs, that would ensure that they didn't end up in poverty or in dire straits; and

protect their rights, and expand their rights at the same time. So, this attack was met by the whole Solidarity movement, which was the brainchild of Art Kube, who was the President of the BC Federation of Labour at that time. And he was using the solidarity thrust, which have been popular in Poland in the previous few years, where solidarity had resulted in changing the nature of the Polish government—

[00:49:41] KN: Lech Walesa

[00:49:42] KN: in Poland, exactly. The concept was sound, and it was a unique creation. Both, Operation Solidarity and the Solidarity Coalition, and the fact that they worked together, it was a powerful, powerful coalition, when you put two of them together. I mean if we could get 80,000 people on the streets of Vancouver, in a political protest in the middle of October that was really something. That was very indicative of how people were willing to stand up and defend that kind of society they had built to that point, and didn't want it torn down, and this was the first example of the Thatcher-Reagan kind of agenda

[00:50:29] KN: attacks on services, attacks on labour, all of that, that was about to change the face of our society, and since then has changed it dramatically. So, we stood up to them. And my role was to, simply, work with the coalition, I took the minutes of their meetings, I worked very closely with Renate Shearer, who was the chair of the coalition, I edited and published their newsletter, did a number of things like that. And then, when we got close to the strike in November, the BCTF was trying to get an exemption to Bill 3. Bill 3 was one piece of legislation, that allowed the government to fire any employee without cause, simply as a way of reducing the number of employees, and therefore, reducing costs, and reducing staff, and that included teachers. Up until this time teachers—school system—had been growing; and so the number of teachers had been growing. We hadn't really experienced a significant reduction. There were declining enrolments in some districts here and there, but overall, the system was growing and the number of teachers in demand was increasing. So, this was a challenge for us, and we didn't have the right to negotiate to this point seniority, severance agreements, because that was the expanded scope item.

[00:52:12] KN: So, teachers didn't have any means by which lay-offs could occur, that was fair.

[00:52:17] KN: And, so the BCTF tried to negotiate an agreement with school districts, and that's when they sent me in, to do that negotiation. I had a short course from David Yorke on what to look for in terms of that particular agreement, and I met with the Richmond school board, which had some progressive people on the board, I met with their negotiators, we tried to negotiate the agreement in Richmond, and we came very close, but we didn't. We didn't reach an agreement. And so, we tried in North Vancouver. Now, this is Sunday, November the

[00:53:01] KN: 6th. We went into negotiations with the North Van board that afternoon and evening, and we negotiated through the night, and in the middle of the night, it must have been 2, 3 o'clock, we reached an agreement! We actually got an agreement with a school board, and as far as Larry Kuehn, the President and the Executive of the day was concerned, if we got an

agreement, that provided an exemption to Bill 3, then, maybe, we wouldn't go out on strike, because we were scheduled to go out on strike on Tuesday.

[00:53:33] KN: So,

[00:53:34] KN: I went home, and slept in. Well, it must have been four o'clock before I got to bed, came to the BCTF building and by the time I got there, it was all news, that the government had told the North Vancouver school board that they couldn't have that agreement, that they couldn't do that, and so, there was no agreement, and so that evening, Larry Kuehn let teachers know, that we were going out the next day. And, we went out for three days, as you know, most of it in the rain, at least at this part of the world, and it was a real challenge for us, because it was the first time where teachers were actually putting up picket lines. And it wasn't just teachers that went out on that Tuesday, it was all education workers, so CUPE was with us, and other education workers were with us. But it really stunned observers, because people didn't think that teachers would go out. This is 1983. In 1982, in a referendum, in the spring on 1982, teachers had rejected asking government for the right to strike.

[00:54:52] KN: So, teachers, who were so timid, they didn't want a right to strike—actually, it was strike or arbitration option we were proposing that they take, and they said “No” to that, 60/40%. So, we had these votes around the province, as to whether or not we would go out over the Solidarity stuff, and actually, by about the same margin, 60/40%, teachers did approve going out. In local-by-local; there were votes taken in local-by-local, so we went out on the Tuesday, and overwhelmingly teachers went out—a number didn't, but most, overwhelmingly most, did. And, it was a huge event...

[00:55:37] DB: This was part of the first stage of the event, right?

[00:55:41] KN: Operation Solidarity, or the BCFED had a plan that over period of time, other groups would join in, if there were no changes. We were demanding the withdrawal of the legislation of what they were doing, and reversal, and nothing was happening. However, that weekend, Art Kube, who was the president of the Federation of Labour and Operation Solidarity, got seriously ill

[00:56:15] KN: and Jack Munro, one of the Vice-Presidents filled-in for him, and went up to Kelowna to meet with Bill Bennett, and it was the long weekend... November 11th, the Remembrance Day was Friday, so it was Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and on Sunday they negotiated an agreement, which effectively, ended the walk-out.

[00:56:40] KN: And,

[00:56:43] KN: Jack Munro wore the deal, because the deal was very unpopular. It was particularly unpopular amongst the Coalition, the Solidarity Coalition, they felt they've been betrayed and that labour had the power to stand up to the state, community organizations did not have that kind of power, but from the beginning, the sense was that we're all in this

together, and we're here to get changes to all the legislation, not just the legislation, which affects labour. And, some people in the labour movement didn't like that position, they didn't feel like their members should be put out on the line, you know, losing salary and so forth, to fight for things that weren't directly in their benefit or the best interests, and so that's where the conflict came, and that's where division arose. And it left a very, very divided house by when the dispute was over, primarily between the coalition and labour, but also, within labour,

[00:57:54] KN: for example, between the BCTF. A lot of people, who voted for taking action weren't necessarily voting about Bill 3, they were voting on the whole package, it was their social conscience, and their belief in a better world that had them vote in favour of taking action. And, so they felt betrayed, many people in the BCTF felt betrayed. So much so, that it would be 20 years before we join the BC Federation of Labour, and in a large part, it was because of what happened around Solidarity. However, having said that, some of the positive aspects of it, was, we did get the right to bargain seniority, severance agreements as a result of that, as a result of a deal that was negotiated, and we did that throughout the province. In every local we had successfully negotiated some provisions in terms of the fair lay-off

[00:58:52] KN: and severance of teachers. And that was significant, because that was the first, real expanded scope item, that we legally had the authority to negotiate. And, secondly, it phenomenally raised the trade union consciousness of teachers, because up until this point in time, for example, if our co-workers in CUPE were out on strike, we would cross their picket lines. We wouldn't do their work, but we would report to work ourselves, get paid and do our teaching stuff. But after Solidarity, we passed a motion, at the 1984 AGM that said, we honour picket lines. And we never, ever since then, have crossed picket lines. And it was very, very significant, because teachers realized that they were on the picket line, they realized how important the picket line was, what it meant, what it represented, and why it should be honoured, because they grew to resent their colleagues who didn't honour the picket line. There was a lot of bitterness against people, who did report to work and got paid during that period of time. But it was a very telling moment for all, and it changed the BCTF dramatically.

[01:00:12] KN: It really did.

[01:00:21] DB: You first said, that the teachers had acquired a new sense of solidarity with other workers, particularly, probably in the public system. But so, this disenchantment was mostly with the leadership, or rather, certain elements of that leadership, rather than with the union groups as a whole...

[01:00:31] KN: I think the disenchantment... I mean, Jack Munro wore it personally; he was targeted for making this deal. My understanding, that he made the deal at the direction of the BCFED Executive, not the Operation Solidarity Executive, but the BCFED executive. And, he was not alone, he wasn't doing that in isolation, but with others, who were behind him in terms of doing it. Larry, who was President at the time knew nothing about the negotiations happening, wasn't consulted, wasn't involved,

[01:01:09] KN: so we were left out, and there was a lot of bitterness about that.

[01:01:13] DB: Especially, since we got out on strike...

[01:01:16] KN: We had done that and it's ironic, because, a lot of political pundits and others said: "Oh, teachers, will never go out." Are you kidding? You know, this isn't going to work! So, when we called their bluff, and actually went out, it was pretty dramatic. I have to say, in all honesty, many of us, who were on the ground—I had metro assignments, so I was working with a lot of metro locals—we were worried that we weren't going to be able to hold them, if we were still out on Monday. You know, that was a concern, a legitimate concern, whether or not we could keep the teachers out indefinitely; mind you, if it was escalating into a full-scale general strike that might have happened.

[01:02:04] KN: But, it was not to be.

[01:02:13] DB: So, now you're back in teaching, and you have some new challenges to face in the local, looking at Bills 19 and 20.

[01:02:23] KN: Right. Well, first I did go back to teach in 1986–87 and I actually ran provincially in 1986 for the NDP in Langley. Now, when I ran federally in Burnaby/ Richmond/ Delta, I was definitely running in a winnable riding; when I ran in Langley in 1986, I was not running in a winnable riding. But I ran mainly, because I wanted to fly the flag for education. Education had been really beaten up since 1982, actually, the year before Solidarity, Bennett had brought in a major restraint program. So, ever since 1982 we've been every year: cut-backs, cut-backs, every year, cut-backs, I mean... I formed an organization called PACE—Parents Against Cut-backs in Education and we were trying to get parents involved in defending public education, because there are students that are being directly affected, and we were very successful in getting a lot of parents involved. But I wanted to run provincially, and I can remember I ended each of my debates, when I was debating with Carol Gran, the SoCred incumbent, and others, by saying: "A child is a child only once"; and, that the cut-backs are really unfair to the children, who are in the school system now, because you might increase education funding down the road, or whatever, but the child that's there now is the one that loses,

[01:04:05] KN: and it was wrong. I did reasonably well, given the circumstances, but nowhere close to winning.

[01:04:13] KN: Anyway, that

[01:04:15] KN: year, when I went to the AGM in 1987 I ran for Member At Large, and was elected. So, having been on staff I decided to try the political side of the organization, I was elected member at large, and shortly after the AGM, actually, the government brought in Bills 19 and 20. And they were huge—

[01:04:41] KN: again,

[01:05:32] KN: I talk about how the Solidarity changed the BCTF, and Bills 19 and 20 changed the BCTF even more so, because of what they did. The bills brought in the College of Teachers, it made administrators part of management, in terms of the system, it provided for teachers in teacher locals to become unions, with full bargaining rights, and full scope, and even the right to strike; or to become an association and have an arbitration process to resolve your differences; it took away compulsory membership at the BCTF. It made an awful lot of changes that we were clear, they're going to impact heavily on the BCTF. And, Bill 20—or it might have been Bill 20 that did all that. Bill 19 was the one, I think, that changed the Labour Relations Act to diminish the right of all working people, all unions. Together they were very devastating couple of pieces of legislation, and the NDP were in the opposition at the time. The BCTF Executive seconded me from my teaching duties in Langley to go and work full-time with the NDP caucus, to educate them about what some of the issues were in terms of them speaking on the bills in the legislature.

[01:06:24] KN: So I basically wrote speeches for a lot of MLAs, including Harcourt, who was the leader and a number of others, who preferred to speak out about that issue, they personally opposed the legislation, of course, but they needed that teacher perspective, and I was there to help them with that. And that was a good experience, because it acquainted me very much so with some of the members of the NDP caucus. That's actually when I began my friendship with Glen Clark, which I maintained to this day. And he was a very young, outspoken MLA at the time and very, very helpful, and very supportive of what I was doing and we became good friends at that time.

[01:06:58] DB: Tell us a bit about this decision around...

[01:07:33] DB: teachers having the option of becoming a member of a union.

[01:07:35] KN: Yeah.

[01:07:37] KN: It had the potential to be a big issue, and in fact, it became a very divisive issue amongst the progressive elements of the BCTF. Teacher Viewpoint, which I hadn't mentioned till this time, and I was a very active member of the Teacher Viewpoint, well, since its inception, virtually—it was an organization of teachers, who came together to caucus, to try and remove the control of the BCTF from the hands of administrators, because the administrators basically had the predominant

[01:08:13] KN: influence in the direction of the BCTF, and the Teacher Viewpoint, I think, did a good job to change that. So, it was very successful in doing that. But when this issue came out, Teacher Viewpoint took the position that the BCTF shouldn't allow any local that chooses the association option to be a member of the BCTF, and that was, in other words, if a local chose that option, they would be outside of the BCTF. I thought that was wrong, and I argued within Viewpoint for a different position, but that was not to be...

[01:09:00] DB: What would have been the essence of the position that you were defending?

[01:09:02] KN: The position I was putting forward was, that we should be doing everything we can to get every local to become a union. We should persuade them, that that's the right way to go. But also, that every teacher, who had been the member of the BCTF should continue to be a member of the BCTF, and that we should, every local—whatever they choose, we should take them into the BCTF. If they choose association—we can work with them, since they're in the BCTF and we'd get them to change their minds over time. But we shouldn't be saying: "You can't belong because of that". I was very much committed to the notion, that moral suasion was very much the way to win the day, rather than a stick, which was, I think, what Viewpoint was doing. I think that they... to this day, I think, they were wrong, categorically wrong in that position, but it caused a split and so I, immediately, with others, many others, formed an alternative organization, called Teachers for United Federation. Because we thought it was critical—there was a Special General Meeting called for the Thanksgiving weekend in October, and these issues were going to be debated there.

[01:10:16] KN: So, we felt we had to organize an alternative voice, and I persuaded Elsie, who was the sitting President, to become part of that. And, it's one of the things that happened in my life in the BCTF that caused conflict with a lot of friends of mine, and it was... I lost some friends, you know, because of that split—the people, who did not accept what I was saying, I didn't accept what they were saying,

[01:10:51] KN: but it became problematic to the point, where we had this division. And so, it is one of those points that I identify in my experience with Federation that was an unhappy one, in a sense, that that's what happened. I think, my view at that time was, given what teachers had gone through, by and large, that if you went to any AGM you're going to have a critical mass there, who were progressive, unlike at the time when we had the administrators there, and so forth—so this had changed; and we didn't need political organizations, political caucuses anymore, that progressive teachers were quite capable of voting for the people that they thought would the best represent them and reflect them; we didn't need slates and we didn't need political parties. Having said that, I created a political party, TUF, and then, there is a dynamic that takes over on itself; so some of the more unsavoury aspects of political parties, like staff appointment and so forth, committee appointments, and all that—I used to detest! Both parties, in terms of what they did, and I couldn't countenance it,

[01:12:07] KN: and...

[01:12:10] DB: The trigger issue that triggered all that—it turned out to be a tempest in a teapot...

[01:12:13] KN: It did. It did, and even though, 72% voted for the position we took, it required 75% to change...but, we convinced every local, including Summerland, which was our weakest link, perhaps, by quite significant majorities, to choose the union option. So, you're right—

[01:12:34] KN: the point that triggered it, it ended up not being significant in its own right, as it could have been.

[01:12:42] DB: Ken, tell us just a little bit about the choices—what were the choices teachers were given, and what happened to the membership of the caucuses?

[01:12:51] KN: Well, I think—good question—the choices that the members were given, and of course, the fact that we lost the compulsory membership, were two very important factors in terms of how the BCTF chose to address them. The option, that the legislation provided for locals (the local had to make the decision in a vote, in a local), was the union option, which gave them the right to certify, to represent all the employees, all the teachers in that local, and to have the right to bargain full scope items, to have the right to strike, the right to lock-out, all those were part of that, whereas the association option did not provide the same scope; did not provide the right to strike, it had a binding arbitration resolution to any dispute that they would have, so it was a very weak option, which is interesting, because we speculated at that time, and if the premier, Bill Van der Zalm was hoping for teachers to choose the association option, he should have made it more attractive. But he certainly didn't. It was, anybody, who looked at it, said: "Why would you choose the association option,

[01:14:11] KN: it's basically going to be exactly what we've had, and no rights, you know?" So, why would people choose that, but, as I said, no one did, thankfully. But, because we lost out compulsory membership, which we've been granted legislatively in 1947, we had to sign-up people into the BCTF. So, we did a major sign-up campaign in the fall of 1987, by that time I was back in my local as President; I was elected President again in May of 1987, and I took over from 1987 to 1988, as the LTA President. So I ran the sign-up campaign in Langley that fall. It was huge! I mean, we approached every member in the BCTF, and got them to voluntarily sign-up to membership in the BCTF, in other words, we can't count on the legislation to keep you as member, we want you to sign up, and 99 percent signed up. Any union organizer will tell you that if they can get a vote over 60 to 65% form a union in any work situation, they'd be ecstatic—

[01:15:45] KN: we got 99%—unheard of! Unheard of! And that's one of the strengths that the BCTF has. So, that was a very, very successful campaign, and, of course, January 1st, 1988, we're into our first round of bargaining

[01:16:06] KN: under the new legislation with full scope, all 75 locals. 76 locals, 75 bargaining units. All of a sudden, we have to bargain a collective agreement, and that was a challenge, where, you can say, that the BCTF certainly, rose to the occasion, in terms of that.

[01:16:33] DB: Some of the highlights of that?

[01:16:34] KN: Well, I think, immediately you have to go to... look at what the BCTF was doing, particularly, the Bargaining Division. They had created what was called, the Collective Bargaining Handbook, which had the so-called model clause language, for every single provision you could ever hope to want to negotiate into a teacher collective agreement, in your entire life. It was just huge, and extremely well put together. We had to re-structure a lot in the BCTF to fit the new model, we used to have a, what was called, The Reserve Fund, which was the fund we used

from time to time to run specific campaigns and stuff like that. But we created the Collective Bargaining Defence Fund, we created strike pay, we had to create all kinds of things that we never had before in terms of our policies and procedures. And, as a member of the Executive, I was very much involved in all of that, and it was an exciting period of time. But there was, you know, the split of the Executive, you know that, and how it occurred that year, between Viewpoint and TUF, and it was the 6/5 split, and it made the Executive very difficult to function.

[01:18:16] KN: It was almost dysfunctional, some would say, it was dysfunctional. But, at the 1988 AGM I was elected for the Vice-President, and a very solid TUF slate was elected at that Executive, and so, in July that all changed. But, going back to the bargaining, the BCTF was also organized to provide training for bargainers, and support; and we had a huge training school in the spring, where people would go and learn how to negotiate certain provisions and stuff, and then we all went to bargaining. We went to local bargaining—I did in Langley, with a bargaining team, and eventually, we had some strikes, and then, we had, of course, strike pay for teachers, because that was the new policy, and stuff, and teachers began to win certain provisions here and there, and we employed what was called the whipsaw. The whipsaw became a very effective way of getting provisions into collective agreements, so if Surrey negotiated a duty-free lunch hour, and Langley negotiated a duty-free lunch hour, Delta would say to their board, and their community, well: “Why not here?” If Langley and Surrey can have duty-free lunch hours, why not here?

[01:19:55] KN: And they used that at every provision—why not here? Why not here? It became very powerful, and very successful, and the school boards were not near as well organized as the teachers, and as the BCTF. Well, another thing that happened, is that a lot of the school boards started using lawyers, and professional negotiators, and stuff, who didn’t really understand, or know very much about education, and about

[01:20:30] KN: the community, of whatever, and that worked against them too. So, basically, if a teachers’ local could connect with their school board and persuade them to go in a certain way, they could get a collective agreement, and as I said in many cases we had to take strikes to get certain provisions and certain changes, and that’s what happened. I think we had about a dozen strikes at least in that first round, although I don’t remember specifically, although, somewhere around there.

[01:21:00] AC: So, Ken, going back, we have now... teachers are all together under the labour code and the Bill 20 and Bill 19; they’re involved in local bargaining. Why is it such a critical feature then, what’s so critical about the local bargaining, over, for example, a system teachers currently have, which is a bifurcated local-provincial system?

[01:21:29] KN: Well, the local bargaining has always been the policy and preference of the BCTF, for one thing we had local bargaining—I wouldn’t call it bargaining for a long time, but, even in 1937, when the Compulsory Arbitration Act came in, all of it was local, by local, and, so we had local bargaining historically, basically, since our inception, in 1917 to 1987, so in 1987 it carried

on, of course, with the legislation. And the main strengths of local bargaining, I thought, number one is—you're bargaining with your employer. So, when teachers sit down across the table from their local school board representatives, they're people they know, they're people they work with every day, they're the people who have a lot in common, and what they have in common, is the local education system and they both care about it. So, there is some connection there, that's something that's important to both of them. And school board is their employer. The school board remains the employer of teachers to this day. So, bargaining with your employer, I think, is both, the principle, and in reality, that's something that works, because there is a lot of caring on both sides.

[01:22:58] KN: And another reason, why, I think local bargaining was so critically important, is because of the aspects of democratic control. During the period of time, when I was First Vice-President, in the first round of bargaining, and during the second round of bargaining, when I was President, I can't count the number of locals I went to, to speak at meetings where they were considering bargaining matters, and they might have been considering whether or not they might be taking a strike vote, they might have been considering what items they might drop from the table, or what items they wanted to fight on, and anything related to bargaining. I'd go to those meetings, and 90% of the members of that local were at the meeting. Cos they all had a vested interest of what decisions were going to be made, they all felt they could influence that decision by being there, by voting, by having a say. It was an incredible demonstration of democratic control by members during that bargaining regime. And that's the strength of local bargaining, that you can't get from the provincial bargaining, because of the distance from the table, and from what's going on,

[01:24:14] KN: and there's nothing you can do to change that. So those are the two strengths that the local bargaining had. And of course, the main argument used to counter that, was, of course, that governments, and this happened while I was President too—a major change in the funding arrangements, so local governments, school boards, who used to be able to affect their tax base by local taxation policies on residential and commercial property, lost that control. And that was all taken over by the province, so the school boards no longer had any revenue creating authority, or rights, through taxation. And therefore the province was in a situation, where having school boards negotiate agreements that they would then have to pay for. So,

[01:25:13] KN: that worked against it. To this day, I still think, that the two arguments I presented, as to why local bargaining was important, and why it works so well, in my view, still stand. But the funding arrangements, and the change in the funding arrangements made it a different ball game.

[01:25:33] DB: OK, so now we move onto The Year 2000 document, which may be a bit misleading, since it actually came out certainly, before The Year 2000, but it also was seminal in terms of what it attempted to do, in terms of the way education was being delivered and teachers in classrooms. You're now President of the BCTF, and this is right on your plate, so can you tell us a bit about how you dealt with it?

[01:26:02] KN: Well, The Year 2000 came out of the Sullivan Commission, which reported in 1988, August of 1988. And there were a number of structures that were formed as the result of the Sullivan Commission, and we were part of that, we had representatives in on that, so we were involved in much of that. And when The Year 2000 document came out, a lot of it was cast in a progressive tone, if you know what I mean—it came across as a very progressive document, but the substantial issues that we eventually ended up having with it, had to do more with implementation, and support for the process, in other words, historically, any time a government tends to bring in changes, there are concerns about those changes, in that they've never been funded... And that, the local school boards, or the teachers themselves bear the brunt of the implementation, or the cost of implementation. So we had major issues surrounding implementation and providing strategy for implementation, and the funding of that strategy, so that teachers had the kind of support they needed to make those changes work. Having said that, there was a lot of support for the changes that were being proposed in the primary program. And the Primary Teachers' Association embraced The Year 2000 proposals, which were essentially implemented over time.

[01:27:49] KN: There was one exception to that, and that was the Junior Kindergarten proposal, where The Year 2000 document was proposing that Kindergarten students be allowed to commence their education in September and in January. And where on the surface that idea had some merit, if you looked at it, it made sense, but logistically, implementing it and having it run through the system, they clearly hadn't thought it through, and so we took on a very serious campaign to get them—and it was a successful campaign—to get them to drop the dual entry Kindergarten proposal. So, after all was said and done the Year 2000 really provided for the changes in the primary programme, which I think were reasonably successful and supported by teachers.

[01:28:24] DB: This was a pretty frustrating time for a lot of teachers, because many teachers thought, in principal, there's lots of good ideas here,

[01:28:59] DB: did you have any sense or—how much sense did you get of the frustration that the teachers had?

[01:29:03] KN: Yes, I mean, teachers did want change, there's no question about that, but the government wasn't prepared to come up with the resources to make it happen. Essentially, that was—if there was one thing that mitigated its implementation, it was the lack of resources to do it.

[01:29:30] DB: Was there any response from the government, regarding the criticism about it?

[01:29:33] KN: Oh, yeah—they don't have the money, you know, so... that's the typical government response to anything that you want to do that might bring about a positive change.

[01:29:48] DB: While we're talking about money, by now we're ready to have the new BCTF building, where we're all sitting today; can you tell us a bit about how that came about?

[01:29:59] KN: Sure. Because I had been on staff in 1982 to 1986, I was well aware of the limitations and the problems that existed in the building on Burrard Street. And, when I say that I am talking about the fact, that I felt that in a different kind of environment, the staff would have been much more effective, in terms of their capacity to deliver services to members. It was that simple.

[01:30:33] KN: That building did not provide the basics, and the physical plant that allowed staff to do what they were asked to do.

[01:30:45] DB: When was it built?

[01:30:46] KN: I think, 1957 was when we moved in. I don't know when it was built, but we were there from 1957.

[01:30:59] KN: So, we grew in terms of size, for sure, but it was just the lay-out of the building and the way it was organized was not very effective.

[01:31:03] AC: We

[01:31:08] AC: had a 1957 wing, and a 1967 wing...

[01:31:11] KN: Yes, a new 1967 wing that opened. So it was basically, in my view, wasn't meeting our purposes in terms what we were there to do. And, predating my time, or maybe, during my time, there was a motion from the RA, because, previous Executives had brought proposals to the Representative Assembly, to have a new building, and the RA would have nothing to do with it. They said, don't bring us anymore proposals, so it was very unpopular to take the position that I took at this time, because I said: "We need new building, and we can afford it!" I talked to our treasurer, Derek Holden about the properties that we had, we had a property at Fir and Granville, we had the property that we owned on Burrard Street; we had another piece of property somewhere in that same area. So, I convinced my caucus, the TUF caucus, that we needed a new building, and we should take it to the RA, so they reluctantly agreed; and we took it to the RA, and I spoke very strongly for it,

[01:32:24] KN: the RA supported it. They supported the process of beginning looking for, and possibly building a new building. And, that was a process that took many years to actually complete, and I remember arguing strenuously, because we looked at sites out in Burnaby, we looked at sites in other parts of the city, and I argued that we should look at a site that was close to downtown, because, I thought, one of the strengths we had where we were located on Burrard street, was, we were close to downtown, we're close to a media centre, we would get a lot of people involved in media just because of our physical location. And so I thought, it was important that we continue that. I argued very strongly for this location, when it came down for the number of options that we were considering. And I saw it through to the actually signing of documents, while I was still President; getting it all signed while I was still President. Ray, who

was the Vice-President did a lot of the negotiations, and a lot of the paperwork, and I basically, lead the political

[01:33:39] KN: impetus to get the building built. And I feel good about that, and proud of that, that it was able to happen.

[01:33:50] DB: So, we're into the provincial election in 1991. Why did you think it was important for teachers to get engaged? Tell us a bit about, considering the rhetoric given (although, all of it was before that), why do you think it was so important for the rank-and-file teachers to be involved?

[01:34:07] KN: Well, you're asking me, why it was important for teachers to be politically involved... The BCTF has always taken a position, that we are non-partisan, and we are—we have never donated to a political party, to a campaign, we've never said, vote NDP, vote Liberal, vote this, vote that; but what we have done, is taken on governments, that have been unfriendly to education, and the BCTF. And, I think, by 1991 we had a series of Social Credit governments, that just were not supporting education to the extent that we felt necessary, and the government had just brought in legislation, Bill 82, which set a ceiling on the amount of salary increases that teachers could get, as well as others in the public sector, this was half-way through our round of bargaining, so we already had settlements in a number of locals, where they had reached salary agreements, and now the Bill 82 was coming in a cutting that in half—not the ones that have been negotiated, but anybody, who wanted to still negotiate the deal, so, getting rid of the Bill 82 became a major plank in our platform, going into that election. And, the NDP was pledged to do away with that,

[01:35:40] KN: so they were the ones, who benefitted the most from our involvement. We had literally thousands and thousands of teachers involved in that campaign,

[01:35:50] KN: and I know the NDP felt that we were a critical factor in helping them to get elected in that campaign.

[01:36:02] KN: Prior to the campaign, prior to the election, at our Summer Conference that year, we had Mike Harcourt, Gordon Wilson, who was the leader of the Liberal party, SoCred's Rita Johnston declined to come, but we had our discussion at the summer conference, and Gordon Wilson, who was a "liberal" Liberal, actually, appealed to a lot of teachers, but it was clear that the NDP were the opposition, and were the ones that were going to defeat the SoCreds, if anybody was. And that's exactly what happened, and I can remember going to, I think it was in Robson square, or somewhere downtown, there was a big get-together of people running into all kinds of new MLAs, saying: "We couldn't have done it without you, teachers", and etc, etc, etc. And, community after community, teachers really got involved in that campaign, and I thought it was very important for them to stand up and do that, and so, that the governments know, that the teachers can be a factor, they can make a difference, we made a difference in that campaign, we can make a difference in campaigns, so, I thought, that was an important statement to make.

[01:37:22] DB: Any particular skills you bring to the campaigns, that you think can be helpful?

[01:37:27] KN: I think, for one thing, teachers are organized into locals, in every community in the province. So, we're everywhere. We're not just in a few towns, few places where there's industries—we're everywhere. So, that's one strength. Another strength... actually, there's two other strengths that teachers bring—teachers, by nature, I think, are good organizers, and good communicators, and both of those are strengths in campaigning. Both of those are useful skills to offer in a campaign, and teachers offer that, and I think that's why they're so sought after, when it comes to elections, because they can make a difference.

[01:38:14] DB: I want to move to something we have kind of touched on briefly before, and that is, sort of... working together with the union movement in a more formal way, like joining the BC Federation of Labour, the CLC; we had had informal links with them over the years, but we reached a point where we thought we should be a part, formally, of these organizations. So, can you talk us through that campaign, and how it began, and all those proceedings?

[01:38:49] KN: Yes...so you want to know how we got to the issue of the affiliation with the BC Federation of Labour, and the CLC in 1992. Personally, I always saw myself as a working person; teachers, I see them as employed professionals, they're workers, and as such I always believed that we should belong to the labour movement, and when you're part of the labour movement, you're part of the CLC and BC FED. But I understand that a lot of teachers, and I understand, why a lot of other teachers didn't accept that position, they didn't agree with it, and the more we got into the specific struggles, like the Solidarity dispute... It went back to the Bills 19 and 20; I didn't mention this in my comments, but teachers walked out on April 28th in 1987 in protest, across the province, a one-day walk-out, so

[01:40:02] KN: teachers were really there. And, on June the 1st, we participated in the BCFED general strike! So teachers were there, and teachers participated. So, I think, Solidarity, then Bills 19 and 20 experience, going through strikes at the local level in the first round of bargaining, and into the second round of bargaining, where there were a number of strikes again, people were beginning to develop a much more serious trade union consciousness, and I always believed that part of that was being in a house of labour. And, clearly, it meant, in my view that we should affiliate. So, we put together a task force, which you were part of to marshal all the arguments, as to why we should become a part of the CLC; I think we had to affiliate with the CLC first, in those days,

[01:41:04] KN: and then, the BCFED. The rules changed in the meantime, but that's the way it was then. So the Executive took a motion forward to the AGM, to, in fact do that—to affiliate. And the motion was supported by 10 of the 11 Executive members. We had 3 Viewpoint members on the Executive, 2 of them supported the motion, along with the 8 TUF members, so I thought, we had broad support for going forward, but a lot of the Viewpoint leadership took the position, that we should not be joining the BCFED; that the Canadian Council of Unions, which existed at the time, was an option we should be looking at, and we should be thinking on...

Underlying a lot of that was the bitterness from Solidarity, which was only 9 years removed, and people were still very much affected by that. And so there was an interesting development at the convention, at the AGM in March of 1992, when that happened, because, I can remember speaking to the motion, and then hearing others speak against it, and giving their rationale. And, it was described by at least one person, who wrote about it, that the bowers of the left, and the bowers of the right in the organization (there was always a right in our organization, it was not very large, but it was there);

[01:42:52] KN: formed an alliance, united, to defeat it. And, that's exactly what happened. And I was really regretful of that, even though I was leaving the presidency, I just felt that I wanted to see whether we can pull it off while I was still there, but that's not what happened.

[01:43:11] DB: But there were some specific issues that Viewpoint had about the way the BC Federation of Labour operated, as an organization, and the approach was, you know, do we join them, and then try to fix it, or they...

[01:43:31] KN: I think you're right—I think that Viewpoint was very critical of the hierarchical nature of the BCFED. I didn't disagree with a lot of the criticisms they had, but I always believed that the way you change an organization, is by being a part of it, you don't change it from the outside, so I strongly advocated that, once we were part of the organization, we might be able to influence the change, and, of course, if you look at our experience since we had become part of the labour movement, part of the BCFED so forth, we now have a teacher, who leads it, so... it's an indication, how change can happen.

[01:44:11] DB: One of the points that was made, of course, during the campaign, was the fact that we had been a member of the BCFED/ CLC before, briefly...

[01:44:18] KN: Yes, between 1943 and 1956 we were members of the Canadian Trades and Labour Congress. So, we actually did have a labour affiliation. Once, the CLC was formed in 1956 by the merger of the Trades and Labour Congress, then the new industrial unions that had formed to create the CLC, we had a vote, that we lost and no longer we were members, but, so for that period of time we were, actually, affiliated. Good Point.

[01:44:52] DB: A related question—why do you think it's important for students to learn about the role of working people in the social, economic and overall development of BC and Canada?

[01:45:06] KN: Why is it important for students to know labour history? Well, I think as a teacher, I certainly experienced this, and I felt it was—and it feels true today—that most students in classrooms, are kids, who come from working families of one sort or another. If you read a lot of history texts, you would think that this province was built by some politicians, and few very rich people, who were entrepreneurs, and built this, and built that. The reality is, working people built this province, and when students from families of working people look at that history, they don't see themselves in it, if it is just politicians and entrepreneurs—where do they fit, where do they belong, where is their family? Whereas, if you have a history that deals

with working people, labour unions and so forth, then, maybe, they see themselves, and they feel part of it, and they're more likely to learn something about their history, if they feel it's relative to them.

[01:46:22] KN: That's, really, I think, the crux of why labour history is so important.

[01:46:28] DB: And, so, have you been personally engaged in any way, to bring this awareness about?

[01:46:35] KN: Well, right now, since I retired from the staff at the BCTF in 2009, I now chair the BC Labour Heritage Centre, and I also chair a group, called the Labour History Project, which is a group of retired and practicing teachers, who basically work on curriculum projects related to labour history, so that teachers in the classroom can use these materials, to talk about how working people did have a role in shaping the political, social and economic development of this province.

[01:47:13] DB: So, if I was a teacher, working through this podcast in a couple of years' time; what resources would you tell me to look

[01:47:25] DB: at?

[01:48:03] KN: The resources that exist for the classroom, there is a series of vignettes, about thirty 2.5 minute vignettes, that Knowledge Network produced, that deal with specific individuals or events in the history of BC, where working people were involved—it's actually called "Working People—a History of Labour In BC", it's the Working People series. So, this group had created lesson plans to go with each of these 30 vignettes, they're available on the TeachBC website. A couple of our members also created an entire unit on labour history, labour studies for the Social Justice 12 class, also available on TeachBC website, and there is more that we're working on. One of the most recent things we're doing, is wanting to get the April 28th day of commemoration for killed and injured workers on the job recognized in BC high-schools. So, that's another initiative that we're taking on.

[01:48:42] DB: And the Labour History Tours?

[01:48:44] KN: The Labour Heritage Centre is involved in Labour History Tours, we're working on our tour of Vancouver, we're working on a labour history book, we have a project to place plaques in all parts of the province that commemorate events, or issues in our working class history, that had a significant impact on the community; we have a number of projects that we're undertaking, and will continue to undertake, to highlight the role of working people in our province.

[01:49:19] DB: You mentioned the Labour History Project a couple of times, could you briefly just sketch out who these people are and how that came about?

[01:49:27] KN: Oh, the Labour Heritage Centre was started by Jack Munro, about 10 years ago, and its initial focus was on building a huge centre, called the bricks and mortar stage. And they spent a few years, just on planning the centre, with a theater, and archive, all kinds of meeting rooms, other facilities. And then realized, that it fiscally, or financially, was not going to happen. So, we moved into projects and partnerships (we worked) with BC Federation of Labour, we worked with SFU Labour Studies programme, we work with the BC Teachers' Federation, we work with a number of unions to implement all of our programs.

[01:50:17] DB: So, on the topic of history—you yourself, like to write. During your term as an Executive Director, you wrote articles on the history of the BCTF. Can you tell us a bit about that project?

[01:50:31] KN: Oh, sure! I've always been fascinated... I mean I love history. I'm a social studies teacher! And I taught history, and I recognize the importance of history. A lot of people don't understand the importance of history, in terms of, if you know history, you know where you've come from, then you're more likely not to know where you want to go. But if you don't know your history, you don't know where you've come from, you don't know how you got here, you don't know how we got here; it makes it much more difficult to move forward. So, I've always recognised the importance of history. And, in terms of the BCTF, I think, we have a phenomenal history, I think we have an exciting and interesting history, and I've always wanted to highlight those elements, and those things that did occur in the past, that made us who we are today. I've alluded in my comments earlier today, to Solidarity and Bills 19 and 20, as the two very significant events, that occurred and helped to shape the BCTF and this union in terms of the way it is today.

[01:51:40] DB: One particular article you wrote, about a young woman, in her first years of teaching, a young woman, who got involved in a job action, if we can call it, in the early 1930s, I believe; can you just touch on that briefly?

[01:51:55] KN: Yeah, I think you're talking about Connie Jervis, who was the President of the Langley Teachers' Association in 1939. Yes, and she actually, became the focus of one of the vignettes, that the Knowledge Network did, because she... she was 24 years old, when she was President of the Langley Teachers' Association in 1939, and she, and the other teachers, tried to negotiate an agreement with their local school board. Well, at this time, between 1917 and 1937, essentially, school boards set the salaries for teachers. The teachers in their locals and individually tried to influence that, but ultimately, the power rested with the school board. We had strikes in Victoria in 1919 and in New Westminster in 1921, and they tried to get some sort of arbitration in, and many times they would reach an agreement with the boards, if that's what they would use arbitration. But in terms of the province-wide application, it wasn't until 1937, that the province made it mandatory for school boards to submit to the binding arbitration, when they couldn't reach an agreement

[01:53:19] KN: on salaries. So, that's what happened in Langley—they couldn't reach an agreement, so Langley teachers said, well, let's take it to arbitration because legislation allows us to do that. And that's what they did, but the school board didn't even show up at the arbitration, and of course, the teachers got a reasonable settlement. Langley board was so unsensed by that, that they actually, took it to court. And, of course, they lost in court, because the law was the law, and that is to have

[01:53:47] KN: compulsory arbitration. And they went through a series of firing the teachers, who were leading this, including Connie, and after the provincial equivalent of the Ministry of Education reinstated them, they transferred them in the fall, to far-away, far flung schools in the Langley school district, and the teachers, who were affected, had reported to their original schools, and sat down at their desk, and weren't going to move. Eventually, the Ministry of Education got in again, and fired the school board. So, what Connie Jervis and the Langley Teachers did in 1939–1940, was to entrench the right to a binding arbitration, as a way of resolving salary disputes with your school board, so that was a significant step, that basically, put in place a system, that lasted for another 50 years, until 1987, without change. Although, with some modifications, as we went along, but essentially, the basis of the legislation, was in 1937, for the binding arbitration to resolve disputes.

[01:54:59] DB: So, all these struggles, for collective bargaining rights, and local bargaining and what not, there is another sort of, a current, to the BCTF, and that is the social justice thrust, which has been there from when I've been teachers, and probably since you've been teaching, and before. Can you tell us a bit about some of the highlights of that social justice campaign?

[01:55:22] KN: Social justice, I think, comes easily to teachers, because, for one thing, people, who become teachers, in almost every instance, fundamentally believe in public education, and the role public education can play in a social justice sense, and that it becomes, as some people call it, the great equalizer. People from very different economic backgrounds can get an education, and if you come from a poor family and can get an education, and perhaps, can advance yourself economically in society because of that education. So, education is something that teachers see as a fundamental to democratic society, and they also see education as the way of changing one's circumstances. And, so, I think, that leads them to support social justice causes quite naturally. So, for example, the BCTF was a leader in terms of its international programs, it's a leader in terms of its anti-racism, its status of women program, its overall social justice program now... And, in other things, like, for example, the no-smoking at the AGM, or at the meetings at the BCTF, I mean, to me, that is a socially progressive step to take. I think we did that before any other organization that we know of—because we recognize that, as teachers.

[01:57:10] KN: I think we'

[01:57:14] KN: ve

[01:57:15] KN: always... like I said, I think, it comes naturally to teachers, and the BCTF has been very good at that.

[01:57:22] DB: Ken, we have a hundred more questions to ask you, but we're going to have to take a break here. I want to thank you for taking your time to come here this morning, and for answering those questions so thoroughly. So, thank you very much,

[01:57:36] DB: and hopefully, we will have a chance to talk some more soon.

[01:57:39] KN: Thank you.