

**Minnesota Foundational Environmental Laws
Oral History Project**

**Narrator:
Robert Dunn (RD)**

**Interviewer:
Stephanie Hemphill (SH)**

**Recorded:
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Stephanie Hemphill (SH): The following interview was conducted with Robert G. Dunn on behalf of the UMD [University of Minnesota Duluth] Kathryn A. Martin Library Archives for the Minnesota Foundational Environmental Laws Oral History Project. It took place on January 10, 2017, at Senator Dunn's home in Princeton, Minnesota. The interviewer is Stephanie Hemphill.

SH: Thank you so much for your time, Mr. Dunn.

Robert Dunn (RD): Pleased to be here.

SH: Just as an introduction, tell us where you were born and where you grew up.

RD: Well, I was born in Minneapolis, grew up in Minneapolis, but spent considerable amount of time at my grandparent's home, which is where we now live. And after I was in the service and got a college degree I moved back up to Princeton and have lived here ever since.

SH: Tell us where you went to college and what your service was.

RD: I went to Amherst College in Massachusetts, and my career there was interrupted by four years of service in the Marine Corps.

SH: Was that during World War II?

RD: During World War II, yes. And then I came back and finished up and then I got back into the Marines again, [laughs] in the Korean War.

SH: Really?

RD: But anyway, that was a while back.

SH: What rank did you achieve in the Marines and what was your specialty?

RD: I enlisted as an enlisted person to begin the war, World War II, and I was a sergeant by the time the war was over. Then I was commissioned at the end of that time without going to officer training. That had to come later.

SH: That shows you have real service. What was your degree from Amherst, finally?

RD: It was a bachelor's degree in political science.

SH: So you came back to Princeton after, as an adult, then. Where did you meet your wife and when did you marry?

RD: I'm currently in a second marriage. My first wife I met on a blind date, although she was a granddaughter of an old Princeton family that had been very close to mine. It was just a coincidence. We had five children and she unfortunately died and later on, about three years later, I married my current wife, Bette.

SH: Okay, thank you. How did you get interested in environmental issues?

RD: I think the main thing was, I had been interested in things like fishing, hunting, canoe trips, camping, and that sort of developed into an appreciation of the natural things and what have you. And I got interested in some of the causes that appeared to be in need of some attention. Among them was the whole taconite tailings business and the health of Lake Superior, some agricultural practices that were not very good, and forestry, and that was one of my main interests in running for the legislature.

SH: You could see the need for some improvement in the way we handled our resources?

RD: Yes.

SH: When did you run for legislature?

RD: That was in '64, I was elected.

SH: To the House?

RD: To the House of Representatives and served there four terms and then elected to the Senate for two terms, sixteen years altogether.

SH: I understand that you had an environmental policy bill early on?

RD: Yes, we, it arose from what appeared to be—I think I was chair of an interim committee on water resources—and as we looked at that, it became obvious, of course, it's a matter of common sense, that that is a part of the whole environmental system and that you don't do good work with water resources unless you have a lot of other things going for it. And so, I think that, as I recall it, that was sort of the way it worked out. And then in the following interim I was on the joint Senate and House interim committee that looked at the environmental, broader environmental approach, and was involved there and a lot of meetings in the interim, we had just dozens of meetings, and eventually merged with the Environmental—I forget if it was called Policy Act, [Minnesota Environmental Policy Act, MEPA]—it may have been in, that was before the '71 session.

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SH: The interim hearings before the '71 session, yes.

RD: Yes. And we got that one through the House. I forget who I asked to carry it in the Senate, but they didn't even have a hearing. So, we had time to go back after the session and the '71 period following that and before the '73 session.

SH: There wasn't a session in '72?

RD: No, there was.

SH: There was?

RD: Yes. '72 was an election year, you know, and it was a shorter session.

SH: A shorter session.

RD: But we had things going there, too.

SH: Do you know why it didn't pass the Senate in the same year you passed it in the House, in '71?

RD: No, it just, they didn't, there wasn't any opposition necessarily. I think it was just a matter of not getting around to it and they hadn't participated in the development of the thing at all.

SH: As you had with your interim hearings.

RD: Yes.

SH: So those hearings must have been important in gathering people's perspectives and points of view?

RD: We had a few hearings but mostly we were working with a small group of interested people. I wish I could give you more. One thing I do know in the water resources thing, there was a professor at University of Minnesota, Walton, I forget his first name, Bill Walton? He was very much involved in that whole thing.

SH: Do you know if he's still around?

RD: I don't. He wrote a book, I remember that.

SH: And then, in '72 there was an election, which changed the make-up of the legislature.

RD: Of the House, the Senate didn't have one that year because they were a four year term, you know, unless there was reapportionment.

SH: Okay.

RD: The Senate didn't change, but--well let's see, I'm wrong--'72 was the election, that's when I was elected to the Senate.

SH: Yes, and that's also when Governor [Wendell "Wendy"] Anderson was elected.

RD: That's right.

SH: So, the legislature was turned over then to the Democrats and you were a Republican?

RD: Yes. And that was an interesting deal, because before the '72 election, we worked this thing up and then I, at that time, moved from the House to the Senate, and here I was a minority member of the Senate and the [laughs] Democrats for the first time in over one hundred years were controlling the Senate. They were interested to be making the big movements of what happened, have them be, not have us [in charge]. The way I heard, was that Senator Coleman, who was the majority leader, encouraged his members to pursue aggressively the control of all these things that were going on. It's certainly understandable; they wanted to make a good showing. And so, the young guy who was put in charge of the subcommittee that was going to be hearing this environmental business, Jim Lord, was the son of Miles Lord, former attorney general

and judge. Jim was a first-termer; it was a pretty good assignment for him, this subcommittee. And he asked Nick Coleman what could he do about this, here I was carrying this bill, and had been, and was working very hard on it and he said, "What do you want me to do about that?" And as I understand, Nick said, "Well, go ahead and let him do it." And so, that was the way that that happened, but it was sort of interesting.

0:11:05.7

SH: They were willing to let you take some of the credit for that?

RD: Yes, except we had one little conflict. I don't know how many times the subcommittee met, but we came out with a bill in which the Environmental Quality Council [EQC] was composed of citizens and of a smaller number.

SH: It might be just three.

RD: Yes, was it three?

SH: I think it was three.

RD: I think it was. And some of the people who headed the agencies weren't very pleased with that. They were going to be in an advisory capacity on another board, but I don't think they liked that. So anyhow, as it came out of the subcommittee, with this citizens' group, and then got into the full committee, or someplace along the line, that was changed so, the department heads of the affected agencies got led by the guy who was a good man too, the DNR [Department of Natural Resources] Commissioner. I can't remember his name now, but he later went on to the Department of the Interior. [NOTE: Robert Herbst.] But he got that out of the subcommittee somehow—I'm a little hazy now—with the board members being the commissioners. It went to the full committee, where I was able to get an amendment on to get it back to the citizen group, and when that amendment passed [laughs] the head of the DNR got up, he was watching all this, and ran out, I assumed he went to the governor's office. Anyhow, by the time it was all over, and I can't remember the exact mechanics, whether it happened in another committee or on the floor, but they broke the bill in half and made the board what they wanted, or what the commissioners wanted, and left the policy act the other half.

SH: Wow. So, that's how they changed that, they broke that out of the main piece of legislation.

RD: Yes. They had two bills instead of one.

SH: Yes. Well, I want to ask you about that later probably, about how you think it works, with citizens and the commissioners on that EQB [Environmental Quality Board]. Can you talk a little bit about the feeling of need, why you thought this policy act was needed?

RD: At that time, there were some things moving on the federal level, too. Because, unlikely as it seems, [President Richard] Nixon's administration was pretty progressive on this matter. And it was clear we had problems and it was clear that there had to be a better, broader approach to these things, and so I think it was pretty well accepted, and it really wasn't very controversial in those days [clock chimes] to look at the legislature, or almost any—

SH: Let's wait a minute. [Clock chimes]

0:15:03.9

RD: [Laughs]

SH: Beautiful tone. So, you were saying, "It wasn't uncommon—"

RD: There was bipartisan support and here I was carrying the bill and the Rights Act [Minnesota Environmental Rights Act, MERA] was carried by a Republican, too.

SH: Who was that?

RD: I'm trying to remember—no I can't remember.

SH: There was one named Popham, I think.

RD: Wayne Popham—he was a Senator. But anyway, the whole approach was more—nowadays, I get the impression that the Republican Party, for the most part, is almost anti-environmental. There's certainly not—you don't find many supporters at all. And, of course, that seems to me to be so totally out of reason and to be going back at this point in history and picking up an attitude that was not a good one, even then, and then in these few years—several years—there shouldn't be anybody who has any doubt about the science of environmental matters and climate change and all the rest of it. But, where were we?

SH: Well, we're talking about the Policy Act.

RD: Yes.

SH: And taking a broader approach, you said, than previous laws, which may have addressed individual problems of pollution or whatever.

RD: And unlike what current people on the more conservative side seem to think, government is the one way you can get a hold of a lot of these things, and therefore, it's important that decisions that affect the environment be made at, not only at the lawmaking level, but at the level of implementation in the local government. And so, we were making decisions, or NOT making decisions that were not sound environmentally and it was at that point, pretty obvious that if it wasn't necessary long ago, it was becoming critical at that time in the '60s and '70s.

SH: You must have felt that this Environmental Policy Act would make a big difference?

RD: Oh yes. I think what we were trying to do was to lay out sort of a general statement of what things should be like, how we should approach our environmental issues, how we would carry on our lifestyle and businesses and so forth, and in addition set up some kind of a framework that would see that that happened. So, that was really the whole key to the thing.

SH: In a way, it was a broad statement of principles, for one thing it said that care for the environment would be a state priority and that financial matters wouldn't necessarily trump concern for the environment. Is that the way you remember it?

RD: That's certainly the basic thought, yes.

SH: And the mechanism to make sure that happened would have been the Environmental Impact Statement?

RD: The council's whole structure and impact and the idea of the— Now, Governor Anderson had appointed what he called, I think it was called the Environmental Council, to inform the—

SH: Before the EQB was established?

RD: Hmm?

SH: Before this law was even passed, right?

RD: Yes, yes.

SH: Yes, okay.

RD: So, that concept of having the agencies work together and to know what, because many of these problems are not specific to any one agency. So if we're going to have an environmental approach, we have to have it across the whole structure of government and this would help bring that about.

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SH: Do you remember how you felt when it passed? Did it feel like a big accomplishment?

RD: It did, because I alone—or not I alone, but from my point of view—it had been going on for three years and I thought it was well over due.

[Both laugh]

SH: Then it was signed into law.

RD: Yes. Fortunately, I had an opportunity in 1990 to be chair of the Environmental Quality Board. So, I hoped—I think Governor Carlson appointed me, yes—I hoped that I could correct, at that time, some of the things that weren't quite working as they did, but I wasn't as successful at that. [Laughs]

SH: Really? Oh, well I want to talk about that for sure. But I just want to talk a little bit more about any debates or controversies in passing the Policy Act. You're saying there was a controversy over the make up of the EQB.

RD: Yes.

SH: But was there any fight from industry or agriculture about these ideas?

RD: They were interested in—and I think Ted Shields was certainly one of them who followed that rather closely. They had—and I can't remember the name of the lobbyist from 3M—but they were watching it quite closely, and I was not aware of any opposition. They'd come to me sometimes with some of their concerns and problems, but there wasn't anything drastic that I recall. It was a long time ago though. [Both laugh]

SH: You must have either allayed their concerns or they figured it was going to pass and it did pass, so not much they could do.

RD: Yes. I don't think there were many that voted against it. I did have one southern Minnesota Republican in the legislature come up to me and said, "I'd like to vote for

your bill, but I'm against the environment." Now, how could that ever be? [Laughs] I had a hard time suppressing my laughter.

[Both laugh]

SH: Let's talk about how you observed it working over the years.

RD: Yes, it started out, I think, with too much of the board being too involved in a lot of the town board or planning commission, getting involved in too much of that. We had to modify it the next session.

SH: How so?

RD: Well, I'm a little foggy on this, but I remember we did have a few changes that were made to involve the board, not in such a low level—

SH: Sort of nitty-gritty involvement with individual decisions?

RD: Yes, right.

SH: Because I think there was controversy and maybe change over whether it should be the EQB that actually conducted the environmental reviews or whether it should be local governments and the agencies who did the reviews.

RD: Yes, that has always been a problem.

SH: When you say it's been a problem, what do you mean?

RD: Well, there's been some that felt, that were a little nervous about the board being too involved.

SH: What would make them nervous about that?

RD: I don't know. [Laughs] Didn't make me nervous.

SH: Talk again about this idea that you had at the beginning about only citizens controlling this, instead of the agency heads. What would be the advantage of that?

RD: That was the structure that they used in the federal law and it seemed like one of the big things to do was to get away from too much turf concern on the part of the agencies and to get into a situation where a more widespread kind of an involvement, and concerning all the various aspects and so forth. And that somebody, to also

emphasize the need for this whole approach to be undertaken, not do as we had been doing it.

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SH: In other words, willing to follow through and make these changes happen.

RD: Yes, and this group and the chair of the group was, even in the revised board of commissioners, the chair was supposed to be the governor's right-hand person on the environment and to be directly involved and closely tied to the governor's office so that the executive was following along with the way things should be run. And that actually has never occurred, and that has been a disappointment. The original chair of the board, as I recall it, was appointed, was the head of the planning agency, the state planning agency and my whole thought had been, and I think the purpose of the act was, to have one person, not part of any agency, as the governor's right-hand, and so the governor was constantly involved in this business. And that the one person would be the focal point for, but then the advising group, the other—I don't remember the name of it—would have been the commissioners, because they obviously had to come along. And I don't think we ever—I was the first citizen chair of the EQB.

SH: In 1990. So, twenty years later, almost.

RD: Yes. And when I did it, I told the governor, because he had asked me to do this, I said, "Well, I'm going to do it on one—I'm trying to think of the word—you got to have one thing, and that is that I'm going to be constantly in touch with you and I'm going to be part of your operation." "No problem," he said. It never worked out. [Laughs] As a matter of fact, his chief of staff at one point, who had been a former judge, [Edward C.] Stringer, told me I shouldn't come to cabinet meetings. And I said, "Well, that's not the way that's supposed to work." He said, "Well, you're a quasi-judicial agency, so you shouldn't be involved with the executive." I said, "No, that's not the way it works." But, that's what they wanted. So, I was very disappointed, and at the end, I wanted to stay after that because I thought I could do some good, but it was, to me, a critical point.

SH: Yes, you thought it should be precisely that, you should be part of the executive.

RD: Yes, yes.

SH: I understand that the EQB, over the years, has never been funded enough to really do much.

RD: No. At times we had some money. We had some good stuff; we did a very good study on timber.

SH: The GEIS [Generic Environmental Impact Statement].

RD: Yes. What do they call it? The Generic EIS. Yes. That was good and we did some other things, but like a lot of other worthy causes, it didn't get the kind of funding it should have. Although we had a staff, we had some good people, and we managed to get along. I think Governor [Mark] Dayton now has revitalized [it], to some extent, after having been totally sabotaged by [Governor Tim] Pawlenty. He's brought the EQB back and funded it a bit. It's too much under the domination of—and [Dave] Frederickson, the current chair, the Department of Agriculture Commissioner, is a good man and well intentioned, but he is commissioner of one agency. And that was the thing we didn't want. We wanted to have the agency members there, but a totally separate entity as chair. That has never come about and I don't know if it ever will.

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SH: It sounds like you would say that some of the potential of the Environmental Policy Act has been lost?

RD: Yes, I think so. Good things have been done, and other things have not been done that should have been done, or should have been done differently. But, by and large, I think it's an important thing to go on with and obviously Pawlenty didn't. And, of course, they've eliminated the planning agency, too, and when they come to dollars, and "no new taxes," and return any surplus to the poor old taxpayers, that's what happens.

SH: I don't know if you've followed the court cases that come up under these environmental reviews, but some people have talked a bit about how courts have interpreted the Policy Act and the requirements for environmental reviews. Have you paid much attention to that or been aware of some of the important cases?

RD: Yes, some of them I have, yes.

SH: What do you think about that?

RD: Well, you know—

SH: One of the things that I've read, is that courts pay too much deference to the agencies and have said, "Well, the agency's got the expertise in this, it's not up to me to second guess them." So, as long as they've studied the matter, then they should have the ability to rule.

RD: That has been certainly a problem and that was one of the reasons we wanted to have the head of the thing separate from any agency. I don't think Frederickson has been bad on that. I think the main time that that happened was under Pawlenty again with the commissioner from PCA [Pollution Control Agency], called director in those days. What was his name? He was from Duluth.

SH: Chuck? He was from the mining industry, right?

RD: Yes.

SH: Chuck— [NOTE: Charles W. "Chuck" Williams]

RD: He was the one, though. That was a good example of what we were talking about.

SH: You were in the Senate for how many years?

RD: Eight.

SH: You moved from the Senate to where?

RD: I decided, due to my disenchantment with what was happening to the Republican Party, not to run again. It had been sixteen years, and that's a long time. I just decided not to run. Then Governor [Albert "Al" Quie] asked me to become chair of the newly formed Waste Management Board. As a matter of fact, I came back to my apartment the night that we had the final conference committee—I had been one of the authors of that bill—and [laughs] my wife asked me, "How'd it go? How did it work out?" I said, "Well, we got a bill, but I don't know who they're going to get to take that lousy job." [Laughs] Then the governor called me, and it didn't appeal, but you just don't say no. So, I became chair of the newly formed Waste Management Board and that was quite an experience.

[Both laugh]

SH: That's a very funny story.

RD: Yes.

0:35:00.9

SH: What kind of experience was it? What was it like?

RD: We started out with the idea that, basically, "What do we do about dealing with the

waste problem?” It was overwhelming—hazardous waste and municipal waste and everything else. The idea struck people as being good, but the application of the process didn’t strike people as liking it where the ax fell or began to look like it might fall. So we had some interesting things. I remember one meeting—I don’t know if you want to take time on this?

SH: I do.

RD: We had one meeting, after the board had been established, in Virginia at the community college, and we flew in there and had dinner and then went to this meeting—it had been well publicized—this is what we were doing before the bill had passed. I shouldn’t have said the board, it was the legislative committee and there were about three people, one of them was the area PCA guy, and another one was—two or three people in this big auditorium. After we got moving on the implementation of this thing, the next time I appeared and the board appeared at the same auditorium, there were about a thousand people [laughs] because we were looking at the idea of waste in the granite rock business up there, and that didn’t appeal to them at all.

[Both laugh]

RD: But it was quite a— I was there five years, by that time I thought we needed a different— I was appointed by Quie and reappointed by [Governor Rudolph “Rudy”] Perpich and it was an experience and interesting thing. We finally ended up with a plan, that was one of our functions, to develop a management plan to do some things to get municipal and solid waste better processed, reducing it, and reusing—the reduce, reuse—that type of thing. And we did achieve some reduction, quite a bit of reduction, in the production of hazardous waste, but we never did achieve the, I think, the best all-around solution we should have. But we’re better, a lot better than we were.

SH: Minnesota has certainly been a leader among the states in dealing with waste, especially in the recycling area. That was from ’80 to ’85 that you were heading that?

RD: Yes.

SH: What did you do before 1990 when you were named to the—between ’85 and ’90—when you were named to the EQB?

RD: I was trying to remember, I was chair of a couple of things, one of them was the Legislative Citizens’ Advisory Board and later I was a member of the Forest Resources Council that came out of that study we did at the EQB. [Laughs] Maybe I came home and behaved myself.

[Both laugh]

SH: Maybe you took a little rest.

RD: Yes. Well, Perpich did appoint me to the EQB before I was chair, too. I was a member.

SH: Oh, really?

RD: Yes.

SH: Because you said Carlson named you the chair.

RD: Yes, I was a member, and then having been a member, Governor Perpich appointed me as a member, and Carlson as chair.

SH: I've been to quite a few EQB meetings—no, I'm sorry, I'm mixing it up with the MPCA [Minnesota Pollution Control Agency]. It was MPCA that I would go to meetings and they had citizen advisory members of the PCA board, too, but they generally give a lot of deference to the agency staff.

0:40:12.7

RD: Oh, yes. I think the PCA board traditionally was a lot less of a factor than the—I always had the impression that it was just sort of to put a little sense of control and moderation on the part of the agency, that is what I think it was created for. But that wasn't true for the EQB; they were more involved in direct action through the agency.

SH: The last question—or maybe two more questions—from your perspective, do you think of particular changes that could happen that would improve the situation now?

RD: With respect to the Policy Act?

SH: Yes, or the EQB.

RD: Yes, I think if we'd get back to the idea of having a separate entity controlling it, that three-man person or one-man or whatever, and like everything else, give it some staff, and some funding, and some capacity. There was a time when some of the commissioners—it didn't happen often—but once in a while, the commissioners would be so busy they thought it wasn't as important as it should have been to come to meetings, and to find things out, and to get together. But I remember Governor Quie told them that, "Your job is to go to that board meeting." And that ought to be a given. And of

course, there was a staff group from all the agencies that worked together, too. But by and large, it's just important that the agencies don't go off in their own direction, and that they're following the idea of environmental control of what's going on.

SH: I don't want to put words in your mouth, but it sounds to me like you're describing a more independent entity than we have now with the agency heads.

RD: Yes.

SH: More independent and also enough resources to do something.

RD: Yes.

SH: Two more question—one is, is there anything else you want to talk about that I haven't asked you about?

RD: We touched on a lot of things. Right off the bat, I'm glad that Governor Dayton has at least partially got back to this thing and we'll see what happens now.

SH: And you've touched a little bit on—and I'd like to hear more about—how things have changed over the years in party politics.

RD: I just can't describe how totally unrealistically this idea has developed on the part of the people who don't like government. Remember Reagan said one time, "Government isn't the solution, it's the problem." Now, what in the devil kind of an approach is that? Look at this whole thing, if the problem with the environment is our Policy Act and our board, [laughs] it doesn't make much sense. And the solution has clearly got to be government. Now, they're all afraid of taxes and they're afraid of controls. We're talking now, under the [President Donald] Trump administration of the fact that environmental controls, along with other kinds of controls, are devastating our economy and you know, really, that's hardly the problem. The problem has been quite the opposite: that those people who don't want to be controlled, need to be controlled, in both the financial area and in the area of the environment. There isn't any kind of justification for the idea that environmental controls, or even financial controls, are devastating industry. In Minnesota we've had a great rebound from the recession and so there's no factual thing to support that idea that, "Get government off your back and we'll run wild." [Laughs]

0:46:14.2

SH: Okay, so my last question is, how do you feel about the work that you've done over the years on these issues?

RD: Like a lot of other things, there have been moments that have been satisfying and there have been moments that have been disappointing. By and large, I think we have moved in the right direction environmentally. Some things are just sort of accepted now. Things that nobody would have thought of years ago, zoning kinds of things, and without getting into a whole lot of details, there's a lot of improvement that has been made there, but in some instances it has defied any kind of reason that other things haven't been done. But, it's a slow process and the main thing is to try and get the concept out that what is needed to be done and how we go about it and we don't have an unlimited amount of time. That's the main concern now, I think, a setback now that we'll have to recover from is really not what we need.

SH: Are you talking partly about climate change here?

RD: Definitely. And a lot of other things—population explosion, over-dependence on agriculture to feed a lot of people that adopts practices that are not very friendly to the environment. You can make a whole list of things that have not been as thoroughly addressed as possible. Part of it is getting support of the public, and educating the public, we tried that in many ways. But, you go up a little bit and get something done, and fall back a little bit, but keep plugging and the need for understanding and awareness—I remember when I was chair of the EQB, talking to the majority leader, Roger Moe, about how we should do some things, and he was a good environmentalist, and of course, I had known him well in the Senate. He thought, and I agreed, that environmental issues would be the big thing in this century, now, the 2000's, and it hasn't been that. We've dropped back to other things, but there isn't anything more important. And to get people to understand that, it's hard to even think about some of the ideas that sprung into popularity in large numbers of citizens.

SH: It is hard to think about those challenges that we're facing now, but I am very proud to be a Minnesotan and proud of the things our legislatures have done over the years to improve the environment and very grateful for your service in doing that. And I thank you for your time today, Bob Dunn.

RD: Thank you! We have been, in Minnesota, leading the way in many ways, so I don't want to appear too negative; it just feels that we're a little bit slower than we ought to be. [Laughs]

0:50:45.7

[End of interview]

