

Interview with Donald Fraser

Interviewed by Ann Pflaum

Interviewed on August 19, 1999

Donald Fraser - DF
Ann Pflaum - AP

AP: This is Ann Pflaum. Today is August 19, 1999. I'm interviewing Donald Fraser.

Don, would you give just a quick overview of your undergraduate, graduate, and subsequent political career to kind of anchor the interview? Then, we can go back more systematically.

DF: My first contact with the university was as a preschooler. I enrolled in some kind of pre-Kindergarten program at the Child Development Center. I don't know how long that was, whether it was one year or two years. My next contact was with University High. I went to high school there from grade seven through twelve. My undergraduate work was not a full four years in time span because I began the undergraduate work in the fall of 1941 and, then, in December, Pearl Harbor happened. I had enrolled in the Naval ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps], so I was kept on campus on what, in effect, was an accelerated program. I got my degree when I left there in February of 1944. Then, I was in the Navy for several years and came back and went to Law School, beginning in June 1946. I finished that in a couple of years. I think I graduated in 1948.

AP: That would have been your father's [Everett Fraser] last year as dean, I think.

DF: That's true; it was.

AP: Then, did you go right into Congress? Help me with the next part of your career.

DF: That summer after graduation, I was working in [Hubert] Humphrey's campaign for the Senate. I was something like an office boy, just a general helper. I passed the bar and that fall, I began practicing law with... I think at that point the firm was known as Larson, Levinger, Lindquist, & Freeman. I practiced law there until the end of 1962. But in 1954, I ran for the Minnesota Senate and was elected and served there for eight years. So I was doing the law practice part time and part time in the state Senate.

AP: Which district were you elected for?

DF: I think it may have been the Twenty-ninth District then. I'm not sure of the number. It involved southeast and northeast Minneapolis. It encompassed the university campus.

AP: Do you remember which committees you were on in the legislature?

DF: I was on the Judiciary Committee. I've forgotten but I think I was on more than that.

AP: Then, in 1962, is that when you went into...?

DF: I ran for the House of Representatives in the fall of 1962.

AP: That's the national House of Representatives?

DF: Yes. I was elected and served there for sixteen years.

AP: What district was that?

DF: The Fifth Congressional District. That was most of Minneapolis.

Then, in the fall of 1978, I ran for the United States Senate but lost in the primary. Then, in, I think, the fall of 1979, I ran for mayor and was elected and began serving as mayor in January 1980 and I served there for fourteen years. Then, I didn't run for reelection. So that was the end of my public career.

To finish it, I've been intermittently doing things since then. I spent three months as a fellow at the Kennedy School. I was about three months at HUD [Housing and Urban Development]. I spent three months over in Sweden. I've done some limited teaching at the Humphrey Institute for three or four years and I helped at the Law School on a course in international human rights. I taught it for one year and assisted it for several more years. That's sort of a complete description, I think.

AP: Yes, indeed, as we know, a long and distinguished career.

Perhaps, it might be good to back and describe your parents because you are what we would call a "faculty brat", came from a faculty family. As a child, for example, did your family go to the Gopher games? I believe they lived right near where you live right now?

DF: Yes, they lived two doors down. That was at 813 Seventh Street Southeast. When my father and mother moved out West after he retired...

AP: He went to the Hasting Law School, right?

DF: Right and I bought the house from him. I got married in 1950 and we stayed in that house until I was elected to Congress. We kept it for a while and rented it. In the meantime, we had purchased the house next to it because the owner was contemplating selling it for a parking lot for an apartment building. At some point, we sold the first house and continued to own the second one. When I came back to run for mayor, that's where I lived. Then, a year or so after that, we bought the house next to that one, so I'm two houses down from the one I grew up in.

AP: How do you describe that neighborhood? Does it have a particular name?

DF: It's Southeast. Some people might call it Old Southeast. It was one of the first parts of Minneapolis to be developed. I think our house is at least 120 years old. It's now called the Marcy Holmes Area.

AP: That's H-o-l-m-e-s and M-a-r-c-y?

DF: Yes. The Marcy comes from an elementary school that I attended, which was on Eleventh Avenue, which was about three blocks away. Now, the former site is now on the other side of the freeway. The freeway went through...

AP: On the north...that's 35-W.

DF: Yes.

AP: If I'm correct, the former house of the university president was in that approximate neighborhood?

DF: Yes, the Pillsbury home.

AP: I believe that's been torn down. Is that correct?

DF: Yes, and I think some faculty housing exists there now.

AP: Do you ever remember visiting that house when, say, [President James] Morrill lived there or [President Walter] Coffey?

DF: I have a vague recollection of being in the house at least once. I don't remember the occasion. It was an old style house, as I can remember it. I remember a little of the detail, but...

AP: Growing up as part of the faculty, did your parents see other faculty members—this, of course, was before the faculty Grove was built—a lot, live a life that maybe was beyond the faculty of the university? Did they take you to football games and things like that?

DF: No. My parents were fairly modest in their social life. What I recall is the, at least annual I guess, gathering of the faculty at our home.

AP: That would be the Law School faculty?

DF: Right. They didn't go to games. I think I first began going to football games after I started practicing law. I was on the university swimming team for two or three years while I was in the Naval ROTC during the 1940s.

AP: How did you find your undergraduate experience?

DF: It was truncated. Part of the day was spent in the Naval ROTC classes and the rest in the traditional university classes. I ended up with a major in mathematics, but just barely, and had very little else. I think I had a little psychology and some philosophy, but I didn't get the kind that one might call a well-rounded university education because of the accelerated pace. For a while, I lived on campus. The Navy took over many of the fraternity houses and housed people like us in the fraternity houses. They had other categories of naval trainees, too. I think a P-12 program also was housed in some of those buildings. Otherwise, the university experience was okay. I joined a fraternity—that was Alpha Delta Phi—but even that part was cut short when the Navy took over the fraternity houses. It was sort of an abbreviated or truncated experience at the university.

AP: Then, your law experience, if I remember the sequence correctly, then, came after you came back?

DF: Right, when I came back in June 1946, I enrolled in the Law School.

AP: And stayed through 1948. What was it like to be the son of the dean? Or were you able to be kind of anonymous?

DF: Oh, I don't think it was a particular problem. I think the biggest problem came for me in the course I took from my father.

AP: [laughter] Oh, my gracious, yes.

DF: I wasn't working that hard as a student and I was always afraid he would call on me and I had that fear throughout the length of the course because he never did call on me. If he had, at least, I'd gotten it over with. But I think on the rest of the classes, no problem.

I was actively involved in campus activities, in a couple of them and in one particularly. It was called the American Veterans Committee of which a chapter had formed on campus. This was made up of veterans of World War II that sought to distinguish itself as one of the more traditional veterans groups by its theme of "Citizens first; veterans second." It was actively interested in public policy issues. We ended up with a large fight in that organization reflecting the same fight that went on in the DFL Party and some of the same personalities were involved.

AP: What was that fight?

DF: It was the split that occurred in sort of the liberal side of American politics and the split centered on one's attitude toward the Soviet Union in the post-war period. One side was more supportive of the Soviet Union and critical of the Marshall Plan, critical of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]. The other side was supportive of the Marshall Plan and supported NATO and critical of what [Joseph] Stalin was doing. I was in the latter group and that was also the Humphrey and [Orville] Freeman group. In that connection, I met Freeman, which later led me to be hired, I think, by the law firm.

Then I also became active in the struggle within the DFL Party. To illustrate it, when Henry Wallace declared his candidacy for president in 1948, I think a majority of the executive committee of the state party supported Wallace as against [Harry S.] Truman, or Truman eventually at least. So a struggle for control of the DFL Party took place and I was actively involved in that with the Humphrey forces when he was endorsed for the Senate. Then, I ended up working in his campaign.

AP: Who did he run against that year?

DF: Joseph Ball, who was an incumbent. I think, initially, he'd been appointed by [Harold] Stassen to fill a vacancy, if my memory is right.

AP: So then Humphrey won, if I'm remembering correctly?

DF: Yes, he won.

AP: He stayed in the Senate for a number of terms.

DF: He stayed in until he ran for president, I think in 1968. So he would have been for about three and a half terms, 1948 up to 1968.

AP: Was the struggle within the DFL age and generational or really more simply political point of view or a little of each?

DF: I've never thought of it as generational, but I've never had that question asked so I haven't reflected on it. I think it more occurred in Minnesota because of the history of the Farmer Labor Party. The Farmer Labor Party had some offices back in the 1930s, including Floyd Olson for governor and I think it was Henry Shipstad who was elected to the Senate. I don't know that history very well. The Farmer Labor Party represented, in some respects, a more radical party. I think going through the war, of course, when we were allies with the Soviet Union, it was just harder for some of those people to sort of suddenly reverse course and become critical of the Soviet Union. But that was a struggle that went on across the country and it was back in 1947, 1948 when the Humphrey and Walter Ruether and some others formed the Americans for Democratic Action, which was a liberal group but sort of overtly anti-communist. It was a fairly tumultuous time politically. Henry Wallace represented the group more sympathetic to the Soviet Union.

AP: Was there a sense of angst over the political point of view as in the [Joseph] McCarthy Era? McCarthy began his accusations in 1950 and began pressuring universities and other places. Did you have any part or any recollections of those pressures? There were three sort of test cases at the university. President Morrill was known nationally, gave speeches on the importance of academic freedom in a university. Then, when some tests arose, he appears—at least looking at it dispassionately from this point in time—to have compromised his principles. There was a man called Forrest Wiggins, who everyone agrees was a radical, who did not have tenure and was not continued. Then, Frank Oppenheimer's brother was a faculty member in Physics and he was not continued. Then, there was another physicist who was not continued. Do you have any recollection of those episodes on the campus?

DF: I don't have any specific recollections, but I was very much aware of the McCarthy movement and very critical of it. At one point, I think my father was on a loyalty board that Truman had set up. I think it was regional or local in character. I haven't any recollection of what transpired there or even what kinds of cases were presented to them. I just remember being thoroughly critical of the McCarthy effort to label people indiscriminately.

AP: I'm looking in Bob Stein's history of the university and he's talking about the Fraser years. He says that a writer called Lucille Brown "chastised the legal profession for its failure to train lawyers adequately for public service and noted that the one law school, that of the University of Minnesota, has been interested for nearly two decades in training lawyers to assume more broadly policy-making functions in regard to the larger issues of justice and the legislative process." In other words, she is crediting your father with developing for Minnesota a broader philosophy than was true elsewhere. Did you have any sense of that, at the time?

DF: Yes, my father used to talk about that quite a bit.

AP: Could you give me a little background on that? That would be interesting for our records.

DF: He would speak of what he believed to be the obligation of lawyers to society at large, to do more than to just go out and make money and practice law. I think it was reflected in his view of how the Law School should train lawyers. I can't go much beyond that because I don't now recall specifically any requirements in pre-law or even within the Law School. But I know that he spoke of it frequently and, interestingly enough, it was Leonard Lindquist and Earl Larson who were the senior members of the law firm I eventually joined who were thoroughly exposed to that perspective and embraced it. So as that law firm got started, it was with the philosophy that there was an obligation to move beyond just beyond practicing.

AP: Is that Darrell Larson—I want to be sure I spell that name...

DF: Earl, E-a-r-l.

AP: Oh, Earl, sure. He later became a judge, is that right?

DF: A judge, yes.

AP: Do we have middle initial?

DF: I think it's Earl R. Larson.

AP: It's L-a-r-s-o-n?

DF: Yes.

AP: He became a federal judge?

DF: Right.

AP: Is the firm now Lindquist and Vennum?

DF: Yes, it later merged with Tom Vennum's firm.

AP: That's my impression and that's probably what we're going to be writing in the history, crediting your father with that dimension. I've seen it enough places that I think it's correct. It's helpful to have it confirmed by talking with you.

When you got into the Minnesota legislature, did you have a new impression of the university or maybe the committees, like the Judiciary that you were involved with did not lead you into any particular additional exposure to the university? Do you have a feel for that?

DF: When I ran for the Minnesota Senate, I ran against an incumbent and one of the reasons I ran was because I was urged to run by, particularly, one of my friends who was on the faculty. The name of the incumbent was Emmett Duemke. He'd served quite a number of years and his father had served quite a number of years in the legislature.

AP: That's spelled?

DF: D-u-e-m-k-e, I think. Emmett... I'm not sure but my recollection is it's a double *m* and double *t*.

He was critical of the university for what, in retrospect, was a rather minor issue. He was criticizing the stores that the university operated for selling stuff, more than books, that was in competition with private entrepreneurs.

AP: I understand.

DF: So that's one reason, I think, that there was some unhappiness with him and one of the reasons why I was urged to run for the Senate. Prior to my being urged to run for the Senate, I had never thought about running for public office.

AP: Who was it that urged you to do it?

DF: Bill Kubicek, K-u-b-i-c-e-k.

AP: What department was he in?

DF: I think he was in Physical Medicine. I don't think he was a physician himself. He was, I think, both an electrical engineer and something else. He, as I understood it, worked with that department in fashioning devices or things that would be helpful to handicapped people. Physical Medicine dealt with people with physical handicaps. The department, all through those years, was headed by Fritz Kottke, Dr. Frederick Kottke, who was another good friend. Both Kubicek and Kottke are still around, although they're both older, for sure. They were both active politically, but Kubicek particularly had been active. He became secretary of the state party, at one point, and maybe held other offices. He was the one that urged me to run for the state Senate.

AP: I'm double-checking. You won the first time you ran?

DF: Yes, in 1954.

AP: Did your opinion change of the university, confirm your opinion? When you were suddenly looking at it through the eyes of a legislator, did that change anything?

DF: I was generally supportive of the university. It seemed to have pretty good support in the state Senate during those years. Was it Ray Amberg...?

AP: From the hospital?

DF: Yes. He was at the legislature a lot, as I remember. He did a good job of promoting the university. I thought that the university, generally, was doing okay during those years.

I remember one other bill that affected the university. In fact, I think Kubicek got me into that one. It was a bill to require that the animals that were impounded be made available for research at the university...stray dogs and cats. I remember working with the State Medical Association because they were supportive, but there were others who didn't like that idea very well.

AP: Who were the opponents? Was there an Animal Rights Movement, in those days?

DF: I think there was some version of it, yes.

AP: Those would have been the opponents, then?

DF: Right.

Going back to my father, there was another incident. I don't know how much you...

AP: Sure, I'm delighted.

DF: My father had spoken out quite strongly for the reelection of Franklin Roosevelt as president. That would have been in 1940. Roy Dunn was, then, national committeeman for the Republican Party, but also, I think, a member of the state House. Roy Dunn publicly criticized my father saying that he shouldn't speak out since he was on a public payroll. The one thing I remember is my father's comment, "So was Dunn on the state payroll as a member of the legislature." That was a controversy that got some press attention, I assume for a brief time.

AP: I assume the policy was confirmed that, presumably, a university faculty member or dean can speak out as long as it's in his or her private capacity? Is that the way it works? You wouldn't send out a letter on dean of the Law School stationery urging something, but as a private citizen, he was free to make a statement? Is that how it ended up?

DF: Well, It ended. [laughter] What the university said or thought about it, I don't have any recollection. Anyway, it didn't seem to impair my father's service. When Roosevelt died, my father gave the eulogy at Northrop Auditorium.

AP: Had he met Roosevelt?

DF: I don't think so. I don't have a specific recollection of him talking about it.

AP: He probably would have if he had, I'm guessing.

DF: Probably.

AP: Fast forwarding to the 1960s, which is a very interesting and fascinating time. You would have been in the national Congress by then. Do you have any impressions of those years and those issues and the various things that happened on the campus? You may have been far enough away that you simply don't. I wanted to ask.

DF: I don't have a recollection that comes into my mind, without a specific reference. I had some impression of the university as the debate over the war heated up in the 1960s.

AP: What was that?

DF: That there were a lot of protests going on. I became an early critic of the Vietnam War. I was one of the handful in the House of Representatives that came to the view that what the United States was doing over there was a bad idea.

AP: Were you on the Foreign Relations Committee?

DF: Yes. They called it the Foreign Affairs Committee in the House.

AP: That gave you particular leverage and influence, I would think on that question, or visibility.

DF: I suppose. I voted for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, but so did everybody else in the House and everybody else in the Senate voted for it, except Senator [Wayne Lyman] Morse, who I think had gone to the university...

AP: Yes, he had.

DF: ...and then he became dean out at Oregon, and Ernest Greening, who had been a newspaper publisher up in Alaska. They were the only two who voted against it. That was in the fall of 1964. But by the spring of 1965, then my views changed. There were maybe eight or ten of us in the House who became critics. I remember at the university, that more and more students were challenging U.S. policy. At one point—I don't remember what year this was—my daughter was involved in one of the protests. When she went to the aid of a student that she felt was being treated roughly by the police, she, herself, got arrested.

AP: Yes, in fact, I have some clippings about that.

DF: Yes.

AP: Do you have any memories of the Civil Rights Movement as it affected the university?

DF: Not specific recollections. The legislation that we worked on in Congress was back in 1964 and 1965, I think, primarily.

AP: Yes, the Civil Rights Act was 1964, I think.

DF: I think the next year was the Voting Rights Act. I would have been aware of what was going on at the university in a general way, but I don't have any specific recollections.

AP: Moving to your post-Vietnam war time as mayor, do you have comments about the university in those years?

DF: I don't recall specific issues. I'm sure there were at least a few. I don't remember what they were—if there were any with the city.

AP: If there were any, right. As you moved further in your career, you, then, came back and did some teaching at the Humphrey Institute and had done some teaching also in the Kennedy Center and you mentioned some time in Sweden. Would your national teaching have had to do with your foreign affairs expertise or was that on a variety of topics?

DF: The field that I ended up spending most of my legislative time on in the House of Representatives was on international human rights. I chaired the subcommittee that dealt with that question. I think back in the early 1970s, I spent a year on that topic holding hearings on United States foreign policy and international human rights and out of it came some law changes. We proposed some changes to the law that involved the State Department. So when I went to the Kennedy School, after I was through being mayor, I ended up leading a series of seminars on international human rights, which worked quite well because Boston is one of the centers for known governmental organizations interested in human rights as well as Harvard itself. It has always played an important role.

My experience at HUD stemmed, in part... [Henry] Cisneros invited me down because, as mayor, I ended up devoting a lot of time to the problems facing children. So Cisneros wanted me to focus on families and children while I was at HUD. I wrote a paper there, but otherwise, I wasn't being very productive so I ended that.

Then, Professor [David] Weissbrodt, who teaches International Human Rights at the Law School, asked me to take over his course one year while he was abroad on a sabbatical. So I taught his course on International Human Rights for one year and, then, assisted him for a couple more years. I still do, but on a very limited basis. I show up for a couple of the lectures and take part. At the Humphrey Institute, I was teaching the course which now is called Law and Public Policy. Last spring, I told them I thought I'd done enough of that. The Swedish teaching was an extension of the Law School. The Law School has an exchange arrangement with Uppsala in Sweden with the law school there. Part of it involves a professor going over from the Law School to teach, essentially, a course on American law. They ran out of real professors, so they asked if I wanted to go for one year, which was just a year and a half ago now. That was interesting, living in Uppsala.

AP: It does sound interesting.

If you were asked to describe the University of Minnesota to a person coming to this state who is new... If they said, "Tell me about the University of Minnesota," and you were asked to give a fairly concise description, what would you see as the salient points about the university?

DF: That it's a very large university, I think one of the larger land-grant schools—at least it used to be. It had professional schools in most of the professional fields. Unlike many university, it's located right in the middle of the two cities. At least in earlier years, many of the faculty involved themselves both in the politics and civil activities of the community and some of its departments were ranked very highly in comparison with other universities. I guess that's how I would describe it.

AP: That's helpful.

We have a few anecdotes related to Humphrey and his interactions with the university, which were more tangential than yours. He was not a university graduate. Do you have any feel for his attitudes toward the university?

DF: To the best of my recollection, he was always very supportive of the university. I thought he did have some connection at some point. He had a lot of friends at the university.

AP: Right, and I think he may have taught a course or two.

DF: Right.

AP: There was some kind of fracas about whether he was going to get tenure in the Political Science Department. The Political Science Department wasn't into tenuring anybody that didn't have a Ph.D., no matter how distinguished they were.

A cute story was the story told by Sandy Stevens who was the quarter back who won the Rose Bowl. He is an African-American, one of the first African-American athletes to play at the university. He had played the last two years of the 1950s when the university was...

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Tape 1, Side 2]

AP: Humphrey used to come and watch the practices and encourage him. Now, he was in the Senate at the time, so I'm assuming this didn't happen very often, but at least he had the sense that Humphrey was an early fan. He said, "He was a fan when we were losing and he never lost faith compared to others who were throwing garbage on the coach's lawn and things like that." He was very high on Humphrey as a friend of the athletes.

The other story that I picked up was Carl Rowan describes getting an offer to go to the U.S. State Department at the Rose Bowl. A telephone [call] came through at the Rose Bowl from the president [Lyndon B. Johnson] saying, "We want you to take a position in the State Department." He said, "Mr. President, I want to think about it. I'll want to confer with my friend, Hubert Humphrey." Humphrey told him to ask for a bigger position in the State Department than the one he was being offered, which he did do and which he did get. I think that's a kind of nice story about the university and about Rowan, who was a great football fan and also very supportive of the Gophers.

DF: Yes.

AP: Somebody said, "Now, Ann, don't take these stories of Hubert as a football fan too seriously." They may be apocryphal. Everybody thought Hubert was their special fan and that was part of his success.

DF: He was enthusiastic about everything.

[laughter]

DF: There is a point to that, I think, yes. It wouldn't surprise me that he would be a great fan of the Gophers because that would be consistent with his general approach to people.

AP: Is there anything, Don, that I have not asked you that you would like to contribute for the interview?

DF: [pause] No, nothing occurs to me now.

AP: I'm certainly very delighted with what you've told me. I always ask everyone that question just in case there's some obvious thing that I might have overlooked. I also thank Arvonne for her interview earlier. I'm most grateful to you both.

I think I wrote down earlier your address, but would you mind giving it to me again?

DF: It's 821 Seventh Street Southeast, Minneapolis, 55414.

AP: What I will do is send you a permission sheet—I'll send one to Arvonne as well—for us to transcribe the interview. It will go into the archives and be a public record so that people studying the university in the future can check your interview and look at it if they want to.

DF: Okay, sounds good.

AP: Thank you very much. Take care. Bye.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[End of the Interview]

Transcribed by:

Hermes Transcribing and Research Service
12617 Fairgreen Avenue, Apple Valley, MN 55124
(612) 953-0730
bhermes1@aol.com