

**Interview with Brian Sonntag, February 13, 1994**

ALISON: Brian, tell me about growing up in politics. Did you even feel like you were growing up in politics? Were you aware of the political aspect?

BRIAN: No. I didn't know the difference. Growing up was growing up. I knew my dad did things different than some other kid's dads. I got to go to ball games free.

ALISON: Did you feel any special responsibility, being a son of an elected official?

BRIAN: At times and after awhile, like by the time I was in Junior High or High School. I would be informed or I knew that actions I took also reflected on Dad. So you have -- you get that in your head a little bit. It makes you think. Whether it changes what you do or not, it at least weighs on your mind.

ALISON: You're aware that you could be affecting your father.

BRIAN: Yeah.

ALISON: Did other people seem to expect more of you?

BRIAN: I don't know, maybe teachers once in a while. My history in school they didn't often get it though.

ALISON: Did you feel it from your father? Did he make you feel like you needed to be a little better than the others, that "you need to reflect well on me"?

BRIAN: Only in behavior once in a while. I didn't have to get straight A's because he was a public figure. I didn't

have to be better at certain things. He didn't want me doing things that would make headlines, probably.

ALISON: That's reasonable.

BRIAN: Other than that, not really.

ALISON: Do you have any feeling about the way Tacoma was when you grew up and the way it felt being a boy here compared to what it feels like to the kids growing up now?

BRIAN: I suppose that is generational, but it was a smaller place, it was friendlier. We used to -- I never did a lot things to get in trouble. I used to just kind of roam and run free. Even with mom I pretty much could come and go around the neighborhood as I pleased and I know doors were left open sometimes, you just lived differently altogether than people do now. I don't know what that does to kids, but I know each generation grows up with different kinds of responsibilities and different things weighing on their minds than the one before.

ALISON: There was a lot less we could do, there was a lot less that we could get into than the kids nowadays.

BRIAN: Oh, a lot less. Just in ways of technology and freedoms, and things kids have today. Shoot they all have cars.

ALISON: True.

BRIAN: That just did not happen before. I don't know if my life was sheltered or not, I didn't have my first beer

until I was 20.

ALISON: Yeah, it was sheltered. What do you know if anything about the evolution of the power structure in county politics? How was control maintained in your dad's time? Where did your dad fit into the power structure? Is there still a reigning power structure? If not, when and how did this change?

BRIAN: I think elected officials, especially at the local level were respected more forty (40) years ago. I think they were looked at as people who were in positions of responsibility, admired, and looked on as they could help with things. I think the skepticism and cynicism, I guess, of the government and political leaders is a lot higher now than ever. The power structure -- I mean Dad was a big shot, he had a lot of control over things, being in county office for a long time. A lot of power or authority was vested, I suppose, in each of the elected officials, probably more so the county commissioners at the county level. I think, in Dad's case, he was probably like the fourth (4th) county commissioner in a lot of ways.

ALISON: Because he had been there so long?

BRIAN: That, and the kind of affect he had. I think also it had to do with the kinds of things he did and I think he was smarter than a lot of them.

ALISON: That could be. Do you think, then, that today there is a lot less trust in general in authority and elected officials in particular?

BRIAN: No question. I don't know if it is because of our

generation being the ones now, the folks who questioned everything growing up, and we continue to question. Some of that is healthy, it is questioning or looking for ways to do things better. That's healthy. The cynicism and the out right [hate] feeling towards government, just total disregard for anything that even smells of government because they just don't think government works on their behalf. [That may not be as healthy.]

ALISON: That is a special challenge to you, then, being from the questioning generation and being an elected official. You can maybe see their side of it a little better?

BRIAN: Yeah. I think I do. It's funny to phrase it that way. I don't look at it still as their side.

ALISON: The right side?

BRIAN: Well, I don't look at it as sides. I question things, I am a government employee and I question things. If I wasn't a government employee, I would still be questioning things. I think I am in a position to ask questions more direct sometimes and, hopefully, in some cases, provide answers to some of those questions.

ALISON: But, you say that you don't think they're are different sides to things, then. Can you elaborate a little bit on that?

BRIAN: Well, by sides I look at it being government and everybody else, and that if we draw sides and everybody who is not part of the government is on a different side. Sides to me sounds competitive and antagonistic.

I just don't like to draw a line between. I want to see that blend, where people are part of government and government is working for people and it's all one effort. Everybody has different responsibilities and jobs to do.

ALISON: Everybody should sort of be aiming at the same place even if we have different ideas on how to get there?

BRIAN: All those different ideas and philosophies are what make the road towards those goals a healthy one. That brings in the diversity of ideas and thoughts, philosophical arguments and that is a healthy discussion. I try not to gauge people on their philosophies because they're opinions and they are not right or wrong, they are all just different. Where we can deal with something tangible is that goal and that outcome out there that we should be striving towards, even if they are general, even if it is to make government better and more efficient, or spend money more wisely. That should be the goal and philosophy of an ultraconservative, an ultraliberal or any other label you want to put on people. Everybody has a different philosophy that they bring to it, but we should be headed towards the same result.

ALISON: So you welcome the dissent? You welcome the question?

BRIAN: That's fine. If it were just easy and we are all just well... "today we are going to do this and tomorrow we are doing that", that takes the fun out of it.

ALISON: Interesting perspective. Is there anything else that you would like to say on that subject before we move off into something else.

BRIAN: Not really. I guess if you look at it as a -- I throw out the word partnership all the time. It really needs to be that. It needs to be a collaborative, cooperative effort on the part of everyone. Every member of the public and those of us who work for the government are still part of the public.

ALISON: Sometimes we lose sight of that.

BRIAN: Sometimes the rest of the public even losses sight of that.

ALISON: You are right. I never thought of it from quite that angle, part of the distrust comes from the idea that they're not us and we're not them.

BRIAN: No. It's sides.

ALISON: You're right. O.K. Tell me a little bit about your dad. What do you remember about him as a person, as a father, as an auditor, as an employer?

BRIAN: As an employer, all I learned about him was that he was ultrafair, I mean just really fair in treating people well. He demanded respect probably, but more importantly commanded respect and I think he also gave respect. That is my disadvantage on knowing him the least, and had the least amount of time.

ALISON: How old were you when your father died?

BRIAN: Seventeen. A lot of my knowing him did not have much to do with government politics. I was doing a little bit of music in garages on weekends, or I was doing a whole lot of baseball. I guess that is where I learned

must of my appreciation for baseball, from Dad.

ALISON: He liked baseball.

BRIAN: He knew the game better than anybody I can think of now, except for a couple of people who have been in it their whole lives. I can remember little things he would tell me about baseball and I remember them today. They make more sense to me today than they did then. So I kind of wish I would have had that same perspective on other things in his life as I did for baseball.

ALISON: I was surprised to learn that he was such a big baseball fan.

BRIAN: He was also a coach. He coached the first Junior League baseball team around here to have a black player on it. That was Jack Tanner.

ALISON: No kidding.

BRIAN: Yeah.

ALISON: That's interesting. I didn't know that. I knew that you loved baseball and I thought -- well, that must be where Brian --

BRIAN: That's where I got it.

ALISON: From your dad. Did he come to watch you play?

BRIAN: Yeah. A little bit. It's funny, one of the very last times he saw me play ball, Richard was with him at Jefferson park. It was the day I was pitching against

Mt. Tahoma, Joe Stortini was the coach and I threw a one hitter. Two hitter, I'm sorry. We won 2-1. I sure remember that. They were standing in back of the backstop a little ways under a tree, Dad always looked an FBI guy with a suit on and a hat and dark glasses.

ALISON: Did you get the feeling that he was proud of you?

BRIAN: Yeah. He told me that -- probably that year or the year before, the best thing -- the nicest thing he ever said to me was that he thought I was a better baseball player than Jack was at that time.

ALISON: That's great.

BRIAN: One of the funniest stories about Dad was, that same year at Stadium High School when we were having all of the riots, there was one day after school where I'd come out. [I was] going up the hill [and] some girl had dropped her purse and so I bent over and was picking up a few things. A couple of other guys came over and said "what are you doing?" I said "just picking up a couple of things that she dropped." At that point they let me know that she did not drop her purse; they had knocked her purse out of her hand. I didn't know these guys. They were 3 black guys from some place. We were having some real trouble at Stadium. Any way, I realized that. I said "oh." As I handed her a couple more things, I looked up and two more guys were coming down with bricks in their hands. I got hit in the legs with a couple of bricks. It wasn't that big a deal.

The next day, I leave school and I am walking up the hill up by Ranko's [Drug Store] to get the bus to come



home. I'm standing there with a group of about 30 kids waiting to get on the bus and here comes this county car pulling up. It stops, one big guy with dark glasses gets out of the car, Dick Greco [Chief Deputy Auditor for Jack Sr., later Auditor]. He opens the car door and says "Brian get in," so I got in. So I come back to school the next day and the kids were saying "what did those cops want with you?" They were getting me out of there to find out how it was going that day at school. That was hilarious.

It was the summer before when I had gone to California with Dad and Greco. They had gone down to observe the California primary, the first time punch card voting was ever used on the West Coast (1968). That was an interesting trip. I could tell you a lot of stories about that. ...

That was ... the time Robert Kennedy was killed in Los Angeles. We were up in San Francisco at the time. The next day, after Bobby Kennedy had been shot, we were in a cab going out to the horse races (Dad's real love). We were coming back from the track and the cab driver and Dad are talking, the cab driver said something about "wasn't that too bad?" Then he said something to the effect of "I hope he dies" and the rage in dad -- I told Rich this -- I thought this was it. I'm in the passenger seat, back seat of the cab going to San Francisco, I thought that I was going to die in a car wreck. I could see Dad just choke the life out of this guy. Dad just flew into a rage. The cab driver meant [he] would rather see him die than [live as a vegetable] or something. But that instant rage [Dad] had right then, that shows his tender side.

ALISON: Caring about people

BRIAN: Yeah, and what he saw the Kennedy's [approach to] government, their care and compassion and way they challenge people to help make their government better.

ALISON: Now, Bobby Kennedy was very much a liberal and had been very influenced by things that he had seen in the deep South. What do you think your father's attitudes were towards racism?

BRIAN: Well, liberal by what standards? It is kind of funny, buy those standards Henry Jackson is a liberal, but he was not a liberal. I think the philosophy they brought was real balance where they had compassion and maybe could be termed liberal on some social kinds of issues where it came to helping people. As it came to defending our country or economical, I don't think you could term people like Henry Jackson or Robert or Jack Kennedy as liberal. If you think that the last balanced federal budget we had was the one proposed in 1963, they had that and their work was what resulted in several civil rights acts in 1965.

ALISON: Where did your dad stand on Civil Rights?

BRIAN: Well, personally, probably like a lot of people in his generation. But professionally, I know he hired the first black county employee, and she wasn't a work crew member or a janitor, so he let fairness come into his professional life regardless of some personal feeling. Although, I know it would be hard for me to call him a racist. I know I had black kids over at the house all the time, kids I played baseball with from the time that I was little.

ALISON: So, regardless of how he might have felt personally -- and an awful lot of people in his generation just had not been around a lot of black people.

BRIAN: I also never saw him act in an overt racist way or speak that way either.

ALISON: That's fair. We are about done with your childhood and your father. Is there anything else that you would like to say? If there's not, we can -- O.K. Tell me about what made you seek the appointment to County Clerk?

BRIAN: That was in 1978, in 1972 I went to work in the County Clerk's office. I had been working for Puget Sound National Bank for three months. I went to work in the clerk's office for Don Perry [Pierce County Clerk]. That was an interesting relationship there, he worked for Dad as election superintendent.

ALISON: I didn't know that.

BRIAN: Then in 1963 he was appointed County Clerk when Bobby Dykeman died. But any way, Don hired me at an entry level file clerk and I worked in what was called the vault filing papers in court files and exhibits, I think at that time we had just got in to 9 Superior Courts and there were two of us working in the records section.

ALISON: You and Glen? [Glen Campbell, Exhibit Clerk for the Pierce County Clerk's office]

BRIAN: Me and Glen. I got to do a few other things in the office too, at least once in a while, I was kind of a

fill in Probate Clerk, worked the front counter some over the next few years. I did several things even a little bit in the docket. I never worked in the Courtroom that was one of the few things I didn't do in the office, but towards the summer or at least late summer of 1977 we knew Don was not going to run for re-election the following year in 1978, that he was likely to retire in the spring. I was one of those people wondering who might run, who'd be interested in that.

The number one threat Richard used was that if I didn't do it, he would. Then I would have to go find another job because I could not work for him because he is my brother. Richard was the one who provided the motivation, the drive to run. He really challenged me, I came up with a zillion reasons why I couldn't. He was finding reasons why I could and, maybe even more at that point, should.

ALISON: He told me when we first met. That he was the custodian of the name until you got old enough to run.

BRIAN: I never thought that. I remember in an early conversation with Richard, back when... well it was 1971 when he ran for the city council and one day in the living room he told me he was going to be running for the city council and he said something like, "Yeah, you're going to help on the campaign." I said, "Sure." That was the first time I realized that I was going to work on a campaign, which was fun. Carrey and I just about door belled the whole city ourselves and signed it. We had a great time. I've got to admit that was fun -- and unsigned it and resigned it and unsigned it.

But, I remember once -- We were probably at the

Harvester, if it was called that by then. He informed me that I would probably get involved in this someday too. He saw me someday as a legislator and maybe himself as a County Commissioner. My best perspective on that at that point, was I said "you mean I would be above you?" I didn't know what the heck either one of them did.

I'm not sure what made me go for County Clerk, but once I decided I would...there you go. When you're on a fast track, you don't look back. You just go, you do the things that you need to do, Richard advised me to get the list of the PC's and call all those precinct committee officers and tell them what you are doing and who you are a little bit. We had so much lead time to campaign for that office [about eight months]. That's longer than a lot of people take to run a full fledged campaign and here we were working with -- I don't know somewhere just less than 600 precinct committee officers who would vote for the three (3) names that would be submitted to the County Commissioners to pick a temporary County Clerk. I'm not sure what actually made -- one thing that made me decide, "yes, I will" or, if it came out the other way, "no, I wouldn't."

ALISON: Tell me about those first few speeches. Those first few phone calls.

BRIAN: The phone calls were never easy. I didn't know a lot of those folks and they were at least a generation older than me, most of them. I went through the list. I'd go in the bedroom on the phone at night and I'd just start making cold telephone calls, telling them what I am doing. Then I went to all the District Club meetings and made my little speeches, but those went

okay. Those were not long. I was able to just kind of recite what I had done in the office. Richard would tell me how to [tell about] some things that I would like to do in the office. I would hurry through that and sit down. The nice part was that, if all of the other candidates were there too, I was going to be better than Sharon White. I was going to do better than Dick West and Cecil Clark in front of people. Once I learned that, that helped a lot. I was worried that they might know more of the people personally, especially Dick West. There wasn't anything I could do about that. I just knew that I had to take my chances. Those speeches were not long. [You would] stand up and they would tell you that you have two (2) minutes. And I'm sure I never took two minutes and smiled and shook hands with a lot of people.

ALISON: How about the phone calls? Did you feel like you had a pretty good reception?

BRIAN: Well, people are generally nice and [especially] if someone is being called in their capacity as precinct committee officer. I can reflect on this a little easier now than then. Precinct committee men are not asked to do too many things. Them getting to choose who the county official is going to be is a big deal. That didn't happen [very] often. Some people were real receptive and that was one of the pluses, too. Richard had been active in the party organization and a lot of those people knew him and that helped.

ALISON: Do you suppose everybody else was making those same calls?

BRIAN: I would assume so. I know one or two of them sent

BRIAN  
Christmas cards to all the PC's that winter. I'm sure that was a nice thing to do. All that started, I'm guessing around August and September and the meeting of the PC's was in March. The appointment was made effective May 1. I think all of April was sort of getting ready time. The speech that was tough was that one when we went before the Democratic Central Committee. That event was run sort of like a mini convention. We had nominating and seconding speeches. Steve Kirby gave my nominating speech and George Walk made the second nominating speech. Bill Baarsma was the county chair. I made the first of the candidate speeches. Richard wrote every word and how to deliver it. Where he wanted me to make a pause for effect, he would put three dots after that word and my charge was to count them silently, like I would finish "but..." and I would count in my mind one, two, three and then continue. It worked really well. I remember rehearsing it that day in the bathtub. Then he took me out for pizza and beer before the meeting that night.

ALISON: Not too much beer I hope.

RICHARD: Just enough to calm him down.

BRIAN: I would have taken it in an IV.

ALISON: How did you feel after that speech was over?

BRIAN: I felt good. I have to admit that I felt real good. Of course, then the other three candidates gave their speech. Again I felt good. As soon as I finished mine the air conditioner went on [and made a lot of noise] and that helped too.

RICHARD: Brian's speech was about twenty minutes or close to it. They clapped when they were supposed to clap and they would laugh when they were supposed to laugh. They cheered like all hell when he was through.

BRIAN: It was good. I was well written.

RICHARD: It was obvious in the room that there was a Sonntag back in County office.

BRIAN: I think that mattered at that point.

RICHARD: It did. They were saying those kinds of things.

BRIAN: We had gone around and worked the crowd before the meeting started. They sat by district and I went through and shook hands and had contacts with people in each district. I let them know that I was there and I was doing this. Dick West -- Ron Hale was directing this mini campaign for West and they had some slick fliers they tacked up on the walls and were handing out. We had our mimeographed sheets that we were handing out to people. As a matter of fact, Mom mimeographed those up at UPS. It went real well, I was received well and the other candidates spoke and then they balloted. It was a real fair way to ballot. They took one ballot. People wrote down who they wanted to vote for and they wrote down the totals for all those people and that is how the names went to the County Commissioners.

RICHARD: And the totals were --

BRIAN: The totals were, I got 108, Dick West got 44, Sharon Wise 33 and Cecil Clark 22.



ALISON: Good Heavens!

BRIAN: 44, 33, 22, I got 108 and I was just really pleased. That was the first little victory in the political world that I had.

ALISON: It would feel real good coming from --

BRIAN: From "why I am doing this?" If I had lost that, I'm sure Richard would have somehow convinced me that, "even without the appointment, you're going to run." I likely would have because I had nothing else to do. That would have been an interesting thing to see how that [would have gone], because the appointed incumbent [had as advantage], especially at that time county wide. It meant something to get that appointment.

ALISON: How about the campaign? Was it a particularly difficult campaign?

BRIAN: In some ways it was really difficult. Part of it got real dirty. I'll get to that. The campaign was tough because I thought the other candidates were fairly active. Cecil Clark, who didn't make that cut for the Democratic appointment, was the only candidate to run as a Republican, so he was the one we faced in November. But getting through the primary was tough. Dick West worked in the prosecutors office and Don Herron was prosecutor and helped him a lot. He was guiding him. He even told Ted Rutt [Brian's former Chief Deputy Clerk, now Pierce County Clerk] one day that, "I think Dick is making it close, it is going to be a tight race."

We just kept door belling, we door belled twenty

thousand homes in that election. We door belled for sign locations and hung signs. Richard wrote the script and I followed it. We had a small number of people like always who actually worked on the campaign, who worked hard. People like Carrey were just tireless. We door belled a ton, we hung signs, we made the speeches, we got the endorsements.

The dirty part of the campaign, we don't know exactly where it came from, although in my heart I have a good idea. There was just an outrageous claim made against me.

ALISON: I remember that. Do think that claim, where it came from, had anything to do with the later bringing down of county officials in Pierce County?

BRIAN: One scenario has it that way. People who were at least connected with some of those folks I believe were involved. Whether that was all part of some conspiracy in getting control of the courthouse, who knows. It was the bail bond forfeiture records kept in the clerk's office, that we helped make available to the press and the public, those were what led to several of the convictions.

I had been in office just for a couple of weeks and I look on T.V. and they are arresting other county elected officials on T.V. It made you stop and think that because there was at least some connection to the other candidate who made those claims between her and the prosecutors office. You could take it that one more step and think that at least some of the same people were involved.

ALISON: There would have been an advantage.

BRIAN: Names like Calger and Michael Valentine and Ed Lund and others kept popping up with that candidate. The charge to me from her and other activities by other of the racketeering defendants.

ALISON: That's interesting.

RICHARD: There was no doubt in my mind that it was a well oiled, well controlled, well contrived plot to discredit Brian and put an employee of the prosecutor's office in as county clerk so they would have all branches of the criminal justice system including the court records. It was the one thing that they did not have that they needed. It turned out that, shortly after the election, people learned how badly they needed it.

BRIAN: On the surface you think, the county clerk who cares. They keep the records and the people sit in the courtrooms and work in there, so what. Send out the child support payments and do your job. A lot of the records we kept were important. They were kept manually so they would have been easy to have them not available. I spent time on evenings and weekends with folks in our office making sure that we could put the information contained in those bail bond forfeiture records in a readable condition.

ALISON: It's important to you to be honest and above board. I assume it always has been, but how great an influence was what happened on you as an elected official?

BRIAN: I don't know.

ALISON: Did it make you feel like, that's not going to happen to me?

BRIAN: Well yeah, but it wasn't. It's hard to say that something like this and other people being brought down was going to make that even more important to me because it always was. I wasn't going to do the things that were going to get me in trouble. I wasn't going to do something that wasn't right and I don't know for what reasons. I'm not sure that we make a conscious decision by saying, "Boy, I'm never going to screw it up," or "I'm never going to do anything that even looks like or smells like improper or illegal." I guess you go the full measure and make sure that everything you do is well above board and if you go too far either direction, you make it so you go too far in the squeaky clean direction for a lot of reasons. One, I don't want to do something wrong. And its not a fear of going to jail or something. It is [that] I don't want people to ever think that I did something wrong. I wouldn't want people to think, "Oh, it's just another one of those politicians," or "He's a crook too," or "Look what he did." That would be tough to take.

ALISON: Your family I suppose -- hurting the name would bother you, too.

BRIAN: I think it would hurt a lot of people, it would hurt my brothers and my mom and other members of the family, kids too and friends and people who expect you to do differently.

RICHARD: There are literally thousands of people who think we are scoundrels, who expect more from a Sonntag than they do from any other elected official.

ALISON: Tell me about the employees strike in 1980, when your employees struck against the county commissioners and you were very supportive of them.

BRIAN: That was again one of those things where you don't have to make a conscious decision on what's right or where you are. It just is. The employees were making their decisions based on the information they had and that was the right decision for them. Whether anybody else in county government, whether I could ever come along and say, "Well, I think the decision you made was wrong." Number one, I was never in the position and I never had that opinion. Even if I could that would be wrong. They made tough decision. The employees in the clerk's office were mostly single mothers. They didn't get paid a lot of money. They did a lot of hard work and they were real good at it and I needed -- They were co-workers of mine before I became Clerk, [that] was part of it too. I needed them to do their job for me to do mine. They made a tough decision to go out on strike and forego their pay for three weeks, 15 working days. That was a tough call and not an easy decision for them at all. You bet I supported them in that decision and I couldn't wait for them to get back.

I was really offended at some comments made by the county commissioners at that time, when they talked about a possible work slow down when people came back or they didn't want people getting "well" on overtime. There was nothing that even resembled a work slow down. We had people put down their picket signs the day the strike was settled and wasn't officially ratified on the settlement. Yet they put down their signs and came in and started working that Friday afternoon. It was the right side to be on, it was fun. We were handing

out coffee and donuts out the windows for those fifteen days. We had a strike sign in the window. One of the judges was not sure how it got there. Judge Warswick popped his head in one day during lunch and let Ted and me know that someone put a picket sign in our window, we "should know about that."

Judge Warswick, the grouchy nut that he always was -- One of the things that I did as clerk was every month I would go down to presiding court and call the roll of the jurors. Well, I went down there soon after the strike ended and I was calling the roll of the jurors. When I finished doing that, I introduced the presiding judge [and told the jurors] that he was going to come out and talk to them next. It was Judge Warswick and I introduced him. I usually just walked on down the aisle [after that] and headed out of there to go back to work. Before I could do that, he came out and put his hand on my shoulder and he said "Before I say a few words to everyone, I want you folks to know something about the County Clerk." I'm thinking, "He just going to rip me here in front of all these people for the strike or something."

Judge Warswick had nothing but praise for me and for Ted and the job we did and our employees during that strike. And as difficult as it was, the fact that we kept the courts going, we kept support payments going out. I came in on weekends and Richard even helped a couple of those times. That was one of the nicest things he could have ever had said about us, what Warswick said about us during the strike. You have to remember I was only 28 years old during that strike.

ALISON: Pretty grown up situation for a 28 year old.

BRIAN: Looking back on it, I think we handled it pretty well. Ted was a very mature 31 and I was 28 and I thought we handled the strike pretty well. The fact that I had to do battle everyday with two of the county commissioners on the front page of a few newspapers -- But they were wrong.

ALISON: You said that you got the child support payments out. Was that an important thing for you?

BRIAN: Yeah. That money went to people who for the most part, didn't not have a lot of money. They depended on their support payments, as small as some of them were, regularly. I knew that we needed to get that money out and I knew I was honoring the strike, so I wasn't going to ask people to come in across the picket line to get their support payments during the day. There is absolutely no way I could have processed them that way anyway. So I would go through the mail everyday and I wrote with a piece of chalk on the floor in the safe the alphabet. I had worked there a long time. I could pretty well identify what support checks were in the mail with all the mail that came in. I would look at the return address and I would just toss the envelopes on that letter of the alphabet and then I would work on Saturdays for a few hours and people who could come in -- we were not able to process them out by mail, but the people who would get into the office I'd do what I could to find their payment. I would ask them what name and then I would say, "could it have come from somebody with a different last name" in case that was the name on the return address. [Then] I would go look in that pile. I bet well over 90% of those who came in looking for their payment, walked out with it. Over \$70,000.00 worth of support payments we disbursed.

ALISON: Wow! \$70,000.00. Tell me in general about your relationship to labor.

BRIAN: I'm not sure there is a relationship, it is just where I am. I'm on the side of working people, working families, inside and outside of government. It is a fairness issue. That is how labor unions started, was to bring fair treatment for employees and that is the strength that they still provide. That is every employee's right -- to bargain for working conditions collectively.

ALISON: Sounds a little like your brother.

BRIAN: He probably says it a whole lot better than I do. That's just where it is though. Maybe not as much as Richard, at least not articulated as well, but there is that line and you got the right side and you got the other side, things are going to fall on one side or the other, that falls on the right side.

ALISON: Did your dad feel that way about organized labor?

BRIAN: Yeah, I'm quite sure. I have never had an organized labor discussion with him, but the things I did know about, I'm sure. If it was fair and it was right, that is where he was.

ALISON: County Charter was changed in the early 80's, I can't remember exactly when the clerk became an appointed position. How did you feel about the charter changes and about your position becoming appointed.

BRIAN: The Charter took affect May 1, 1991. [ALISON: The same month as SCOMIS (Superior Court Management



Information System)] Same day! I've got the picture of Governor Spellman signing the bill that provided the funding for SCOMIS state wide. I was 29 years old then, in fact [to Dick], you went down to Olympia that day for that bill signing. I've got my bugs bunny and daffy duck tie on.

We went from three commissioners and seven other full time elected county officials to eleven elected county officials. Seven of those, however, are regionally elected council members and a elected county executive. The offices of clerk, coroner and sheriff were eliminated as elected offices and became appointed offices. The positions of assessor and treasurer were combined into one, called assessor/treasurer. Through further reorganization and the department of budget and finance being created, that took almost all of the treasurer functions and even some of the financial responsibilities from the auditor and placed them in budget and finance. What did I think about the role of county clerk? Probably it is hard to justify why you would ever elect a county clerk. But then you have the philosophical argument that people are probably better served and there is greater accountability from any elected department or elected department head. You can make that argument.

ALISON: The  
How it effected me personally, not at all. In fact I was interning at the county executive's office for four months and I was the one who wrote the letter to me and to Lyle Smith, who was the sheriff at that time, appointing us to those jobs [County Clerk and Sheriff] when our terms ran out at the end of 1982. I was one of the ones at the county, and probably the only one inside county government, who thought home rule

government would be good for Pierce County.

I ran for free-holder in 1976. Two things on the ballot. One [was] the issue of shall we elect free holders to draft and propose the County Charter to the voters of Pierce County, yes or no. And, regardless of how you vote yes or no, here for your district -- they went by commissioner districts -- are your candidates for free holder. So I ran for free holder and would have won, however, the county voted no on the issue of should we draft and propose the home rule charter.

Then the difference between that and the effort that led to [home rule charter] in 1980 was the county commissioners decided that we will draft and propose the home rule charter to the voters of Pierce County. They made that decision, passed that ordinance. The next step was to elect free holders to draft that charter. I didn't run for free holder at that time. I was already the county clerk. That is a very healthy process. I'm not sure the county gets any better served, however, with an elected executive in council. But again, it is largely up to the individuals who hold those offices as to how well people will get served anyway.

ALISON: The only advantage I see, is that there is less opening for abuse. If the commissioner is elected and is legislative as well as administrative, you could do a lot more damage were you so inclined than if you are just legislative and not administrative.

BRIAN: You truly did not have any separation powers. The way they are structured now, you have the legislative branch being the county council, you have the elected

executive heading the administrative branch and then you still have other elected offices; auditor, assessor/ treasurer and prosecuting attorney are the other elected administrative offices in county government.

ALISON: Were you surprised at the charges against county officials? Did you have an inkling [about] what was going to come down, when they charged the auditor and the sheriff?

BRIAN: No, no idea at all.

ALISON: You would have been set for life as appointed clerk. What made you decide to run for auditor?

BRIAN: There were a few things. One I think the employees in the auditors office deserved something better than they had. I tried not to be real critical of who was in office before. The word challenged gets used a lot but it was a huge challenge to be able to go do something different. I think that I had done a good job as county clerk and there was not a whole lot more I could do there [in the auditor's office].

ALISON: Did your brother use the same challenge on you?

BRIAN: Probably. He probably knew that that was something I wanted to do. I had made sort of a deal, too, with Ruth Fisher -- A lot of people had been after me to run for county auditor, including Bill Baarsma and others. I was not going to run for county auditor and run against Dick Greco. There was no reason to do that. Everyone thought for sure that he was going to run one more time, and he had told me that spring that, yes

indeed, he was going to run. So I didn't have to make any kind of decision neither did Ruth. On the day he announced that he was not going to run for re-election, Ruth called me within a half hour and said, "Well, are you running, because if you're not I am." I needed to think about it a little bit. I really thought that it would be another four (4) years before I was going to have to make that decision.

I ran for that knowing that there were term limits on it. That made me question my sanity, the whole reason for why I would or wouldn't run. Why would I put myself in that position where the longest I could be in that job was eight years. Then what am I going to do. Again, I think I needed to do that for a lot of reasons. You could say that I was elected County Clerk and the fact that I was 26 years old and ran county-wide, that I lucked in to that. Whether or not I believe all that or not, I heard it enough times that I wanted to prove to people that it wasn't true, that I could discuss the issues surrounding the county auditor's office. What I thought were important, the things that I thought we could do with that office, that office had a lot more potential to do things for the public than the county clerk's office. I think there were real important public policy issues for that office and I think we accomplished a lot in the six years that we were there.

RICHARD: That was what you talked about before you decided to run, the office doing things for people. Your commentary was the point that you were able to do things for people as elected county clerk, but once the county form of government changed your influence starting changing. You were almost accepted as another

bureaucrat. You wanted that level of influence back where you could cause things to change or to happen on behalf of people. You said that.

BRIAN: I'm sure I did, I know that is what I feel and we had done about what we could do in the clerk's office and there was not a lot more we could do. We developed the mandatory arbitration system, we were the second county in the state to do so. The domestic violence program was initiated under the time I was there. Both of those things allowed people greater access to the court system, and it is hard to do that. It is hard to be an administrative bureaucrat and allow people greater access to things much less the court system, but I think we did and we at least got those programs off the ground without a lot of additional cost to the county.

RICHARD: As clerk and then as auditor you were the only elected county official in the State of Washington to appoint and listen to the citizen advisory committee.

BRIAN: The things we did in the auditor's office really touched people. [Of greatest impact] were the election issues. The most impact I ever will have on any office I could ever hold was just the fact that we were the ones able to finally bring in a new voting system for this county. The previous county auditor and two county executives tried, and I think took very inappropriate paths to try to change. They didn't involve the public in the effort. They were very short sighted and I think we did it right and we got it accomplished and just a landmark change for this county for many, many years to come will provide much better service. What we did with voter registration is we are the only county to make precinct committee officers for

each political party roving voting registers. That put two registrars in each neighborhood, one from each party. It was up to the parties to take real advantage of that opportunity.

Where people used to have to stand in line forever to renew tabs would virtually eliminate the lines, that was a big deal. We had lines that sometimes people would stand in for up to 50 minutes or more at the end of the month. There really is no such thing. We also increased the number of licensing sub-agents in the county which put licensing centers in neighborhoods, that helped a lot. When we got there, in the auditors office, because of the vacancy with Greco being arrested and all, I took office December 1st of 1986 and they were still using manual typewriters that had been discarded by Boeing when they first went to electrics. Using adding machines that dropped numbers so the first thing that we did was replace those kinds of poor equipment. The equipment problems in the office were terrible, they did not have the tools to even do their job well.

ALISON: Why did you decide to run for State Auditor?

BRIAN: Back to that, my term was running out half way through my second term. I was unopposed in 1990 which was kind of nice and at the end of 1994 my term would be up as County Auditor, so sometime before that I was going to have to find something else to do, inside or outside the government. We were considering two offices to run for in 1992 and you know a lot of this story yourself. You can even embellish, but the two considered were Pierce County Executive and State Auditor. Why State Auditor? Who knows why we even brought that into the discussion, but I had been asked by the state

democratic party to consider running in 1988 for Secretary of State. That was kind of flattering; but I think they were just looking for a creditable candidate to put up against Ralph Munro with little chance to win. Number one, I didn't want to be in that position, number two, I kind of like Ralph and think he does a pretty good job in office, so that would make it real difficult for me to run against him. Why State Auditor almost came to a point "why not State Auditor". It was again one of those things of me challenging myself and I keep saying that, I would have had to be convinced why not to run for State Auditor, why I couldn't win, why I couldn't do the job. I never became convinced of either one of those. So I ran. I thought I could do the job if I got there. I have confidence in my ability to manage. It's far from perfect, but I think I have some good ideas in that regard. Part of the reason to run was to show the people who would keep saying, "You can't win that," or "If you do, you sure have to do it differently than you ever did before." That kind of became [part of] the whole thing too. You wanted to be able to prove once again, kind of like running for county auditor, you wanted to prove that [being elected] county clerk was not a fluke. Well, I wanted to be able to prove to people, too, that [after] winning elections in Pierce County, we could take that same [type of campaigning] and do it statewide. I may have to answer that again sometime, because, after all, 1992 was a Democratic sweep. We were lucky enough to get through the primary and after that a Democrat was going to win.

ALISON: But you got through the primary.

BRIAN: We are the Rodney Dangerfields of this political

business.

ALISON: What, you don't get no respect?

RICHARD: 90% of it is the way Brian talks. Brian keeps talking about "hire me" rather than "elect me." Serve the people rather than the people serve the elected official. It drives other politicians nuts and makes them want to say things about Brian that make it look like he just a flash in the pan.

BRIAN: We are also obviously not creditable enough, no matter how long we have been in this business, which going back to Dad is to 1948. We are not creditable because we don't spend as much money as the others. There is that strict formula out there that you have to spend so much money, you have to hire certain people, you have to campaign in certain ways and, if you are not in that mold, then you are not creditable or legitimate candidates. We were not looked at as the most creditable or legitimate Democratic candidates in 1992 state wide. We kept hearing that, but personalities kind of came through. And any time people would get a chance to talk with Richard and me or others associated with the campaign, I think then they started to realize that we were for real.

Even people like Patty Murray, I am sure that she had more associations during the long primary campaign period with Robin Hunt than she did with me, but yet we established a good relationship and got along real well to the point where even during that primary Patty took some of our little campaign cards to things that she went to in Eastern Washington and would just hand some out at her coffee hours that she was attending. That



was awful nice.

ALISON: You came through the primary against two women in the year of the women, that must lend some creditability.

BRIAN: For a month afterwards I wore a button that said "survivor".

ALISON: Did you feel that the family of the Sonntag's, your mother and your brothers were supportive in you state wide campaign?

BRIAN: Oh sure. Richard is the campaign. I am sure Mom wore out another set of rosary beads. I am sure Jack just - -I'm sure some strength of his will played a role in that [campaign]. Somewhere in there with him, this is us and this is brothers so, therefore, they better win.

RICHARD: Jack has ... always been on our side.

ALISON: Tell me a little bit about the state wide campaign and how it differed from the county campaign.

BRIAN: Geography was at times the biggest difference. I put thirty thousand miles on the car that year. I flew to Eastern Washington several times and tried to make those campaign trips have more than one thing attached to them. I tried to really maximize the time. I was not going to spend a fortune in the media. I wasn't going to do a lot of mailings, so we had to follow the philosophy and spend most of our time outside and truthfully that is where voters are. So a lot of it was spent driving between here and Seattle and here and Everett and here and Seattle again, sometimes all in the same day, twice to Seattle and once to Everett and

then back here each time because I kept working in Pierce County during the campaign. I could have just gone off and campaigned twenty-four hours a day and still been paid by the county, but that was difficult year for our office. We were implementing that new voting system. Early in the year we had to negotiate the contract and buy the darn thing and then start putting in place all the new procedures. We had the State's first ever Presidential Preference Primary in the spring to administer that election. We had a complete county wide re-districting where we re-drew the boundary lines for every precinct in the county. We didn't just redraw the lines we started with a blank sheet of paper for the county and drew new boundaries. It was a huge year to work in the office, in the Pierce County Auditor's office, and then be running state wide. One of the other difficult things, naturally, was the fact that outside the boundaries of Pierce County that name familiarity dropped off fast.

Back to the first part of your question, that was one of those challenges to run. It was kind of fun at times and more fun looking back then at the time. The challenge to run places where you are not known to see if people will buy your message or listen to you as well as if they know you as a good guy who has been in office for a long time. Sometimes it was very disheartening that no one knew me and would rather believe the women candidate because she was a women for instance, but at the same that was a rewarding challenge.

ALISON: I remember a poll that was taken early in the campaign that showed that you were only slightly better know than -- I can't remember exactly what it was, but it

was pretty funny.

BRIAN: The name familiarity poll? It --

ALISON: Nobody had heard of Sonntag --

BRIAN: That was it, they tried to get a state wide flavor for that but it's so hard because you got one big chunk of the state where we are known real well. In his home county [Sam Reed, Brian's opponent in the general election] was known real well. Thank goodness this [Pierce] is a lot bigger county than his [Thurston]. That is essentially what it boiled down to, too, that and the fact that we out campaigned him like crazy. He spent \$180 some thousand dollars to our \$57,000.00, yet we just out campaigned him.

ALISON: Yet he thought he would win, didn't he?

BRIAN: Oh, yeah.

RICHARD: He had staff hired and everything.

BRIAN: He had \$100,000.00 budgeted for transition teams and on election night he had a big party planned, a big hotel in Seattle, food and beverages were delivered and they did not get to enjoy it.

ALISON: Tell me about some of the things that you have done as State Auditor.

BRIAN: Well, we went in with the goal to, again, do things a little bit differently. The text book stuff, Washington had been the only state in the country with a law that said that the Auditor can't monitor

performance or audit for effectiveness, do any kind of operational review on how well government is doing its job. We can audit financial statements and audit for legal compliance issues, but we could not look at performance issues. So we went out and got legislation passed our first couple of months in office. The change that brought returned some performance audit authority to the auditor's office. We did not do that alone. I had good legislative support on the bill, it came out as executive request legislation from our office. All those good things aside, that bill does not pass if it is not for the general public and their support and their phone calls and letters and visits to Olympia telling people that "this stuff called performance auditing sounds good," and "we think it is important and could bring some new accountability to state government. So Mr. and Ms. legislator, vote for it." That heightened public interest is what actually got the bill passed last year.

ALISON: Can you tell me briefly -- performance audit.

BRIAN: What performance measurements would do is -- A performance review of the state government would evaluate the effectiveness of state systems and programs rather than just auditing for efficiency. A regular audit that we do, a post audit, checks to see if an [agency's] financial statements balance, if they are in good financial condition. We audit for legal compliance and point out areas where they were not in compliance with the Constitution or State Law. Performance review would look at identifying weaknesses in systems, duplications, unneeded red tape, ways to do things more simply and more effectively, to knock down barriers that prevent good service delivery by state

government. After reviewing and identifying weaknesses, we will work with state employees to help identify ways to do it better. It is those front line employees, again, who are going to implement any changes. We are not really reinventing the wheel. We have looked at other states who have had great successes.

I was named to a National Performance Audit Task Force, by the National State Auditor's Association. I got to speak last fall at a performance measurement conference down in Texas attended by nearly 1000 people, 41 states and 4 foreign countries. That was kind of a neat deal. It was 1000 people in one place talking about how to measure government differently, how to do things differently. I guess the main difference would be to focus on results and outcomes of programs, rather than on input and input measurements, such as how many people walk through our door and how many people we waited on, how many license plates issued. Not just gathering data and numbers, but evaluating the results, are we meeting the needs of the public, are you doing the things, are you meeting your goals and expectations and not just your own expectations, but what the public expects you to do.

When I talk about state employees driving this, so does the public have to be part of helping develop a vision for state government. All kinds of departments and agencies and operations have visions and mission statements. Well the state doesn't, the state doesn't have any picture of where it wants to be or what it thinks it should be doing. Those states that do, and there are some, Minnesota is probably the most shining example I could think of. Those states that do have a real vision for what the state is going to do, meeting

the needs of the public, they are the ones that are just taking leaps toward improving their service to the public and they are in a better financial situation. They are in a better performance and results situation, delivering service to the public.

ALISON: So not just are you spending all of your dollars appropriately, but are you spending your dollars on things that work?

BRIAN: Decisions wise, really evaluating judgment calls on the part of government and you have to build that process backwards, you build it with what it is you want to achieve, what are the results you want to achieve. You have in place the measurable goals and objectives that will get you there. Where I see the auditor's role now is as a post auditor, to come in and evaluate how you did. The best way to fulfill this responsibility [of performance auditing] would be to be a facilitator, to work with the public and that state agency, bringing them closer together to help that product as good as it can be.

ALISON: Sounds like a monumental cause.

BRIAN: Yeah, in some ways it seems like it can never happen in this state. Yet, if we get the right people turned on about it or interested or thinking for whatever reasons that it is the way to go, then it will work. And it has worked in other states. It is not even my [original] idea.

ALISON: Assuming that this putting in place performance audits is going to be quite a challenge and keep you occupied for a while, when that is done and you have that in

place and it is comfortable -- All through this interview you have been talking about a challenge. What's next?

BRIAN: Well, that one is so big, I can't see when the completion date is, and I am only a year into this. I don't know if you could [write] a script that says, "within the next year or two years we will have a landmark performance review and performance measurement in place in this state that takes us to the performance leadership in the country." That sounds kind of silly, but we are not --we could be there in a year if we did this. Say our communication went to a level that we are interacting with the public. We are playing a role that says facilitator, not just a post auditor. We have taken our professional staff and made them even more professional by bringing in other types of people to be part of teams of examiners, not just CPA's although they are great, but there are other talents out there too. I am saying [that even if we accomplished] all that, I still don't know what I would want to do next. This one is fun. If I can do those kinds of things it will keep me challenged for a long time.

ALISON: Is there anything else that you think I should know?

BRIAN: How I am supposed to work with the public, why I am communicating with them. It is not because I want more people just to know about the work I am doing. I have a responsibility to report to those people because they do employ all of us. The family tradition has been to use that work "hire" and that is the nice thing to use in campaigns, but you also have to live it. It would be a nice gimmick to use on a campaign fliers, if

we pulled it out every four years and made sure that that word got used on [the campaign literature]. It's got to be something that you live. You have to be able to put it in place and in action all the time. It's a philosophy.

ALISON: Anything else?

BRIAN: I don't think so.