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Interview with Lester Crown

Date: 31 August 2009

Location: Office of Lester Crown, 222. North La Salle St., Chicago, IL.

Present: Lester Crown and Dr. Tim Lacy Ph.D.

Dr. Tim Lacy (TL): For the recording's sake, it's August 31, 2009, 2:10 p.m. on Monday. And I'm sitting with Lester Crown. You were friends with Mayor Richard J. Daley?

Lester Crown (LC): I'm not saying friends. It was a different generation. I was friends with him through my dad.

TL: Okay. So how did that come about? I mean, were you young, seeking work, contracts, or business?

LC: No. Our business was Material Service Corporation, which was a supplier of sand, gravel, ready mix concrete, and other hard materials to contractors. So contractors worked for the city, and not just for the city, but for projects, and more predominately, projects within the city. Therefore, we were part of the business community.

TL: So your dad made the first acquaintance with him say, in the forties or the fifties?

LC: I would say it was long ago. I wouldn't know when it first started. They both had been Chicagoans. My dad had been in business here since 1919. And that was long before Mayor Daley.

TL: So it was not a South Side neighborhood contact or anything like that?

LC: No. I would say when the mayor became involved in Chicago politics, my dad would have come to know him.

TL: Okay. Well then, that may be as early as the thirties, when he was a state senator and when he was a county treasurer, I think, for a little while.

LC: It could have been. But my guess is when he became the mayor. I doubt if it was before that. That's because I don't think there would have been any reason to before that.

TL: Okay. So with your family, you did not grow up in Bridgeport. You did not grow up on the South Side?

LC: Yes. That is correct.

TL: Were you west, north...?

LC: We were north. We were in Evanston, starting in 1925.

TL: Okay. So it was a long time. And your father's line of business was always, I don't want to say a general contractor, but construction supplies.

LC: He was not a general contractor. He was a supplier to general contractors, a supplier of hard building materials to general contractors.

TL: So there was cement, sand, quarry materials, and maybe marble.

LC: No. There was sand, gravel, cement, and ready mix concrete. Those were the primary ones. There was a time when we had roofing materials. And we were distributors for brick and architects tile. But the primary ones were the hard materials, but not marble.

TL: Okay. So you became associated through your father. About what year did you meet Richard J. Daley?

LC: I probably met him when I was in high school or in college. But that was just a question of meeting him. The only time I think I really got to see him was after I came back here and went with the company on a full time basis, which was around 1950.

TL: And you went to college.

LC: I went to Northwestern.

TL: Well, 1950, that was right on the ground floor then, of the Chicago building boom.

LC: Yes. That absolutely was.

TL: There's no other way to say it. Do you remember what sort of big projects the company was involved in, say on lower Wacker Drive? Or were there other kinds of...?

LC: We supplied the general contractors. So we supplied whatever jobs they attained. And at that time, because I think of our location, at several locations near the loop, we probably supplied many of the large projects that went on in Chicago.

TL: Yes. I guess this is a learning curve for me, understanding how your business interacted with those who actually got the contracts to do the building and that sort of stuff.

LC: Right. We were not the contractors and we were not the ones that got the contracts. We merely supplied those that did.

TL: Right. This is just helping me understand it. I don't know perfectly how city business works. I just know some of it by association (TL laughs) how contracting works. My father happened to be in construction. So I just know a little. Residential was his area, running a caterpillar loader. So he was a very sort of union guy at low level. Well then, you did meet the mayor early on. What were some of your early impressions?

LC: My early impressions were the same as the later impressions, as a matter of fact. He was a man that was completely dedicated to Chicago. I never saw in him any interest in any other job. It's presumptuous for me to say it. But he felt that this was the best job there was. He didn't want any other position, other than being the mayor of Chicago and what he could do for the city. And he was dedicated to that. I think he was his entire life.

TL: That's what you saw for sure from, I guess, the business side. But you saw the same thing personally when you...?

LC: I think so, definitely. I mean, that was his persona. And from everything I saw in talking to him, that's what he was interested in. He was interested in the improvement and the betterment of Chicago, both from a standpoint of buildings, roads, everything else, and schools and education. It was all of that.

TL: Right. I'm sure you've read the stories. I think it's unquestioned that he was seen as the builder of Chicago, the best in the city's history, as far as that's concerned. Somehow though, there was a reputation out there. You see it in Mike Royko's *Boss*, and you see it in some other biographies. He was less people oriented. It was not that he didn't care, but maybe he was less empathetic and understanding than some of the more social and personable sides. What's your take on that?

LC: Well, just the times that I saw him or associated with him, he was very interested in people. He had a great touch, as far as people were concerned. I think it was during a tougher time than what we see today. So perhaps he didn't have the velvet touch that people are looking for.

TL: Maybe during the sixties, for instance.

LC: Yes. I think it was a rougher period. I think he was tougher. And that was the look that most people saw of him.

TL: He was maybe tougher than the job required, even at that point (TL laughs).

LC: I don't know about tougher. This was his personality. When he wanted to get something done, he wanted to see that it got done.

TL: When you met with him, or whenever you saw him, was it always mediated by your father? Or were there times when you were able to sit personally with him?

LC: No. I think I saw him personally a number of times. I can't even tell you what the reasons would be. In any event, it would always be in reference to something in Chicago. I did not know him, really, from a personal standpoint. I knew him as someone that worked in Chicago and was part of it. And I would see him as the mayor.

TL: Right. It was as a business associate and a civic leader.

LC: Well, I don't think I was at that point at that time. But I would see him as the mayor of Chicago. And whatever I saw him about was either something he called me and asked me to do and be a part of. Or I would go to see him on something. Now, it didn't happen that often.

TL: Right. Maybe it was once a year, or something like that?

LC: Oh, I think it was maybe a few times a year.

TL: So, your father was your first sort of mediator with him. I should probably know this. But your father, was he around the whole time that the mayor was alive?

LC: Yes. My dad did not pass away until 1990. So he was.

TL: Okay. You said that you met with the mayor sometimes on business. Sometimes it was you and the mayor. So at some point, your father turned over some of that relationship to you to handle that.

LC: Yes he did, to my older brother and to me. We were all part of the company.

TL: So it was starting in the mid-sixties, or the fifties already?

LC: I would think so. From the time I came back to Chicago, I'm sure I saw him alone. I'm sure that some of those times, I was carrying a message from my dad to the mayor. Or the mayor wanted to tell my dad something. He called me over and asked me. You know, I was a messenger at the time.

TL: Right. I only asked this to establish for whoever else will view this or listen to the tape. Just sort of your credibility—that's not the right word I'm looking for. But it's just the level of interaction. That way they can say, "Okay, this person with this level of interaction felt or understood the mayor to act or to be in these ways." Then they can compare those notes across the board.

LC: As I said, this was not a personal relationship. So if I saw him, it had to do with something that either he was interested in or it was something that I had to talk to him about.

TL: Yes. It very was practical. Do you remember anything in relation to, well, I should back up a minute. There was the controversy around UIC's founding. Florence Scala and some of the neighborhood folks were protesting the site decision to put UIC in its current neighborhood. I just wonder what your impressions were from that time, if you were paying attention (LC laughs), if that was something that was on your radar screen. I know that everyone can't have time for all of the news. But I know that this was a big deal in Chicago.

LC: I remember that there was a controversy about it and that he was interested in doing it. You've now exhausted my knowledge (TL laughs). I'm sure I read a lot about it in the papers at the time. Just in the back of my memory, I know that that controversy existed. I really don't know any of the other details.

TL: Okay. Completely legitimate, we've had others we've talked to that have known the mayor that have been suggested by Michael Daley. And they weren't always knowledgeable or in the know about the particulars of UIC's founding. You've already covered the nature of the relationship between your father and Mayor Daley. What was your sense of Mayor Daley, in relation to politics, Democratic politics, city politics, and nationally? Did that ever interfere with business or help? I mean, that's probably not the right way to put it. Did it interfere with business? I don't know if that's the right question that I want to ask. So if I'm treading on bad territory....

LC: I think it was pretty separate. The mayor was interested in running the administrative side of his office, with reference to Chicago, on what the office was to do. Again, I'm saying what the newspapers told me, that he was influential and he was looked on as a very influential person in Democratic politics. He was looked on as having a very substantial amount of both interest and involvement in the Democratic process nationally. But that was only what I would get from the media. It wouldn't be anything that I would know anything about or had seen. So I only saw him as the mayor of Chicago, not on what he did on a national scale.

TL: Sure. With your father, was he more interested in the political side of things? Or was there any connection there that you know about, or could speak to?

LC: Dad was a very dear friend of Adlai Stevenson II. He was a dear friend, just through his life, met a lot of people that were in politics and everything else. He wasn't really related to the political side in any way at all, although he had a lot of good friends who were. And he supported them.

TL: Mayor Richard J. Daley had a great relationship with the business community. And so it's one of the things that we're trying to tease out. I mean, there's always the negative side of whatever anyone would want to dredge up, as far as seedy connections or whatever. What we're concerned about is the positive relationship and how that helped the city?

LC: I think that's the most appropriate way to put it. He was the elder of Chicago. It was during a very aggressive time of both affluence and all different types of operations. So he had the opportunity to build the city at that time. That was what he wanted to do. That's what he was dedicated to doing. And he needed to have a relationship with the business community. It was extremely important to him. And he did. He had a superb relationship with the labor organizations at the same time. The only thing I see different with that between him and his son is that he kept those two relationships separate.

TL: You mean Richard J. Daley?

LC: Right. He seemed to me to keep them apart. He negotiated with the labor unions. He negotiated and discussed things with the business community. He didn't pull the two together. And I think that's what he seemed to do purposely because I think he felt that he could accomplish more.

TL: So he saw it as being beneficial. Do you think that was a beneficial arrangement?

LC: If he thought it was beneficial to accomplish what he wanted to accomplish, I've accepted that was the right way to do it. I don't know who'd be in a better position to decide. But he seemed to keep them apart and to really be involved with both of them constructively.

TL: One topic that really comes up a lot, in relation to Richard J. Daley the builder, is that much of the historical literature about him acknowledges his protection and fostering of the loop area as being something that was important to keeping Chicago from becoming, say, Detroit. That's probably the worst case scenario. It's the most horrible example that you can bring up.

LC: Well, that's Detroit today, not necessarily during his time.

TL: That's true. But it's been acknowledged that that was a farsighted decision, to keep a strong central city, well maintained, and a good core.

LC: I think he felt the City needed it. There's no question. He was dedicated to having the loop as the central core, the business core, for Chicago. And he did a tremendous amount to make sure that there were improvements in the loop. He worked on that very diligently, and I think very constructively.

TL: Okay. You mean literally and figuratively.

LC: That's literally and figuratively, absolutely.

TL: It sounds like, in some ways, it was a nice coincidence that Daley the builder came at a time when you had the federal highway expansion and the public housing expansion in the sixties. Now there are arguments about whether that was well done or not. And history has sort of shown that the high rises weren't maybe the best approach to public housing. But it sounds like your story agrees with that story. It was a time and place that came together, a person and a time and place. And they proceeded swimmingly (TL laughs).

LC: I think they complemented each other very well. He was the right person for the job at the right time. There was a tremendous demand for housing, a demand for consumer products, and a demand for expansion, with office space and everything else. And that's exactly as I saw Mayor Daley. That's what he wanted to accomplish. He wanted to build Chicago. He wanted to make it better. He wanted to improve it, both through construction and through education. I think the only thing that trumped his interest in doing that was his devotion to his family. He was about as family oriented a person as I think that I have ever known.

TL: Yes. If you have any small anecdotes or anything that you can do to round that out, that's something that we've been trying to understand even better, that devotion?

LC: Well, it was just what you saw. With anecdotes, I think the best anecdotes were in the media where you got the number of times you saw pictures of him taking his family to the White Sox and being out with them. He was completely devoted to his family. And I think he was devoted

to the creation of family units within this whole area. And that's something that he wanted to see done. As I recall, he used to talk about that. If you'd see him on television or what he would say in the paper, he would talk about the creation of and the maintenance of the family units. And he was without question, from what I saw, completely devoted to his whole family.

TL: In some ways, the person behind the office of mayor could very much fit into what we sort of look up at today as a Republican family values stereotype, in that devotion, in that sense, to want to foster. It's interesting how today's categories of politics, positions, and parties don't match up always with the historical instances of how people talked about their job, their family, or what they were doing in the city. I'm just reflecting on what you were saying there.

LC: You just proved an absolute truth. You can't categorize by names. You can't categorize by Republicans or Democrats. The things that Mayor Daley was really interested in, I would really say, are known today as Republican values.

TL: Right. Well, it was a different time and different era.

LC: It was a different time. Sure.

TL: Do you have any other random thoughts about education in particular? It doesn't have to be strictly related to UIC, but just anything you can recall about his (Daley's) interests.

LC: Well, I think he felt, as anyone who was really interested in Chicago and its growth are concerned, that better education for more people was a critical part of that growth and advancement. So his interest in improving education for more people was very much in line with improving the number of paved streets, the number of buildings, and everything else. It was another building block, obviously an essential building block, in making this a better city.

TL: Right. And it would become more important, in terms of making public schools. I mean, even during his time of being the mayor, you began to see the decline, during that period, of some of the Catholic schools. In the mid-seventies, the Catholic schools were already in trouble. He had to have seen that in the paper.

LC: I think he did. I can't say that I saw the decline that you're talking about. But it obviously occurred. And if he was really interested in education, he had to be interested, as the mayor, in public education, not just Catholic school education. And if that was really one of his goals, then his effort had to be in the field of public education. Exactly what he did for the benefit of it, I don't know. But I know that with his interest in advancing Chicago, this had to be a major part of it.

TL: Maybe the last thing then is that I can leave this open to you. If there's anything that I've not covered, or something you were wanting to tell me that I haven't said here in the questions, if there was anything you wanted to add about his legacy, or your relationship with him....

LC: I think Chicago was very, very fortunate to have Richard J. Daley as mayor. The media, the writers, and everyone else liked to point out flaws. They liked to point out things that were

wrong or that were bad. They may or may not be true. But in balance, I think Chicago benefited dramatically by having him as the mayor during that time here. That's because his devotion was to the city of Chicago. There are many people that use this kind of a job as a stepping stone to something else.

TL: Right. National politics or something, for example.

LC: In fact, I've only seen three people who didn't want anything more than that. And he was one of them.

TL: And his son apparently (TL laughs).

LC: Well, his son, and Teddy Kollek in Jerusalem are the three people that come to my mind as wanting only that job, and handling it very well and to the real benefit of the city in total.

TL: Have you read any of the biographies or the books out there on Mayor Richard J. Daley?

LC: I've read parts of them. I haven't read them all through. I've looked at certain things that I've been interested in at times. And I've read one or two chapters of something. Some of the things I really got angry at, because I think it's unfair. Even if it might be true, I think it's unfair at that point. That's because, again, it wasn't balanced in the era in which he lived, in terms of what was acceptable behavior and what was not acceptable behavior at that time. Chicago benefited greatly for his being the mayor. And that's what I look at more than anything else.

TL: I think this might be my final question. Are there any last anecdotes in relation to your father and Mayor Daley? Is there anything you remember that was interesting, colorful, or fun?

LC: This is one that I'll recall at three in the morning (TL laughs). The answer is that I'm sure there are a bunch of interesting stories. And I haven't thought about them, whether I can recall them or not.

TL: It's okay.

LC: If I do, I'll call and tell you.

TL: We can always make a little written addendum to the end of the oral history.

LC: All right.

TL: Okay. We can call this done. I'll turn this off now.

*****END OF INTERVIEW*****