

Oral History Program: Biographical Notes

Morrish Alexander (Tim) BESLEY

Civil Engineer

- Birth & Family:** Born 14 March 1927 in New Plymouth, New Zealand. Married to Nancy
- Education:** Attended New Plymouth Boys' High School
- Qualifications:** BE (Civil), University of New Zealand, Christchurch. B.Leg.S., Macquarie University
- Memberships:** FIEAust.
- Awards:**
- Work History:** Besley's interest in engineering began in High School when, at his mother's suggestion, he was placed in an EP (Engineering Professional) class; he later won a small bursary which helped with the payment of university fees and books.

After graduating from university in 1950, Besley obtained a position with the State Hydro-electric Design Office. He became interested in the Snowy Scheme and later that same year accepted a position with them as Engineer Grade 1 in Sydney in the Civil Engineering Design Division where he worked on exhibition plans for Guthega as well as designs and specifications for the T1 and T2 power stations.

In 1952 Besley was one of a group of trainees sent to the United States for in-service training with the US Bureau of Reclamation where he worked on designs for the Upper Tumut works as well as construction field work at Folsom in California.

Besley returned to Australia in 1953 and after a brief stay in Sydney, was sent to Cooma where he worked in the Powerhouse Design area; he was later transferred to the major contracts group in Cabramurra where he was involved in administration and management of contracts for the Eucumbene Tumut Tunnel, Tumut Pond Dam and Tumut 1 Power Station.

In 1955 Besley returned to the Civil Engineering Design Division where he was involved in the preparation of specifications for Tooma Dam, Tooma Tumut Tunnel and Tumut 2 underground Power Station. The following year Besley became Office Engineer to Associate Commissioner Tom Lang and in 1959 transferred to the Development Division and became Engineer for project investigations. This Division was involved with the integration of Snowy electricity into the generating systems of New South Wales and Victoria, and because the work involved not only the Federal Government but also the States, it gave Besley the opportunity to observe the practical application of politics.

In the early 1960's Besley undertook a number of overseas assignments: in 1961 he visited South Africa, United Kingdom and Europe recruiting engineering staff eager to work on the Snowy Scheme. Whilst in Europe, he took the opportunity to study various hydro-electric projects and developments in engineering techniques in

France, particularly an ultrasonic way of non-destructive testing of welds – this technology was later used very successfully on large pressure pipelines on the Snowy. In 1963 he was involved in negotiations with the World Bank in connection with Australia's loan of \$100 million.

Besley was appointed Head of the Tunnels and Aqueducts Branch of the Civil Engineering Design Division in mid 1964, during which time he produced a paper on the designed use of rockbolting for tunnel supports. Later that year Besley joined the personal staff of the Commissioner, Sir William Hudson, and became Assistant to the Commissioner, remaining in this position (at Sir William's request) until 1967, which almost covered Sir William's second extension, and shortly before his retirement.

Knowing that the Scheme itself was finite and future direction uncertain, Besley left the Scheme in 1967 "to be a bureaucrat for a while" - during his time in the Snowy he had developed a close association with, and great respect for, various senior people in the bureaucracy. He applied for a position advertised in the Government Gazette, at that time not open to "outsiders" and very restrictive, particularly in the management division. This eventually led to his appointment to the Department of Territories (later known as External Territories), which dealt with the administration of territories such as Papua New Guinea, Cocos, Norfolk and Christmas Islands.

Besley remained with the Public Service for 14 years, serving under 14 different Ministers. During this period he set up the foreign investment division for the Department of Treasury, eventually becoming First Executive Member of the Foreign Investment Review Board, and in 1976 he became the head of the Commonwealth Department of Business and Consumer Affairs.

In 1981 Besley returned to an engineering environment when he was "headhunted" and appointed Chief Executive of Monier - at the same time continuing to study for a law degree.

In 1988 was asked by the Federal Treasurer, Paul Keating [Federal Treasurer 1983-1991], to become Chairman of the Commonwealth Bank. At the same time Besley also served as Executive Chairman of CIG Group (until 1993) and Chairman of Leighton Holdings Ltd (current).

Prepared by Jill Willis, December 2003 from oral history interview conducted on 26.7.2001.