

*Oral History: John Lowell Burton
Part Two*

Interviewed by Jerry Roberts

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In 1987, Assemblyman Art Agnos was elected mayor of San Francisco, which created a vacancy in the Assembly. Speaker Willie Brown leaned on his old friend John Burton to run so he could help him fend off a challenge to his leadership for the so-called Gang of Five, a group of dissident Democrats.

JERRY ROBERTS: Agnos was elected mayor in '87, so yeah, there was a special for his Assembly seat.

JOHN BURTON: That long.

ROBERTS: There is an opening and supposedly Willie comes to you, asked you to...

BURTON: Not supposedly, Willie came to me.

ROBERTS: Okay, Willie comes, I don't trust the media. Burton's first response was "No fucking way, no fucking way, no fucking way." Is that true?

BURTON: I don't know if that's what I said, but yeah.

ROBERTS: So you didn't... You didn't want to...

BURTON: Are you quoting Willie?

ROBERTS: No, I'm quoting the San Jose Mercury News.

BURTON: How the hell would they know that's what I said to Willie? But, yeah that was...

ROBERTS: You didn't want to do it?

BURTON: No. And then Art called and then I figured, well, be nice to be mayor. I said, "I'll stand, I'll trot, I'm not going to run."

ROBERTS: What did you mean by that?

BURTON: What do you think?

ROBERTS: I don't know.

BURTON: I wasn't going to be up ringing doorbells and doing that shit. But I ran, won easily, went to Sacramento.

ROBERTS: What was different when you went back, after, when you'd been gone 15 years?

BURTON: Not much, the membership was different.

ROBERTS: Were the politics different? Was it more polarized more partisan?

BURTON: Not at all. It was kind of like I left, only different faces or places. And it was...

ROBERTS: Willie was the speaker?

BURTON: He was the speaker. There was some -- term limits hadn't kicked in, so there was very few people that were there when I was there, but there were some... I knew the... wasn't that different.

ROBERTS: Yeah, term limits didn't come until the '90s.

BURTON: It wasn't that different.

ROBERTS: So you feel like the atmosphere was still bi-partisan, in the same way that it was...

BURTON: It wasn't different.

ROBERTS: It wasn't different. OK. All right. And then you became head of rules committee again. How would you compare Willie as speaker to Unruh or Moretti, some of these other guys?

BURTON: Well, Unruh wasn't as tough or wasn't... And he picked up a lot of his members after his '62 re-apportionment, or before that. He was not like a big daddy in doing this. He ran through... His shit was through persuasion or something, I don't remember him telling, "You've got to do this." Moretti let Willie run Ways and Means, he let me run Rules. He didn't interfere with much. Willie, I think, took more control, either as a result of his having lost that one election, or whatever. He did have a little trouble taking control of me. No, 'cause when I chaired Rules under Bobby, I did something Willie kind of had his own thing. But it was fine. It was a different deal. And when I came up there in fact, that's when things had gotten me up there. They had that so-called Gang of Five revolt.

ROBERTS: Against the Speaker.

BURTON: And that's when I think he might have said... I don't think he says, "I need you," but it was obvious to me that it would be helpful to him for me to come back, and so I did. And that had to be helpful 'cause he had, a half-ass good right arm.

In 1996, after eight years in the Assembly, John Burton was elected to the state Senate to fill the seat vacated by the term-limited Milton Marks, who three decades earlier defeated him in a

special election. Two years later, John Burton was elected President Pro Tem, the leader of the 40-member house. With his new powers, John was able to restore benefits for welfare recipients that had been cut during the state's deficit-plagued budgets.

ROBERTS: And then in '96 you were elected to the Senate. Whose seat was that before?

BURTON: It was Milton.

ROBERTS: Oh, Milton was termed out by then.

BURTON: Yeah.

ROBERTS: Oh, that's funny shit.

BURTON: Took me a while but, I got there.

ROBERTS: So he had...

BURTON: I didn't want to run.

ROBERTS: You didn't want to run for the Senate?

BURTON: No.

ROBERTS: Why?

BURTON: I didn't want it. It wasn't my cup of tea. I'm an Assembly guy.

ROBERTS: But you were termed out so you had to?

BURTON: Yeah, but I didn't want to run. But there was nobody I wanted to vote for. That's a true story. There was nobody that I wanted to vote for. It was me, it was Angela and I don't know who else.

ROBERTS: Angela Alioto

BURTON: Yeah, so finally I just said screw it, and I ran myself.

ROBERTS: OK, so you're elected in '96. When did you become pro-tem? 98? Was it right away?

BURTON: Well there's another thing. I was supporting Pat Johnson for pro tem. I wasn't running for pro tem. What am I going to be pro tem in the Senate? And several of the liberals kept telling me. "You've got to run." I said, "I'm not running. I'm for Pat."

ROBERTS: Pat's from the... He's from the valley, right?

BURTON: Stockton. Good guy, good guy, another Jesuit, and I'm for Pat. And you know Hayden and Barbara Lee and some -- it's not for him. You get it? And well, we couldn't vote for us. I'm telling you I'm voting for him. So the court ruled term limits constitutional. I'm in Palm Springs at a friend's house. I get a call from Tom Hayden. He said, "The courts ruled on term limits and you should run." And I said, "How many times do I tell you?"

So I called Pat Johnson. I says, "Patrick, the court rules on term limits, and if you're running, I'm with you. If you don't want to run, I'm going to take a shot, but I'm with you." He said, "Good, 'cause I don't want it." So I get on the phone. I would say in 15 minutes I make seven phone calls for seven votes. Maybe seven counting me or maybe seven without me. If I put my mind I remember. So a day or two later I get a call from Patrick, and he says, "You know, I talked to Margie," who's his wife and he said, "I decided I'm going to run," and I said, "Jesus, fuck man, I'm out there." He says, "No, I don't expect you to get out, but I didn't want you to read in the paper that I'm running without telling you." So I just kept going up, trying to get votes and worked it one-on-one. Got some help from some people, then ended up, getting the votes.

ROBERTS: And here there's that famous picture of him handing you a basketball.

BURTON: A basketball. Threw it to me and I spun it on my finger. Yeah, then I made him chair of Approps and I told him, I says, "Your job's to spend money, not to save it," cause Pat was very, very funny. He's very kind of great, good guy, but kind of rigid. I said, "Goddamn it, Pat." But he was a good, loyal, right-hand. And I don't know if you were there. I know George Skelton was there with a couple old-timers and I just say who the shit would've thought this thing happening? Made no sense to anybody, and I believe I did better than a credible job.

ROBERTS: Well, you were basically the most powerful legislator in Sacramento from then until you were termed out in 2004.

BURTON: Well, that's always the job. You know Willie, when he was speaker, he was more powerful than Roberti. You know, the image that I...

ROBERTS: But the speaker shouldn't have been diminished by that time because...

BURTON: Yeah, I would have been fortunate, because some of the speakers like their staff would be like, "Burton's out to screw you." Not out to screw anybody. I mean, I just don't give a shit. I think I had five speakers. I don't know. Bustamante, Antonio, Fabian, Hertzberg. Is that five?

ROBERTS: That's four. It's close enough.

BURTON: Whatever.

ROBERTS: So what did you accomplish when you were president pro tem of the Senate?

BURTON: Got all that money back that they took from the welfare people.

ROBERTS: How so?

BURTON: Just that was the price. Kenny Maddy was my buddy. Kenny Maddy Republican.

ROBERTS: Former Senator from...

BURTON: And Senator, and he was close to Pete, and Pete asked him, he said, "What am I to do with Burton?" 'cause when he was governor and I was in the Assembly I was all over him, and Kenny says, "He's going to want you to take care of his poor people and don't matter." So Pete says, "What do you want?" I says, "I want back all the money, all the COLAS we took and all that stuff." He says, "What else?" I says, "I don't care. What do you want?" and I got it back.

ROBERTS: So they put the COLAS back in?

BURTON: And picked up all that was taken away.

ROBERTS: Oh, the money that was lost for the...

BURTON: The money that they lost, yeah.

Pete Wilson was one of the seven California governors, starting with Pat Brown, who served while John Burton was in Sacramento or Washington. Ronald Reagan was also president while John was in Congress. Despite their political differences, Burton won significant political victories while Reagan was governor.

ROBERTS: And you having a lot of famous interaction with him on welfare issues, health and welfare issues and it was a big reform for him, the woman with the Cadillac and all that kind of stuff.

BURTON: Cadillac, color TV, and nine kids, and I told him, if you can find her, and Verne Orr was his director of finance, I said, "Give her that guy's job. If she can do all that on \$340 a month, you want her being your head of finance."

ROBERTS: The Welfare Reform Act of '71, you had a lot of face-to-face negotiation. What was he like, what's your take on him?

BURTON: Well he'd get mad at me because I'd get mad at Pete Schabarum, who was a former 49er, Republican. Pete wanted something on...

ROBERTS: Schabarum, he was from LA and...

BURTON: Yes. West Covina. And Pete Schabarum wanted, I don't know if it is was a snitch list, I think. That if you see your neighbor driving a car that... Or something. And I kept doing that. And I'd scream at him, "God damn it Pete!" And he says, "John, you can't talk to him that way." I says, all right, "Gosh darn it, Pete! You can't do that." The welfare bill, all Reagan

wanted was 100 million in savings. And Bill Bagley, a liberal Republican, was chair of welfare and he'd do this thing that's kind of a bogus. And there was a thing in welfare for old aged people called Relatives' Responsibility. That means if you had... You're 40 years old with a wife and kid and you're working. And your father's on old age assistance, you have to kick in. And this was a big saver. And we're doing it and Bagley just says, "Well, we'll do this." I says, "Bag's relatives' responsibility saves \$40 million, we're home free." So he did it...

ROBERTS: So you wrote that into the bill as a way to get...

BURTON: That was in the bill. And what else we put in was a cost of living increase for aged, blind and disabled in the law. And for AFDC families... Reagan didn't care if it took effect the next year 'cause he's out and Jerry's in. And Jerry walked into that. And we drafted... My brother was the guy involved 'cause he was a genius in welfare. He would call me and tell me what to do and I had a good staff guy. And on that one, I think we started out, we had a COLA on COLA, the federal... Anyway...

ROBERTS: I know you hate the word legacy, but it seems to be... That's kind of... That may be the most lasting thing, those automatic cost of living...

BURTON: Well, it was lasting until the Legislature gave it up. What we used to do when we were broke, is suspend it, in negotiation with Governor Schwarzenegger, they gave it up for nothing. I would vote to suspend it. Nobody was tougher than me.

ROBERTS: Governor Reagan, he wanted to be able to say there was a \$100 million in savings. Didn't really care as much about specifically what was in it.

BURTON: Exactly.

ROBERTS: So you guys were... We talked about the automatic cost of living increases, the relative responsibilities piece of it. What else?

BURTON: Well, there's another piece that in... If people were on old age assist, on social security, and their grant was so low it wasn't worth much, that the state would supplement it with old age assistance. And what would happen was that if the federal government gave a cost of living increase for social security, the state used to take that away because otherwise it would be unequal treatment for... The ones on social security would get \$7 more again. And that was a big fight. I had that. I guess I've carried it over from my brother.

ROBERTS: That was a pass on, right?

BURTON: Social security pass on. And they had a fight with Pat Brown over that. I think we did it, I don't know if we passed it and he vetoed it, then... Or something happened, but there was a big to do and we had a press conference and Hale Champion, his guy from finance...

ROBERTS: Finance director.

BURTON: Finance director, said something and I just said, "That's not true, Governor." And Pat... "Nobody can call my finance director a liar!" Pat stormed out of the room. Old people, they're there; they're crying. This old guy Eddie Elliot saying "oh dear, oh dear." And I just... I didn't say he was a liar. I get Ray Johnson saying, "If you're not telling the truth that's a lie," but I mean I just... It's not true, but in any event... So that was a bill that was ongoing, and I took a bill...

ROBERTS: The pass on thing?

BURTON: The pass on. So I figured out how much the pass on was in dollars, then I took that lump sum and spread it out over all the old people. In other words, so everybody got some kind of a bump. And they're all over that bill, and we're near the end of the session and there was a guy named Larry Townsend, Sir Lawrence from Torrance.

ROBERTS: Sir Lawrence from Torrance.

BURTON: Doesn't care much about much. And I said... These are the days you could have a conference committee report that wasn't even in print, nobody knew what it...

ROBERTS: So you would take a spot bill or something?

BURTON: Yeah. Take a bill... And ask unanimous consent to take it up without reference to committee, print or file.

ROBERTS: And this is as the session's about to end and you stop the clock?

BURTON: It wasn't stopped but it's near the end and so I go, "Larry, I'm going to give you this bill, you put it in the conference and you could go around and I'll go get the signatures for you." And took the bill up and they're still trying to kill my bill that I was letting them kill. George Steffes has got his eyes on this. And they do that bill and it gets down to the governor and the governor is getting ready to veto it.

ROBERTS: So you kind of slipped out...

BURTON: I call a guy, Reverend Ed Peep from Glide Church, a senior citizen guy, and I said, "The governor's going be down there speaking at the Commonwealth Club. I want you to get all the troops out. Get 'em all out from all over." And so Governor Reagan's walking through this thing and these old people are picketing him. And, "Why are you taking my money?" And he's got a temper, Old Dutch, so he kind of pushed one with a picket that she's got, tears in her eyes. It's on TV and I guess it was Stu Spencer, his campaign guy, is trying to figure out... Ron is trying to figure out why the bill should be vetoed said, "No".

ROBERTS: Stu told him...

BURTON: No. He saw that on television, you need that on television? you pushing and getting old ladies to cry? so he signed the bill. I'm not even on it, but that was... That was good fun.

ROBERTS: He was involved directly in these...

BURTON: Who?

ROBERTS: The governor, Governor Reagan?

BURTON: Well, he was in the meetings. And then he had named Bob Carlson his welfare guy, who was a numb-nuts, and then the health and welfare guy was Earl Bryant who was kind of wacky. And we had Bagley, which was fortunate, a Republican chair, and then Tony Bielsonson in the Democratic chair, and so it all worked out quite well.

ROBERTS: Reagan at one point said you were nuts, and then you went ...

BURTON: No, he didn't say I was nuts. Get your quotes right. It was, I think, it was either a bill or maybe when there was a marijuana bill and they were asking are there people in the Capitol smoking marijuana I said... I don't know. I said, "I don't know what goes down on the first floor with all those actors." I don't know if that brought it on with Ronnie or... But he said that Burton had more... A person in capital had more to fear from the squirrels in the capital. And that's when I went out, I think it was with a copy of his bill, and was going like that, trying to get a squirrel to do it.

ROBERTS: And then another big issue you had with him was the veto override. What did he... It was a mental health measure?

BURTON: Yeah, he was closing the mental health hospitals and the money was supposed to follow the patient into the community. It wasn't doing that. So I introduced the bill that said, unless and until the money gets into the community to take care of people, the hospitals can't close. And we've seen the results of it... Well, now it's Vietnam vets and that, but because of Ronnie when he closed the hospitals, a lot of mentally ill people on the streets and screwed up. Most of them probably damn dead now, it was so long ago. And so, I pass it. I get it over our house and it gets to the Senate, I got Moscone doing it. This is the story of my political life, why I never became great. So it passed my... And it's kind of nothing. Goes in the Senate, George takes it up, it's a vote short. See it gets consideration. And Bill Richardson, the gun guy...]

ROBERTS: H.L., Bill Richardson.

BURTON: H.R... H.L., the gun nut.

ROBERTS: Very conservative Republican.

BURTON: Oh, yeah. And he wasn't there. I said, "HL, where the hell were you? I needed you on the bill." "What bill?" "The one to keep the mental..." He thinks everybody should be locked up, right? "The mental health bill." He says, "I'm for it," I go, I says, "Moscone, ah, he's bullshittin'." I said, "George, H.L., he's going to vote for the bill." So bill gets taken up, the veto passes, all the

fucking TV's on Mosconi. As usual. I'm the guy... I just I don't need the credit but that was... You know, that one put George in. I says, "Georgie, H.L.?" he says, "Yeah, I'm for it."

ROBERTS: Why was he for it? Was it because he had seniors...?

BURTON: Well, one, he thinks everybody should be locked up. But, more importantly, Reagan supported Earl Bryan against HL in the Republican primary for maybe Cranston's, for the Senate race. All politics being local. So you, you know, yeah.

ROBERTS: And then in '80, Reagan resurfaces. Now he's the president. The Republicans took over the Senate that year. Reagan had won a great landslide. That must have... I mean that completely transformed the political calculus in Washington as well. How did that...

BURTON: Well, the Democrats still controlled the House. Reagan was easy, and the Senate, Republicans, I mean Baker, they were all like decent people. Different points of view but they were in government to do stuff.

ROBERTS: That's the difference now, isn't it? That the Republicans ...

BURTON: No... like nothing. Reagan, I'll give you a good one on Reagan. So when he ran against somebody, and I think I was still in Congress, but he made the Panama Canal was a big deal, take back the Panama Canal, take back the Panama... And so I sent, I put in a resolution. I still have it somewhere. And the guy who was the clerk at the house says, "You don't want to put this in." So I said, "Well, yes, I do." He says "Well, you really don't." So I didn't but I got it somewhere. But I passed the resolution to create Reagan's Rough Riders to go back in and take the Panama Canal. And money is appropriated for a white horse so that he can lead the charge. I get a letter back from him.

ROBERTS: From Reagan?

BURTON: From Reagan. "Dear John, I read about your idea of taking the Panama Canal and giving me a white horse," says, "you should know that they never put the leader on a white horse because he's too easy a top target, or is that what you had in mind?" How can you beat that? I mean, that was Reagan.

In 1973, Ronald Reagan signed a bill that legalized abortion in California. That law, however, did not replace on the books the original law that had prohibited abortion since 1850. John Burton, as president pro tem of the Senate, won passage of a measure that removed the old statute, which might have taken effect if the U.S. Supreme Court found Roe v. Wade unconstitutional. In doing so, Burton also gave a lesson in how to "low ball" legislation.

ROBERTS: So I want to talk about one more issue that was historically significant when Reagan was the governor and you were on the other side of a lot of negotiations, and that's abortion, the pro-choice thing. Reagan famously signed the most liberal abortion bill...

BURTON: In the country.

ROBERTS: In the country. Talk about that a little bit and also, subsequently, what happened, because a lot of the anti-abortion language wasn't taken out at that time.

BURTON: Well, the abortion bill, it wasn't that...

ROBERTS: This is '73.

BURTON: Yeah, it wasn't that... It was a big deal but it wasn't kind of that, it was therapeutic abortion, whatever that... It was carried by a Republican Craig Biddle, and I think the senator, I could be wrong, might have been Don Grunsky, I think, maybe a Republican senator, or it could have been something like Tony Beilenson would do, who legalized selling condoms in front rather than having to go under the counter and get 'em. And that was... Someone was going use that against... Or the Jerry Ford guys, Bagley and those other guys, were kind of figuring out how to use that against Reagan in the New Hampshire primary. But what happened was legalized it, and I came back, when I came back to the Senate, or the Assembly when I left Congress...

ROBERTS: In 1980, so that's like 15 years later.

BURTON: And it dawned on me for some odd reason that that law was... The laws were still on the books, so...

ROBERTS: The anti-abortion laws.

BURTON: So I drafted, went to a woman who worked for me, and also is on the National Planned Parenthood board, and I says, "This shit's still on the ... I'll put in a bill to get rid of it," and a local lobbyist for Planned Parenthood, "Oh you don't want to do that, you'll call attention." I says, "You'll call attention enough, you got Roe versus Wade, and whatever it is." And so I put that bill through, and it was like nothing, wiping stale...

ROBERTS: Taking...

BURTON: Taking it out. I might well have even low-balled it ... take old stuff off...

ROBERTS: Low-balling is an interesting...

BURTON: Yeah, that's why I'm... Yeah, you could do that.

ROBERTS: How do you low-ball something?

BURTON: I'll give you a great example. I talked about this Frank Lanterman, and Frank Lanterman had two bills; one dealing with mental health, both of them, one was semi-controversial, the other was nothing. He stood up and asked unanimous consent to take the bills out of order, and so he got unanimous consent. He took up the bill that didn't do much, and had about 35 minutes debate, and it turned out it didn't do much with that. Then he gets up and he

said, this is his companion bill of the measure we just debated, sat down and went over to him and I says, "You old bastard." I learn something every day.

ROBERTS: So that's what happened with this abortion... To wipe off the... I mean, but it was a legitimate low-ball, you were just getting rid of old stuff.

BURTON: Well, yeah, and I just wasn't looking for debate, just do this, but Frank's was... That was the best.

ROBERTS: So when you did the abortion bill, it didn't seem like a big deal, but...

BURTON: Now it's a big deal.

ROBERTS: So you pass this bill to get rid of the old language. It didn't seem like a big deal at the time, but now, with the way the Supreme Court is going with *Roe v. Wade*...

BURTON: Could be and they would have to go back. It's kind of like when they took away those cost-of-living increases – they're never going to get back in the law.

Ronald Reagan was one of seven California governors with whom Burton fought or worked together as a lawmaker and legislative leader. He offered his recollections and impressions, starting with Republican Pete Wilson, who took office in 1991.

BURTON: Pete had the guts to raise taxes. Raised them eight million dollars. And it was the Democrats and some Republicans. The hardline Republicans, my friend Ross Johnson and the others. No taxes. No taxes. We got the taxes, through and then got the state right, and Pete deserves a great amount of credit for that.

ROBERTS: I want to ask you about introducing your bill to criminalize poverty in 1994. What were the circumstances in that?

BURTON: 'Cause Pete was always... You know it's like people were poor because they wanted to be, so I figure if you criminalize the behavior, they will no longer be poor.

ROBERTS: Yeah, and that was the year that Gingrich, that the Republicans took over the House as well so there was a lot of...

BURTON: No, I mean that had nothing to do with what I was doing.

ROBERTS: It was just California still.

BURTON: And then I wanted to open gruel houses... No poor houses, almshouses and feed the kids gruel. That's just making a point that... What's easier to pick on than people that have nothing. What are they going to fight back with? And Pete was a good guy. If Pete wouldn't of run for president, he could have been one of the really great governors in my opinion 'cause he was a moderate Republican. But he... When he started running for president, the Republican, he

had to move to the right. Not right today, but right. I think that kind of screwed him. And then he did the 187.

ROBERTS: 187, the anti-immigration.

BURTON: Yeah and that wasn't like him. That wasn't like him.

ROBERTS: You think that it was just political posturing?

BURTON: I can't impute it but yeah, it wasn't like him.

Gray Davis became governor in 1999 and John Burton finally had a Democratic governor with whom to work. But the relationship was often contentious.

ROBERTS: So those were pretty good times, the late '90s for a while.

BURTON: Well, cause Pete had the guts for the tax increase

ROBERTS: And then Grey Davis gets elected in 1998...

BURTON: Yeah.

ROBERTS: And you had a somewhat adversarial relationship with Grey Davis?

BURTON: Well, part of it was me, part of it was him, part of it was his political advisors. 'Cause I know Grey for...

ROBERTS: He worked for Jerry, at least.

BURTON: Huh?

ROBERTS: Since he worked for Jerry the first time.

BURTON: No, shit, I knew him when he was Tom Bradley's campaign treasurer, and my friend Max Palevsky was the top money guy, and so I knew him since then. In fact, when he gets elected governor I go down and see him, and I just says, "Who would have thought?" and he said, "Some things are meant to be." And I says, "Maybe you, man, but not me. I'm a goddamn accident of history." And we could have gotten along all right. I think his staff kept causing trouble, and I just wasn't going to take shit.

ROBERTS: So how did that manifest that tension, or that conflict?

BURTON: I don't know. He made a mistake. We were there to implement his vision.

ROBERTS: Yeah.

BURTON: That's kind of was an insult to the institution, so to speak, and a couple things.

ROBERTS: Famous interview where they told Rob Gunnison, that actually in the Chronicle. Yeah.

BURTON: Was that...

ROBERTS: They're here to...

BURTON: That's how it all started?

ROBERTS: Yeah.

BURTON: So I don't know, then it just got... We each had a vision and they were different.

ROBERTS: What was his vision and what was yours?

BURTON: Ours was to implement, [laughter] his? I don't know. I just did what I did, and I truly blame it on some of the staff, 'cause for years I've known him and I had no friggin' beef with him. And it got contentious, and finally, who's going to do this? I think a lot of it came out of his staff, whoever they were. I don't even know who they were. And his political guys.

ROBERTS: Bustamante was a press guy for a while...

BURTON: Michael Bustamante?

ROBERTS: Yes.

BURTON: Oh, he was nothing.

ROBERTS: Garry South?

BURTON: Yep, it's what I think.

ROBERTS: Why, were they trying to triangulate, or what do you think?

BURTON: Exactly, whatever that means. I don't know, 'cause I don't care about stuff. So why would I care about this and care about that? Let me alone. And a couple times, in my goofy mind, wanted to make some end runs. One, I wasn't going to have it, and two, my membership was always solid. 'Cause the day I took over the job from Lockyer, and I said, 'cause Billy used to do whatever Billy did and come back and tell it. Sometimes it'd be 3 in the friggin' morning, Lockyer would wear everybody out But I'd go and say, I'm going to go down and say, "Pete, Governor Wilson" and this is what I'm going to say, "Does anybody got a problem?" I'd go down and come back and say, "This is what I said, this is what Pete said.

Any problem?" No. I'd go down and say, "I'm going to say it." So he said, "No, I don't like it. I don't want to do that." "OK, fine. Everybody feel the same way?" I'd never come in with...

ROBERTS: Saying this is what we're going to do.

BURTON: Yeah.

ROBERTS: There was more of a consensus.

BURTON: No, I would say, you know, "Why is that?" You tell them in advance and they were all fine. I mean, I think the very last night of the last session, we got in an argument over something, it was just kind of stupid and that's when I just dropped the gavel and says "I'm out of here. We're adjourned." And it was over just some... One of the members had a bill and he kept wanting it. He didn't want to kill it and he didn't want to do... Came back from conference and finally, "I want to do something, got my thing." I said, "OK. We're out of here."

ROBERTS: One of the things that happened with Davis that people now point to as a financial big deal was the pension increases for the corrections officers. Did it start with them or the CHP?

BURTON: Well, the CHP always, they were the pride and joy.

ROBERTS: Yeah.

BURTON: All law enforcement, safety personnel.

ROBERTS: And then it got...

BURTON: No. Safety personnel, they all went... The Highway Patrol always went first. They were the best, nobody was mad at them, and then the safety personnel, I think, went up to 90 percent after 30 years.

ROBERTS: 90 percent of salary in their pension?

BURTON: Yeah.

ROBERTS: Yeah.

BURTON: And at that time I don't think it had an adverse effect on the budget. Probably did later. But the...

ROBERTS: No, because the PERS was... I mean, when they were making a lot of money, but when that crashed and...

BURTON: Well, I don't think that happened under Gray. The crash.

ROBERTS: Why was he recalled? Why do you think?

BURTON: Oh, God, the energy crisis... Which he may have... He probably could have we probably could have done. I don't know what he could have done. The only thing he could have done was really raise rates and his dictum... I guess... Don't raise rates. It's like raising taxes. And that was it.

ROBERTS: 'Cause he looked like he couldn't make a decision? Or he looked weak at it?

BURTON: Yeah. Well, not weak, I think 'cause... He didn't want to raise electrical rates, which, and he kind of had to... And he took a while I think... For that we went back to see Secretary of Treasury Robert Rubin. This is, well, Clinton was a lame duck, I think. And Ken Lay, the guy from...

ROBERTS: Enron?

BURTON: Yeah. Who actually tells you how dumb I am, I says, "that guy down there impresses me." And it just... It called for very decisive action that... I think it was just a shit pot full of stuff and he didn't want to bite the bullet on it. And, I mean I probably wouldn't have wanted to bite the bullet anyway but probably would have bit it.

ROBERTS: There was a budget problem by then too. By the time of the recall it was a projected deficit. Was that a big piece of it, you think? Or you think it was mostly the energy?

BURTON: I think the energy thing and maybe a few points he didn't, you know, he didn't act decisively. Which if he would have acted decisively everybody would've been PO'd. He was in a rock and a hard place.

ROBERTS: So where were you on the recall?

BURTON: I was against it.

ROBERTS: You were just against it? And so...

BURTON: What was I supposed to do? Shoot somebody?

ROBERTS: I don't know. But so you were against it and you were for him, in other words. 'Cause he was on the ballot...

BURTON: Yeah, of course. And I was in favor of putting Cruz, lieutenant governor on the ballot. And Gray's staff, some of them, to this day blame me for his recall, which gives me a lot more power than I thought I had.

ROBERTS: Why do they blame you?

BURTON: Huh?

ROBERTS: Why do they blame you?

BURTON: You have to ask them. I don't know. Well, 'cause I used to get starting with implementing my dream. I was not hesitant of getting on them in the press about stuff if I didn't like what he was doing and the press asked me.

In 2003, California voters recalled Gray Davis and actor-muscleman Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican, became governor. Once, again the power dynamics in Sacramento took a sudden shift.

ROBERTS: Is it fair to say you were surprised that Schwarzenegger ended up as the next governor?

BURTON: Well, no. As soon as Darrell Issa wrote a check for \$2 million, I said, "It's over." 'Cause then all of a sudden the money had started coming in. I said that to President Clinton, friend of mine, very wealthy guy, contributors... We'll leave them nameless. We're having dinner and he's telling me, I said, "Well, that guy wrote the check. It's just all screwed." And so, my friend has...

ROBERTS: This is Issa who later went to Congress and...

BURTON: He has Clinton call me and start to... I say, first of all, I said, "Mr. President, do you think if you were to beat John Paul Hammerschmidt for Congress in '74, your life would change?" That's when he lost the congressional seat. What? And then he starts telling me, "You've got to get Bustamante out of it." I said, "Well one, I can't get him out of the race. Thank you. And two, once that check was written we're screwed." And he starts explaining shit to me. And I said, "Well, why don't you come down and walk the streets of Gardena, blue collar thing? It's gotten out of hand. It's gotten beyond the governor's control."

ROBERTS: Did you know Schwarzenegger before he was elected?

BURTON: I met him once. I met him when he was doing his after school deal.

ROBERTS: Mm-hmm. He had an initiative...

BURTON: Yeah, to put a school in. You know and I... Well, I didn't know Maria, but I knew... I wasn't close to Teddy, but I was close... Supported Teddy against Carter and all that.

ROBERTS: Yeah.

BURTON: Schwarzenegger and I at that time got along like... As good as you could get. He knew he needed me and not to get what the hell I wanted.

ROBERTS: So, after he's elected, did you call him and he call you or, how did that come out?

BURTON: He probably called me. I don't know. I might have called him. Because of... His wife.

ROBERTS: Maria?

BURTON: Maria. No, I mean, we were... We got along. And allegedly he told his people, the only two people who could walk in without an appointment were me and Maria... 'Cause I... Friends would buy in, like Warren Beatty and others were friends of his. I was in the army in Austria and I could BS about that stuff. So, I could even sprachen a little bit of Deutsch. And so we got along pretty good. Which he said drived the Republicans nuts.

ROBERTS: He had as much a problems with the Republicans or at least as much a problems with the Republicans as the Democrats.

BURTON: Well...

ROBERTS: You think he...

BURTON: He was more at that time more liberal side... I don't know what the hell he was. It was... We just, we got along fine. And like I say, I don't think if the thing with Gray was implement his vision or something before that 'cause I told him the time I met him after the election. What do you want? I don't want anything, what are you going to do for me? Abolish capital punishment? You probably won't. So it's just like the thing that I had with Pete Wilson. Here's what I want and... I guess my problem is I don't have a hidden agenda, so if I've got one it's kind of out there which could become offensive, especially if I put my agenda out in a very offensive way.

ROBERTS: Which you've done from time to time.

BURTON: I would say.

ROBERTS: Yeah. So, who was more effective or ineffective? Gray Davis or Arnold Schwarzenegger?

BURTON: Well, it depends on what the hell it is.

ROBERTS: State budget.

BURTON: Well, the budget. The budget's the budget.

ROBERTS: Except there was no money. I mean there was...

BURTON: Well...

ROBERTS: They raided everything...

BURTON: The thing is that I would be in the position that I'd fight for what I thought should be in the budget and that was going to be in the budget, that was going to be in the budget, that was going to be in the budget. And this was before we made a majority vote budget, which is probably one of the best things for the state I ever did, as chair of the Democratic Party. We pushed through majority vote budget before the people, and it's made life infinitely easy.

ROBERTS: And before that was the two-thirds?

BURTON: Yeah, you don't have to... You know, cut... Although there were... When all the time I was up there until I think after I left or something, one time there was a long time without a budget. But when Jesse was here... There'd be a little grumbling when he just passed the budget.

ROBERTS: But that stopped when the Republicans just decided to stop.

BURTON: Well, yeah, but that we'll get it... When I was there and we had 25, one time we had 26, but we had 25, and so you could basically, after a while, pick a couple off, or Brulte would, the Republican leader...

ROBERTS: Jim Brulte.

BURTON: Would show responsibility and he'd vote one of the budgets. We got Ross Johnson to go up with us 'cause they were fighting over nothing.

Burton was in Washington while Jerry Brown served his first two terms as governor, starting in 1975. And he had left the Legislature when Brown was elected for his second two terms in 2010 after he was termed-out of the Senate. Nonetheless, their political paths crossed many times.

ROBERTS: Jerry Brown. You saw him as governor back in the '70s, you saw him as governor there. What is your impression of him, what is your relationship with him, how did he change?

BURTON: Well, I was back East when he was governor here, and my problem with Jerry was, is that I grew up when he was his sister's little brother, Cynthia. And Cynthia married one of my good friends, so I mean it kind of, it was always Jerry. Is that... And he was different his first time around. I don't know, I wouldn't say he was overall insecure, maybe could've been a little insecure, but I think these two things, he mellowed I think his time as mayor of Oakland taught him a lot 'cause he had to deal with... He couldn't deal with...

ROBERTS: Real stuff.

BURTON: Real stuff, exactly. No substitute for real stuff and I think he loosened up a bit, I always tell him, he takes after his mother Bernice instead of his father, Pat. Bernice was kind of tight with the buck. And I think he's been a great governor, he's willing to step up on stuff. He's got the guts to step up and repair the roads and bridges in this state which had been long overdue. The easiest thing for any politician to do is defer maintenance 'cause you don't see it right away. I will see it if I cut your pay. But if I just defer maintenance, don't hire janitors to clean this room, don't do this or that, you don't really see it until all of a sudden there's too much shit on the floor.

Termed out of the Legislature in 2004, Burton was installed as chairman of the California Democratic Party. He served until 2018. It was a time when Democrats began moving towards hegemony in state politics. Aided by demographic changes and Republicans moving further and further to the right on cultural issues like abortion and gun safety, Burton's Democrats began to pile up huge majorities of Democratic legislative seats.

ROBERTS: Your time as a state party chair.

BURTON: Was great.

ROBERTS: Democrats did very well.

BURTON: Very well.

ROBERTS: Two-thirds majority. You've got all the...

BURTON: I had a very great staff. I had great cooperation from the governor and I do like and know politics. And we did it, like in the Senate, we got up to 26 once, dropped to 25, but we picked up a lot of seats and I mean that goes for the volunteers and activists and the candidates and the legislative leaders and the governor. But we worked together and I had a good enough reputation with them when I said, "This is the kind of things we'd like to do." And they'd kind of go along with it, or if they said, "No, we want to do that," I said we'd have a big discussion and whoever made the most sense won.

ROBERTS: We're talking in July of 2018 and the state party, which you're no longer heading, has just endorsed Kevin de León against Dianne Feinstein.

BURTON: Yes they did.

ROBERTS: You were... Disagreed with that?

BURTON: Well yeah, I mean I gave my proxy for Senator Feinstein.

ROBERTS: Do you think that's a mistake that they did that?

BURTON: They did what they did. The party got a new bunch of people that were brought into politics through Bernie Sanders.

ROBERTS: Bernie Sanders.

BURTON: To his campaign and they ended up getting very involved in the state party and kind of exerted a lot of influence, and they did what they did. I think... It didn't make sense to me but I wasn't there so what am I going to do? And to be honest, Senator Feinstein got 40 something percent against Kevin's 11 in the primary...

ROBERTS: In the primary, in the actual vote.

BURTON: Yeah, in votes. So that's... They did what they did and I think maybe it was... saying something. I don't know what the something is. But this is where we are, we're take no prisoners progressives or whatever. I don't know what progressive is. I'm still a leftwing liberal, so the progressive thing I think of Hiram Johnson. But that was their point of view, and I don't think it's going to have an impact on the election itself. I think Senator Feinstein will win handily, what the impact it will have on the state party going forward is, we won't know until...

ROBERTS: Has it diminished the party, do you think?

BURTON: We'll have to see, won't we?

ROBERTS: We will have to see. All right.

BURTON: Yeah. We'll have to see. If all of a sudden nobody sends in another dollar bill and nobody volunteers because of that, then it will diminish it. If a whole bunch of new volunteers and new contributors jump into the breach then they could strengthen it, although I think that's kind of to me... It didn't make sense. Day one it didn't make sense, but we'll see what happens.