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Housing, Urban and Regional Affairs) 1976 – 1979

Background

I finished up in the Whitlam Government as PPS to the PM. On the Dismissal I
decided to go back to Sydney and return to the law.

I got a phone call Hugh Hudson from SA asking if I would come and work in his
office as a planning advisor. I had met Hugh a couple times in relation to his
education projects seeking the PM’s interest. We had got on well.

Up to that time I had had a fairly mixed career. You couldn’t really call it a career
as I had just done what had come up. As a result of a teenage illness it was
expected that I might not survive beyond the age of 50. Accordingly I decided to
just do what came around rather than settle down to being a Sydney solicitor.

My interest in urban affairs stemmed from my Uni days. I had a number of
friends and later some clients who were architects. I was enthused about
heritage and urban design issues, especially because of the early fights to save
historic houses led by people like Leo Schofield. Also at this time I was a director
of the Australian Institute of Political Science and played a major role in the
organization on summer schools, Australian Cities and How Many Australians?

One of my close school friends suggested he and I should attend the part time
town planning course at Sydney University so we started the post grad course in
1966. At this time I was also concerned about the way in which the Housing
Commission was creating large scale housing estates which I thought were going
to be socially deprived enclaves. I wrote a couple of short articles about it and
was surprised by the strength of the Commission’s attack on us. Middle class
critics that had no interest in the working class was the typical approach.

I also wrote a chapter on urban design in a book by Robyn Boyd and others. In it
I criticized the role subdivision control had on urban design – ‘the tyranny of the
lot boundary’.

Anticipating a Labor victory in 1972 in late 1969 I threw in my partnership in my
father’s firm and took my young family to Canberra where I joined the NCDC as a
class three town planner. I think I was employed as insurance for the
organization because I had been assisting Tom Uren with some of his urban
speeches. Also a lawyer who also was a TP was unusual.
On the Labor victory I was seconded to Uren as his Senior Advisor – one of the first of the new advisor positions.

During my time in Uren’s office, in DURD as an Assistant Secretary and back in NCDC, my views on urban issues were further formed. I was especially influenced by:

- The work I did in reviewing the Design Controls for Detached Houses in Canberra. With a couple of Victorian architects we laboured to get better urban design in suburban Canberra only to be defeated by the way the planning and administrative system as a whole operated. It was here that I began to realize that ‘form follows organisation’. The best we could do was to at least write the controls with reasonably meaningful objectives and standards, which I think was a first. I also managed to have sites for medium density (unsubdivided sites) released for sale with broad urban design objectives and only a minimum of controls over density and height and none over detailed design. There was a bonus if the design was judged to be excellent.

- The realization that there was nobody in the NCDC apart from the Commissioner himself who could take responsibility for the end product of our efforts. The Commission was the ultimate silo organization where there were a large number of experts each of whom had carriage of a particular standard. One view of the design of suburban Canberra is to see it as the sum total of those standards. With a silo organization it is not possible to have clear responsibility for outcomes, such as how a new suburb looks and operates.

- The insistence by Pat Troy not to have anything to do with the NURDA, later the Cities Commission as the basis for his new department, DURD. He did not want a planner/engineer dominated organization but rather wanted to employ a wide range of skills and talent. For this he needed the administrative grades not the professional grades, entry into which depend on particular qualifications. He put together a truly outstanding group of people.

- The urban forecasting work of Bunker and Wilmoth, which, for the first time, really got to grips with the household formation patterns, economic trends and area predictions.

- The concept of urban management inherent in some of DURD’s work, especially the potential, seldom achieved, of the roles of the regional managers of the Area Improvement Program.

- From a policy point of view during this time I fought against large scale or distinct public housing projects. So I opposed, both unsuccessfully, the Woolloomooloo project and the concrete manufactured housing project in Belconnen, ACT. Concerned about the excessive support given by the tax system to home ownership, I fought semi successfully against Senator Geitze’s proposal to make housing interest rates tax deductible and sponsored a detailed look at all aspects of Canberra’s housing policies.

- While in Canberra I helped to sponsor a cooperative housing scheme for purchasers, which totally threw away the standard controls of the
Re the new town projects, I was opposed to the Cities Commission’s list of proposals. These had been the result of nominations provided by each State under the previous government. The only ones I supported were Albury Wodonga and Campbelltown, the latter because it was really just an extension of Sydney. Wanting the government to concentrate on the outer suburbs issues, I did my best to derail the new cities program. Uren didn’t necessarily disagree although, for a range of reasons, he felt obliged to go along with the program.

Adelaide Connections

Uren’s sense of humour saw me appointed as the CW representative on the Monarto Board.

My only connection with SA had been in the early days of the Government when I deputized for the Minister at a talk given to a dinner in St Peters. It was an odd occasion but very civilized. Wives etc waited on a large table of males and at the end of an excellent meal I was asked to address a number of urban issues. Included was where I thought the new town for SA would be and I answered ‘Albury Wodonga’. Next day back in Canberra I was rung by a very threatening person called Peter Ward to impress on me how vital the new town project was to the Dunstan government.

My several trips to Adelaide for Board meetings were instructive. I was disappointed that the structure of the Monarto Commission was an NCDC style with silos but it had a good, if excessive, number of staff. I kept calling for more population studies because Wilmoth’s work was showing that the demand was just not there. The excessive money Uren had got out of Cabinet for funding the new towns projects saw a fair amount going to Monarto, given Dunstan’s quick cooperation compared to the other conservative Premiers. After paying for a generous land acquisition program, I ensured other funds got spent on tree planting thus avoiding the commencement of the sewerage system, which would have locked in what I considered to be a project which, at that stage anyway, looked as if it would not be needed or be viable.

Ward and others constantly reminded me that the project was critical to Dunstan’s electoral success. I have since come to suspect that the genesis of the location had to do with putting Labor voters in the seat of Murray Bridge.

Ministerial Advisor

I started as Hudson’s ministerial advisor in early 1976. We were in an office in Greenhill Road. Hudson was also Minister for the Housing Trust and the Land Commission and Monarto? An intelligent man he was an excellent Minister. He loved an argument and would always think about the issue and often came back to you in agreement. Hudson was a strong supporter of Monarto, having had, I
think, a hand in its adoption. This may have been because he was a numbers man for the Party.

My task was to review the planning system and give consideration to housing policy. I had a couple of discussions with Dunstan who I knew from my time with Whitlam. He was unhappy about the SPA and the lack of action on a range of urban design issues. I think Peter Ward had a strong influence on some of these issues, especially the City ones. Because of the Monarto connection I saw quite a bit of Ward who I liked and respected and with whom I had some interesting discussions and arguments. Peter’s views, like Dunstan’s were influenced by concerns about symptoms. He also, like most of us, was concerned about particular issues outside the front door – Hurtle Square in the City in his case. Dunstan (and Ward) was critical of the quality of the arterials with strip development, outdoor advertising, stobie poles and little landscaping. He was also very concerned about the loss of agricultural land in McLaren Vale, the Hills and the Barossa. He was suspicious of the way development was controlled and concerned about the quality of development and the architecture.

Dunstan had a shopping list of issues, but, like many people concerned with urban issues, he addressed symptoms. The underlying causes were not analyzed, although he did identify the government structures, managers and processes as somehow the causes of the problems.

I went around discussing issues with heads of departments, architects, Stretton, Platern, etc. It wasn’t a very structured review, but I did write a short report for internal use.

In keeping with my interest in urban management I got two young social planners from Monarto to do an assessment of an area of new development area at Hallet Cove in southern Adelaide. I wanted a post development assessment.

It was damming. Despite all being controlled by the planning system, the final product was poor. Bits of centre on both sides of the railway. Gaps, opportunities lost. Social development non-existing. The statutory planners could not see anything was wrong. All the bits internally complied with the controls. It is just that they didn’t fit together. It was typical of the products of a typical statutory planning system. And, of course, as with Canberra, nobody could be held to be accountable for the outcome.

**Sacking the Police Commissioner**

While we were at Greenhill Road I recall Hudson returning from a Cabinet meeting pulling me into his office and closing the door. ‘We have just sacked the Police Commissioner’ he said. I said, ‘You are all dead’.

Given my experiences with Uren and Whitlam, the latter especially in the last few weeks of the Government, I was conscious just how much Labor Governments must not threaten the security services if they are to survive.
My Approach to Urban Policy

It was a time when all reformist governments were putting ministers in charge of what had been till then powerful State commissions – public works, land and water managers. Power was being redirected to Cabinet with a view to Ministers becoming more managerial.

I had formed the view that the problem for Town Planning organizations and the Planning profession was that they essentially influenced the end of a production process – separating land uses and exercising development control over design. They were not structured or qualified to understand and influence the drivers of urban development – the urban economics, the institutional imperatives, the nature of the legislation and the politics. Planners are essentially colour consultants.

My proposal to the Minister and Dunstan was that planning should become a Ministerial Department rather than be a statutory body. It should operate with much more influence in Cabinet and manage the cities and regions rather than just control development by administering the planning legislation. The fact that between the new Land Commission, the Housing Trust and Monarto, for which the Minister was responsible, the State owning a large slice of the further urban land, meant that the government potentially had a major set of levers to manage development positively not just wait for proposals, although I would have taken an urban management direction even if the public land holdings were not so influential.

We worked out how the change could take place without going to Parliament, which may not have supported it. The SPA continued, along with the statutory position of Director of Planning. It is just that, by Administrative Arrangements Order, the staff that had been made available to the DoP came over to the new DG of the Department.

City of Adelaide

One of the jobs I was given in mid-1976 was to legislate the George Clarke City Plan. This was a comprehensive document with over 90 policies. The planning exercise was a typical and successful example of SA corporate togetherness. The Labor Government, the interested academics and professionals and the City business establishment combined to take control of the City from the Council engineer and rethink the future of the City.

The Clarke Plan, while excellent in many respects was the subject of an IDC that didn’t seem to be going anywhere with powerful Ministers such as Transport and Roads opposing the strategic policies that affected State programs and Labor electorates with things such as a by-pass freeway.
It was clear that I would not get Cabinet approval to ‘legislate for the plan’. This did not concern me as I had the view by then that planning and managing are administrative activities with controlling development being merely a tool of urban management. In a sovereign government such as a State, only development control needs legislation. What does it mean to legislate policies that have direct implications for budget expenditures?

As the IDO controlling development was ending at the end of 1976 and the Upper House had said it would not be renewed, legislation was urgent. I proposed to the City Planner and the Parliamentary Counsel that we should only legislate for development control. This became the City of Adelaide (Development Control) Act 1976. The City Planner (Michael Llewellyn-Smith) and I sat in his garden over one weekend and took out of George’s plan all the policies that affected property rights. These became the ‘Principle of Development Control’, a title dreamt up by PC, and it was these that were given the force of legislation.

Building on a technique from San Francisco, George had adopted a place or locality format for writing controls with well worded Desired Future Character Statements for each of the 80 or so places in the City and North Adelaide.

We retained the successful City of Adelaide Development Committee, the four by four city/state committee that had overseen the City Plan and exercised interim development control. As control was now to be exercised by council, I gave the CADC an exception role for applications that exceeded the controls and for State and council developments. The CADC was the model for the SA Development Assessment Commission in the 1983 Development Act, which was greatly influenced by (if unnecessarily more complex than) the 1976 City legislation.

In the end, we finished up in the City with what became a model, I still think should be a model, for the rest of Australia – very simple legislation where everything is subject to consent and there is a multifaceted strategic plan for the City with legislated development controls formatted largely on a place basis. Indeed, if I had had a choice, I would have integrated the land use zone controls into the place formats.

And, in the City, because of an accident of history, there was no control over subdivision, which is not necessary if you control use and structures. Without subdivision control you can liberate designers and make it possible to get a better cash flow with medium density housing. (Unfortunately, some years later, some tidy minded planner decided to make the City planning consistent with the State. Subdivision control was imposed in the City, instead of it being abolished in the State.)

With typical SA corporate cooperation the Bill passed the Parliament in time and only suffered from one major fault – the inability to impose IDO while changing controls. (This mattered later in the eighties when the City tried to down zone some sites leading to a rush to over build in a boom, which exacerbated the collapse.)
The next five years saw an excellent relationship between the City and the State. With senior public servants on the CADC, with the Lord Mayor as chair, my area manager with his office next to the City Planner’s and on good terms with the LM and my friendship with the City Planner, almost all issues were solved before they became problems. It was an excellent example of what has been called a marble cake version of intergovernmental relationships – having the right arrangements to enable the right mix of powers to meet whatever is the issue – rather than the layer cake version dependent of the clear division of powers so liked by the constitutional lawyers. This was the model for the way I wanted to manage the planning issues in the rest of the State using Area Managers who job was to get on-side with their local councils to foster cooperation rather than the excessive State/local friction that had existed.

**Head of Department**

Dunstan and Hudson wanted me to head the new Department and I agreed. It meant being put over the head of Stuart Hart the public servant who was also chair of the SPA, a statutory authority. As a public servant he headed a State Planning Office, then a division of the Premiers Department. Dunstan created a new Department of Housing and Urban Affairs and put the staff of the Office in that with me as its DG.

An early issue I had to deal with was the quite natural anger of Stuart and others about the change. I had to point out that the staff of the Office were mine and that I would continue to provide assistance to the SPA in its statutory duties but, in the end, I would organize and direct staff rather than Stuart (he did have some support staff for whom he was directly responsible). He could complain to Parliament in his annual report if the Authority lacked resources. I found the continuing existence of the SPA and DoP useful as they provided statutory bodies able to make development control decisions at ‘arms length’ from the Minister. This was essential if the Area Managers were going to be working in a proactive manner at the local level. They could not be seen to be also managing the assessment decision making. In the end the bodies morphed into the Development Assessment Commission, a model copied by NSW and being looked at by others.

**Designing an Urban Management Department**

Given my views on urban management and the experience of DURD, I was determined to change the silo department consisting of separate divisions of planners, planning technical officers and admin officers into a multi-disciplined urban and rural management department. I held the view that people behave as the organization requires them to behave and that therefore structure matters. (Now apparently known as the public choice theory) You cannot get the policy implemented unless there are people whose job it is to deliver. You cannot get
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new policy unless the organizations encourage their adoption by being structured to be unthreatened by policy change.

I needed new skills if we were to address the underlying drivers that created the outcomes Dunstan complained of.

The organizational change was substantial and deep. Essentially it led to all the professional planning positions and the technical positions being changed to administrative positions. This enabled a wider range of skills to be employed. It provided the opportunity to shift staff to new positions that did not have to have job descriptions that demanded a particular qualification.

The resulting structure was based on a series of area teams in a very flat structure, with a Regional Manager for the Metro and one for the Country. The teams consisted of Area Managers for each of the areas into which we divided the State – five in the City and more in the country – equivalent to the regional planning areas. These positions were what I have now called ‘outcome’ officers. The roles of the Area Managers were to do whatever it took to achieve the outcomes for the area. They were to get onside with the local councils and work with them in a partnership manner to achieve the government’s objectives for the area. (This period has been extensively described by Alan Fogg in Process, Procedures & Plans AIUS 1980.)

The levels in the hierarchy were reduced from around 12 to five/six. The changes caused considerable resentment amongst some of the existing staff, especially some status conscious planning professionals, despite very great efforts at staff consultation and development over an 18 month period. There was some resentment of the ‘Canberra imports’, most of whom were already working in SA and were not imported by me.

There was no intention to get rid of anyone and a real effort was made to find places where everyone could find useful work. The design of the new structure gave me considerable flexibility in shifting staff to where they and I felt they could do best. The flat structure and clear outcomes based positions resulted in significant increases in productivity, which was necessary because we were involving ourselves in many issues that had not usually been the province of planners.

I was especially concerned to break the barriers that constrained the non-professional staff from having a career path and worthwhile jobs. I was concerned about this because of the example of the most experienced planner in the NCDC being unable to get promotion because he only had a technical diploma and not a degree. The SA Department had many keen technical officers who, because of the new digital technology would find their jobs becoming redundant. They needed new career possibilities. There was also the general admin staff who could do better jobs. For example, an early action was to disband the stultifying and inefficient typing pool and distributed them amongst the new geographic teams as support staff. Many took on new lease of life.
During this time I was well supported by the Minister and the staff in Dunstan’s office. Ward and Dempsey (Dunstan’s Executive Assistant, who took over from Peter Ward when Ward resigned) were especially helpful with both passing on what they thought were Don’s main concerns. Bakewell I also got on well with and he offered advice and caution on how what we were trying to do fitted into the wider objectives of the government. Like Guerin after him, I found Bakewell a bit sphinx-like in his utterances.

Strategic Planning

At the time of my review the strategic planning division of DoP’s office had started a review of the cadastral land use-zoning map that was the strategic plan of Adelaide. (I realized how wrong it was for the statutory zoning map to be the strategic plan of a city when, early on in my role, the Deputy DoP asked me to approve the official statutory plan of Metro Adelaide which laboriously had been put together from all the council zoning maps. The Greenhill offices were show as zoned ‘residential’, but virtually the whole street was offices. It was explained that, in the written controls, offices were a ‘consent use’.)

I was considered the updating the Metro plan was premature.

The typical planning exercise projects forward a population a certain number of years, turned that into households, calculated the land required to house that increase and produced a zoning map accordingly.

I thought this premature because the DURD projections identified a dramatic slowing in new household numbers in Adelaide – a housing demand of 12,000 dropping to 6,000 over a short period. I was also concerned about the viability of the SA industrial economy as Australia moved towards the abolition of tariff protection. We did some modeling on this and, whichever way you looked at it the future was not great for the SA economy. Given this, there was more than enough land identified as future urban in the existing Metro Plan. Publishing a new outer urban boundary would encourage speculation and a decline in rural land use and encourage wasteful public works programs.

It was said that a new plan was needed because the service providers demanding that they needed to plan their long term works program. I became aware that bodies such as the EWS had large day labour forces and their population projections tended to those that supported the continuation of their public works program. Budgets seemed to be based on last years plus expenditure, rather than demand. I did not want the planners to produce a new zoning plan that identified land for development before it was needed and gave everyone a false view of the future. I rightly suspected that when one analysed the need for certainty it did not need a zoning map and timing into the next 30 years. When one really worked out the information needs of the agencies they would turn out to be a lot less.
Accordingly, the first thing I did on becoming DG was to stop the strategic planning work and replace it with work that after a couple of years produced what was known as the Staging Study. This work was the first of the development forecasting work that since has become one of the techniques of most planning bodies.

That brilliant urban economist and policy person, John Collins, had a small team of demographers and economists who went around and discussed population projections and capital works programs with most of the agencies. The centralized subdivision control system operated by the Department provided an excellent cadastral database and a lot prediction process. Eventually the work was written up as the Staging Study, a simple unglossy typed document with strategic choices for constrained or expansive futures. There was no new zoning map but rather a large number of urban management actions that needed to be managed if the more constrained future was to be achieved. Much of this work was already in hand through the regional teams and in changes to housing policy, etc. We would get the teams together every few months, review what had been happening and work out the general strategic objectives and actions for the next period. The results of these planning workshops provided the Area Managers with their work programs.

We did not produce a glossy planning document and make a public performance out of the work because the news was bad, given the traditional ‘develop SA’ political rhetoric. We were criticised as not doing any strategic planning work, when I would argue that we did far more effective planning and managing work than most planning agencies.

The general strategic approach was to encourage a densification of the existing extensive urban area, stop using the poorer families as fringe development cannon fodder, create new second home development areas, save the Southern Vales from urbanization, a key Dunstan concern, by treating the Onkaparinga River as the southern boundary, with development being north if anywhere. We, perhaps wrongly, wanted to get rid of the freeway reservation that was causing blight in the western suburbs and was an invitation to continue the southern sprawl into the Southern Vales.

As a consequence of this work the agencies made substantial adjustments to their programs achieving substantial efficiencies. This was done in a cooperative manner and, generally, was not seen as the planners telling agencies what to do. Certainly there was agreement on common and more realistic population projections.

Land Price Control

An early policy change Collins pushed for was the abolition of the land price control system. We showed that if anything it was sustaining prices given the lack of demand and the oversupply. By the time it was abolished, if it had ever done anything, it had outlived its excuse for existence.
Naturally the operators of the system argued for its retention but with Hudson’s support, Cabinet went along with it. There were no price consequences.

This policy change was, I suppose, an example of what Stretton called ‘Canberra economists’ thought. Certainly we were economic rationalists (rather than ‘economic irrationalists’?), nowhere as extreme as say John Patterson (who was then I think heading the Hunter Water Board) became, but our rationalism was heavily affected by welfare concerns. In other words, we were concerned with policies that had negative welfare consequences.

**Housing Policy**

The Minister and Dunstan wanted change in the SA Housing Trust but they did not want to upset Alec Ramsay. Dunstan wanted better design – but I was concerned about leading the push for better medium density residential design using Trust housing. This approach tends to give architect designed medium density a poor market image and tenants do not like to be stigmatized by good residential design that is unlike commercial housing.

I was more concerned with the declining state of the SA industrial economy and the disappearance of the worker/manufacturing plant basis for Elizabeth etc – the original basis for the large fringe developments. I was also especially concerned about the Trust’s development of the southern suburbs, given a view that the future was to the north, rather than the south – for reasons of economics, social policy and the protection of the Southern Vales.

The new department had for the first time in any State government a really good team of welfare economists, including Greg Smith who recently was one of the Henry Review Commissioners (2010). Traditionally, housing in State governments meant the Housing Commissions whose policy was whatever supported what they were doing and what they were doing was what they organized to do and what they were organized to do was spend the money from the C/W. Ours was the first independent housing policy unit, apart from those who intervened occasionally at the margin from Treasury. While the staff were pretty left wing in social beliefs, there was a fair bit of what is now labeled economic rationalist thought. We brainstormed a list of fundamental changes in policy we wanted to achieve. Partly they were influenced by planning policy for Adelaide and partly by equity and efficiency concerns.

Essentially the changes were directing at ridding the system of the ties between assistance to lower income householder for housing and the building of new houses. The great influence the building industry everywhere has had on housing policy had seen in SA, especially, the situation where almost all assistance was tied to the production of a new house. Both the housing industry and the social structure of Adelaide were seriously distorted.
Most of the fringe growth of the City was by subsidized housing, both owned and rented. It was obvious that, increasingly, those housed in public rental housing would be unemployed, often single mothers. The inner and middle suburbs were emptying with schools declining. Existing houses were cheaper than new ones but you could get a subsidized loan.

The whole development pattern had to change. It should no longer be based on bribing the less well off to live on the fringe where living was most expensive and services least.

The policy changes implemented included:

- Change the CW/State Housing Agreement (in 1978) to drop the requirement that rents be charged on the basis of the cost of the house being rented. This crude cost-rent policy excused the construction of housing on the cheapest land – i.e. where others did not want to live. It gave the Trust the excuse to not build on the small parcels of land it had in the inner and middle ring suburbs, or to buy existing housing. The new Housing Agreement for the first time treated the housing authorities as businesses rather than public works organizations, with new C/W money being treated as a capital contribution, rather than funds at a certain rate of interest to construct certain new houses, the rents of which were to return the cost of that house over the lifetime of the loan. With the tie between the rent and the cost of the actual house being broken, the stock could be traded with the Agreement requiring that any funds had to be reinvested.

- Stop the Trust from building any more housing tracts on the fringe. This could happen because the cost based pricing had ended.

- Encourage the Trust to change from being a housing construction organization to a housing manager directing more attention to the existing estates. To this end, we analyzed the Trust’s accounts reformulating them from a cash based to an asset based format. In keeping with the new Housing Agreement we encouraged the Trust to sell underperforming assets and trade in stock. Also to stop building stock that couldn’t be subdivided and sold because it had no separate connections.

- Buying rather than building houses, especially for special needs households. The Emergency Housing unit was run out of the Department for a while. I wanted to see it back in the Trust as a normal program rather than an exception to always build rather than buy approach.

- Reduce the almost 100% tie of subsidized loans from the State Bank to the building of a new house and so allow more purchasers to buy any type of house, preferably in existing suburbs where some stock was cheaper than a new house and much better located from the point of view of existing services and public transport. This was achieved by encouraging (by threatening to raise the interest rates which were extremely low in a time of very high rates) existing loan holders to repay
their small balances thus increasing the money available for loan and progressively reducing the tie.

Most were achieved but with some hostility, particularly from the Trust Board, which thought we were ‘empire building’ and bullying a SA icon organization. Gilbert Seaman at the State Bank on the other hand was very pleased with our initiatives, which substantially increased the volume of lending.

Dunstan did not seem to have a problem with tackling the Trust and getting it to accept the changed circumstance of public housing financing. Hudson, although a Keynesian economist in the main, generally supported our tougher economic approach to housing policy.

Alex Ramsay’s death touched us all. Alex had been extremely good to me, spending long hours discussing issues. I particularly learned the lesson, when proposing some particularly potentially unpopular policy change, Alex pulling out a bit of paper and saying, ‘Yes, well lets just write the Minister’s press statement.’

Hudson and I at that time had been putting a fair bit of pressure on Alex, especially about his budget proposals. I realized later that his Board was very unhappy with us. Hugh had been urging him to retire, not because we were unhappy with him, but we were concerned about his health. He, I suspect, did not want to do so until our threats were resolved.

I became aware that a number of people who loved Alex (as I did) saw me as being at fault. Indeed one Board member said she hated me at the time, although some years later, she realized that what I was trying to do with the Trust was right.

**The Staging Study**

The Staging Study, of which I have a copy, set out a preferred direction for the future of Adelaide. In the place of continued Trust and low cost first home buyer sale housing to the south and up the Main North Road, we encouraged second home buyer developments, especially Golden Grove. With the low cost loan tie to new houses being reduced, it was expected first home buyers, of which there would be less demographically every year in the 1980s, would buy existing houses, thereby helping to populate emptying suburbs and schools. Hopefully, second home buyers would pick up some of the slack, although demography ensured that whatever policy was adopted, a housing industry downturn was inevitable.

Being on the Land Commission Board, I pushed for the LC to stop producing blocks on the northern plains and to bring Golden Grove and other more up-market, second homebuyer sites into production as soon as possible.
Over a long period John Collins and I had been trying to dispose of the Monarto project. The staff had long been incorporated into the Department. Those around Don, including Hudson and Ward, were very protective of the topic and always emphasized its continuing importance. (Hugh and I had some great rows over it, including one in front of a very British planner from Milton Keynes. I suspect he had a new view about colonial ministerial/DG relationships after that robust exchange.)

Finally, with the aid of Dempsey, we managed to arrange a presentation of the Staging Study work to Don, and the big three ministers, Corcoran, Virgo and Hudson. John had a big map of Adelaide that did not include Monarto and he started to go through the demographic and housing industry projections. Dunstan used to sit in these meetings with his eyes closed and one was not sure if he was listening. When John pointed out that housing starts dropped from 12 to 6,000 over the next few years, Don opened his eyes and said ‘Is that right, Hugh?’ Hudson said it was and Don said, ‘Well that’s the end of Monarto then.’ And without further discussion we went on with the rest of the presentation.

Urban Design

Dunstan and Ward were most concerned about the quality of design. So was I.

Thing was, what to do about it?

The planning development control system was not driven by urban design objectives. It was the standard zoning system with a cadastral plan separating land uses into detached house, medium density and high density zones and the usual retail commercial, industrial uses. There were standard subdivision controls and requirements. The arterials were generally zoned for a mixed-use strip development.

The important design requirements were set back and height controls for each zone and, importantly, substantial car parking on site requirements. Also an excessive requirement for 12.5% open space in a subdivision. ( Apparently when the Planning Bill was going through the Upper House the usual 10% rule applied. Someone late at night moved 15% and 12.5% became the compromise. Thus are planning standards made.)

The Office of Planning was intent on implementing the Model Country Zoning Regulations on all the country towns. These 50+ pages of detailed controls would have zoned the towns and imposed standard design controls on them all. Amongst other things they would have in time destroyed all the historic and often unique main streets as the requirement to have large car parks in front of retail premises was implemented. Disaster.

(During one of my several conversations with Stuart Hart about what he wanted to do given my being put in charge – we agreed on his conducting a review of the development control system – I asked him when would he know when he had
achieved his objectives and he replied, 'When the Model Country Zoning Regulations have been made across the State'. I realized that I really was not a statutory planner.)

Building on the City’s urban design lead I was determined not to go down this standard and destructive traditional planner’s path. I spoke to Dunstan about it at one of the lunches he and I had every six months or so. He strongly supported an urban design approach.

I had already employed as consultants an excellent couple of young architect planners to do a collaborative urban design/heritage study of Robe. They had produced a simple set of City like place-formatted controls, which the local council and community supported. The beauty of the DFC approach is that the community can have a meaningful role in setting realistic and meaningful objectives. Burra provided the next opportunity, this time using departmental, ex Monarto, staff. A great success and strongly supported by the locals. The Area Manager in Norwood was conducting a similar exercise.

This began the long process of preparing desired future character statements for all the important and threatened country towns. I wanted the locals to value the whole place, not just isolated items or parts. This was especially necessary given the different histories and settlement patterns in a number of towns.

A standard ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach would have been a disaster, as it already had been in the Metro area.

With a useful architect, Hank Den Ouden, from the Monarto team we prepared a series of design guides. I remember our concern when he was unable to find more than a couple of examples of good architecture on the coasts and river frontages. Unfortunately we probably did not publicise the guides sufficiently, but they may have had some effect. Certainly, their effect on local shopping centre design was substantial, with almost all applications producing something that looked just like the sketches in the guide.

Up till then the traditional approach of planning to areas of special significance was to impose special zoning controls that required ‘good design’ and the exercise of design discretions by the controllers rather than merely checking lot sizes and set backs.

The Hills Face zone was a classic example of special design controls. We worked with the officers controlling the developments in the zone and produced and published a clear set of design standards and controls, which has served as an example for more general use.

I took the view, and still do, that every place is important so I did not want good design to be limited to special places. This was the approach of Clarke’s controls in the City and this therefore became the philosophy for everywhere. It was only partially implemented following my departure and recent (2009) ‘reforms’ have,
along with the rest of Australia, tended to return to controls that assume everywhere should look the same as everywhere else, except for special ‘character’ areas. A typical elitist approach.

Reformatting the SA planning controls

At that time the SA legislation required the preparation of Regional Development Plans and then the implementation of Planning Regulations.

The Development Plans were useful geography and regional policy documents with words that could be taken as generalized policies for the exercise of discretion in the control of development using interim development control. Once the Planning Regulations became law they applied with most developments being ‘as of right’. If the controls required a discretion to be exercised third party appeals usually applied so developments strived to comply with the controls, even when, if a discretion was exercised a better design could be achieved. I recall a large shopping centre proposal on the Main North Road where we tried to get the developer to put in a better design. Everyone agreed it would be better for all concerned but, as it meant a few less car parks than the standard, it didn’t happen because the opposition centre would put in a TP appeal against the exercise of discretion and delay the opening.

The Courts had difficulty in applying the generalized policies in the DPs. I was not happy with the lack of design discretion in the regulations. I was also attracted to a single document format – similar to the City control document.

The country model zoning regulations were dispensed with and we decided to work with councils to write place/parcel-formatted controls using DFCs as the objectives. Also in the Metro areas. Using the Norwood controls as a model, a team of staff were employed to rewrite the development plans into a single Development Plan for each council, put on a word processor and linked to the cadastral data base. This ‘document’ contained the controls applying to each parcel. The 1984 legislation said that the only controls that applied were those in the DP. This was a substantial improvement on traditional planning practice and is a credit to Stuart Hart with considerable assistance from Di Gayler who adopted and drove the approach. (My only disagreement was with Stuart’s insistence that the 1984 Act contain a section requiring there to be ‘land use zones’. This has led to a zoning layer in the controls, whereas any controls on use should appear under the Daces along with the other contextual controls.)

For the approach of the legislation and other qualities, the SA planning system consistently has been judged the most efficient and effective in Australia. (Recent changes raise questions about its transparency.)

Heritage Legislation

I was determined to ensure that what became the Development Act should be the State’s development control system and that the tendency to set up separate
legislation for each reason for control should not happen. To this end I ensured that, for example, the Coastal Authority legislation, which was just a repeat of the Planning legislation creating a regulatory overlay for a bit of the State, was integrated into the Planning legislation. The Coastal Commission became a referral authority.

When Rob Dempsey became head of the Department of Environment he clearly decided to demonstrate to his staff that he could deliver the goods. He proposed Heritage legislation which would have seen a heritage list of places with control over them being given to a Heritage Council attached to his department.

This was at a time when Area Managers were working closely with councils to accept that the whole of their areas were important and that country towns in particular should retain and enhance the qualities of their towns. I could not have Heritage come in and take the control of the key buildings to Adelaide by a separate control process. The local councilors would have been convinced that the rest didn’t matter. This is the problem of listing.

Dempsey had a Cabinet submission doing the rounds. One day when Hudson was away interstate he put it into Cabinet on short notice. With Deputy Premier Corcoran as his minister I knew I would lose so I did the improper thing and dropped a note to Dunstan telling him that our efforts to simplify the development regulatory system would be undone if we started to go down this path. Don got Cabinet to postpone the decision and I was ordered to negotiate with Dempsey. There was a very heated discussion chaired by Andrew Strickland and in the end the Heritage Council became a referral authority. (It should be noted that in the recent (2011) Productivity Commission Report on planning systems, SA is singled out as the only State where the Development Act contains all the referral bodies as against, for example, the over 100 other bits of legislation in NSW that contain referrals.)

Don resigned shortly after this event – no connection – and I remained on Corcoran’s black list I suspect.

Don’s Resignation

I was aware that Don was not well but his resignation came as a shock. The night of the news Hudson told me that he may become Premier and that I should be ready to move to Premiers. The next morning that changed and Corcoran became Premier. Wrong choice. Interestingly Dempsey did not go with Corcoran into Premiers.

Hugh was moved on and Don Hopgood (nice man) became Planning Minister, I suspect with instructions to get me under control. (I recall briefing him and telling him how proud we were at getting rid of some non-rationalist rort, I think the tie of cheap loans to new houses, and he said, ‘Getting that increased was one of my great achievements.’)
Postscripts

When the Labor Government fell I gave the incoming Minister my resignation. At that time I felt strongly that governments should be able to appoint their own people as heads of departments – I was critical of Whitlam not doing so immediately with the Prime Ministers Department position. But I also thought that those political appointees should resign on a change of government and I had been openly critical of a couple of colleagues that had stayed on in Canberra after the Dismissal on extended leave.

Before I went I urged Ron Barnes, the head of Treasury, to take over the development programming staff and information, as it would provide an excellent tool for budgeting purposes. I was concerned that those that came after might revert to typical planners practice and this excellent work would be lost. I don't think Ron understood its usefulness. State Treasuries generally do not see themselves as long-term strategic planners. Nor do most planning departments unfortunately. Within a few years the planning department reverted to type and it remains essentially a statutory planning rather than an urban management agency.

A couple of years later when Hopgood was again a Minister he rang me to make sure that I would not make a fuss if Seaford were developed. Being owned by the Trust and Land Com, and in his electorate I am sure the decision was about something other than good strategic planning. Once the Onkapringa River was crossed there was no southern boundary.

I, of course, said it was a wrong decision but agreed to say nothing. It was shortsighted, like recent proposals to further develop south and in the Hills. Developer and housing industry pressures have won. The Southern Vales and the Hills are assets too important to be frittered away on sprawl that can be accommodated in less valuable and scarce environments.