This is George Lewkowicz for the Don Dunstan History Project interviewing Mr David Meldrum. David was working in the Department for Community Welfare in the early ’70s and beyond that. The date today is 29th May 2008 and the location is David’s home.

David, thanks very much for doing this interview for us. It’s a very interesting area of Community Welfare and then, more specifically, juvenile justice. Just by way of background, can you just talk about yourself a bit, your education and then how you got into the Department – is it of Community Welfare or for at that time?

It was for, we were told it was for Community Welfare.

Okay.

It amuses me. I’ve come across that just recently in a department where they were doing this.

So what was your, say, academic education and how did that lead into you getting employment in the Department?

In the early ’70s I was a primary school teacher and so I had a BA and a Diploma of Teaching and so on, and I was doing honours work aiming towards an MA, that I never really got around to finishing, in politics, and I was a tutor in the Politics Department. So I had a variety of things going on. And primary education was pretty exciting then, there was a lot going on there too with the introduction of open-space classrooms and so on and brand new curricula and the new maths and all that sort of stuff. But the exciting department some of my friends kept telling me about, particularly from Politics, was Social Welfare and Aboriginal Affairs. It was a very intense period of activity amongst leftist students around Aboriginal affairs on the campus and so there was a lot of talk about that. There wasn’t much talk about young offending stuff, but in I think about 1971 the Department – still called [of] Social Welfare and Aboriginal Affairs – started advertising for what they called, I think, ‘assistant supervisors in training’, which is sort of like positions for people who would have accelerated management careers in the new social services. And I went for one and I didn’t get one the first time around, but some interesting people
did – George Beltchev and Robin Maslen and Sally McGregor all got those sorts of jobs – and I got in in the next round, early in 1972. So that was the background.

The first time I applied, in fact, I got knocked back because I had no social work qualifications, but by the time I came around again Ian Cox was working very hard against a lot of conventions around at the time and one of the conventions was you couldn’t be promoted in the Department of Social Welfare unless you were a social worker. Well, he felt that teachers and psychologists and other people had equally-relevant life skills and perspectives, but it took him a while to break that down.

So he was wanting to broaden the entry base.

Absolutely. He was the one who insisted they move into advertising in the Education Department, whereas before people felt that that was really quite silly and a bit pointless. But a number of people came from a number of different backgrounds than had ever worked for the Department before.

Just going back to when you were at uni, you said there was the discussion about Aboriginal affairs issues. Was that in some broad context of just general political reform, and then, linking it with Don Dunstan, did you know about him at the time?

Well, you couldn’t really be working in the Department of Politics – (laughter)

Right.

– and not know about Don Dunstan. These were the days when Steele Hall and Don Dunstan and others addressed meetings in the Union Hall and the end of the gerrymander and all those sorts of things. It was a very intense period. Don Dunstan, was he Premier for a minute and then wasn’t and then he came back?

Yes, about one and a half years and then he missed out in ’68.

Right, that’s right. Well, through that whole period it was obviously of intense interest to anybody studying politics, so yes, we were very aware of those things. But I was leaning more and more towards interest in welfare issues – even in teaching I was very much interested in the programs for the difficult kids.
So in politics and there was an interest in South Australian politics and society, it seems more so than there is now in the University, from what I pick up, but what were the sort of issues that you were coming across?

Well, that was the period of time when the whole role of the police – you know, the Vice Squad and the Larrikin Squads – censorship debates, homosexual law reform, these things were all brewing intensively at that time. Less obvious for those who weren’t as directly involved was housing policy – the Housing Trust was going to a new level of development that wasn’t necessarily being supported by the Commonwealth Government – and arts policy, Don Dunstan was in that early period very, very involved in driving arts policy and we tend to take the Festival Centre for granted in these days; in 1974 when it opened it was an extraordinary building by Australian standards and an extraordinary investment in the arts. And at the same time the foundation stones were already being laid for the regional arts centres in Mount Gambier and Renmark and Whyalla and so on, so that was a very intensive period and I was always very interested in the arts and worked in it later on in my career.

So there was a general feeling of the Department, if we can talk about that, opening up to younger people and a feeling that things could change?

Well, the context of that is one that could easily be missed looking at the history, because, for example, my boss was a guy who was twenty-three.

Really?

And he was about third in charge of the Department.

Really? Who was that?

Rod Squires.

Rod Squires.

And then another boss was Frank Althusen, who was about three years older than me. So if you looked at it across the Department the bulk of the new players were under thirty. Now, this was not dramatically unusual. There were principals of schools at the age of twenty-five in that particular period, so I wasn’t that surprised
by that. But now I look back on it and now I see the way that society normally is structured, there were some fascinating cultural things happen because we worked a fair bit with the police, because of our juvenile justice stuff, and the police never changed that way, the police never, ever broke away and brought in outsiders and different perspectives and so on; they continued fine-tuning their basic approach to production-line policing. And so you’d find a situation where a twenty-eight-year-old like me with long hair and a beard ranked equally to a chief superintendent (laughter) in a meeting, you know, and those guys were just like in complete culture shock. (laughter)

Can you describe any behaviours from their end and the conservatives around the place, like the ‘old guard’ I’ll call them?

Well, we’re sort of jumping around a bit, I suppose. But can I go back to my story just briefly?

Yes, sure.

As soon as I got into the Department I was pretty excited because it was a significant salary rise, too, and to jump from primary school teacher to – I think my first job I did, worked with George Beltchev to induct sixty new residential care workers, so we recruited and trained all these new people. And every part of the Department there were all these people from their early twenties up into their fifties coming in who had never worked in this sort of field before. Salaries were rising very quickly – I’m talking like twenty per cent a year over that period – not just because of inflation, but because Ian Cox was determined that people who, for example, were attendants in places like McNally would be paid something like schoolteachers. He believed they needed to be that sort of quality of people and he wanted people with degrees and diplomas and so on in areas which before had been regarded as barely above domestic-level jobs, you know?

When I first went to Vaughan House, the residential care workers there were being paid significantly less – these are people in their thirties and forties – significantly less than a trainee teacher. A primary school teacher at twenty-five would have been earning almost double what they were earning. So naturally
enough – well, a lot of things flowed from that in the selection of staff and their attitudes towards the situation and the perks that they expected. For example, their attitudes towards what we would think of as gross exploitation of kids, like getting their cars serviced free by the kids at McNally servicing their cars, or taking a bit of food home from the kitchen and all those sorts of things, there were all sorts of attitudes like that which were based on the notion of, ‘There aren’t many perks on this job; you’ve got to take what you can’.

So what was the transition between the new and the old? Did you pick up any sort of themes or arguments along the way?

The key philosophies that were going on, as far as I’m concerned – and I think Ian Cox’s views on this I wouldn’t want to argue with now, even, thirty-five years later – were that, by and large, removing people from problem situations doesn’t change the nature of the problem. Wherever you possibly can you try and work out ways to deal with the issue in situ by building supports around it and building skills around it and bringing new opportunities into that environment. And in the area of child welfare and in the area of Aboriginal welfare and in the area of young offending and the area of working with poor people in general, he just pushed those policies as far as they could be pushed. He tried to make services more accessible, he tried to make the quality of the workers available to give support to better-paid, better-educated people, and that just flowed right through. He just said from the start, in relation to places like Vaughan House and McNally, ‘If you can come up with a program that keeps the community safe and never locks these kids up, let’s do it’.

Yes, good.

‘If you can come up with a program that keeps these kids with their families and they arrive into adulthood in reasonable shape still with workable relationships with their brothers and sisters and mum and dad, then let’s do it that way.’ And he was very strong on those things, even stronger at times than I was, and I look back on it now and he was right.

I took over very quickly – and I’m saying ‘quickly’; by the time I’d been here for less than six months I was the supervisor of Vaughan House, which was a place with
something like forty staff and was in the news every day because the girls were rioting and wrecking the place and absconding and stabbing each other – and so I was extremely quickly propelled into that by the fact that the previous superintendent was actually pushed down the stairs and crippled by a bunch of girls. But when I got into there I very quickly started to get invested in trying to run a really good institution and run really good programs in it, and I very quickly developed the attitude that the community-based social workers were not terribly proactive or competent or engaged and didn’t understand these kids as well as we do. So I started to develop pre-release and then post-release programs to follow the kids up in the community and halfway houses, which is exactly what I now realise is completely wrong about the way people try to develop disability services and mental health services. You’ve got to stop, you’ve got to reverse the paradigm and say where people live most of their life [is] in the community, and that’s where you’ve got to build from. You don’t build from the ‘centre of excellence’, as you think of it. And he used to say, ‘No, no, no, you’re not to do any of that stuff. You’re not to follow these kids up. If you’ve got concerns about the relevance or the way the social workers in Port Adelaide are doing their job, let’s hear them and let’s work on them and let’s build those services until they’re working right’. So he was very radical about that, and he was right. And I don’t think anything since then has proven him wrong.

I think, like anybody who works in that area, you sometimes lose your sense of what the community is prepared to accept. You sometimes forget that the kid you think of as a lovable dickhead is in fact a very scary thug, and so at times I think we lost community confidence by not engaging the community well enough in the dialogue. But anywhere you read in the literature about how people approach things now with people with mental illness or with criminal behaviour or whatever, the core philosophies are the ones he was espousing. Way ahead of his time.

Was there some medical approach as well, like some triage? Like these days there’s this focus on the mental health aspects of some of these kids as well.
When I arrived at Vaughan House, there were about forty-five girls there and all but about five were on a daily dose of medication, psychiatric medication.

**Oh, really?**

It was a cuckoo’s nest. And it wasn’t enough to control a lot of them. Even though some kids were just about glassy-eyed, there were still fights and there were still kids who hit staff and there were still kids who managed to escape. And I had a big run-in with the [psychiatrist] – I just bluntly asked the psychiatrist one day why this was necessary: I couldn’t believe that this bunch of girls could all be mad. (laughs) And her view was they were the most damaged kids in the community, they were the one per cent of the one per cent, and that yes, many, many of them did have mental illnesses and this was the only effective way to keep them safe and us safe. And I said I didn’t feel that that made sense to me entirely; I felt many of them were just unhappy kids who were starting to be acculturated into a way of lashing out in that little community and that I’d prefer to try working less with the drugs and more with behaviour change. And she spat the dummy, said if I was so clever they could do without a psychiatrist, and she left. (laughter) I won’t quote her name, because she’s long gone. But I then had to spent several weeks trying to find another psychiatrist and couldn’t find one, they all ganged up against it, so I got a local GP who was really good – who eventually did have a mate who was a psychiatrist, called Peter Reisen, who did eventually get involved in being helpful – and I would say from then on we averaged about five out of the forty to fifty kids had some form of medication, and I think things got better quite quickly.

**Where were psychologists in the scheme of things?**

Well, they weren’t in the scheme of things when I arrived, but we gradually started using psychologists a bit more. Never a big part of the operation, but we got a Psychology Branch with half a dozen people in it after a while.

**What was their role, was it diagnosis and behavioural change?**

It had been a bit mickey mouse up till then, it had been individual psychoanalytic therapy with vibrating couches and things – it was a bit of a joke, really, it was a bit
of a psychology backwater – but it changed to people who were focusing on behavioural therapy in individuals and in groups, helping people to learn to manage their anxiety and depression and so on, and became quite useful. Some quite talented people came through at that time.

Oh, right – and group therapy and group work was in vogue?

It was very much in vogue, that’s right.

Just going back when you first started, what sort of training did you get to do the job, or were you just thrown in?

People like me got none at all other than what we had in our background. We’d all done some educational psychology, or I had a psychology major, things like that, you know, so generally you needed to have some sort of behavioural sciences in your background. But with the staff we focused on increasing gradually their levels of in-service training until they were – most people were getting about half a day a week by about 1974, we were very clear in our own minds we weren’t going to get a lot of graduates in and so we had to do really good in-service training, which we did.

And did you get a sense – like Ian Cox was the leader in the Department – but any sense of political backing behind a lot of what was going on?

Well, funnily enough, during the period of the Steele Hall Government, Robin Millhouse was, and he got on very well as far as I could see. I mean you’d have to be right of Attila the Hun not to realise there were some reforms needed, (laughter) and he wasn’t right of Attila the Hun. But, for example, until they changed from the Social Welfare Board, every child who was born out of marriage in South Australia had to be visited by a child welfare inspector every year, that was until 1969 or something. So it wasn’t just the black kids that the welfare inspectors were visiting; it was anybody who was illegitimate, the stain of illegitimacy. And that was all just changing.

The other thing that was really noticeable at that time were the gigantic institutions. When I first joined they were just starting to break up the first one, which was Seaforth Home down at Brighton. But there were hundreds and hundreds of kids in institutions for various reasons, not just young offenders. There
was Glandore Home and Seaforth and there was Carramar[?] and there was Mareeba[?] and there was Brookway Park and Windana and there was Struan[?] Farm down the South-East, and then there were the Salvation Army places up in the Hills, Eden Park Boys’ Home, and these were all still going. I don’t know how many, but I would have thought there would have been way over a thousand, maybe as many as three thousand, kids in various sorts of homes still in 1971, ’72, ’73. But Ian Cox just went at it full-bore, finding alternatives, driving alternatives of community-based – where you could with families, where you couldn’t in small group homes, where you absolutely couldn’t in smaller institutions with better-trained staff. He really set a paradigm. I didn’t realise how radical it was until I went to England to actually finally study social work in 1978, and we were so far ahead of anything in England, it was unbelievable. They still had all these places. They were still thinking of radical ideas like putting delinquent kids into intensive family foster care situations, they were still thinking about it; we’d been doing it for five years, you know? So we didn’t realise how advanced we were.

I don’t know where he got all these pictures in his head from, but he drove them.

Interesting.

Because he actually had worked in institutions before that. He was the superintendent of Turana Boys’ Home or something just before he came to South Australia, which is a big McNally-type place in Melbourne.

And just the Aboriginal, the younger people: the Commonwealth had taken over responsibility generally for Aboriginal policy and that, but the welfare department had a responsibility, whether they were Aboriginal or not, to pick up these sorts of social welfare-type issues.

Yes.

Was there any need to talk to the Commonwealth people on Aboriginal people?

Only about two very high-level policy people in the Department did that. It was not noticeable at all, even at my level, because I was sort of – I don’t know what you’d say, sort of regional director-type level. But even at that level I had nothing to do
with the Commonwealth at all. There were just sort of annual discussions about money and responsibilities.

The Department at that time actually ran a few reserves. The staff actually worked for the Department. They ran Coober Pedy, Point Pearce, Point McLeay, Gerard. I don’t know enough about the Commonwealth–State relationship, I don’t know how that was done. I don’t know whether the Commonwealth paid the State to take them over from churches or how it happened.

Just earlier on you talked about accessibility and then you mentioned you were regional director. Was that a big reform in the Department, setting up regions?

I know everybody always said that, but no, the accessibility thing that Cox had was he decided we needed community health and welfare centres in every major centre in South Australia where there was extensive need, and he from about 1971 pushed really hard on that. And really the first hiccup in the whole thing was when the Commonwealth did get involved suddenly in community health centres and the people that were on about the community health centres decided very early on in the piece they didn’t want anything to do with services that took children away or looked after young offenders or dealt with violent people, they wanted separate community health centres; and so his dream, which was community health and welfare centres – the first few of which got established, one at Campbelltown and then The Parks and Thebarton – and his dream of this never really got going because the whole thing got split and a completely different movement started to develop out of the community health movement and all that sort of stuff.

All right. Well, I’ve got some things I wanted to go through here with the young offenders a bit more specifically. So you’ve mentioned some of the initiatives on young offenders; was there anything else you wanted to cover there?

Well, it was the range of things that we took the challenge from him, there was a whole bunch of us in an area called Treatment Services – I’ve got no idea why it was called Treatment Services – but our job was to come up with a range of things that would work for the kids for whom simple home support, being on a bond wasn’t quite enough. And so we established youth project centres, where kids went
to group settings, sometimes even two or three times a week. Sometimes they had to go there every day. We established group homes, we established intensive foster care models – there was called the Intensive Neighbourhood Care model, ‘INC’ parents. We worked on developing what we called mentors, which is people who were paid to actually sort of be an unofficial uncle to a kid. So we really read widely and tried every program we could think of with young offenders as alternatives to just locking them up, because we were all completely clearing our minds of just locking them up for a while, just put a pause in the offending. In fact, it didn’t even put a pause in the offending cycle because you cannot control the internal environment of an institution. Anyway, to survive well in an institution is to learn to be a better thug, you know?

Yes, interesting. And what were the legislative changes that were introduced? Rod Oxenbury wrote a chapter for the The Dunstan decade book and there was some mentioned in that, but I just wanted to see if you can recall some of them.

Not much. The change to the Community Welfare Act brought a whole new set of objectives to maximise the community-based solutions for all these problems. The big change that I noticed was actually a change in the Commonwealth level with benefits, when they started to flow to fifteen- and sixteen-year-old kids and particularly the single mums. That made a huge change, it suddenly became financially possible for a kid with a baby to leave home and survive on their own and so on, and I don’t think we ever quite all came to a decision in our own minds whether that was right for everybody. (laughs) It was very unfashionable to raise questions about it, but some of us actually had serious questions about it.

So there was no encouragement of debate in the Department, or was it Ian’s view and everybody had to fall in line?

I think we regarded it as part of the wider environment that we just had to adapt to.

Juvenile courts, did they – – –?

It’s another thing I should mention in passing is one of the things that did overnight was eliminated a whole range of places for expectant teenage mothers, because they were kept in places like Fullarton Girls’ Home, that great big building up on Fisher
Street, until they had the baby, and then most of the time the baby was whipped away from them and then they went back to society, presumably okay. And suddenly that was all different: the kids were saying, ‘No, I want to keep the baby. I’m going to get enough money. Look, I’ll get a little flat and live on my own, so I want my social worker to get me a Housing Trust priority’, and those places just went out of business in about three years.

**Interesting. And was there any support for these young women with the baby?**

It didn’t spring up as comprehensively as it should have. The Parks Community Centre, a few church welfare groups, responded really well. Some churches didn’t respond very well at all, others said, ‘Well, that’s the way things are now, we have to make sure the programs get to the kids in their flats and their homes and so on’. It’s not an area I’m well-educated about because I was working in the institutions at that time.

**And what was your relationship with the courts? I’ve got a note about courts, the Youth Assessment and Training Centres, and then McNally. You were with Vaughan House, as you mentioned.**

Well, after that I was the superintendent of McNally for three years, and my relationship with the courts was continuous, because one of the things we did was we were continually writing assessments of the kids and making recommendations to the judges about what to do with them while we had them on remand. An interesting example of how we went about things that might seem quite minor but made a huge difference was it was generally accepted around Australia, and I found in England as well, that a remand period of about a month to six weeks was about the right time to assess a kid, and George Beltchev and I sat down one day in about 1975 or ’76 with Kingsley Newman, who was the head judge of the Juvenile Court, and we worked out between us how long did we think it would take with all but the most complicated cases to write a report on what we thought should happen to the kid next, and we decided it would be ten days. And the Juvenile Court judge supported it, and we supported it, and we discovered we didn’t actually have to tell anybody because all that was happening was the court would say, ‘When can this
young man be brought back for a determination?’ and we’d answer, and just by
habit we’d said, ‘Six weeks’. And so we started saying, ‘Ten days’, and the
population of the place in McNally went from a hundred to forty in about three
months.

Oh, god, yes.

Just arithmetic, you know? (laughter) And no-one had ever done it before. And
then when I’d go to other states and then when I went to England three or four years
later I’d say, ‘Why do you keep them here so long?’ They’d say, ‘Well, you can’t
properly assess a kid’, and I had to say, ‘Well, we found that it made no material
difference. You learnt what you needed to know about a kid in about a week’. And
you had the help of his community social worker. Almost all these kids were
well-known by everybody by the time they ended up in lock-up. Though sometimes
you’d get a complicated one where some Aboriginal kid’d come out of nowhere for
murdering his uncle or something in the Pit Lands and it would be hard, but you’d
say, ‘Well, what are you actually going to learn in the next month that’s going to
make a difference?’

And you mentioned the judges were tuning into this as well: were they getting
any pressure from anybody, from not necessarily the Department, but to speed
things up or be more enlightened about the various cases?

No, I don’t think so. They varied a little bit – the sort of ‘hanging judge’ end of the
spectrum was a guy I remember, I won’t name him now, but even then he’d be
regarded as a (laughs) quite radical left-winger by anybody in Louisiana or
somewhere. (laughter) And I can remember him – well, really, he was only just
tough on us, make us prove our case. And if a kid did re-offend after we’d said that
we thought he had very good prospects, and particularly if people got hurt, he was
happy to put them down for a year, sort of thing. But no, it was a very, very liberal
era.

It seemed to have changed.

The cops were always unhappy. The cops were always complaining. I did a lot of
work with the cops and we ended up with reasonably good relationships. When you
dug deep, what you found was that everybody believed the same thing: that you did not actually achieve anything except temporary public safety by locking kids up, and cops know that. They were just pissed off that they were bringing the same kid back three weeks later.

**What was the recidivist rate, if you can remember it?**

At one stage there at McNally it was about fifty per cent, and over the period of time I was there we got it down to about twenty or something, measured over a twelve-month period of re-offending and so on. The Aboriginal population we got from about thirty per cent down to about eighteen per cent, and I noticed somewhere recently it had jumped up again. That takes hard work, and some of that hard work had to be done at the community level that we weren’t responsible for. You had to work on police attitudes towards cautions rather than arrests and all those sorts of things, very hard to – so many Aboriginal kids used to arrive just for having thrown a rock at a police car or something, and they’d been bundled into the back of a paddy wagon where they’d – what did we use to call them? We used to call them ‘triple whammy’ street offences, which was insult a police officer, resist an arrest, assault a police officer, which consisted of, ‘What the fuck do you want?’ followed by, ‘You can’t talk to me like that, kid. Get in the back of the car’. ‘No, I’m not doing it’, push. Triple offence, bang, bang, bang. And, ‘All right, you’re off to Adelaide, pal’, in the back of a paddy wagon all the way from Ceduna or somewhere, arrive at McNally with no-one knowing why they were there or anything, and before the new era they might spend six months there, just through thoughtless but unintelligent responses.

**And what was the police view? ‘We’re going to teach these kids a lesson that they’ll never forget and won’t re-offend’, sort of thing?**

Oh, they’ve taken a difficult kid off the streets of Ceduna for six months and done everybody a favour.

**Interesting. Just in the institutions themselves, the twenty per cent you mentioned were recidivists, were they continuous, like they’d go out and then come back in again, the sort of repeat offenders: what happened to them?**
Went to jail eventually.

**Went to jail. And can you recall any of the sort of underlying factors there?**

Well, one of the things we noticed early on was that the average reading age of the kids in McNally: the kids were on average fifteen and the reading age was on average eleven.

**Eleven, really?**

So they were grade six performers on average, and averages lie, of course: that means that something like a third of the kids in fact were functionally illiterate. So some of the most useful things we did were teach kids to read and write. It didn’t necessarily mean they stopped being criminals because there were a whole lot of other factors at work in their environment; but when, as almost all kids do, or did in those days, grow out of it at about eighteen or nineteen anyway, they at least had some new skills to then apply to life without being a complete loser. But most kids stop. Most kids stop. Their experience of it is they just get pummelled with punishment by the world continuously until they start to think, ‘Maybe I should do something different’. (laughs) That’s not society’s perspective of them.

**Were there any empowerment sort of approaches as well, like get them to take on some responsibility?**

Of course, yes. Anything that an intelligent person would try to think of in that regard we were doing. We were doing all the right therapy programs and educational programs and trade programs and working with their families and buddying them up with community mentors and giving them training opportunities, anything you could think of that makes sense.

**Sporting personalities, were they into it then?**

Were they what?

**Like footballers would come in?**

Oh, yes, yes. We had particularly Aboriginal footballers were very helpful. But the fact is that a low-achieving time bomb having gone off when you’re about fourteen,
you might stop being a really big social problem by the time you’re seventeen or eighteen, but you’re damaged for life in terms of your opportunities and in terms of your attitudes and in terms of your mental health. It will re-emerge as drunkenness and domestic violence and unemployment and everything else.

And was there some case-management relationship with the potential employers?

No. No. We had a few employers who were good guys who would give kids a go when they came out of McNally or whatever, but it wasn’t an organised industry in those days.

That brings me onto non-government organisations. Was there any relationship with them, the churches and – – –?

They were essentially, in my understanding at that time, limited to working with young girls who were having babies and providing residential care services for what used to be orphans or neglected kids or whatever with a few kids at the margins being picked up by street services like the Salvation Army. But by and large that was the limits of their role that I can think of at this stage.

So they were enmeshed in the whole process.

The Adelaide Central Mission was probably the earliest off the block in the ’70s providing some programs for youth around the city area. Ian Cox was quite important in that, too, because he set up a thing that I can’t remember the name of now, a committee, towards the end of the 1970s – he had Keith Seaman as the chairman, I remember, who became the Governor – and they looked at the funding and the operation of non-government programs for neglected and young offending kids. And as they were encouraged, pushed, cajoled, shamed out of some of their residential care places, because some of them were bloody awful, they were encouraged strongly to get into a variety of community programs and he saw a future where the NGOs would have a big role – again, fifteen years before much else happened in society.

And I’ve got a note about Community Consultative Councils. Did that system feed into what you were doing?
Not a lot. There were a number of other developments I haven’t mentioned. There were community people called something like ‘juvenile aid workers’, I think they were called, and there were Community Consultative Councils which were then copied by the combined Health and Welfare Department in the late ’80s with Health and Social Welfare Councils. Some of them were quite good. Some of them never really made a big difference. But they were a part of a range of strategies to engage the community. Because Ian Cox, sociologically, quite clearly came from the base that, ‘These people are not “the other”, they are us’, and so he was working at every level to try to work out ways in which society accepted everybody and worked with everybody.

Yes. **It’s a form of what’s called now ‘social inclusion’**.

Absolutely. He had a completely well-developed social inclusion policy, I think, yes.

**Interesting. And was there anything else in the juvenile justice and young offenders area that I haven’t touched on that you want to talk about?**

I think the bit we did badly in the ’70s was not recognising the extent to which kids were sexually-abused. And the psychiatrist I just mentioned before actually told us that some of the girls would tell us that their fathers and uncles and older brothers were sexually interfering with them, and this was an ‘Oedipal fantasy’ and we should never play into it by encouraging them. We should just quietly ignore it and politely change the topic. And so we were actually being taught to believe that this was rubbish, and I cringe when I think back to – I can remember kids coming to see me, see the superintendent, ‘I want to talk to you behind the door’, and then breaking down, saying, ‘I don’t want to leave because my father’s going to start fucking me’, and I’m saying, ‘There, there’. When I just think back on it it just makes me feel terrible that we had those views. So I think that many of the things that we did in those days – not for all of the right reasons; we just didn’t think it through – Ted Mullighan’s been hearing about recently.

Yes. **And this was because the psychiatrist was the ‘expert’, so to speak.**
I don’t think we were any different from anywhere else. I found five years later in England that the attitudes hadn’t moved at all. I think what we did do was we reduced the level of continuing abuse in residential care by bringing in better-educated people and having better systems and higher levels of staffing and having no-harassment policies and better punishment policies and those sorts of things. So I think the number of kids who were actually hit or sexually-assaulted, et cetera, reduced dramatically.

Ian Cox very famously – in about 1971, I think, might have been even the end of 1970 – rocked up at seven a.m. at McNally Training Centre one day because he’d heard what happened each morning at seven o’clock, which was that the superintendent at the time got all the kids, after they’d had their showers, in this massive area like a basketball gym all lined up in rows just with a short towel on –

**These were boys, right.**

– and then the boys that were due to be punished were read out from the roll. You know, ‘Lewkowicz, George, insulting an officer, six strokes to the breech’, and the boy had to step forward and bend over and be caned on the arse in front of everybody and mustn’t make a sound and then had to step back, and this went on in 1970. And, for example, just in that area, they took all the doors off the toilets so that the boys wouldn’t wank, so that there’s rows of boys all sitting there having their morning crap with the staff watching them, and then they step out with their towels on and go out and be thrashed and so on. And Ian Cox just walked in one morning and said, ‘I’ve heard this was going on. I didn’t believe it. It stops now’. Bang, that’s it. ‘No more corporal punishment in this place will happen from today.’ Now, he was fifteen years ahead of other places in Australia. The worst places in Australia didn’t stop until the mid–late ’80s, and of course in three-quarters of the world it’s still the same, let’s face facts. But he just stopped it dead.

**Were there any complaints from the super?**

Absolutely. When I got there as the superintendent in 1975 the first thing they did was bring out the punishment book to show me all the records to say, ‘These were
the days when we had this place under control, Mr Meldrum. When kids saw that they soon came into line’. Yes, they wanted it back.

The staff of McNally hadn’t been changed radically when I got there and I set about changing them as quickly as I could, but the bulk of the staff in the security area of McNally were ex-army men from England. The chief of the security section had been rejected by the South African police. (laughter)

Gee. I won’t speculate why.

Not a high enough standard of education. So he decided to come to Australia and work in residential care. And they were absolute thugs. Straight short back-and-sides. The only thing that it gave me as an advantage was they always obeyed my orders. (laughter) So if I said, ‘No more punishment’, they went, ‘Right, no more punishment’.

Interesting. So why did you survive and Robin Maslin[?], for example, didn’t in the prisons, if I can ask that question? Because he was the head at Yatala, I think.

Oh, look, I think he could have survived. (child enters, break in recording) Sorry, I forgot what I was saying.

Robin Maslin compared with your experience.

No, no, he didn’t fail. He chose not to put up with it.

Right, I see.

I could see when he was going there that you never win in prisons. You’ve got a bit of a chance with young offending programs because people generally, deep down, have an attitude that kids have diminished responsibility and you’d better do something before they get to adulthood because it’s the last chance you’ll get. But once they’re adults the reality is that penal reform has not occurred. (laughter) The whole idea that with the stroke of a pen in about 1974 the world changed from prisons departments to corrections departments didn’t change anything. It doesn’t correct people and everybody knows that. (break in recording)

I don’t know whether you know it, but Rob ran McNally for about a year before he went to Britain, and I guess he got inspired by what he had achieved with
youngsters and made the wrong decision – ‘Let’s get really tough’, you know? – and he could quickly see, and he was right, ‘I’m going to be here in five years’ time treading water, I’m just not going to do it’. Then he said, ‘That’s it, I’m out of here’.

So he couldn’t win in prisons but you got some reforms going in McNally, where you were.

I look back on McNally and I think we made three achievements. The first and most important one was we got three-quarters of the kids out of there, and some of that could only be done from inside. Secondly, we educated quite a lot of kids who would otherwise have remained illiterate for the rest of their life. And, thirdly, while they were there we stopped abusing them. I couldn’t say anything more positive about it than that.

Did you ever come across some of these young – well, they’d be older people now.

Some of them are fifty. (laughter) Just occasionally. No, no, I don’t have strong views about how they turned out. No-one’s ever done a good long-term follow-up. Interesting.

There was one kid who was really smart with locks. He came up to me one day when he was leaving – Delaney, his name was – and he said, ‘I want you to have this’, and he gave me a master key. He said, ‘I’ve been able to go anywhere I wanted to while I’ve been here. I knocked it up in the workshop. I took a print on a block of soap off one of the staff when they weren’t looking, because I used to work for a locksmith’. (laughter) And he said, ‘I want you to have it because I don’t want you to worry’. He said, ‘I haven’t got any copies’. And I met that kid about ten years later and he was a businessman. He had a couple of lock shops, you know? He’d done well. He’d just made the boo-boo of doing a few robberies, because he was slipping into people’s houses and pinching money and stuff like that. I suspect he did better than most.

So have you got any general reflections you’d like to make about your time there? I’ll call it ‘time’ if I may.
Well, I think I’ve been very lucky in being able to find where the cutting edge of reform is for most of my career. But it was certainly a halcyon era. You would go to Ian Cox and it was to him – in Education they had a guy called John Steinle and it was a very similar environment there for a while – you’d say, ‘I’ve got a different way of going about this, and I’ve thought it through and I reckon it looks like this. What about it?’ And it was like you imagine the environment of a really well-run private company to be. The boss says, ‘Well, if you’re sure of it you’ve got six months to prove it. Here’s the money’. And it’s so different from the way that government usually is. I was totally spoilt by it, given all sorts of opportunities to do things my way, but always with this clear direction. The clear, overall strategic direction was, ‘We’re going to find solutions which work that don’t take kids away from their environment’.

So that was the underlying philosophy.

That was the underlying thing, yes.

Very good. Have you got any comments on the young offenders these days? There’s some particularly difficult ones, I don’t know exactly why, but recently the government came up with this idea about community protection panels and intensive case management and youth justice teams and another area, school retention programs, to keep the particularly young Aboriginal kids in schools.

I don’t think I’m very well-educated about modern teenagers. I think it’s likely that the wider advent of drugs created a slightly different crime culture. Some of that was already around in the early ’70s, and certainly people were drunk out of their brains all the time. But I’m more interested in statistics, and the statistics say that the juvenile crime rate is probably lower than it was then. It hasn’t disappeared.

I’m also a bit interested in history, and you can write chapters of quotes from people from any time from the Ancient Greeks saying that young people of today are out of control, da-da-da-da-da-da, ‘They’ve got no respect for their elders, we’re all going to hell in a hand basket’. Whether it was the advent or the sword or the horse or the bicycle or the ..... or whatever, ‘These are all going to undo us, kids are going to have greater freedom and greater opportunity to plot things and steal things’. I look at it all with a sort of old fart’s whimsical feeling, but the key thing that matters
is the stats. Are more people getting raped, are more people getting their houses broken into, are more people getting their cars stolen? The answer on all of those, my impression is, is that things are a lot better than they were in the ’70s.

Just while I remember it, was there any political rebellion at all? There were no kids coming through who’d got involved with some of the more radical anarchist routes or anything like that that you can think of?

No, none that I can remember at all.

No. (laughs) I do remember getting into strife with a bunch of people because I banned a film at Vaughan House once. There was a film called If.

Oh, yes.

And we’d just had this massive riot and a number of kids had got badly hurt and a couple of staff had ended up in hospital, and one of our youth workers said, ‘The kids ought to see this to realise that there’s another way to view things’. (laughs) And this film was about how the kids take over the institution and torture and kill the staff. And I was really upset at myself to be censoring a film, and a lot of people complained about it. But I never doubted I was right on that one. (laughs)

Yes – it would have given them too many ideas.

Yes.

All right. Well, thanks very much, David. That’s been really interesting.

Right.

END OF INTERVIEW.