This is an edited version of interviews for the Don Dunstan History Project dated 9th August 2007. The interviews were conducted on 9th August and 13th September 2007. The interviewer is George Lewkowicz and the interviewee is John Summers. The topic is Don Dunstan and his activities in Aboriginal affairs and Aboriginal rights.

John, thanks very much for doing this interview for the Don Dunstan History Project. Can you just talk a bit about what you are doing at the moment just briefly about the University and then talk about how you met Don and got interested in Aboriginal affairs?

At the moment I am working at the Flinders University lecturing in politics and public policy and one of my research interests is Indigenous policy and the history of Indigenous affairs in Australia. My involvement in Aboriginal matters came about through meeting Don Dunstan. I first met Don through the Young Labor Movement when it was involved in a marginal electorates campaign in the March 1965 State election. When Labor won office Dunstan became the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs as well as the Attorney-General. Because of his interest in Aboriginal affairs and his new policies on Aboriginal matters, I had become interested in it, and in 1966 I was encouraged to take a job in what was then the South Australian Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) as a Welfare Officer. I think that was the title, but the particular brief was as an Arts and Crafts Officer. Dunstan was particularly interested in getting some sort of craft activity going on Indigenous communities. Of course they were not called Indigenous communities then; they were either missions or government reserves which were run and administered, in the case of the missions, by churches or mission societies, or, in the case of Aboriginal reserves, by the DAA. The regime that was in place on Aboriginal Reserves had been in place for most of the 20th century. Aborigines who lived on reserves or missions had very few rights and were essentially an administered people. It was part of Dunstan’s program to change this. One part of Dunstan’s program was the development of economic activities on Aboriginal Reserves. He had been influenced partly by what he had seen in America and particularly the Navajo and the Hopi who had maintained a number of cultural activities—weaving and silver work for example—that had a strong traditional element, and were a source of income. Dunstan was also impressed by what had been done at the Presbyterian Mission at Ernabella (now called Pukatja) where a craft industry, that made use of traditional skills and provided income to women, had been established. He wanted to foster some craft activities that also gave some expression to a genuine Indigenous culture.

I was employed to work on this project. Several ventures were considered but ultimately I finished up working on one that related to the mining and cutting and polishing of a gem stone called chrysoprase. Chrysoprase is a variety of quartz which is coloured green by a small amount of nickel. It was found on what was then called the North-West Aboriginal Reserve (NWAR) and is now the APY Lands, and the plan was to try to set up a gem stone cutting business on the Reserve.
The NWAR had been established in the 1920s, partly at the instigation of advocacy groups who sought to exclude Europeans and to protect the Indigenous people still living there in their traditional manner. At the time the people living on the Reserve had had very little contact with Europeans and maintained a traditional hunting and gathering existence. In 1937 Ernabella, a Presbyterian mission, was established on a pastoral lease adjacent to the NWAR. Ernabella was established, in part, with the goal of acting as a buffer against the intrusion of Europeans until the Indigenous people were better equipped to deal with the contact that had been so disastrous for Indigenous people everywhere else in Australia. It was in many ways an atypical mission. Schooling was in the vernacular, English was taught as a second language, all staff were encouraged to learn the Pitjantjatjara language, and there was a positive effort to respect the Indigenous culture. In 1961 the South Australian Government took the first steps to having a presence on the Reserve with the establishment of a government station at Musgrave Park (now called Amata) at the eastern end of the Reserve and about 90 miles, as the crow flies, west of Ernabella.

In 1966 I went to Musgrave Park as as an Arts and Crafts Officer. At that time it was very remote in every sense. When I arrived at Musgrave Park the non-Aboriginal staff comprised a Superintendent, a Stock Overseer, a Building Overseer, a Welfare Officer, a Nurse, and a Nurse/Patrol Officer. Over the next year the staff numbers increased slightly with the addition of a storekeeper and a mechanic. In April 1967 I married Anne Summers who came to live at Musgrave Park for the rest of my time there. There were occasional short visits from other DAA staff and others. However, non-Aboriginal people needed a permit from the DAA to enter the Reserve and because of the distances it was not easy get away for short periods. For the European people who lived there, there was a real sense of remoteness and seclusion.

Supplies came by truck from Finke on the old narrow gauge Ghan train line which was about 400 km east of Musgrave Park on rough dirt roads. It took a minimum of two days to drive to Musgrave Park from Adelaide over roads that, north of Woomera, were unsealed. Mail came once a week on a mail-plane and the only other communication could only be done through the very public Flying Doctor radio network. If staff wanted to send a private message urgently you could send a telegram over the Flying Doctor radio. If there were heavy rains the rail and road could become unpassable and the landing strip made unserviceable.

There were about 3-400 Aboriginal people who came from an area of hundreds of square miles around there. The numbers did fluctuate quite a bit. The people who lived there still had a very traditional life style. Some of the people had previously lived at Ernabella where there had been to school and some medical services had been provided since the late 1930s but some of the people had only had any significant contact with Europeans for a decade or two. Almost all the Aboriginal people lived in wiltjas—rough shelters traditionally made of sticks and spinifex but after contact with Europeans the construction sometime included some canvas and a sheet or two of galvanised iron. In many cases it was little more that a windbreak. People cooked on open fires and slept on the ground with a swag, or the like, for bedding. Men who worked were paid a small wage. Older people received the standard Old-Age Pension which was quite a bit of money relative to the wages that were paid to workers. Child
Endowment (a Commonwealth benefit at the time that was paid to families with children) was not paid to families on the Reserve but was paid to DAA which used the money to provide a cooked meal to the children at lunch time on week days1.

Dunstan was keen to get some craft activity going at Musgrave Park. The missionaries at Ernabella, had established a craft industry which was reasonably viable. The craft workers were paid wages that, I think, were in line with the wages that were paid to other Aboriginal workers at Ernabella and Musgrave Park. Dunstan saw this as one avenue for achieving some sort of progress for Indigenous people in that area. He was critical of what he called the ersatz arts and crafts—the kitsch stuff that was made only to be sold to tourists. He was looking for something that was in some sense authentic and of a higher quality and would give some expression to Indigenous culture. Ernabella mission provided a model for what could be done in this regard. Winifred Hilliard’s book, ‘The People In Between’, provides a good insiders account of the development of the craft work at Ernabella.

It was intended that I would train some of the people in gem-stone cutting with a view to establishing a business in cutting and polishing chrysoprase for setting in jewellery and at the same time looking after the mining of chrysoprase and the sale of uncut chrysoprase. The plans were not fulfilled but it would be an exaggeration to say that the whole undertaking was a failure. The sale of chrysoprase did raise quite a bit of money—sufficient to purchase a new Bedford truck for the ‘community’. The sales (to Chinese jade cutters in Hong Kong) were organised by the Head Office of DAA. On the reserve I ‘supervised’ (if that’s the right word) the mining of the chrysoprase. Aboriginal men had been mining this gem stone at a location that was then called Mt Davies which is about 150 miles west of Musgrave Park—very close to the NT, SA and WA border and near what is now the Pipalyatjara Community. The mining had been going on for some time before I started at Musgrave Park. The routine was that a group of about 8 or 10 men would camp at Mt Davies for three weeks and mine the chrysoprase. The chrysoprase was simply dug out of the side of the hill with picks and shovels. The men would dig into the side of the hill and follow a vein of chrysoprase until it looked like the overhang was going to collapse and get out as much of the gem-stone before it did collapse. I drove to Mt Davies once a week with food and water etc. and brought back the chrysoprase and every three weeks took out a new group of men and brought the others back.

Gem-stone cutting and polishing was not a success. Chrysoprase is a very hard mineral and is difficult to cut and polish. Opal is very easy to cut and polish compared with chrysoprase. A lengthy period of consistent training and practice would have been needed to produce the the very precisely shaped stones that were required for sale as cut gem stones. In any event it was not the sort of thing that the men wanted to

---

1 It is interesting to note that at the time some DAA staff were in the habit of suggesting that Ernabella mission was paternalistic with the implication that DAA’s policies were more enlightened and progressive. In fact Ernabella phased out the provision of meals much earlier that the DAA run settlement. Ernabella phased in direct payment of Child Endowment to Aboriginal parents in two steps; first by providing credit at the store which could be used only for food and clothing etc, and then, after an interval, removing all the restrictions. My point here is not to defend Ernabella but to draw attention to one feature of the DAA misleading, defensive and self-promoting bureaucratic behaviour.
do and it did not lend itself to giving expression to Indigenous culture. Several people showed some ingenuity in stone cutting but had little interest in the repetitive and extremely precise work that was required for sale for conventional jewellery settings.

The other thing that I did, that was perhaps closer to what Dunstan had in mind, was buy and sell carved wooden artefacts. The artefact business was quite successful in the sense that the quality of the artefacts was quite good and it provided some income to women and men. Things like carved animals, various sorts of traditional wooden bowls (bidi), spears, and digging sticks were made. These things were all made with a mixture of traditional methods and modified European tools. The basic shape of the article was fashioned with a metal tomahawk, which invariably had a makeshift handle, and the finishing would be done with a kind of adze, which was made by fastening a chisel or gouge blade to a digging stick or a short piece of pipe, and rasps files, and broken glass used as a scraper. The bowls were usually decorated with traditional designs that were burnt into the wood with bits of fencing wire heated in the fire. All the work was done sitting crossed legged on the ground. I was amazed at the finish that they managed to get with the most basic improvised tools. When I started buying them the making of artefacts became a major activity in the community. All around the camp men and women were making artefacts. There was a ritual on Friday afternoons of purchasing artefacts and people with items to sell would all come up and sit around patiently while I dealt with each one in turn.

I tried to give some assistance by providing some better tools—for example some small carving tools to do the more detailed carving and I sharpened pieces of steel for blades for their improvised adzes—but mostly the people had their own way of doing things. They made use of European tools—the axe heads, rasps, chisel blades etc—but they had their own ways of adapting these tools and most of the things that I thought would be better were not taken up. (I noticed recently on a trip to the APY lands in 2007 that the methods used in making carved wooden animals has not changed much in 40 years.) The artefacts were sold in various outlets in Alice Springs and Adelaide and they were certainly were a much higher quality than the kitsch ones that Dunstan objected to. It was the beginning of an artefact industry that has been going, on and off, in that area ever since. I still have some artefacts that I bought in 1966/1967 and in 2007 they were still in perfect condition. Looking back I am amazed at the quality of finish that people managed to get just by scraping with a sharp stone or broken glass.

When you got up to the Musgrave Park who did you actually relate to when you were there? Was there some local leader or leadership group or some welfare type person up there?

The thing to understand about all Aboriginal reserves at that time was that they were very much closed and ‘total institutions’. Aboriginal people living on reserves were an administered people. They had no political voice; their political and civil rights were

---

2 In his monograph *The Pitjantjatjara People and Their Crafts* (The Aboriginal Arts Board, Arts Council North Sydney 1975) Peter Brokensha says “…the first organised craft was initiated around 1968 but the quality was poor and the sales of craft only about $500 per year” p. 68. I don’t know what the sales were but, for what it’s worth, the statement about the quality is simply wrong. I assume the assertion about quality came from self-serving statements of the European craft officer who worked at Amata in the late 1960s and early 1970s.
constrained in all sorts of ways by the Aboriginal Affairs Act which made them second class citizens and an administered people. Everything on the Reserve was run by the government, the store, the school, the allocation of housing (on the Southern Reserves where there was housing).

The Aboriginal people who lived there at that time really had very little independence. The Superintendent ran the place. It was like any closed institution, of the sort described by Goffman (Irving) in the book ‘Asylums’. It was a multi-purpose institution in which the residents lost the sort of autonomy that existed in the wider community. There was a division between the white staff and the Aboriginal people that had elements of a ‘master-servant’ relationship. There was a sense that everyone on the place was subject to the dictates of the Superintendent. Although there was no compulsion to stay—no one was required by law to stay—people had become dependent on the store and medical services, and the small amounts of income they could get from working. It would have been difficult for people to go back to an independent existence by living off the land, or alternatively, to leave their country to get work in the European economy.

But it was not just the legal situation that was the problem. The law relating to Aborigines at the time was bad enough but there was a social pathology in the relations between the European staff and the Aboriginal people that arose from the way the place was and had been run. Despite the excellent work done by some staff (for example the nurse) and the friendship, and trust between them and the Aboriginal people, there was an overriding sense of tension between the two groups.

I would contrast the situation at Musgrave Park with that at the mission at Ernabella. Ernabella is about 90 miles, as the crow flies, east of Amata, on the eastern boundary of the Reserve. Although it was an institution, in the same sense that all Aboriginal settlement and missions were, it had a very different ‘feel’ about it. Most Europeans working there spoke the Pitjantjatjara language and there was an attempt to cultivate Indigenous leadership within the Church and within the community. At Musgrave Park there was always a feeling of tension with a much greater divide between the European staff and the Aboriginal residents. At Ernabella the atmosphere was much more comfortable; it was much more at ease, which is not to say that there was never any conflict or disagreements. Aboriginal people would think nothing of wandering up to a superintendent’s office and have a chat to him in their own language about something that was worrying them. On the Government station there was a sense of it being run much more like an old fashioned boarding school or a military camp or some such, where there was an overt hierarchical structure and a clear demarcation between the ‘inmates’ and the European staff.

I make the point because ‘advanced thinkers’ and ‘progressive’ people at the time tended to have a blanket view of missions that was critical and negative. There was a view that missions had been authoritarian agents of cultural destruction and had placed greater store on ‘saving souls’ than the welfare and wellbeing of Aborigines; that at best they had largely concerned with ‘smoothing the dying pillow’. In many cases this was justified (though in many cases it would have been a mistake to believe that a government takeover, which at the time was the only alternative to a mission, would
have been much of an improvement). I don’t think that this stereotypical picture was true of Ernabella. Ernabella was quite different from the typical picture of a mission and I think Dunstan himself, although he did not share their religious views, appreciated that, and he admired much of what Ernabella had done. He had worked with Dr Charles Duguid, the ‘founder’ of Ernabella on various matters in relation to Aboriginal rights. Duguid was a tireless campaigner for both the legal equality of Aboriginal people and for respect for Indigenous culture. (There is a good account of Duguid’s role in the establishment of Ernabella in Winifred Hilliard’s book ‘The People In Between’ which I mentioned earlier, and by Duguid himself in an autobiography called ‘The Doctor and the Aborigines’. Both these books are of course sympathetic accounts written from a point of view of ‘insiders’.)

The direction in which Aboriginal policy was changing under Dustan—that is away from the hard-line assimilation which had been adopted in the 1950s and towards a much more pluralist position—had much in common with Duguid’s ideology/philosophy that underpinned the operation of Ernabella. By the late 1960s or early 1970s there was a growing view that was critical of the uncompromising assimilationist orthodoxy of the time. Dunstan and others had been pushing that line throughout the 1960s. Duguid’s vision for Ernabella was in some ways a precursor of that development.

Your project, how many people worked with you on that, that is the Aboriginal people?

On the gemstone cutting, only a handful of people. As I said before, that undertaking was not successful.

There were a lot more people involved in the mining of of the chrysoprase. On a rotational basis it could have included 50 to 60 people, perhaps 8 to 10 working on it at a time. Over the time that it lasted it provided quite a bit of income to the community.

Anyone and everyone were involved in the artefact making. Importantly this provided work and income for both men and women.

Did you get any sense from the Aboriginal people about any political movement or awareness of their rights, including rights of work?

No. At that time there was nothing like the political movement in relation to Land-Rights that developed in the 1970s. There were, however, people who were clearly leaders. There were people who stood out as natural leaders that took up issues on behalf of the community. As I said before the nature of the settlement at that time put the Aboriginal people in a subservient position. The most senior of the traditional leaders were old people who had no, or very little, English. At Musgrave Park the people who were most prominent in relations between the community and the Superintendent and other European employees tended to be middle age people who had some standing in traditional matters but also greater familiarity with English. They tended to be people who had worked on pastoral properties or had gone to the school at Ernabella. They could communicate reasonably adequately in English and in the case of some of them quite well.
John SUMMERS

So there was no land rights sort of movement at the time ——

I wasn’t conscious of it at that time. Issues arose about particular areas where Europeans blundered into secret or sacred areas or disturbed important sites. People were clearly affronted by the actions of Europeans in relation to sensitive areas of the land—disturbing features or the landscape that were important in the dreaming for example, or trampled over important sites without any regard to the people whose land it was—but I don’t recall people talking in terms of land-rights in the way they did in the 1970s. Also, it is probably important that at that time there was no discussion at all about title to land. Land-rights became an important political issue for the people, in the way that we think of the land rights movement now, when the issue of legal title to the land was raised by Europeans.

Yes right.

Perhaps I could jump ahead and talk about land-rights more generally and the background to those developments and Dunstan’s role in it. When the Labor government was elected in 1965, Dunstan, as Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Attorney General, put forward three important bits of legislation relating to Indigenous affairs. One was for the establishment of the Lands Trust, one was an Anti-Discrimination Bill and one was legislation to facilitate the incorporation of Indigenous organisations on Aboriginal communities. That package of legislation can be seen as part of Dunstan’s broad policy objectives—of moving away from the strict assimilationist policies of the past six decades and removing the restrictions on the civil and political rights of Aborigines. (Later we could come back to the question of that broad program.)

The Aboriginal Land Trust Act was the first attempt in Australia to provide Aboriginal people with a form of native title. Dunstan argued that Aborigines should be granted title to the bits of land that had been reserved for them. The Letters Patent that established the European settlement in South Australia had required the reservation of one-fifth of all land for the use of Aboriginal people. This had simply been ignored by the settlement company. The granting of land rights Dunstan argued, would in a small way, compensate Aborigines for that breach of the original intentions of the British government in establishing the colony of South Australia. Dunstan’s view of the form in which the land-rights should be granted was influenced by what he had seen in the United States. He argued that the fate of individual American Indian communities had been shaped by luck; if a community had been able to hold onto land that turned out to contain valuable mineral wealth it was relatively well-off. If, on the other hand, as was much more common, it finished up with land that was essentially useless it was extremely deprived. The difference was just a matter of luck. He argued that legislation to grant land rights in Australia should provide for the sharing between all communities of any mineral wealth that fortuitously happened to turn up on one piece of Aboriginal land. The Aboriginal Lands Trust was set up in a way that if wealth did arise out of any bits of land that were granted to Indigenous communities it would be held by the Trust for the benefit of all the communities that were members of the Trust. The Lands Trust Act established a statutory Trust made up of Aboriginal members. Unoccupied Aboriginal land was transferred to the Trust and the residents
John SUMMERS

of the occupied Aboriginal reserves in the South of the State could decide whether they wished to transfer title to the reserve to the Trust. In the first instance there were no plans for the North West Aboriginal Reserve to be incorporated into the Trust.

In 1977, when the of title to the North-West Aboriginal Reserve being taken over by the Aboriginal Lands Trust was raised, there was forceful opposition by the residents. Representations were made to Dunstan as Premier. Spokespeople for the Pitjantjatjara argued against the land being held by any outside body. They wanted the land to be owned by themselves. By this time the policies of self-determination were in place; at the Commonwealth level there had been the period of the Whitlam government, the passing (by the Fraser Government) of the Northern Territory Land Rights Act. By the late 1970s there was a very different atmosphere from the one in the middle of the 1960s. There were half a dozen or so communities spread across the North-West Aboriginal Reserve that had been in operation under a policy of self-determination. The people had become more experienced at dealing with Governments. So by the late 1970s when the question arose about what would happen to the North-West Aboriginal Reserve, and the possibility that the land would become vested in the Trust was raised, the people reacted strongly; it was an issue on which they appeared to be unanimous and highly motivated. This was one matter on which they appeared to speak with one voice. There were a number of non-Aboriginal people involved in the negotiations and campaign about the North-West Aboriginal Reserve but I think that it is true to say that the strong reaction to the proposition that the North-West Aboriginal Reserve be transferred to the Aboriginal Lands Trust, as opposed to the people from that country, sprang from the people themselves. It was one matter on which they appeared to be unanimous. I don’t think there is any doubt that that they didn’t want their land vested in the Trust. By this time Dunstan was Premier (and not the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs) but he was involved in the negotiations about the fate of the North West Aboriginal Reserve. Initially he remained wedded to the Land Trust and my recollection is that in the first instance he tried to talk them around and to persuade them that their interest would be protected if the title to their land were transferred to the Aboriginal Land Trust. However, the representations from the people of the North West were very persistent and forceful and Don was persuaded to change his mind and established a Committee to recommend on the tricky question of the means by which the land could be owned by a corporate entity made up of the people of the North-West Reserve. This Committee made recommendations that led to the the drafting and introduction of the Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Bill.

Are you talking about the ’60s or the ’70s? In the late ’60s he was firstly Premier.

No, I am talking about the late ’70s. Don had resigned as Premier before the Bill was dealt with by the Parliament and the Bill was still before the Parliament when his successor as Premier, Des Corcoran, called the 1979 election which Labor lost. Ultimately a version of the Legislation was passed by the Tonkin Liberal Government but only after the Liberals had attempted to back away from it. It was only passed after a forceful campaign by both the Pitjantjatjara people and organisations from the wider community in support of the legislation. By this time Don was out of the Parliament but he was very active in the campaign to have the legislation passed. The events
surrounding that campaign and the passing of the legislation has been well
documented in various publications

Have you every studied the societal change at the time and why the public was
supportive, was it a sort of fair go view, you know they seemed to have a good argument,
give them a fair go or was there something else going on ---

I don’t know. I think from the 1970s and into the ’80s there was a much more positive
attitude to questions of Aboriginal rights. To some extent the results of the 1967
Referendum are an indication of that. It is worth noting that in the 1950s and early
1960s Dunstan (and a few other politicians of like mind) met with a lot of opposition
to their advocacy for a change in Aboriginal policy and hostility on account of causes
they took up on behalf of Aborigines. There is no way of being sure, but I think that
given the prevailing attitudes of the 1950s Don’s attacks on the Playford government
in relation to its handling of the Stuart case probably won him some support but also a
lot of enmity. It was not a cause a politician who wanted to ‘play it safe’ would have
taken up as vigorously as Don did. Also, the legislation that he introduced as Minister
of Aboriginal Affairs in the mid 1960s attracted a great deal of opposition.

Of course it was not just attitudes in the broader community. The policies in relation to
Aborigines (and immigration) that Don and a small group of other people in the Labor
Party were fighting against in the 1950s and 1960s were deeply engrained in the Labor
party and the union movement. These people were swimming against the tide both in
the Labor Party and in the general community. Dunstan (and others) took up
Aboriginal and immigration issues at a time when you couldn’t have thought there
were many votes in it and that it would not have won you much support within the
Labor party. A more cautious politician would have been much less outspoken
on these questions. This is not to say that he was foolhardy in this regard. There were
events at Musgrave Park in 1967 that I was involved in and I had hoped that Don
would take a different direction from the one he did. However, by that time he was
Premier and was more responsive to the advice that was coming from the Public
Service and, no doubt mindful of the imminent election; he did not want any public
fuss about what was happening on an Aboriginal Reserve. (Those events go to the
circumstances under which Anne and I left Musgrave Park. We can come back to that
later if you like.)

Did Don ever speak to you personally about his views and beliefs in this area?

Yes. He often spoke privately and publicly about the things that had influenced his
attitude. One thing that he referred to frequently was his childhood experience in Fiji
(and of course he retained his interest in the racial politics in Fiji). I could not say
where his particular interest in Aboriginal matters came from. From the 1950s he was actively involved in the Aboriginal Advancement League and as a Member of

---

Parliament he had had a lot of personal contact with different groups of Aboriginal people around the State. In his book ‘Felicia’ Don describes a visit he made to Point Pearce Aboriginal Reserve in 1956 with Ron Loveday, another Labor member of the State Parliament. He describes the terrible conditions on the Southern reserves at that time and the impact it had on him. He clearly maintained contact with people on those reserves and in the 1950s took up a number of issues in relation to Aboriginal affairs.

In the late 1950s and the 1960s there was a small but growing amount of debate about the objectives of Aboriginal policy by academics and commentators. I think Don was familiar with those debates and the increasing amount of criticism that was directed at the hard and fast assimilationist policy which had been adopted by all governments in Australia. In South Australia people such as T. G. H. Strehlow and Fay Gale were raising questions about the goal of the ‘assimilation for all Aborigines’ and of the mode of its implementation. Don was not alone in taking these issues up in the Parliament in the 1950s. In the Commonwealth Parliament there was a small group of politicians who took an interest in Aboriginal issues; for example Kim Beasley (Sn.) and Gordon Bryant on the Labor side and Paul Hasluck and William Wentworth on the Liberal side amongst others. In the State Parliament Ron Loveday (on the Labor side) was one other parliamentarian who took up Aboriginal issues and undoubtedly there were others.

During the 1950s Don had called for reforms to the Aboriginal Affairs Act. Since the first decade of the Twentieth Century Aborigines in South Australia (and all other States and Territories for that matter) had been subject to segregationist legislation that also denied them the most basic civil and political rights. Throughout the first half of the century the restrictions on Aborigines had been increased and the ambit of the legislation relating to Aborigines had increased not decreased; anyone who had any Aboriginal ancestry was subject to the restrictive and segregationist legislation. The legislation was based entirely on racial background except in one important regard; Aborigines who the Aboriginal Affairs Board determined as having attained a standard of character or development and intelligence (or words to that effect) could be declared to be not an Aborigine for the purposes of the Aboriginal Affairs Act. (The exemption which applied to very few people was referred to contemptuously by Aboriginal people as a ‘dog licence’.) People who were covered by the Act could not vote, were subject to directions by the Protector of Aborigines, could be removed to reserves, forced to remove their camp, towns could be declared off-limits to Aborigines, the Protector could in some circumstances take control of the property of an Aborigine, the Protector was the legal guardian of all children until they reached the age of twenty one. One provision of the Act which I heard him discuss was the ‘consorting provision’. This made it an offence for a non-Aboriginal male to keep the company of a female Aborigine unless he was married to her. This provision was clearly included in the Act to protect Aboriginal women from exploitation by European men. However, Don believed that in its implementation it was sometimes used to prevent non-Aboriginal trade unionists and political activists from being active in Aboriginal communities. An activist who was regarded as a trouble-maker could be warned-off any contact with the community by the threat of being charged with consorting. In 1962 Don played a significant role in modifying a Government Bill to amend the Aboriginal Affairs Act.
John SUMMERS

One thing that had influenced Don’s ideas in this area was a trip that he made to the United States some time in the 1950s. If my memory is correct he wore a very large silver and turquoise ring that he got on a Navajo Reservation. He also talked about an American novel, ‘Laughing Boy’, by Oliver La Farge, which was about the clash of cultures in the American South-West. I cannot remember exactly but I think it is a sympathetic account of the Navajo efforts to maintain their culture in the face of European settlement. The Navajo Indians had retained some autonomy within the United States and had maintained some of their cultural activities which they made use of in their art and craft enterprises. The Navajo provided something of a model for some of the things that Don wanted to see happen in Indigenous affairs in Australia. Also, I mentioned before how Don’s ideas about how land-rights should be granted was influenced by what he had seen in the United States.

Just getting back to your work up at Musgrave Park how did you relate to the Office of Aboriginal Affairs---

I was employed by what was then the South Australian Department of Aboriginal Affairs. The Department administered all the Aboriginal Settlements on Aboriginal Reserves that weren’t administered by missions. At that time there were still three Aboriginal Missions operating in South Australia—Ernabella which I have mentioned, Yalata on the far west coast (which was run by the Lutherans) and Nepabunna in the Flinders Rangers which was run by a Mission Society (I think the United Aborigines Mission). The Department of Aboriginal Affairs ran reserves at Point Pearce on the York Peninsula, Point McLeay on Lake Alexandrina, Gerard in the Riverland, Davenport at Port Augusta, Kooniba out of Ceduna and one at Coober Pedy. In addition the Department ran patrols from Musgrave Park and Oodnadatta to Aborigines living on Cattle Stations in the north of the State. There was one quite large Aboriginal Community living on a cattle station called Granite Downs (south-east of the North-West Aboriginal Reserve) which was serviced by the patrol officer who operated out of Musgrave Park. In his time as Minister of Aboriginal Affairs (I think about 1967) Dunstan negotiated the purchase of a piece land that was excised from Granite Downs station (a cattle station to the southeast of the North West Aboriginal Reserve). That land became Indulkana Aboriginal Reserve—it was managed by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs until it became part of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands with the passage of the Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act 1981.

Musgrave Park station had been established in 1961. Until that time the only services to Aborigines on the vast area of the North-West Aboriginal Reserve had been provided by the Ernabella Mission. I understand that the Superintendent from Ernabella made visits out through the then unstaffed Reserve from time to time. The rationale for the establishment at Musgrave Park station was in part the provision of training for Aboriginal men to work on cattle stations. When I arrived in 1966 the settlement consisted of a small group of houses for the white staff, a store, a workshop and a few other buildings (a galvanised iron building for the provision of meals for the children, a small generator shed, a small freezer room). There was a fair-weather airstrip several kilometres away. The store was essentially a small galvanised shed with the freezer room attached. It stocked only a very small range of goods—white flour, sugar, tea, powdered milk, jam, tinned meat, tinned vegetables and cigarettes.
and tobacco and a few other things I cannot remember—probably some rice and pasta and washing powder and bath soap and billy cans, saucepans and tin pannikins and the like. Only the most basic things (and generally foods that made for a bad diet) were available. No bread was available and people had to make it themselves or go without. The Aboriginal people had no way of making bread and they used the flour to make damper and ate it mostly with treacle or jam. I remember that the Department of Aboriginal Affairs made some efforts to improve the quality of the food sold. The Aboriginal people were completely resistant to wholemeal flour because they said it did not make good damper. The Department in conjunction with Ernabella got one of the flour mills to provide white flour that contained some mineral and vitamin supplements. The people immediately noticed the difference and took every available opportunity to buy ‘unadulterated’ flour from one of the cattle stations if they could. The white staff got other items freighted in in various ways. There was a prohibition on Aborigines drinking on the Reserve but the whites who did drink alcohol could get it shipped in from Alice Springs and consumed it openly and freely.

For Anne and me one major consideration arising from the remoteness was access to news of events from the wider world. We could get reasonable radio reception at night but we had newspapers posted to us from a newsagency in Alice Springs. They came once a week with the mail plane. (There was always a dilemma about what to do with a weeks newspapers that came all at once—do you systematically read them in date order or quickly leaf through the lot?)

Did you used to go to Adelaide and attend meetings on things like---

The North-West Reserve was so remote—the distance was so great and the roads were so bad in those days—that it was not possible to leave for anything except annual leave. We did make occasional visits to Ernabella and to adjacent cattle station for social events but other wise it was not feasible to leave for anything but annual leave. The Superintendent went to an annual conference of Superintendents in Adelaide and perhaps went to Alice Springs to deal with some issues but otherwise there was no possibility of popping off for the weekend. It was very remote. As I said before, the only communication was through the Flying Doctor Radio. We received supplies by truck from the Finke railway station and if the train was washed out, as it was from time to time, supplies could get very short. Other than driving to Adelaide, which took a minimum of two days, there was the Ghan which could be taken from Alice Springs or Oodnadatta or Finke or a bus from the main road which was very uncomfortable and took about 36 hours. It was very different from the situation today where the roads are much much better and to speak to someone in Adelaide or anywhere in the world it is possible to just pick up the phone.

So who was the head at the time?

The head of the Department was a man called Miller.

Miller, right.

And the Deputy Director was a bloke called Don Busbridge who had worked his way up I think from Patrol Officer; originally in the Northern Territory. Jobs in Aboriginal
John Summers

Affairs at that time didn’t attract the normal sort of public servant. I’m not sure of Miller’s background but the Superintendents of Reserves tended to be people who had been employed because of a practical or trade skill. Some of these people turned out to be very good at their jobs in very difficult circumstances, but it is the case that the Department often found it difficult to attract good staff to jobs where the employee had to live on a Reserve and/or in remote areas. On the North-West Aboriginal Reserve for example there was quite a mixture of staff with a wide range of motivations for being there. Amongst them there were some very dedicated and skilled people—the nurse, the building overseer, the stock overseer, and the mechanic—but there were some complete no-hopers. There had been one, before my time there, who when very drunk and driving back from Finke with supplies and a number of Aboriginal people made a sexual attack on an elderly Aboriginal woman. The story only came to light because the Aboriginal people were able to communicate effectively with the Superintendent at Ernabella who spoke Pitjantjatjara and he was able to pass it onto the Superintendent at Musgrave Park. It was said that the person concerned had got his job on the Reserve because a senior person in the Department wanted to get him out of Adelaide. I cannot say for sure whether or not that part of the story is true, but what I can say is that it is not inconsistent with my understanding about the way employment practices sometimes worked in Aboriginal affairs. There was another case when I was at Musgrave Park. A bookkeeper/storekeeper was employed. It turned out that he had a real problem with alcohol. I’m not sure that, despite the drinking problem, he was that bad at the job—he probably had the skills to be an adequate bookkeeper-storekeeper but the important point is that he had taken the job out of desperation and had absolutely no interest in the matters relating to Indigenous people. He did not stay long because when his probationary period finished it was revealed that he had a police record that precluded him from permanent employment in the public service.

Right.

And often they were people of extremely narrow vision. I recall the Clerk who administered one part of the operation in Adelaide who was an English migrant who openly expressed hostile racist attitudes. The DAA was a small Department that had very little clout in the wider public service. The Head of Department was not in a strong position to make demands of the Public Service Board about staffing. A job in DAA was not attractive to young able ambitious public servants unless they had a very strong interest in Aboriginal affairs.

And did they have any written instructions for you or contextual policies which gave you a bit of an idea of what, how you fitted into the role?

My position was a very junior one and I’m not sure exactly what instructions had come from Dunstan to the Department. Busbridge and Miller spoke as if they had discussed the question of craft industries with him and there were no great disagreements between them on the matter. I think that the senior management of the DAA were sceptical about some of Dunstan’s ideas but there did not appear to me to be the sort of open hostility there was between Don and the Children’s Welfare and Public Relief Board. There was quite a bit of discussion in the DAA about the
John SUMMERS

Government’s policy. I remember a visit to the DAA office in Adelaide by Gerry Long who was a well known and well regarded patrol officer in the Northern Territory. His patrol area in the Territory was adjacent to the North-West Aboriginal Reserve. When a group of people were casually discussing the finer points of the government’s policy some one eventually asked Gerry about the policy in the NT and he said ‘we don’t have policy, we just do things’. At the time I took him to mean that all the discussion of policy was a waste of time, but on reflection I was never quite sure whether it was an ironic reflection on what was happening in the Northern Territory. The point is that there was a lot of discussion of policy in the Department and I cannot recall anyone expressing open opposition to Dunstan’s policy. No doubt there were people in the Department who were hostile to the Government and others who were quite cynical about the whole venture and were simply time-serving but there was not open ill-will that existed in some departments. A curious feature of the DAA was that there was an Aboriginal Affairs Board which, until change in the legislation in 1962 (I think), had been called the Aborigines Protection Board. The Head of Department was the Secretary to the Board and the Board still had some Statutory responsibilities (for example it was the Board that formally granted Aborigines exemptions to the Act). From about 1962 the Board in its annual reports had cautiously expressed views about the direction of Aboriginal Affairs that were not at odds with Dunstan’s. For example the Board said that it had some misgivings about an assimilation policy that required that Aborigines completely abandon all aspects of their own culture. To some extent the policy direction that Dunstan advocated was something that had been talked about in the Department for several years before Labor came to office in 1965. This is not to say that there were not many people in the Department who continued to see their job in a way that was completely at odds with the spirit of the stated Government policy. Nor does it mean that the Department was not very much stuck in a bygone era or that in its actual practices had changed much. However, I don’t think that at the senior levels there was the same sort of hostility to Dunstan as Minister as there was in some quarters.

One change Don did make in the Department that goes to the matter of the relations between the Minister and the Department was the establishment of a Research Office. There were two staff appointed initially. The Head was a man called Kevin Martin who saw himself, and presented himself in the Department, as an agent of Dunstan whose job it was to steer the Department towards in a new progressive direction. Kevin came from NSW and later went to work for the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs. He was quite forthright in his views in the Department and I think that although he was responsible to the Head of Department (and was appointed in normal way by the Public Service Board) he made it fairly clear that he saw himself as Dunstan’s man. He let it be known that he was a personal friend of Don and Gretel. This was at a time when there was not ministerial staff in the way that there are today. I’m sure that the senior people in the Department cursed him behind his back (and I think that Kevin expected them to do that) but even then there was never the animosity to the new government that there was in some sections of the public service.

There were no Aboriginal people working there?
John SUMMERS

There were Aborigines working on the Reserves in the way that I have described and there were a few working on in clerical or trade positions in the Department but I don’t recall any Aborigines in influential or policy positions. There were a few Aboriginal people working in the Department but no one in a senior position.

Did you ever see Don relate face to face with an Aboriginal person?

Yes.

How did he do that?

I think that one of the ironies of Don is that he had that plum in the mouth way of speaking, and in a lot of ways appeared awkward talking in small groups or to individuals, but nevertheless he usually went over quite well with people from a quite different background to his own. I once went with him to the annual Miss Young Aborigine Ball at Point Pearce, on a Saturday night. At the time he was Minister of Aboriginal Affairs as well as Attorney General. Given how busy he was I was surprised that he made the time. He spent the night there chatting to people in that very ‘posh’ and ‘proper’ way he had of speaking and in many ways he he looked awkward and a ‘fish out of water’ but he went over very well. It was always a bit of a puzzle about how he did relate to some groups of people with whom he had no interests in common. He never attempted to adopt a knockabout way of talking but he still managed to somehow relate to them and to ‘go over’ quite well.

Don became Aboriginal Affairs Minister in 1965 and brought a quite new approach to the portfolio. Could you elaborate on that and what were the innovations and where did ideas for them come from?

First, there was obviously the removal of discriminatory legislation. To some extent this was a move that was underway around Australia and in the case of South Australia something that had commenced with changes to the Aboriginal Affairs Act in 1962 when the Liberal Government accepted amendments, moved by Dunstan, to the Government’s own Bill. Allied to the removal of discriminatory legislation Dunstan introduced anti-discrimination legislation which was much more contentious. These measures could be seen as steps towards creating legal equality for Aborigines. It was difficult for people to object to legal equality but not entirely out of the question. It was one thing to support the notion of equality in the abstract but another when it came to practical issues. One step that Dunstan took when coming to office was to change the regulations under the Act which prohibited Aborigines from drinking. Under the new regulations a prohibition remained on Aborigines on the North West Aboriginal Reserve from drinking (and perhaps in some other places) but was removed elsewhere. Some media outlets were complicit in a scare campaign about the effects of this. To say that alcohol abuse was an issue amongst some Aborigines was pushing at an open door, but the tactics adopted by some media outlets to get a ‘shock-horror’ story were by any standards unethical. In one case a

---

newspaper photographer went to Port Augusta and induced some Aborigines to sit in shop doorway with bottles to be photographed. This was exposed (I recall Dunstan making a speech about it in the Parliament) but of course the newspaper had the last say. As with many things I don’t think that many of the opponents gave a damn about the issue except that it was a way of attacking Dunstan.

In addition to the measures to remove legal discrimination there was a whole raft of other measures that could be seen as going beyond simple legal equality and more allied to what today would be called ‘Indigenous rights’ and the right to ‘self-determination’. These measures were in line with a policy that rejected the hard-line assimilationist policies that had been adopted by all Australian governments (at a State and Commonwealth level) since the 1940s. In the parliamentary debate on the 1962 legislation Dunstan had spoken in favour of a policy that was then called integration. He questioned the policy of assimilation which he said aimed to make Aborigines indistinguishable from other members of society, apart from their skin colour. The policy that he advocated would allow for the retention, by Aborigines, of some features of their own culture and the maintenance of some group identity.

One measure which would come under this category is the Land-Rights legislation that I have already talked about. Despite what you read in some of the things written in Canberra and the Eastern States it was the first land-rights legislation in Australia. Another measure was the legislation to facilitate the incorporation of Aboriginal organisations which could on a range of matters give Aboriginal groups a means of taking control over their own affairs. And of course one administrative measure was to try to establish Aboriginal craft industries that could give some expression to Indigenous culture.

In 1972 the Commonwealth entered the field of Aboriginal affairs that was under the Whitlam Government I think, how did the Dunstan Government react to that and what difference did it make to Aboriginal affairs administration in South Australia?

The Labor Party in South Australia come back into office in June 1970 after two years of a Liberal Government which in broad terms continued with the policies that had been put in place by Dunstan. Robin Millhouse had been the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Minister of Community Welfare in the Liberal Government and my recollection is that in South Australia at that time there was not a huge gulf between the two parties on Aboriginal Affairs and to some extent it was the case that around metropolitan Australia there was growing acceptance of the sorts of policies that had been adopted in South Australia—less so in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The amendments to the Constitution made by the 1967 Referendum had given the Commonwealth Government power to make laws in relation to Aboriginal people living in the States. (The Commonwealth already had total control over Aboriginal matters in the Northern Territory). The Liberal Government in Canberra that had instigated the Referendum made very little use of the power and in fact all the initiatives that it did take were probably within the constitutional powers that the Commonwealth had before the Referendum. The Labor Party under Whitlam went to the Commonwealth election in December 1972 with a platform of increasing Commonwealth involvement in Aboriginal Affairs, of
implementing a policy of ‘self-determination’ for Aboriginal people and granting Land Rights to Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory (as a first step to achieving Aboriginal Land Rights across all of Australia). In Western Australia and more so Queensland these policies were met with hostility and opposed on the grounds of ‘State’s rights’: what today is called ‘dog-whistle politics’. In South Australia the Dunstan government welcomed the development. One thing the the Whitlam Government did was establish, for the first time, a full blown Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs and did so by taking over large sections of the State Departments of Aboriginal or Native Affairs. These takeovers of State departments were negotiated with the States and there were formal agreements between the Commonwealth and each of the States about the terms of the takeover and the division of responsibility. It would take too long here to go into the intricacies of those agreements but roughly it was that the Commonwealth said that it would be responsible for matters relating to Aborigines that arose out of people’s Aboriginality and the States would remain responsible for those services that were provided to all citizens on the State by virtue of being citizens of the State. Or to put it another way the Commonwealth would be responsible for those special services that were needed by people because they were Aboriginal. Also, the Commonwealth did not take responsibility for the management of Aboriginal Reserves. It should be said that the demarcation in responsibilities and functions between the two tiers of government was never clear and bedevils Indigenous affairs to this day—it has allowed blame and cost shifting on a level that surpasses all other policy areas, and the simultaneous denial by both tiers of government of responsibility for the provision of services and for an endlessly regressive process of establishing bureaucratic structures to coordinate services and to coordinate the coordinating committees and to oversee the coordination process and to establish committees of stake-holders to act as a consultative forum in relation to the coordination process etc. etc etc. ad infinitum.

Whitlam’s point of view was that the Commonwealth (or as he would have put it, ‘my Government’) would set policy on all matters and the States would fall into line and implement the policy set by the Commonwealth. Most of the States transferred parts of their Departments to the Commonwealth but in Western Australia (and perhaps in Queensland—I’m not sure now) the State Government resisted and in that State the Commonwealth had to create a whole new Departmental structure from scratch.

As I said the Dunstan Government welcomed the developments at the Commonwealth level and readily entered into the process of transferring that part of the South Australian Government’s bureaucracy concerned with Aboriginal Affairs to the Commonwealth. (By this time the old South Australian DAA had been merged into the Department of Community Welfare). Dunstan went as far as to say that with the Commonwealth entering the field of Aboriginal Affairs the State would no longer need to maintain a Department or Section of a Department to be responsible for Aboriginal Affairs. My recollection is that the Opposition criticised this move, saying that it would not be possible for the State to do without such an Office and that turned out to be the case.

Because the Commonwealth Government did not have the means to directly administer anything much—with the exception of the Northern Territory it did not have the staff or the administrative structures or the technical expertise—it was not
John SUMMERS

able to directly run any Aboriginal programs. It made tied grants to the States but was also able to by-pass the States by dealing directly with other organisations for the delivery of programs. Its mode of operation became the short term funding of particular projects on matters such as health, mother and child welfare, education, community development. It did set up some new structures like Aboriginal Legal Aid, and the Aboriginal Land Commission and the Aboriginal Development Corporation but in general terms it dealt with its responsibilities by funding a variety of organisations—Aboriginal, Local Government, NGOs etc—to carry out the programs. Because most of these programs were managed through short term contracts there were few ongoing programs and there were not many organisations that developed any expertise and it was not possible to hold anyone responsible for the failure of programs. The policy of self-determination exacerbated this trend.

The one thing that Commonwealth governments did not want to get involved with was land-rights in the States. Both the Fraser Coalition Government and the Hawke Labor Governments raised the issue of Land Rights in the States, arguing that they had the constitutional power but backed away in the face of a very adverse reaction in Queensland and Western Australia.

Earlier when you were talking about the extent to which Don was taking political risks with some of his policies on Aboriginal Affairs you mentioned the circumstances under which you left Musgrave Park. Could you say something about that now?

I said earlier that there was one matter on which I had hoped that Dunstan would have taken a stronger line. It related to the administration of Musgrave Park5. The Superintendent, who had taken over the position there at the same time that I arrived, was a man who had a chequered career in the DAA. He had come to the Department (probably in the early 1960s) having been the Superintendent of an Aboriginal Settlement in the Northern Territory called Areyonga, where the people were largely from the same group as the people at Musgrave Park. His first job in the South Australian department was in the south-west of the State (near Ceduna) as Superintendent of Kooniba Aboriginal Reserve. He had engaged in some entrepreneurial activities there which the Auditor-General had some problems with. For example, he tried to set up a factory to make tubular steel furniture, and an enterprise to make concrete fence posts. As far as I know these were not in any way designed to benefit him financially but he was a man prone to enthusiasms and had an ambition to establish these enterprises. The problem was that he went ahead with these activities and committed the Department to expenditure for which he had no authority. Certainly this was the case with the concrete post scheme. He had bought a vast heap of aggregate from a farmer at what was said to be a bargain price. He had no authority to make the purchase. That would have been bad enough but it turned out he had been conned by the farmer. The aggregate turned out to be full of ‘fines’ and was useless for making concrete and it was said would have worn out several trucks to shift it all and so it was never moved. The Auditor-General made an adverse report on that particular matter but it does not seem to have affected the person’s fortunes in the

5 Anne Summers has written about this time at Musgrave Park in a chapter called ‘Pitjantjatjara Nightmare’ in her book Ducks on the Pond: An Autobiography 1945-1975, Viking, Ringwood Victoria, 1999. Her recollections and mine do not coincide on some details, but in essence they are the same.
John SUMMERS

Department. He was appointed to the position of overseer of all Reserves (I forget what the position was called) and then in 1966 when they were looking for a new Superintendent for the North-West Aboriginal Reserve he was appointed to the position.

He was not a man that was suited to the position of Superintendent of an Aboriginal Reserve. It was not that he was without some appreciation of the issues facing Aboriginal people, or at some level, concern, but he did not use the power that he had wisely. He could at times appear quite understanding and considerate but in his dealings with staff and the Aboriginal people he was often proud, pig-headed and inclined to stand on his dignity and he was taken to manic enthusiasms and to sudden extraordinary flights of fancy about how he could transform the situation. He loved new schemes which he would take up with great enthusiasm—all else would be put aside to lay out the route of a new road from Musgrave Park to the NT border, or set up a system for making interlocking cement bricks, or to revolutionise the Aboriginal people’s work ethic by putting every one on piecework overnight, or enlarge the vegetable garden, or modernise the egg production, or build a dam. All the enthusiasms quickly faded and in time a new one would be taken up. In some cases the rise and fall of an enthusiasm was simply comical or wasteful but in other cases the impact of others was more destructive. In the case of the new route for the road out of Musgrave Park to the Northern Territory a large number of wooden pegs, two to three feet long, were made out of ‘two by three’ timber that had been transported all the way from Adelaide. These pegs were driven into the ground at intervals to mark out what would be the route of the new road. When that particular plan went out of favour the pegs sat in the ground for a while and then they gradually disappeared as, we assumed, they were taken for firewood by the Aboriginal people. This venture was wasteful but it caused no harm and it did provide a rich source of jokes for the rest of us. Some of his other enthusiasms did cause considerable distress.

On one occasion, after he had been at Musgrave Park for about six months, he drove to the Aboriginal people’s camp and decreed that the store would be closed if the camp were not cleaned up. It was not cleaned to his satisfaction and he closed the store. I cannot remember how long the stand-off lasted but it was more than a week. I had no objection to the Superintendent making an effort to deal with the rubbish littered around the camp (or indeed to his trying to put in place a mechanism for the cleaning up the rubbish and for its collection and disposal) but this came ‘out of the blue’ and it was not clear who in the camp had the authority or standing to make the whole camp engage in a general clean-up. I’m sure that the Superintendent thought it was a simple matter of a few people in the camp rallying everyone to help pick-up rubbish. Equally I am sure that no one in the camp understood what he wanted and, even if they did, they did not have the authority or standing to get everyone in the camp to comply. To the Superintendent it seemed so simple—‘pick up all the rubbish and I will re-open the store’—but it clearly was not that simple. In the conditions in which the people lived the closure of the store for a week or more had serious consequences. They had become dependent on the store. It was no longer possible for the hundreds of people living in the camp to obtain food by hunting and gathering. (Maybe some of them could have got some food that way but for that number it was impossible.) Also, the people had no way of storing food and were reliant on the store
being open regularly; there were old people and mothers with young babies for whom the consequences could have been quite drastic. The closing of the store produced considerable tension and bad feelings. People did literally go hungry. Some of the European staff slipped some food to Aboriginal people they had a lot of contact with. It may be that some provision was made for people with young children—I can’t remember, but I do remember the bad feelings that it generated.

Another sudden enthusiasm of the Superintendent was the building of a dam in the hills near Amata. To some extent I blame myself because I drew the existence of the site to his attention. The site had a good spring in a fairly narrow gully that opened up to a wider area of flat rock. At first sight the impervious rock base made it look like an ideal location for a dam. It turned out that the Mines Department had previously looked at the site and reported that it was not a good location for a dam because although it had a solid rock base, the walls had strata of very open material that would allow the water to seep past a dam wall—it would not hold water. Whether or not the Superintendent was made aware of the Mines Department’s report before he embarked on the dam building I don’t remember but I don’t think that it would have made much difference; the prospect of embarking on a building project cast a powerful spell. However, the real problem was not whether the dam would have held water; the problem was that in his enthusiasm to get on with the project he took no heed of the importance of the site to the Aboriginal people. The site had some spiritual significance. It was not highly a secret/sacred site. There was no objection to people visiting the site but in the course of building the dam some important rocks, that were part of a creation story, were moved. Even that could have been remedied; he undertook to restore the rocks but in the process he bolted ahead and refused to take any notice of the people about how it should be done. The whole incident led to great ill-feeling. One of the young people involved in the negotiations with the superintendent said to one of the staff from Ernabella ‘one day you are going to turn on your radio and hear that we have hit that fellow’. I did not see most of these events first hand but I saw the consequences. This event and many others created great resentment and growing hostility between the Superintendent and the Aboriginal people and between the Superintendent and a number of the European staff.

Many of the actions of the Superintendent sound trivial when recounted, and any one of them by themselves would probably have been passed over, but the cumulative effect was increasing ill-will and tension in relations between the Superintendent and the Aboriginal people and a general increase in the tension in settlement.

This growing tension was not just between the two groups; there was also increasing tension amongst the Aboriginal people. There were at times four hundred people living at Musgrave Park. In the best of circumstances this would probably have resulted in tension between various groups. Traditionally, these desert people would have lived in small groups. As far as I could see their own authority and decision-making structures were not suited to making decisions in large groups. A number of the Aboriginal people had asked to be able to go back to their own country, at least for short periods, but the Superintendent would not agree, or more to the point he said that we would not facilitate it or provide services to people living away from Musgrave Park. There was nothing to stop people walking off the station and living anywhere
they liked on the whole of the Central Reserve but these people had become to some extent dependent on European goods. Some of the European staff argued that we should provide a patrol with stores and pensions etc to several areas on the Reserve away from Musgrave Park, if only for short periods so that the people could have a holiday away from the place and do some hunting and gathering in their own country. The Superintendent would not agree and I suspect that the Department would not have supported such actions. The Superintendent said that government vehicles could not be used for what was in effect private transport but I am not sure that he did not have other reasons. I could talk about this issue at great length but for the moment the point is that the policy that had created one single settlement on the North-West Aboriginal Reserve with a large number of previously nomadic people on it was creating a social environment that was bound to lead to social pathology and social disintegration as well as an unhealthy physical environment. This was not the doing of the Superintendent but his random, arbitrary actions and his inflexibility did not help.

In late 1967 I wrote a letter to Don, to his home address, with some general news about inconsequential things but also reporting that I was dissatisfied with what was happening at Musgrave Park and that if things didn’t change I would resign. Obviously I cannot remember the wording but it was not meant to be a direct request to do something—Dunstan was by then the Premier and no longer the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs—but, since he had been instrumental in my taking the job I felt that I should at least tell him. I cannot remember the exact timing but shortly after the letter was sent there was a visit to Musgrave Park and Ernabella and possibly some other places in the North by the new Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Ron Loveday (and his wife) and Miller, the Director of the Department, and some other senior people from the Department. I think that the visit may have been already planned—possibly a trip to show the new Minister around. A meeting of all staff was held to meet the Minister and the senior people from Adelaide. During the meeting there was an opportunity for people to ask questions and to voice concerns they had. There was quite a long discussion during which several of us raised a number of issues about the way the place was being run. All the concerns were dismissed by the Minister and the senior staff. In due course it became clear that Don had handed the letter on to Ron Loveday who in turn had handed it on to the Director and that the party had come prepared to deal with questions and complaints. I remember being struck by the ease with which Loveday and the senior staff could brush aside matters that I thought were of great concern. At the end of the meeting I said that given that it appeared that nothing would change I would resign because I believed that what was happening at Musgrave Park was unacceptable. That night the Minister announced that he was initiating a ‘Ministerial Enquiry’ into the situation at Musgrave Park. We were told that this was an established Public Service procedure. It was to be conducted by the Director of the Department who would stay behind at Musgrave Park when the rest of the group moved on with the remainder of their tour. I assume that the Minister and Miller had previously discussed the possibility of holding a Ministerial Enquiry as a way of dealing with the situation if they could not smooth it all over in some other way. I was a bit surprised because their whole argument during the meeting had been that everything was alright and that the staff complaints were an over reaction and it did not appear to me the staff members who were complaining were in a position cause them any real embarrassment.
The whole procedure lasted a week. All the staff were asked to write a submission and then the Director interviewed each of us in turn in the presence of the Superintendent. Miller had no secretarial help and the whole thing was written down in long hand. He must have had ‘writer’s cramp’ at the end of it. He wrote down his own questions and the answers and the response of the Superintendent in long-hand.

At the end of my interview Miller asked me whether, in the light of the fact that the Enquiry had been held, I still intended to resign. I said that it depended on the outcome and he said that was not the question; the question was, did I still intend to resign? And he wanted an answer straight away. Up to that point it all had been quite civil and reasonable but suddenly he became more officious and assertive. It did occur to me that I could say that I no longer intended to resign and then if it did not suit me I could change my mind. They could not hold me to what I said, but the fact that the question was asked in the way it was made me think that, in some sense, they thought that holding the Enquiry was all they needed to do. Also, all through it I had the growing feeling that there was a bureaucratic machine at work and a few complaining staff would in the end be fobbed off in the way that our concerns had been in the initial meeting. At the time I could not have put my finger on it but it was a phenomenon I have seen many times since—the near universal propensity of organisations to support the senior person against those under them, even though, to use an expression of the locals, ‘every dog, every stone knows’ that that the senior person is a disaster. So, I said that if there were no assurances that there would be some change I would still resign.

I saw myself as having taken a principled stand (sort of) but of course it was not a stand that inconvenienced Miller. Even though the implicit suggestion in Miller’s question was that I should not resign because they had held an Enquiry, I’m sure that for more than one reason he was very pleased to see me go. Were it a matter that worried him for more than a few seconds after the episode was over, Miller would be able to say to his political masters that even though they had held an Enquiry one of the malcontents had still resigned; what does that say about the complaints?

Almost immediately after the Enquiry the Department did get rid of one of the other staff members who had been outspoken. He was a person who was persistent in pursuing matters of principle or issues that he thought were important—and no doubt this worked against him—but I was struck by the way that things could be twisted to present him in a bad light and the negative preconceptions that some senior staff seemed to have. It seemed to me that there was an antipathy to him that had nothing to do with his competence or his suitability for the job. Quite the opposite—the decision of the Department to get rid of this person clearly had nothing to do with his ability or effectiveness at his job. It was particularly surprising because of the difficulty of getting competent people with technical or trade skills to take jobs in the area. This particular person went on to work in Indigenous affairs for much of the rest of his working life and was sought by numerous Indigenous communities in South Australia, the Northern Territory and Western Australia and by government departments and private employers in all those jurisdictions to do work for them. He had a reputation throughout the western desert area and beyond for his work and for his empathy with Indigenous people. Recently his work and achievements, including an enormous
amount of voluntary work in both the Indigenous communities and the wider community, have been recognised with the awarding of an Australian honour. It was easy to see why the senior people in the Department would be very happy to see me go but the antipathy to the other person is difficult to understand except in terms of irritation at his forthrightness.

When I spoke to Don about it after our return to Adelaide he was noncommittal; he was clearly happy to accept the Department’s solution to what had been seen as a difficult situation at Musgrave Park. He did not want to be drawn into any discussion about it. He was by then Premier and was focused on an election which was due in early 1968 and he certainly did not want any bad publicity about Aboriginal Affairs. On one occasion he asked me accusingly who I had been talking to about leaving Musgrave Park. I said that obviously I had told friends and acquaintances—what else could I have done. Apparently, Robin Millhouse, the Liberal member for the House of Assembly seat of Mitcham, had asked a question in the Parliament. The level of Don’s sensitivity on the question was surprising and, I thought, a bit ridiculous. Later, out of interest, I looked up Hansard and the actual question that Millhouse had asked was really about the fact that the craft officer, who had left, had not been replaced.

Needless to say I would have liked Don to have taken a different approach to the whole matter. When Anne and I were leaving a senior and very highly regarded Aboriginal woman said that she was sorry we were going. Obviously distressed about what was happening she said ‘all we want is a kind Superintendent’. It’s a long time ago but I’m fairly sure that those were pretty much her exact words. There is no doubt that in the short-term the actions of that particular Superintendent caused a lot of unnecessary grief and distress. In the long run, however, I don’t think that any of it made much difference to the fate of the people at Musgrave Park. The forces that produced the social disintegration and social pathology in Indigenous communities across remote Australia had produced much the same outcome in all remote Aboriginal communities.

As a post-script to the story about the Ministerial Enquiry, it is worth pointing out that not long after I left the Superintendent was removed to other duties in the city. I think that the move was prompted by quite a nasty confrontation between him and the Aborigines at Musgrave Park but I cannot remember the details—just that there was some incident that led to his being asked urgently to do another job in the Department. I also understand that when he had finished the task that he was given, and it became clear that he was just marking time, he insisted on being returned to work that was appropriate to his substantive level in the Department and he was appointed Superintendent of the Coober Pedy Aboriginal Reserve. Again, I cannot be sure of the details, but a couple of years later he resigned from the Public Service. It was said that he had been charged under the Public Service Act with having misappropriated Departmental assets. The story was that he had not necessarily been lining his own pockets but, true to form, he had been seduced by plans to build or construct things and as a member of the Coober Pedy local government body (such as it was at that time) he had been using Departmental facilities and equipment for various projects around the town. The stories about his departure did not extend to any suggestions about who might have benefited from such projects.
John SUMMERS

Alright, well thanks very much John, that’s the end of our interview. George Lewkowicz interviewing John Summers.