Interview with Ian Cox conducted by Bruce Guerin on 5 July 2007 at the University of Adelaide, South Australia, for the Don Dunstan Oral History Project.

INTERVIEW COMMENCES

I’m talking to Ian Cox on 5th July, we’re meeting in the Malaysian Room of the Adelaide University Alumni Building for the Don Dunstan Foundation. Now, Ian, can you tell me what was your role in government back in those days?

I came from Victoria and became Director of Aboriginal Affairs and Social Welfare in 1970, September, and that was after a period of time of being appointed, being sacked and being appointed again.

Fascinating process.

Yes. I was appointed by the Liberal Government and when Don Dunstan got elected and was Premier there was no way they were going to continue my appointment and I received a letter that said that the appointment was off; and then a couple of weeks later a Minister of Welfare, Len King, turned up at my house in Blackburn, Victoria, and interviewed me on the Saturday morning.

Had you had contact with Len King before that time?

No, that was the first time. He’d rung up and said he was in Melbourne and was with Rylah, who was the Minister, and of course there had been a suspicion that I was leaving and I was at that time supervisor of treatment of all young offenders in the State and had a fair bit of possibilities of promotion and so on. So it wasn’t really the most satisfactory time to meet Mr Rylah, either, and get his car to drive out to my house.

Then Len King was coming as a result of talking to somebody else.

Well, I think that what happened was they wanted to check whether I was a Liberal plant or whether I’d been selected from a field. And I can understand the anxiety of that, because what Don Dunstan talked about when he was prior to becoming Premier, when he was Minister of Welfare for the short period of time, was certainly different; and when it was advertised, I felt that there was a possibility of a Labor
Government coming with Dunstan in South Australia, so I was willing to take the risk of being appointed by Millhouse and hoping for an election.

But I think that people over there, we’d just been through a traumatic time in Victoria with hanging of Ryan and I’d been involved in that in many ways.

**When was that?**

That would have been – now, I haven’t got the date, but it was about three years before all this happened and the professional staff in Victoria became very restless because Bolte, the Premier, had given some instance that he would hang the guy, and so I was against this, I was giving a fair bit of advice against it. And then I was involved in the final – when the Director-General finally got told that he had to hang the person. What he had done to bring prisons and youth and the whole welfare scene together in an attempt to do some of the things that Don Dunstan talked about when he was Minister of Welfare.

**So apart from that push from behind, I guess, you wanting to leave, what was interesting and attractive in South Australia in the first instance for you to be interested in moving?**

There was an advisory council over here, which came over to Victoria to see what I’d been doing in terms of young offenders and some of the members spent a week there: and it was Gordon Bruff, who was then Acting Director-General. I’d been overseas on a Churchill Fellowship and studied community treatment of young offenders, and so when they came over, they’d done a lot of their work on setting up new arrangements regarding community activity on young offenders. I talked to them about juvenile aid panels and those sorts of things, so that gave me a push in their interest, and there seemed to be a receptive group of people. So that’s the way in which I got more interested.

**What was your awareness of Don Dunstan as an individual, as a leader, at that stage?**

I think that he did get a lot of publicity in terms of some of the things he said, and he did talk about community and he did talk about non-residual welfare, and I knew about that because I was also doing a bit of lecturing and, as lecturers know, they keep up with some of the publicity. But there were whole groups of social workers
who were hearing this new person talking about these things and it wasn’t in his deliberative programs but more in a philosophical way, and that captured quite a group of people. And so here we knew Don Dunstan, apart from changing restaurants and things, we knew that this man was really thinking something different about those most in need.

It was probably not so well-known at the time, but Don famously told the story of a confrontation with the head of what I think was the Widows’ and Orphans’ Board which signalled that there would no longer be a Widows’ and Orphans’ Board when he came back into power.

And he also talked a lot about residential deinstitutionalisation. He knew that those things did something about human rights. So I mean this was right down my alley, and (laughs) I’d just done it in Victoria of reducing the numbers in institutions by about two-thirds. So I was quite excited and thought that there was somebody around — —. And at that time I was forty and I’d run institutions for fifteen years, I wasn’t interested in a large organisation but a community one, and there was a lot of satisfaction in seeing somebody do something progressive. And when you work in government you realise that the relationships between ministers and heads of departments sometimes absolutely are awful and sometimes are magnificent, and this person seemed to have an understanding of task, you know?

Well, when you came over to take up the job after the visit from Len King, did you have the feeling that you were being commissioned to get on with your vision and get on with your program or that you were being hired to put into effect somebody else’s program?

That’s very good. I really became very confident that there were not going to be great hurdles put in front of me. My first fortnight was to go up to Port Augusta and investigate a murder on the Port Augusta reserve. That absolutely taught me a great deal, and that was under Len King. Then there was a discussion with Don Dunstan and Len King in relation to the nature of welfare and what we were to do, and once that had occurred and he obviously showed a great support for some of the things I wanted to do and so on, I just felt there was no hesitation in going ahead.

Now, I would meet him on-site, there was an impatience built into him, why I hadn’t done it all in the first year. I don’t think he understood. But when you look in the years, say, the budget of the Community Welfare or the Welfare and
Aboriginal Affairs Department was about four million when I took it over, and in ’79 when I think Don finally was no longer Premier – ’79? –

He resigned early in ’79.

– the last budget was something in the twenty-eight million. If you look at what happened in terms of, for instance, community grants – and that is the interesting thing: they made me prepare a document for cabinet and that went through – – –. Oh, first and foremost, I appointed a research officer; that would have been unknown in the history of the department but that was supported straight away.

When was this?

Nineteen seventy.

Nineteen seventy.

And it was a guy called Michael Court and Robin Maslen too became those two who were brilliant brains and brilliant in the things they wanted to do. But our document going to cabinet was unchanged and supported and of course that then led to writing the Act (Community Welfare) and of course the Premier was very keen on what the board had said about using the results of the advisory council, which was also community-oriented.

So which board was this?

It was an advisory board that was working for the Government in relation to welfare. I would think that he was worried that that board existed when he was Minister of Welfare. But I would suggest that he give them a job to do, which they did and they came over to Victoria to do it with me. So I got a double bonus out of that because he was aware; that board then ceased to exist not very long after, and then the new Act came in and I think that was ’73, ’74, the new Act, and he liked it and we stated aims and objectives in the Act against Crown Law advice. They said they’d never had an Act with aims and objectives, and the Premier and the Minister both wanted aims and objectives. I mean, all those sorts of things were absolutely compensating for the struggle of trying to start a new department.

So even though you had strong backing politically it was a struggle?
Oh, yes. You don’t expect such resistance. You see, what had happened in the Department was that their personnel practices related so much to church. Now, I mean, this is quite a problem for a director coming in, and they think that he would be a Christian; but for me to get rid of that sort of process, which locked in the way people thought about the poor and in some ways connected sinners and theology all together, was one of the most difficult tasks.

And they had over a period recruited from –

Churches and local preachers.

– a limited number of churches or denominations?

Oh, at that stage, you see – I think we’re more now likely to have divisions in the fundamentalists – but these people were mostly, there was very much a fundamentalist aura about it and then there was always a combination of making criminal law, if you disobeyed criminal law, that you were also a sinner. Now, that just had to be changed. Those things were difficult. For instance – I don’t know if this is part of what you want to know – but I abolished compulsory church parade. I went out to Vaughan House and the chaplain said, ‘This is wonderful.’ Their girls, ninety girls, ‘are likely to lapse’. The stupidity of locking up girls in that sort of thing! And they said, ‘We have compulsory chapel.’ I said, ‘Well, that was the last Sunday that occurs.’ And they had eight at church the next Sunday, and that then got into the Sunday Mail. So I had my own set of problems that sounded fairly much like I was anti-religious and everything else. But I also had support, great support.

And were these people also social welfare workers or they hadn’t had that sort of training?

There had been no training. A lot of them were brought in because they were dedicated church people. So the first thing – I’m talking about in administration – but it had to happen that you had to put them all through a ‘horse trough’, I said. But they all had to go through training because the people who worked on maintenance had suspicions of everybody who was getting maintenance money, and if you found clothes hanging on the line that were a man’s they’d do something about it; so you had all these people working from a false philosophy for welfare.
Obviously I then talked about professionalising it and the figures and statistics of the Department reflect that, and that was agreed to by the Minister and the Premier.

**In this, your appointment of research officers, that would have been the first in any department, I guess?**

Oh, yes. And the board didn’t understand this, you see. But these were absolutely first-rate, and so I look at the documents now and think, ‘Well, how the hell did we get to that?’ Because they worked with groups and we had the voluntary agencies saying to the Minister that they had never been consulted, and yet these research people advertised for people to come and talk to us. That actually, the voluntary people – and there were social workers amongst them – gave a very strenuous opposition for a period of time. But having the research officers and having the information, ensuring it was done step by step and having the time limit because the Premier wanted it not too much longer, (laughs) it all was quite satisfying.

**So were the people in the community concerned that they weren’t going to be talking to the top dog but only research officers, or they felt that they had to be directly involved rather than go through any process like that?**

I think that fact that they went – at that time there was about twelve officers, I think, that they went out to and ran community meetings, made them more approachable. And King attended most community meetings around the State to hear what people wanted, and he with his wisdom did a lot of community work which became very strong in terms of the development of the Department. Once people saw community grants in the legislation, that was the first time that it had got out of just being a political bunfight of who knew the Minister to get a grant. The Premier was very keen on community grants, and I think that the annual reports reflect how he appointed Keith Seaman as the Chairman of the Grants Committee-- he was at the Adelaide Central Mission at the time--and that gave it standing, and they did their work extremely well; and after that it was very much the Premier and the State Minister wanted the voluntary agencies to play their part.

**In appointing these research officers, in parallel to that there was Bob Bakewell in the Premier’s Department who’s making changes: was that at the same time that he was starting to employ research officers, or did that come afterwards?**
Yes. Bob was pretty interested in what I was trying to do. He actually helped the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to come under Community Welfare.

Okay. Well, you’d developed the legislation with aims and objectives in almost over Crown Law’s dead body or draughtsmen’s dead bodies; but what were the key features in the legislation?

I can summarise those things that I constantly was aware of that Dunstan had talked about when he was in the first ten years. I think there were about fifteen, but can I just mention those?

Yes, please.

Welfare should not have charitable connotations. Welfare services must involve professional and lay workers. And these came out of discussions with the Minister—the Minister would come back from Cabinet and spend time with me. Ministers seemed to have an opportunity after Cabinet first to talk to the Premier in relation to the direction of their departments. The Minister would come back refreshed and say, ‘Did you know this, Coxie?’ (laughs) Sometimes he was more polite.

Decentralised services are a must. Availability and immediacy of services would be central to the program. No discrimination of any kind. The community must assist the alleviation of problems and perpetuation of residual services must be avoided. I mean, these are fascinating principles, because they’re stated in that book, it was a part of the things that I stated in this development of the program to put up to cabinet, and these did come from the Premier. I think they’re incredible. And at that time the Seebohm Report (Report of the Committee on Local Authority and Allied Personal Social Services [chair Frederic Seebohm], HMSO, 1968), was coming out in England and I was a Seebohm-ite, you see, so I was able to garnish these a little.

Family unit is key and should be central to service development. Collaboration was central to good service delivery and, as you know, Don had an intolerance of when departments didn’t get on. And one of the things that ministerially seemed to happen was that they each protected their territory but somehow the presence of Don ensured they co-operated. In the situation between Health and Education, we
did things that never were thought possible before. We started youth project centres, Don went to the first one – of course, it happened to be in his electorate.

Which project was that, do you recall?

Well, the Norwood project, it was the first youth project centre. We had kids truanting from school and then becoming delinquent. And we looked it up and I talked to the Director-General of Education and we said, ‘If we had a place at Norwood – – –.’ And just at that time there was a Catholic school which was closing and that’s where Len King had been to school or had some activity, so Len thought it would be a good idea to use it. It had just been sold. He agreed to it and he talked to Hudson and Hudson agreed to it, and as I understand it they met in the front row of Parliament and agreed to the whole lot with the Premier in that day; and when we opened it the Premier was there. That started a series of project centres – and I’m not sure they’re still existing, I think that’s a great pity – but that meant that institutions which had, you know, McNally had over a hundred and forty kids, and we changed the whole nature of the place and they got down to thirty. Brookway Park, we shut it. So that some of [those] steps were the steps in relation to the future. Does that answer that question?

I think it does.

(laughter) And then all institutional care must be investigated and an alternative sought, and that really got us into trouble all the time. I’d have people going to look at the Salvation Army or the Anglicans and you would see throughout that period of time a lot of institutions changed; and we went into foster care and we went into mentor care for adolescents who were delinquent, and so that made major changes. We shut Vaughan House, shut Glandore, shut Brookway, shut Windana, so it was quite a significant period of time of reallocation of funds. And you can’t do that if you don’t have as strong support as we did have at that time.

So when you were closing these places what happened to the staff? Were you still employing them or redeploying them, or – – –?

Well, you see, the thing about it is that they would know it was on the way. The numbers were going down so you wouldn’t be appointing new staff, and that was done – we started a personnel section, a proper personnel section, with a couple of
people, and that meant that these people were looked after. Now, many of the people who left during that time – I mean, apart from age – were employable, were good workers, and the public service helped to ensure they had jobs – I mean, with Labor being in power you had to make sure that your steps were right.

But from the other point of view I was interested whether you then had workers of a certain kind that you still had to use within your own boundaries while you were trying to change everything.

And those people, I put them out in the field and they would get some of the jobs which were less person-centred and because we established – I think by the time I left the Department in ’85-- I think we had something like thirty community centres and so we had plenty of variety of employment and so on. But by that time of the institutional change, we’d made the big operational changes.

Yes. Well, as time went on, did you have regular or periodic contact with the Premier, or – – –?

No. Usually – it is interesting as I tried to think in relation to it – he wasn’t a shadow behind it because he was more powerful than a shadow behind the changes going on. The loyalty of ministers towards the cabinet was one thing that struck. I’ve talked to the Director-General of Education of that time about that, and we both said that the loyalty that Ministers had to cabinet, and whilst they did their thing they did their thing in response to the loyalty they were getting from the Premier. I think that is interesting. He would see me, particularly if you’ve got a guest or you’re doing something or you’re opening something, so I had that sort of contact with him, and it was always, ‘Have you nearly finished it? Are you nearly there?’ And then, in ’76, I was offered a Commonwealth job at the Children’s Commission– I chaired the Children’s Commission and Mr Whitlam was very keen. I also went to the Premier and he sort of arranged that I could go overseas and do my master’s and was quite adamant that he just really wanted me to stay in South Australia.

So you went overseas for your master’s?

Yes, I went over to Canada and did a master’s for eighteen months.

Why Canada?
Well, I wanted to do human services management: I wanted to do integration of human services, that’s what my thesis was about, and I didn’t want to do it in America because I’d looked at their literature, and I knew quite a lot of the professors in the States and here was this person that stood out in terms of what he’d written, and I tended to be a person that followed people who had a philosophy; and it didn’t disappoint me, and the research and the work that I did, and I came back quite thrilled to do my job.

Well, progressively, people were coming to South Australia to see what was happening and how it was happening and wanting to copy it, and certainly Community Welfare was part of that. Did you always have the feeling that you were pioneering not just in South Australia but in Australia?

Yes. The fascinating thing was that I came back from overseas and I was approached by the Family Law Council. I had been chairing the States’ welfare administrators for about seven years and they’d come over and they’d see what we were doing. Then there was an investigation of market-driven government departments by Queensland University and they took our department as a market-driven government agency and we got a lot of credibility out of that. So those things happened; but some of them happened after Don had finished his premiership. But there was no doubt about it: the starting with aims and objectives, the fact that he had some ideas he was pushing even in the ten months – I think it was only ten months – that he was Minister, these things were available, and I think that that was great leadership for us.

Putting it into a wider South Australian context, as the ’70s went on there was quite an emphasis placed on an overhaul of the public service and the public sector as well as trying to make substantive progress in areas like education and health and so forth. How did you see the agenda for this wider reform developing and being put into effect?

I had got to the stage of believing that if I could do some creative thinking I could be useful to those sorts of things and that nothing was ever quite right, and that’s been my sum total of attitude about that. So if somebody was prescribing that there was a need, it was time for change, then you’ve got to start to look at some of the things that you were doing and whether they were wise or whether there were new initiatives that we ought to be grabbing. Now, I’d got my staff learning – that was
my process with the staff, you know? ‘Don’t hold on to something that you think’s good because you think it’s good, but listen to the process.’ And, as you know, we started a library, we had one of the best libraries in the State in the Community Welfare Department, and the staff loved that. But you are really change agents as heads of departments, and I just think – I mean, there are certain times that I’d put my fist down; but I think the other thing is that there was a fairly good relationship with most permanent heads.

So in Education, for example, the person who – – –.

John Steinle was there.

For virtually all that period, was he?

Well, there was a guy before him for three or four years, Alby Jones, then in came in John, and he was open. Of course, because I was teacher trained, I think that that helped a bit, and as you know I’ve been a consultant, a couple of consultancies with Education since I retired. But he and I – and there was Brian Shea in Health; there was Phil Woodruff, who was one of the older-style administrators, he was in Public Health; and yet, you know, we could get together. And with Phil it was a different world, you know, he wanted me to belong to his philosophical autobiography group and I didn’t ever go but he used to always ask me about every month (laughs) whether I was going to come.

A ‘philosophical autobiography’ group?

They met at the University, about five or six, got dressed up in a bow-tie and so on, and they met at homes, you see.

You take Keith Lewis, I was on the Golden Grove development project and his strength in what I wanted to do on that board was very great, and I think that that’s the way in which it worked.

That was in part an outgrowth of those ’70s developments.

All the time, you know? Alec Ramsay, who was General Manager of the Housing Trust – was he there when you were there?

Yes.
And I said we wanted to set up an Aboriginal Housing Board, right? And one night we said, ‘We’ll go down and talk to the Aboriginal Women’s Club’: they had a big group there but we went there at half-past seven, we sat on a fence, he and I, till about half-past eight and they all turned up, and that was the start of an Aboriginal Housing Board, and the work he did for that – – –. Now, I had responsibility for Aboriginal Affairs and the Aboriginal Task Group, but he cherished what he did in that.

It was interesting because Alec Ramsay had his difficulties with the Dunstan period. Before I was involved in government I remember him telling me that he shared many of the objectives of Dunstan but had difficulty with the style or the approach.

That’s right.

So did you get that feeling that there were differences in government, within the public service, either because they didn’t want to do what the new government wanted or because they didn’t think this was the way to go about it?

I think that when Don Dunstan was appointed Premier he had amongst his heads of departments a lot of conservative thinkers who were Liberal appointments, and that takes a great deal of change. Now, I came from a different area, but I think that some of those that were conservative – and I could include Alec Ramsay in that – changed incredibly when they realised that what Don was wanting to do made sense. And I think that there was a fair period of time where gradually he appointed some new people; but, you know, it was quite an interesting period of time for change in terms of attitude. I think governments have still got this problem with political affiliation which slows down their programs and so on; but I think that the Premier took – you know, I can remember the first time we all met together and he had lengthy periods of silence.

‘We all’, this is being heads of department, was it?

Yes, in the early stages. I mean I was more preoccupied with (laugh) getting Community Welfare off the ground; but it was the integration of human services which I think – of course, Bannon took over and used me up in that but we never got very far – but it really was a time where it happened. I still think that that was about the ministers in cabinet being trusted, but also being led.
I interrupted you when you were saying there were periods of silence.

Yes. He didn’t overdo his elocution, you know. He knew that too much of that wouldn’t have gone down with permanent heads. If they didn’t speak, then he’d have a silence. I can remember a deathly silence, because nobody was willing to expose themselves too much to their political thinking– it really was very clever.

When the Premier was meeting with heads of departments, was that a frequent occurrence?

No, that wasn’t often and I can only recall – I can recall that particular meeting because it was quite important in the early stages of the way things happened, and I’m sure that happened in ’72, you know, way back in that early stage.

END OF INTERVIEW.