This is an interview by George Lewkowicz from the Don Dunstan Foundation for the Don Dunstan Foundation History Project interviewing Mr Geoff Anderson on the topic of industrial democracy in the 1970s. The interview is held on 3rd October 2007 at the Don Dunstan Foundation in North Terrace, Adelaide.

Geoff, thanks very much for doing this interview for us. You were very influential in the 1970s in the industrial democracy implementation, spearheaded under the administration of Don Dunstan. Before we get into some of those details, can you just give the project some background about yourself before you joined the industrial democracy unit?

Okay. I joined the unit in 1973, actually – I think I was the first person appointed – September 1973. Prior to that, I’d just finished my honours degree in Government and Public Administration at Sydney University and I’d done a thesis on a trade union, the Builders’ Labourers’ Federation, and I was particularly interested in the impact of technological change on industrial relations and power relationships in industry. I then went on to do a master’s degree under Bill Ford at the University of New South Wales.

In the second year of that master’s I saw, I guess it’s fair to say that I was getting a bit tired of being a university student. I’d been a political activist; a lot of the people I’d been a political activist with had gone on to work in governments and particularly the Whitlam Government and I was looking for something to do. I saw an advertisement, literally just saw an advertisement for this thing called the Worker Participation Branch and in many respects the job description or the description of what the unit was doing was almost exactly my thesis topic, particularly the issues about job enrichment and the democratisation of the workplace and change in workplaces.

I’d been to South Australia on holidays when I was seventeen, in 1967, and it was a fantastic place. I’d been following Dun Dunstan’s career – in fact, in 1968 I took place in a demonstration outside the South Australian Tourist Bureau against the election result. The Sydney University students marched on the South Australian Tourist Bureau in Sydney and I think we had quite a few thousand people there demonstrating for democracy and for Don to be re-elected in that extraordinary period in 1968. But I had a feeling that South Australia always was a place I wanted to become, I wanted to be part of the Dunstan experiment, the Dunstan Government, and this seemed to be an opportunity to do it. A whole lot of things came together.
So I applied for the job, I was actually interviewed in that Tourist Bureau by Lindsay Bowes and I was given the job as research officer of the unit, and I packed up all my belongings, the wife and the dog and drove to Adelaide. I think I got here about 19th September and I started in the Department of Labour and Industry in September ’73 and the unit hadn’t formed so I was just put in their research branch and worked there for a while until I think Charles Connelly and then Ken Wang joined.

What was your role there, what was the title of the job?

I was called ‘Research Officer’. But it’s fair to say that when the unit formed, particularly when Lyndon (Prowse) arrived –

Lyndon Prowse

– Lyndon Prowse, and given that we were sort of practising what we preached there was a blurring of distinctions between project officer and research officer and as the unit developed, I can’t remember the exact time but I think within the year I was formally a project officer and we probably brought in somebody else. I can’t remember who it was.

And just to give some context about the social and economics of the time, you were interested in the position but were you aware of what was going on in South Australia and why this ‘experiment’, we might call it, would or wouldn’t work?

Well, I have to admit that I hadn’t been closely following South Australia. I’d been aware of, I think as most people had, Dunstan and he was an extraordinary magnet for people like myself who’d been through university in the ’60s, the Vietnam years, who fought the Vietnam Moratoriums, who’d believed in – I tell my students these days it was a time when we believed governments could do things, and we believed that what you did when we joined the Labor Party – I joined the Labor Party when I was sixteen – we believed that by electing Labor governments we would change society and we would change the nation. We were firmly committed to the Whitlam Government. Whitlam had come in in ’72, he was still riding high, the loans stuff hadn’t happened, Juni Morosi hadn’t happened, it was still an enormous change, new ideas, the extraordinary unleashing of ideas, I think I wanted to be a part of that.

South Australia I understood to be a place of experiment where Dunstan was carving a new sort of social democracy. I sort of understood that in a broad – I didn’t have a great deal of understanding about South Australian history, history or its industrial structure.
I think when we talked about this informally before you talked about a bit of a change at the time. There was some demand for labour and for workers.

Economically. If you think of the 1970s, early '70 and when the unit was formed, it quickly became apparent to me that the biggest issue – and I suppose this was something I also found when I was doing my thesis on the Builders’ Labourers’ Federation – that Australia was going through a sort of growth phase. Labour was in demand. The biggest problems facing industry was turnover. Industry were concerned about very, very high turnover rates and how did they keep people. In retrospect I can now see we were about to be hit by a lot of global shocks and Australia was about to feel the full effects of global economy but we probably didn’t know it at the time and industry I think was – there was lots of discussions in the media about work, about the soullessness of work, how we had to change industrial processes. As I said, my thesis, my undergraduate thesis, had been about the way in which technological change in the building industry had brought the builders’ labourers to the fore and completely changed the traditional work relationships in building, so I was interested in that.

As part of my thesis I’d been reading a lot of stuff by Fred Emery and Emery and Trist, the whole experiments in coalfields, Durham, and the Indian textile mills and the whole idea of socio-technical systems. Then when later I applied for the job and I got hold of the research committee’s reports, that was another connection, that’s why this was ..... ..... this was like my thesis topic, that aspect of what the committee had recommended, what became to be called ‘job enrichment’, which Fred called ‘job redesign’, I was particularly interested in that because that was what I was researching, if you like.

**Which research committees were these?**

...... ..... ..... social committees, there were two committees – I forget their names now, I think one was on the private sector and one was on the public sector – which were set up which led to the formation of this inquiry, and I came to understand that was a classic strategy of Don, to set up a committee of inquiry out of which he would drive a policy change. He tried to do it later with the Royal Commission on Non-Medical Use of Drugs. He did it on a lot of things; it was the way Don worked, as you know. It was sort of create an idea, throw it out there, have a lot of debate on it, then he’d synthesise some sort of move forward.
One committee, I think it had been chaired by – I think the public service one might have been chaired by Graham Inns, I’m not sure who chaired the public sector one –

**Geoffrey Badger, who was a professor at –**

– that’s right, Geoff Badger.

– *Adelaide Uni at the time.*

At Adelaide, that’s right. And Roy Abbott was on that one. Roy was the Secretary of the Vehicle Builders’ Union at this stage. He’s interesting because of the motivation I think he had for the whole project, which we can come to if you like.

**Right, okay.**

And they had been influenced very much I think by Fred Emery, and they had two broad recommendations: one was for consultative councils and the other was for job enrichment, and what they understood about job enrichment they’d largely got from Fred Emery.

**We’re talking about job enrichment and consultation, we’ll call it, those two approaches. What did you see as some of the broader opportunities perhaps that were missed at the time? We can talk about some of the implementation later on, but just getting all of this in your head when you arrived.**

From the outset I don’t think anybody in the unit had much faith in the worker consultative councils, the joint consultative councils approach. Any of us who’d done any research or reading on it saw that as a sort of ’50s, ’60s English concept. You could see why somebody would recommend that, but I always thought that it fundamentally misunderstood, if you like, the nature of the capitalist enterprise and it wasn’t going to work in our sort of system. I think it’s important as the way the unit developed was the personal views of the members of the unit and if you like the strong views of Lyndon Prowse and the strong views of Fred Emery who was always – I don’t think you can understand the early unit without understanding the role of Fred and Meryl, his wife – was that the joint consultative council was just a joke and we weren’t really interested in that. Later we were forced to be more interested in it, which we’ll talk about, but we were interested in job enrichment.

As to whether things were missed, I came to see that it wasn’t so much that opportunities were missed; it’s a more complicated answer, which is that I don’t think the
committee or to some extent the Premier really understood what forces they were unleashing, if you like what ants’ nest they were poking. And it was not just in terms of industry, although that was hard enough in terms of them not wanting to give up management control, but in terms of the union structures and how the unions existed in the workforce.

If you go back and read industrial relations history of that time, I think you’ll find that the biggest thing the employers were fighting in those days in the courts, in the arbitration system, was on so-called ‘management’ issues. They wanted the right to be more flexible in how they managed their enterprises, and it’s interesting if you look at the history of the industrial relations system through Hawke–Keating right up now to Howard the Federal Government has basically chipped away at the allowable matters. I mean, there used to be dozens; there’s now only six. So the Commission can only rule on hours of paid wages and conditions. But back in the ’70s there were major industrial debates and cases about effectively what management saw as their right to manage, and that right to manage was something which we now – it’s thirty years ago and you look back on it: it looks like another country, Australia has changed so much. To anticipate a conclusion I think in many ways the way industry works now was probably more like we were trying to implement back then; it just took twenty years for that idea to become more obvious.

But, getting back to the unit, I didn’t know Lyndon was going to be head of the unit, obviously we didn’t know who it was going to be. Lyndon arrived and obviously that was very much driven by Fred Emery. Fred had got to know Lyndon when Fred worked in Lyndon’s pet food company, Luv Pet Foods – Lyndon was famous for eating his pet food on television – and Lyndon had made a lot of money by, he thought, job enrichment, industrial democracy, things like this. But I think Lyndon was – difficult to know. Lyndon was a crazy character, can talk a lot about Lyndon; but there’s no doubt that Fred was influential in convincing Lindsay Bowes and the Premier to appoint Lyndon as head of the unit. I once said to Fred, ‘Why did you do that? You must have known he was mad.’ And he said, ‘Well, maybe, but we needed someone to market this. We needed a salesman.’ Lyndon had no idea. Lyndon’s knowledge of industry, of how unions work, it didn’t exist. Lyndon had made his money by the cut-throat business of doing deals, his background was a salesman for the Mars Corporation – he always talked about ‘Mr Mars’
with reverence, as in Mars Bars, and Mars Food went into pet food. He broke away from that to create his own pet food industry.

Lyndon once told me – give you an example of Lyndon – Lyndon once told me a story about – he said, ‘If you ever go to a sales conference,’ he said, ‘have a look at the blokes with all the women around them.’ He said, ‘They’re the good salesmen. They can sell themselves. They sell themselves, then they can sell the product.’ That was Lyndon and he was a salesman, he was just a salesman, and he had very little understanding of how industry worked, he had no understanding how government bureaucracies worked. If you go into the archives and look at the letters he wrote they’re sort of fascinating because they’re just colloquial, like somebody chatting. He thought he could bring to the job all the things that had got him through the pet food industry and very, very quickly it was found absolutely wanting and quite disastrous in many respects. He very quickly made this a marketing exercise. I don’t know if you’ve got the famous ‘Make Life Work’ brochure – I’ve got one at home somewhere if you want it – but we very quickly, we felt we had to put out some sort of document; and he immediately changed the name of the unit from the Worker Participation Branch, although the government still thought that’s what we were, Lindsay Bowes still referred to us like that; but under Lyndon he dreamt up this name of the Unit for Quality of Work Life, hence the whole emphasis immediately shifted from any sort of representative forms of participation to this job redesign and a focus that was all about quality of work life, and that we had this slogan called ‘Make life work’ and a daisy, I think it was, a flower, which was a sort of symbol for the unit. And Lyndon had – somewhere I’ve still got them – Lyndon had gold cufflinks made of flowers and stuff. It was all about marketing, and we became the Unit for Quality of Work Life and the whole concept of worker participation got downplayed. We, under Fred and Lyndon, went off into this full-steam into trying to redesign workplaces and redesign the way jobs were done.

**Can you just talk about that a bit more?**

How did we do it?

Yes.

Well, it’s interesting. I said to you the other day I was talking to Greg Patmore from Sydney and it reminded me that we were never really a consulting organisation in the
sense that people would come to us asking us to help them do things, but we didn’t have the resources or the capabilities to go in and redesign the workplace, nor did we think that was our role. Now, having said that, people like Charles and Ken who had that capacity given their background as industrial production engineers I think probably did a little bit of that with certain companies, but mostly – again, under the direction of Fred; as I keep saying, you can’t really understand the first few months without understanding Fred – under the guidance of Fred, who at that stage of course had come back from Tavistock Institute in London to the Australian National University, what was called the Centre for Continuing Education and with Meryl who was his second wife, I think had previously been his research assistant, quite an extraordinary woman, and Fred had a technique, a technique of what was called ‘the deep slice’. We would get companies – if companies came to us and said, ‘We want you to come and give us advice’, we would say to them, ‘Well, we’ll run a workshop’ – it was based around these workshops – ‘and we will take a deep slice of your organisation from the management down to the cleaner and we’ll take you away and we’ll work with you to redesign your workplace, then you get the ideas and you can take it back and put it into practice.’

While we kept saying, ‘This is not like the old-fashioned encounter groups, the old-fashioned … groups, the old-fashioned sitting around on beanbags’, and, you know, emotional destruction that used to go on in those days, they often became like that and there were some very famous occasions, fuelled by alcohol, particularly down at Christies Beach, driven by Lyndon, where they became quite amazing situations.

So this was just the unit, was it, let alone the company involved?

Well, the unit would pull people together. One of the biggest ones we did was Chrysler. We had a lot of involvement with Chrysler and we ran a lot of workshops for Chrysler. Now, I said Roy Abbott was in the Vehicle Builders’ Union: Roy once said to me, ‘We’ve got to get something happening in Chrysler to stop those bloody shop stewards.’ Roy’s motivation was that – the shop stewards – I was talking to some people at Flinders about this the other day – there was quite a sort of worker–student alliance, Maoist cell in Chrysler – Haydon Manning was telling me about it because Haydon was one of the Maoists, you know, the Maoist cell down at Chrysler – and there was a nascent shop stewards’ movement who were picking up stuff from England and the shop stewards’
movement in the UK and what they’d done in places like the shipbuilding industry and car industry and they were trying to re-create that and get union democracy and shop steward democracy.

Roy had comfortably run a very hierarchical, top-down management of his union for years and the last thing he needed was shop stewards challenging him on the shop floor, and he was anxious, he saw this sort of worker participation as a way of giving the workers some form of participation and satisfying their demands for greater participation without empowering the shop stewards. Now, of course, that’s just so against any – that it is so unlikely to work. I think we probably did set up a joint consultative council at Chrysler, but how useful it was I don’t know. What we did do at Chrysler were these job redesign workshops. And remember at that time Clyde Cameron had been over to Sweden and the media was full of stuff about Volvo, about the Volvo system of taking out the production line and creating work teams, and Chrysler were very interested in how they might do that.

I have to say I don’t think any of it ever happened because again one of the things nobody fully appreciated was the amount of technological investment and capital investment you needed to redesign a production line. That came later in the ’80s when they had to do it to be efficient, to compete with the lack of tariffs; but at that time remember tariffs, we were still under – – –. Whitlam cut tariffs by twenty-five per cent in I think ’73, but we were still highly-protected industry. Australia still had to face that massive competition from overseas that came in the ’80s when Hawke really started reducing tariffs in the car plants and so on and then under Button when they invested in trying to make world cars. Back then they were still making highly-protected cars on a pretty standard production line.

So that was interesting and we did a lot of things at Chrysler. We had these famous workshops at Christies Beach, and looking back – I’ve now had the archive shown to me by this guy from Sydney – we did lots of that. If someone came to us and said, ‘We want you to help us’, we would run a workshop where we would take a vertical slice of that organisation and we would run these workshops. But the capacity to then take that and actually implement something, I think that’s a problem of government: how do you do it? It’s not your job, we weren’t set up to be management consultants, really. But back to – – –.
Talking about management, how did they see this? Did they quarantine – ‘Well, look, you can go and redesign jobs but don’t start impinging on our key powers’?

Well, it was always interesting in these workshops. Fred would make a speech about how money doesn’t motivate people and a couple were rude enough to point out that he was probably getting paid. Then it was always interesting at the end of the workshops, I remember; they’d go incredibly well, like all those things did – you know, you take people away for three days and they’re down at Christies Beach Hotel Motel – we had the Governor come once, this huge lunch, Oliphant. I think that was more work than I’ve ever done in my life – I mean getting the right menus because he was vegetarian, having police. A big sort of thing, and we were cutting edge of reform, blah, blah, blah. But at the end of these workshops often, when it’s all said and done, people would get up and say – particularly the union officials – would say, ‘This has been a great experience, a great time, I’ve really enjoyed it and I’ve learned a lot about what you blokes think, but I just need to say that I’m here of course in a personal capacity and I need to report back to my organisation. I can’t say what they’re going to say about it.’

So it was always the power relationships both of the unions and of the management and the other requirements of the management cut in, and I don’t think we really ever got to – – –. I mean, when you look at how industry changes you now see that you get somebody, CEO normally of a company, says, ‘I’m going to change this company’, and they drive it. They drive the change. They put their reputations behind it. We never really saw that anywhere in any of the things we did. We were dealing with HR people, we were dealing with production line people who wanted to change, but the sort of major change of investment and really pushing something like that never happened.

This takes us into where Don Dunstan saw all of this and whether he actually appreciated how things actually worked out there or this was some ideal he’d thought of and – – –.

Shortly after we joined the unit, as a young – I was twenty-three, twenty-four – things I remember about South Australia is the extraordinary accessibility of Dunstan, and shortly after the unit formed and I think before Lyndon came, I think Charles and Ken were there, Don took us out to dinner with Stephen Wright and we went to the Sorrento in Hindley Street, as I recall. We had dinner with the Premier, which is amazing. He took his public servants out to give us his understanding of what he wanted us to do. I always remember
him talking, he talked a lot about his life of driving electoral reform and political reform and reforming the Legislative Council, and he said that he saw industrial democracy as the next stage. I later thought about it. He said, ‘This is the next stage we’ve got. I’ve reformed the political structure; now we need to reform industry.’ And I don’t doubt that that genuinely was his belief, and I think looking back on Don’s career and later when I worked for Bannon, Don resigned and I wrote speeches for the many, many valedictory dinners, I went back and read some of his early speeches of the ’50s and he was absolutely consistent. In the ’50s Don – and his maiden speech in Parliament was brilliant because he talks about how his constituents in Norwood do not have the hospitals they deserve because they don’t have the electoral power that they deserve. He was making a point that because his constituents in Norwood – because of the gerrymander, his constituents did not have the electoral political power to get what they needed. He was consistent with that from ’54 through ’74 and I think that did drive him. I think that was the way Don worked, that as I said with these things like these inquiries, he had an inquiry, he pushed out ideas and then he sort of stood with the ideas but then synthesised [?in one word?]. I think that’s Don’s greatness.

I think the last years of Don’s life he tried to reinvent himself as a sort of bureaucrat, which he wasn’t. He tried to promote himself as a great administrator. He wasn’t. But his great power, to me, was someone who happily…. It was the way he inspired ideas. Industrial democracy I think was part of that pattern of Don saying, ‘We’re going to create a new industry that is based on democracy to match our political democracy’, and I’m sure he believed it.

We clung to the speeches. There was a speech Don gave at the Conygham Street Australian Mineral Foundation in ’73, a Tony Baker special, beautiful speech, which we sort of clung to, really, as our entire bible on that. In fact, I think it’s in that book, there’s an extract of it. I’ve got some somewhere. It’s interesting how – I used to try and explain this to Bannon later – how much speeches are important in public service because that’s what you got remembered by.

Later I had more to do with Don and there was one occasion when he was trying to introduce the legislation for public directors and I sat in a meeting with him with various industry people who gave him a really hard time. I obviously never had a chance to say to him, ‘I don’t think you understood, Premier’, but I don’t think Don fully appreciated what
he was unleashing or how hard it was to do what he wanted to do; that he was trying to change industrial structure which increasingly wasn’t controlled by South Australia. I mean Chrysler was – in those days; now Mitsubishi – Chrysler was not really run from Adelaide, nor was General Motors. It’s interesting when I look at some of these meetings. We would go to Sydney to talk to people from CSR or Humes because even in those days that’s where the head offices were. So the decisions weren’t really being made here.

Also I think that the worker participation councils, the joint consultative councils, didn’t work anywhere in the world because if they worked, if they were really effective, then people would oppose them. If they stayed on it was because they weren’t effective, because they dealt with rats and mice issues. They didn’t really deal with – I mean, capitalism doesn’t really allow for that. We were working on the assumption that there was in fact a common interest between the workers and managers, which there isn’t, and there wasn’t. Once the economy changed and we hit the recession and job retention became less of a problem, we had less people coming to us. Industry saw this as a useful tool to help them with some of their problems, but nobody was out there, nobody’s out there actually believing in democracy – and, to be fair, we weren’t selling it as democracy.

It’s a bit like corporate social responsibility these days: if there’s some advantage for the bottom line people will come in on it, or risk aversion or risk management.

Yes. Just about whether Don was clear, jumping ahead after when he introduced that legislation for public company directors or public directors of listed companies, it’s interesting, I think that was Don’s sort of – I mean, he was a lawyer at heart, or he was a lawyer, and I think that was interesting that he chose that. That didn’t come out of the unit. Bannon was very much involved in that. When John Bannon came, when Clyde Cameron was dismissed as Minister of Industrial Relations, John left Clyde and came back to South Australia to become effectively an assistant director or deputy director of the Department of Labour and Industry. Even though by then we’d been moved to the Premier’s Department, John was responsible for the unit. I’m not sure where – it certainly didn’t come out of the unit and I’m sure we didn’t particularly think it was a great idea, this idea of public company directors, public officers on private boards, and that was a sort of, if you like, a legalistic response of that’s how you get the community involved. I’m not sure why Don did it. He would never have got it through the Upper House.
Whether he saw it in terms of something that you have there like a sore that you keep scratching and you keep pointing out what a bunch of Neanderthals these people are, which he did with electoral reform, I wouldn’t be surprised; but that was when we did have some meetings with people from what was then called the Institute of Directors and Employers’ Federation, and they just basically said to him, ‘If you do this we’ll fight you, fight to the death. We’re not going to tolerate this. We’re not having worker directors on our board’, to which Don would say, ‘But they’re not worker directors. We will choose people who are trained to represent the public interest.’ I look back on it now as, as a shareholder running my own super fund, I’d be aghast at that. Just fundamentally, it’s sort of woolly Labor thinking that somehow the companies are not profit-making organisations, they’re somehow social democracy entities, that they’re there to give people work. They’re not; they’re there to make a shareholder return. And in this new neo-liberal age we’re much more focused on that. Can you imagine what would happen to the share price of a company that put somebody like that on their board? Down it would go.

I remember we had a meeting with Don and they really gave him a hard time and after they left – you know -and he looked at me and he said, ‘You see what I’m up against?’ And I felt this great sympathy for him.

But the Germans had the supervisory boards and things like that: was that maybe where some of that idea came from?

I think it did. But that’s a totally different cultural environment. It’s interesting, people point that out, although I think there was always management board and supervisory boards. Germany happily existed like [that] for a long time, but of course now I think they’re trying to unwind all of it.

You mentioned Don had the vision, but did he also talk about strategy and how to get this sort of stuff through, or did he really leave it to others—-?

It was more a vision thing. The fraternity fell apart pretty quickly, largely thanks to – I don’t blame them, but Lyndon, I had more to do with Lyndon than most, I guess because I spent a lot of time with him and Lyndon was a generous host, if on other people’s money. But Lyndon quickly tried to use the sort of techniques that he’d used in running a business of both hectoring, cajoling and flattering, which of course didn’t work. The classic was
John Scott from the metalworkers. He got sued by John Scott, I think successfully. He went to a meeting of metalworkers and I think he – Lyndon had these great phrases. One of them was, ‘There’s a streetcar named Desire and it leaves every five minutes and if you don’t get on it you get left behind.’ That was roughly [it]. He used to say this, he had these sort of phrases; or ‘When the dogs piss on your swag in the Diamantina you know it’s time to move on’ or something, and he had these sort of folksy phrases and he’d come out with them, and he could harangue unionists as though they were salesmen that he had to inspire. He didn’t realise that these blokes had, if you like, a whole separate ethos – in those days particularly the unions had a separate power structure, separate life.

When John Scott was critical of what we were doing Lyndon went public – AMWSU¹ – Lyndon went public and said that John Scott’s out of touch with his members and if he’s not careful they’ll just move on past him or something like that. Now, of course – I was thinking of that today, actually, when I was thinking about Joe Hockey saying those academics were trade unionists masquerading as academics. They’ll obviously win their case, because saying that sort of thing about a union official that he was out of touch with his members was seen by the courts as defamatory. This was saying I think by a union to an academic that you’re cheating, you’re sort of distorting your data, is damaging to an academic’s reputation. John sued Lyndon, so we were in a difficult situation where a powerful union in the UTLC was suing the head of the unit.

This was all of course leading up to the ALP conference where Les Wright, the AWU² and the Left moved this motion that we be abolished, because they didn’t see us as really industrial worker participation. It was the classic – these days we laugh about it – it was the classic left unions seeing that what we really needed was true democracy which they saw as more union control and power in the system and that we were in fact trying to create separate structures from the trade unions, that we were trying to bypass the unions. There was an established system of unions, industrial relations systems, arbitration courts; we were trying to separate something different; the unions and the shop stewards should be involved in this and we should be abolished. Now, what’s that big debate? Was it ’74?

I can’t remember.

¹ AMWSU – Amalgamated Metalworkers and Shipwrights Union.
² AWU – Australian Workers Union.
Seventy-four Convention – I talk about it there in a chapter – when Les moved a motion which was carried. So we had the interesting thing of having a motion of the supreme policy body of the party saying we should be abolished. Out of that there were a number of changes.

A lot of that, I think it was to do genuinely with the fact that we were threatening the people but also the way in which we’d gone about it and the way in which Lyndon in particular had enraged the Union Movement by basically telling them that they could either get on board or miss the train, and they didn’t like to hear that. In retrospect Lyndon was not the right person for the job, and this whole issue and debate about personalities, but I don’t have much doubt that the decision to choose Lyndon almost automatically meant that this initiative would fail, in some respects.

I think the other thing too was Lyndon was not a manager, he was a salesman, so there was nobody in the unit representing us at a senior level. We would often discuss it. I think by the end of that time the unit combined to try and say to our bosses, ‘We can’t work with this man any more. He is damaging us.’

So what happened?

He eventually sort of just went and then Phil Bentley came.

Phil Bentley, right.

But nobody had thought through, there was no strategy really of saying, ‘Okay, this is what we’re trying to do: how are we going to do it?’ Lyndon was so taken with Fred’s approach. Like that’s what happened to him, he went away to one of these workshops, suddenly he saw what he could do, he created self-actualising groups in the workplace and made millions of dollars, sold his pet company to somebody – god knows what happened to the workers – and he was happy. And I think somehow Lyndon’s very simple view of the world was that ‘It’s a self-evident truth if I say it and I sell it then everybody will take it up, because I did.’ But it wasn’t like that. When you’ve got union structures and industrial relations structures – – –.

The other thing too was in those days demarcation was a huge issue and a lot of the blokes coming to us what they really wanted was to break down demarcation. Now, if you had to set up a self-actualising work group and you’ve got somebody in those days from the Metalworkers’ Union, somebody from the Electrical Trades Union, somebody
from maybe the Carpenters’ Union, and you tell them they’re all going to now just work together on the job as a team, what happened to the award? What happened to the award system? I think it’s interesting.

Later when I went to Warwick University I tried to think through some of these things. A lot of these experiments – which were shonky anyway, because they did pay people to get involved in them so the payment was important – I’m not sure that India or England, where these experiments were operated, or even Sweden, had the sort of award structures that we had in the ’70s. It was a highly-regulated system of industrial relations and human resource management. So how you were going to create a work team when you had these demarcation issues between unions, don’t know.

**What actually happened after that ALP Conference, as you said, in ’74? Was that a watershed in terms of the whole focus of the [unit]?**

We were renamed. Yes, effectively the Unit for the Quality of Work Life disappeared and we were renamed the Unit for Industrial Democracy, and by and large I think we were sort of directed by Lindsay that we were to concentrate on joint consultative councils, particularly in the public service.

**That was Lindsay, but at the same time you’ve got the unions, there was some sort of a committee set up to look at the whole bigger issue of worker control, if you like.**

I think possibly out of that – and I’d have to go back and look; my memory’s stretching here – I think out of that probably came these public director concepts, and that bypassed us. We weren’t allowed to be involved in that, that came out and that was announced.

**But you also had the statutory authorities having so-called worker directors.**

Yes. I left in ’76 and I think Lyndon had gone by – I’m not sure when he left, actually, when Philip came; look that up. But I remember the occasion when Lyndon finally – we got much more involved in the public service. The Public Service Board was set up. Graham Inns by then I think was Chairman of the Public Service Board. Malcolm McIntosh and Stewart Sweeney were a sort of unit in the Public Service Board. Stewart was pretty influential on this. Stewart was very influential intellectually. Stewart was, would I think then have called himself and probably still does a Marxist, but Stewart, particularly for my thinking and we’d spent a lot of time thinking about what was wrong here, and he introduced me to the English author called Alan Fox who’d written a
lot about unitary and pluralist systems. It was an interesting bridge to a more Marxist view, which wasn’t a class-based view but rather say that a lot of the ways we were pursuing, particularly worker participation committees and joint consultative committees, were based on a framework, if you like, that industry was a unitary system where everybody had the same ideas. If you said, ‘Well, it’s not; it’s a highly pluralist system with a whole lot of different, competing ideas’, then that idea of joint consultative councils just becomes a nonsense. I must admit my heart was not in sitting in the bloody State Library or Housing Trust helping them set up worker participation councils. They did exist and I think they went on for a while.

Then in those days – I think this was then – people like Peter Berry from the PSA\(^3\) – Peter had the distinction of looking just like Leon Trotsky – and the unions, largely driven by people like Peter, had this concept called ‘single channel’, the single channel of representation. So they argued very strongly – and this I think again came out of the party’s Worker Participation Committee – that there was a single channel of representation for workers and that was the Union Movement, and that we should not set up anything that broke or impinged on that single channel. Now, in the public service where people like the PSA in those days were more powerful, this was very difficult. How are you going to set up a – we’re setting up joint consultative councils and we spent an awful lot of time, meetings, discussions, trying to agonise around how could we set up a joint consultative council where the workers were allowed to elect people if the unions were saying, ‘They can elect people so long as they’re job reps’?

I think we tried compromises where you had job reps and a combination, I really can’t remember the details, but I do remember that a combination of changing economy so that industry was not as interested, they didn’t have the problems of retaining workers any more because the economy had changed, and the fact that we’d been badly burnt politically and the unions were very opposed to us, that we sort of retreated back into the public sector.

_was there some debate about unions covered particular issues – wages and conditions – and these councils or consultative committees can talk about anything else?_

\(^3\) PSA – Public Service Association.
Yes, I think that’s probably right. I seem to remember that as we – my mind is thinking of a meeting actually in the library – yes, where the joint consultative council would not be allowed to touch any industrial issues, which of course meant that they would be left with things that nobody cared about. I mean, if they weren’t talking about how the place was run or they weren’t talking about these matters, then – – –. The other thing too, of course, again, the demarcations were even stronger in the public service. If we’re talking about any sort of change, in those days you’re an ASO-1 who did that, you sat at that desk and had that job, and if you want to do that desk and that job that was a whole new application. This system, you may recall, is far more rigid than it is now. So the idea of any sort of structural change was a joke.

I must say by the time I’d left, the time I’d decided to resign, I was thoroughly pissed off with it and I thought intellectually it was a failure. And it was always going to be a failure because these ideas of industrial democracy didn’t have any support– there was no coalition for them anywhere, they worked against everybody’s interests. The unions didn’t like it because it threatened the unions, the management didn’t like it because it threatened the management’s right to manage. I think it was only after the ’80s when we had union amalgamations and when we had that whole productivity bargaining through the accords, the massive change that happened in the ’80s, and Australian industry had a major shakeout in manufacturing – we’re talking about sixteen thousand people down at Lonsdale, there’s about four or five thousand now if you’re lucky, major shakeout in manufacturing – and the introduction of technology where a lot of the jobs that were very, very difficult, dreary and horrible were taken over by robots, car production lines changed dramatically – – –.

When does the quality movement come in, the Japanese total quality control, that seemed to be a version of the job enrichment process?

Well, because Mitsubishi took over Chrysler with Tonkin in ’79 or ’80, so I think by then they were probably done away with anyway. But I think, as I said, in that period management started to change and I think the sort of ideas – I always thought that the sort of ideas that Kelty was talking about and managers were talking about in the ’80s were very similar to what we were talking about in the ’70s. We were a little bit too early and the economic conditions weren’t right. But I think probably a lot of the sort of restructuring and job redesign that we were talking about happened in the ’80s naturally
and happened as part of a restructuring of manufacturing, therefore it had logic and had people who were supporting it, as opposed to us trying to impose this crazy idea.

**Just about that, you mentioned Don met with the Institute of Directors. What was he actually saying to them about why they should pick this up, if you can remember that?**

I think he was telling them it wasn’t threatening. I think he was telling them that this wasn’t a threat, that these people would not be union hacks, they would not be worker directors; they would be trained, we would set up training, trained experts who would bring to the company an understanding of the community’s needs and aspirations and that this was a very democratic process, this would be a democratic way of introducing more democracy into the management of industry. But of course what they’re saying is industry’s got nothing to do with democracy, it’s not a democracy; it’s about making a profit. I think that sort of fundamental difference, that’s why I say this thing was intellectually flawed, because industry’s about making a profit and I think back in the ’70s there was still a vaguely fuzzy social democratic idea that somehow industry was there to serve the community.

What got rid of that was globalisation in the 1980s when we realised that we were trying to survive here. I say to my students, ‘You have no idea. If you go to drive to the airport past what is now Bunnings there were about six thousand men working there at Perry Engineering. There was O’Connor’s, probably another three or four thousand. We had all these manufacturing industries, people bending metal, which is now all gone.

**Yes – foundries, you name it.**

To survive there had to be a lot of change. I think those pressures weren’t there and Labor parties and Labor governments had an idea about supporting industry. They came to office with all sorts of ideas about industry plans and EPAC. In those days the Minister of Labour, Jack Wright, used to have a tripartite committee called the Industrial Relations Advisory Committee or something, IRAC; and we had EPAC under Hawke. The Labor Party policy in 1983 was to promote industry plans and quite a degree of control, and by December ’83 when the downturn came that just went, all gone, because Australia was fighting for economic survival – bit too dramatic, but we were – and industry was fighting to survive in a global workplace and a lot of the stuff which in the Labor Party’s views – Kevin Rudd, he says, ‘There’s not a sliver of light between me and John Howard in
economic policy’ – but in those days the Labor Party did have a sort of a belief in social democracy, which was a euphemism for socialism, and I think Don did have a commitment to social democracy as he understood it, which was that industry should serve the society to a greater extent possible. We didn’t really see that that might be incompatible with making money.

But these days people talk about a ‘business case’, if you like – I forget even whether that term was being used –

Hell, no.

– but there was no business case presented for management.

There was no business case, no. In fact – that’s what I say – I think later they did see the business case, just in the same way that companies today do report on corporate social responsibility - this triple bottom line stuff. Now, a lot of it – I teach this at uni, so get the students to think about this is real or it’s just a way of being able to make more profits without people giving you a hard time; but I think there is a recognition by big companies that they can’t just operate without reference to the stakeholders and the community in which they work. Now, they don’t need public directors to get them to do that, so in a way if Don had called this ‘corporate social responsibility’ back then he might have had a better way of – he might have pushed it easier. If he’d said ‘I want to you adopt concepts of corporate social responsibility. I want you to appoint a corporate social responsibility officer’ or something, that might have been a step. But they fought what they saw as a fundamental attack on their power to manage their industry, which they weren’t going to give up without a fight.

The bill, I think it just lapsed after the change of government, didn’t it?

Yes.

I don’t think Des was all that excited about these things.


I’d gone by then. I came back.

Oh, I see.

I came back in ’78, but I was only there for a little while and then I started working for John, John Bannon. And while my substantive position was in the unit I was on leave
without pay to work in the Minister’s office and then Leader of the Opposition’s office. Of course, the big thing that we did in ’78 was the conference, the industrial democracy conference that Philip – the international conference. I didn’t have much to do with the planning of it, I got here and it was already under way, but I think in many respects it was a good tactic from Philip to re-energise and to bring this thing back on the agenda. In some respects it would have been a good thing to do in 1973.

So I don’t want to be too critical of Lyndon because I was close to Lyndon, I enjoyed his company and he was quite an extraordinary character, amazing person really and had a lot of things about him that somebody should have harnessed; but he was not the person to develop this initiative. It really needed somebody sufficiently experienced – – –. And we didn’t ever have that. When you look at the resource we had, I mean I was fresh out of university and fresh out of student politics; Charles and Ken spent their lives working as production engineers, middle-level management. It actually lacked a pretty senior manager to think through what it was we were trying to achieve and how were we going to deliver it. These days you’d have KPIs$^4$ and all sorts of things; but what were our objectives and what we were going to be, how will we know if we could ever be successful?

**Did you sort of sit back and reflect on how you were going?**

I think we did once. Lyndon wasn’t a person for self-reflection, and most good political leaders aren’t. I don’t think our current Premier self-reflects much, that’s why he’s so good. If you reflect too much you worry; you just get on and do it. And Lyndon was a bit like that.

**What about when Phil Bentley came in?**

Well, Phil had more academic background. Phil was interesting and there was no question that Philip was a more natural politician and Philip played the bureaucratic political game well, and in a way he was what was needed at the time I think to calm it down and redirect it towards a more research-based, promotional group.

At the end there I overlapped a bit with Philip when he was head of it, and in fact we’d moved into Currie Street, and we were still at that stage trying to do a lot of things in the
public service. Then I left for a year and a bit and I think that’s when Philip, I think his idea of the conference, the national conference was to really re-energise it because it wasn’t – I don’t think it was probably going anywhere. Bit hard for me to talk about time I wasn’t there, of course. But Philip sort of calmed it down and gave it more credibility in terms of dealing with the bureaucracy and managing that bureaucratic process and getting policies written, processes done that Lyndon wasn’t interested in.

One image I have of Lyndon is when he left his office every night he would open up a drawer and he would get his hand, he would sweep everything on the table into the drawer and close the drawer and he would never ever look in there again. Max Johnson’s secretary used to sneak in and go through Lyndon’s drawer and try and find all the memos that Max had sent him.

That was Lindsay Bowes’s deputy.

Yes, Max. Those days, Lindsey, it was a bit of status for Lindsay to get a deputy secretary. Max came and Max was sort of in charge of us. There was this interesting thing where Lindsay sat at one office, Max was next to him, they had an adjoining door, and then we were outside Max’s office. So it’s hard when you think of the bureaucracy those days that Lindsay would write a memo to Max, Max would write a memo to Lindsay, and Lindsay would sort of laugh at it and throw it in the bin. They were different days.

Then of course we went across to Premier’s after that and the bloke who was in charge, I was trying to remember his name the other day: it was Bill –

Bill Voyzey.

– Bill Voyzey.

Yes.

Bill Voyzey was nominally in charge of us. I remember the meeting that finally sealed Lyndon’s fate. John Bannon was there, I was there, Malcolm McIntosh was there, Charles might have been there, and Lyndon, and Bill Voyzey was chairing us. We used to have this sort of committee meeting. Of course by then Graham Inns had taken a lot of

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4 KPI – key performance indicators.
initiative in the Public Service Board, who I think we originally saw as a threat but ultimately we became quite close to both Stewart and Malcolm and trying to work with them in the public service. Malcolm had done something, just doing his job, and Lyndon had decided it was an outrage and I remember him shouting and screaming at Malcolm that he was useless and, you know, the streetcar named Desire and blah, blah, blah, blah, and I think he said something like, ‘You’ve got to get out. Get out. Get out of here.’ And I actually felt that I finally needed to take some sort of responsibility for this and I said, ‘Lyndon, I think you’re the one that should go.’

Really?

And he looked at me and I think that was when he realised that there was nobody there supporting him. I remember just saying, ‘I think it’s time actually you should go, Lyndon.’ And he stormed out, and I always remember because shortly after that Bill’s secretary knocked on the door to say that the gentleman had left his umbrella. (laughter) I always thought, ‘If you’re going to storm out of a room, make sure you’ve got your umbrella.’

You mentioned Bill and Lindsay and Max Johnson, was it?

Max was deputy secretary.

Yes, then John Bannon, who was the rising star.

Yes, John came in as assistant secretary.

But who were the champions around the place? You mentioned Graham Inns and the top level people were champions around the public sector; but in terms of the industrial area you suggested there wasn’t a senior manager who could really work that.

No, I don’t think there was. The people who pushed it a lot out there in the community was we used to have a thing called the Productivity Council, but now I don’t think they exist any more. The Productivity Council – and there were some people in the Commonwealth Department of Labour and Industry, there was a guy called Doron Gunzburg in Melbourne.

Yes, I remember him.

They were very keen on that. The Productivity Council, there were a few managers around who were keen, but there was no significant people. In the public service – well,
you know, it’s another one of the Premier’s ideas. I don’t think Graham was a great supporter—Graham was responsible for Graham and Graham was interested in Graham. You know, if the Premier wanted it that’s what he’d do; but he wasn’t about to have major change in the way the public service was structured. I don’t think there was anybody.

There were some people like Ray Dundon. We did a lot of work with Woods and Forests, again because of issues about safety, issues about turnover in their wood mills down in Mount Gambier. Ray was somebody, in those days a pretty junior manager, who supported it and was pretty keen. There were some guys in CSR – Jim ….. who was the national HR manager for CSR, he was very supportive. Again, we did a few things here in CSR, we ran workshops for them, but nothing got bedded down.

There was always a problem, there was a gap. Like you could run a workshop, you could run a meeting. If you were a private consultant you’d then go in and give them a plan, but we weren’t set up to do that. Ken Wang might have done a bit of that with Philips where he used to work; Charles might have done a bit of that with Simpson’s where he used to work. But it was pretty patchy and I think it was the whole problem. I mean, these days the government wouldn’t bother. You might even fund consultants to do it for you or something and you would just unashamedly say, ‘We’re just promoting the idea’, which is really all we could do.

Even in a way by sort of stepping over into these workshops we were half trying to implement it and just creating problems. We hadn’t thought through how we were going to do it. Were we going to stand there and hold their hand and help them if they tried to do something? Were we going to say, ‘Look, you’re going to have to totally rip your production line apart’? Don’t think so. So that was the whole problem, how you actually implement these things; only these days people have thought that through more. We didn’t think it through; there was no real discussion of strategies, about how we were going to do it. It was a marketing campaign: ‘Make Life Work’. We produced this colour brochure with flowers and things about work–life balance – very trendy, very trendy, we’re right in there now – and I think it, as I said, it had fundamental problems that at the time nobody had the intellectual capacity to overcome.

I don’t blame the Premier. I mean, the Premier started this, gave it life, made it clear that he saw it as a major sort of move of democracy, then he must have been distressed at getting all the letters from people complaining about our behaviour. (laughs)
He sort of moved in and out in terms of the direction, if you like, that is, ‘Let’s go in, let’s develop softly[?] – – –.’

And let’s remember that in those days – okay, we got kicked off in ’73, and then you’ve got to remember too by the middle of ’75 Don was fighting politically for his life in the Whitlam period. So we had a double dissolution election in ’74 which he would have been greatly involved in, then of course we had ..... ......, then he went to an early election in ’75, he only won because he made the guy from Port Pirie Speaker. Don had a lot of things on his mind, and I’m sure there were other things happening around – and the South Australian economy was probably, it would have been hit by recession. You forget. All I have learned about politics and business is that you really do need champions, someone who says, ‘This is what I’m going to do in the next five years’, and it didn’t really have that.

I think the structure of the business community in South Australia, even then, was suffering from the lack of head offices. The people we talked to – people like Simpson’s and what other companies? Well, they didn’t do much. In those days Philips had a whole lot of women out there winding motors. Simpson’s had people working on production lines making whitegoods. But again, you know, they were pumping out whitegoods. I don’t remember anybody ever saying – well, they might have committees saying can we do something here; they would not have ever really got past job rotation, which was an insignificant part. The fundamental stuff that Fred was talking about, of allowing people to decide how the job was going to be done themselves and empowering that group to get on and do the job, that probably happens now but it certainly wasn’t happening then.

There was the international conference, that would have rounded up some of the observations around the world and the State, but then as you said the whole thing wound down after Corcoran. Then, when Tonkin came in as the Liberal Premier –

It disappeared.

– it got chucked out the window. But why do you think it was picked up later on by the Labor Government under Hawke, there was activity – – –?

The biggest thing that happened then I suppose was – – –. Just go back a minute. You see that book we published in the ’70s? There was a national interest in this. Around Australia there were people interested in it and we used to have lots of – Fred Emery used to call them ‘flockings’. We would get together, there was a lot of interstate travelling to
talk to like-minded people. You look back on it and you say we were talking to ourselves, but there was a lot of interest both academically and in some unions in some areas.

Now, what happened in the ‘80s? I think in the ’80s there was the famous [case of] the metalworker who went off, led a group to Sweden. Now, what was his name? A good old communist.

Ted Gnatenko

No, I was thinking nationally. Ted Gnatenko, there’s a blast from the past. The guy who was running the metalworkers nationally. He went off and he led a deputation and out of that came Australia reconstructed, the big report that was done.

Laurie Carmichael.

Yes, Laurie Carmichael. And out of that came Australia reconstructed and that document, that thinking, the Australian National Training Authority, competency-based jobs as opposed to jobs based on old demarcations, union amalgamations, a lot of these things came in the ’80s because they were economically required to get a modern economy. Now, I don’t think the Labor Government in the 1980s ever went back to saying, ‘Let’s have industrial democracy.’ That didn’t happen. The Bannon Government didn’t do it, nobody was interested in those sort of phrases. What they did talk about in the 1980s I think was productivity-based pay, which was one of the Accords, restructuring, trying to change manufacturing. And in the public service of course in the 1980s we had a whole move towards let the manager manage, manage by objectives and so on.

Hawke and Keating changed the Public Service Act to give more power to the ministers direct. The public service started to remade. I can remember doing some research on this and found some Hawke speeches about when he introduced the new Public Service Act was to say, ‘We’ve asked the private sector to become efficient; it’s now the turn of the public sector, they must also undergo these same sort of management changes.’ So I think in the ’80s we had a modernisation and a move to a more managerialist style in the public service, where we started breaking down the old bureaucratic structures. Meanwhile, industry I think had modernised and had recognised that it had to bring in more technology and change things if it was going to survive. Some of the stuff I think we were talking about, particularly involving people in how it’s going to be designed, how’s it
going to work, was happening; but no, I don’t think anybody went back to industrial
democracy as such.

All right. Just in winding up, are there any broad reflections you want to put on the
record about your time in that unit?

Just looking at your questions ..... ..... ..... I’ve missed one.

As I said, I think the main thing I would say is that it almost went off the rails
immediately. I think Don’s idea of, if you like, creating a movement for more democracy
in workplaces, if you were doing it again you’d go about it entirely differently. But I’ll
also say whether or not that was Don’s legalistic view and, if you like, almost – I mean, I
don’t think Don had great affinity for or really understood – I have to be careful what I’m
saying, I’m not sure that’s fair. I’ve often felt Don didn’t fully understand what he was
doing in this area. That’s not meant as a criticism, just trying to say that he was a lawyer
and a politician who saw changes in institutions and changes in structures and changes in
processes as bringing about change, and he would change the law. If you want to make a
society more caring you created a Department for Community Welfare, you changed laws
on homosexuality, you changed laws on this or that, you changed the laws on six o’clock
closing. You changed the laws. I think this was an era when people believed that that’s
how you change society. I think this was not an area where you could do it by changing
the law.

The other problem you had was that a law that did exist, which was the industrial
relations law, was sort of working against you and what was needed to change that
industrial relations law to have a more – you know, we had a highly-centralised
bargaining system then. The thing that changed it was enterprise bargaining, and the
person who brought enterprise bargaining in was Paul Keating. John Howard’s taken it
further. So it took another twenty years and a massive economic change in Australia to
recognise that industrially we had to let people at the workplace bargain themselves, and I
think while nobody would say it was perfect I think some of the changes of the bosses
wanting certain things and workers wanting certain things started to come in enterprise
bargaining.

So in a way I guess Don was probably twenty years ahead, which is not surprising. If
you combine that sort of industrial change and corporate social responsibility
developments then you’ve got something like we were talking about.
Okay. Well, thanks very much, Geoff.

All right, I hope that’s been helpful.

That’s been very informative, very helpful. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW.