

Maurie DOWNER

Interview with Maurie Downer conducted by Alan Hutchings on 24 September 2007 at Woodforde, South Australia for the Don Dunstan Oral History Project.

INTERVIEW COMMENCES

This is Alan Hutchings from the Dunstan Foundation and I'm interviewing Mr Maurie Downer, a developer who also had a number of other skills and qualifications and was very involved in the Dunstan years with some of Adelaide's development. Over to you, Maurie.

Thank you, Alan. In fact, I am a former member of the Dunstan Foundation.

Of course.

Now, you're looking for me to talk on Seaford? Or generally?

Seaford, anything to deal with mainly Dunstan and what happened in those days and what that may have led to. That might have been a base that led to other things, and also the Dunstan years were – some other people I've interviewed talk about them being a culmination, but some of those people were older than you and I, Maurie.

Yes. Well, I guess some of the projects that I was involved in during those Dunstan years was Para Hills development, about three thousand allotments – most people know where Para Hills is; the Modbury out against what is now the new Golden Grove; South Lakes at Goolwa; West Lakes; and all of those or several of those projects included indentures with government, and I well remember sitting at a table at the Highways Department and the indenture was getting to a bit of a grind, coming to a bit of a grind, and Don Dunstan came to the meeting and said, 'Look, I'm a busy man', basically. He said, 'I'm not here to understand why this project shouldn't go ahead; I want to know the conditions under which it *can* go ahead, because it's something that we support as a government.' From then on, the attitude changed towards getting that project through. He had a way of expressing himself to get people – anything that he thought was a good idea, most people seemed to believe *was* a good idea, because he was a very clever man anyway. I don't think that project would have ever got up and running if Dunstan hadn't been there at the time as Premier.

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Similarly, other projects that we were involved in, even when he was still the Leader of the Opposition – he started out, by the way, as being the company solicitor back in the good old days of Dunstan, Lee, Taylor and Lynch.

And Roder.

Roder, yes. And so we had known of him for a lot of years, not that he physically did a lot of work for us, but his company did. And there is no doubt in my mind that, as a planner in a period when there really weren't too many planners around, he was a gifted planner. He could see the future, he could see things that a lot of other people couldn't see, and I think a lot of that era – I mean, they were very heady years. Adelaide was ramping ahead and they were just wonderful years to be involved in, whereas now we find that basically you go in and it's more about, almost seems as though, 'How can we stop this happening? Because there's been so many bad things happen before, we shouldn't be doing anything until we work out what we're going to do.' But there is no-one there that is working out what we *should* be doing. We need people, strategic planning, and there aren't many of them. There are not many gifted people that can plan a new town.

I mean, if we look back, Alan, I know you were involved in the Monarto project. If only we'd put Monarto on hold, what a great piece of land that would be to expand Adelaide today. And so at the time there were many passionate people that said, 'This is something not for today but for tomorrow', and instead of people accepting that and putting it on the table and leaving it there for the future we lost it. It's a great place for the zoo, but the zoo could have been there, too. But that's the sort of thing: planning is not tomorrow, it's further down the track, and we don't have anybody doing that in Adelaide. It's a bit of hit-and-miss. 'We need another piece of land', so they grab Port Wakefield or a piece of land at Buckland Park which floods every few years, 'Let's turn that into housing.' That's really not a plan.

No. I think I couldn't agree more, Maurie, but going back to those days you mentioned Dunstan coming in when you were trying to put the indenture to bed, so to speak. Were there any other particular events like that, or occasions where he may have sort of cut through?

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Well, I think we're all looking for a leader, I think most people, most of us are followers; and I think that meeting demonstrated to me that there are a whole lot of government departments involved – in those days it was Highways Department, what the fancy name is today; I don't think there were any planning people there – oh, there probably was someone from the State Planning – but they were all looking for leadership and he gave that leadership. He was the one that said, 'We want this project to proceed with all the right conditions.' He wasn't there to say, 'It's got to proceed at any cost', but, 'Examine how this project can proceed and the conditions under which it can go ahead.' That's basically what he was putting on the table, because from the State point of view he felt that it was a good idea – not directing them to do it, but actually I guess giving them all a reason for looking at it as a project that should proceed rather than something you should stop. That was his task that I saw that day.

So let's go back to those days: there was West Lakes; Golden Grove was a bit later, wasn't it?

Yes, that came a little later. But nevertheless went ahead with the same indenture deal, the same people who did the indenture for West Lakes did Golden Grove, same company as the old Lynch Meyer as it turned out, Kevin Lynch. And basically the Government said, 'Look, we want to do this but we want all the right ground rules put in place.' It was the planning and infrastructure planning and human services planning and all of those things that were put in place in the indenture which made Golden Grove a great place to go. It was predetermined for them. And to some extent the Seaford one, we actually produced the master plan and that became a planning document for the whole scheme and it detailed all the human services that were required to go in, and that really is a product not of Don Dunstan's era but of the process that he put in place for other projects, and again that was also Lynch Meyer were the solicitors behind this proposal, and Geoffrey Walker, who did the planning, and people understood – Government understood and public servant people understood – the great contributions that this sort of project could bring if it were master-planned.

Yes. I'm looking at the Seaford brochure and it really is a classic case study of how to plan a new town, as much as anything.

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Absolutely.

And with the neighbourhood centres and Seaford District Centre itself – I shouldn't rave on too much about the planning of it, I don't want to give people a planning lecture, but you're right, I suppose – well, I don't want to interview myself here, but this is a tremendous opportunity to put on tape, I suppose, the fact that in many ways Seaford was the last product of the Dunstan era in some ways.

In a way it was, yes.

You know, the way that, as you've said, he set up a certain approach in the '70s in his day of West Lakes, the indenture there, the rules so to speak, the way that we set up the policies for Monarto, Golden Grove, Seaford and these all fell within Stuart Hart's '62 plan, within the boundary of the '62 plan, and of course it was Dunstan, wasn't it, who got the *Planning and Development Act* too, which made the '62 plan the strategy.

That's right. Well, it's interesting that John Bannon was the Premier of the State when we did Seaford, so basically we had the same sort of doctrine, I suppose, handed down from Labor, the Dunstan Labor era, which was carried on. And I think everywhere in Australia actually believes that some of the planning we've done is quite unique. It's held up as a model, the West Lakes and the indenture system, because it's like a contract. We have to contract that we will produce all of these things so the Government can embody in that indenture all the things they want. You know, 'We want cycling paths', and all the industry, we put a main street in here, in Seaford, the district shopping, the local shopping, the transport, it's all documented before the indenture is signed, and so that master plan was actually in the indenture when we signed it.

Yes. Yes. Looking through the brochure, one of the things that catches my eye is this large section on – well, it was only a small brochure so I won't say it's too large, but in bold writing with good policies 'human services and facilities' and that goes back to my own memory of the way that those days and that type of thing was thrashed into us –

Yes.

– and that could have only been thrashed into us if it had the support right at the top.

Yes. That's right. It had to have leadership, otherwise – I mean, the government departments acted quite independently of each other, or seemed to be, and there was

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nobody that sort of co-ordinated in a group. The human services side of the delivery system provided that co-ordination. If you were getting a bit of a hang-up with the Highways Department because you couldn't get a road, then they would go out and talk to Johninke and say, 'Why can't we do this, because this is what the community needs?' and it happened. So it was a unifying time and a unifying practice that he put in place through the indentures.

From the outside, Maurie, looking in at government – I don't want to put words into your mouth, but from what you're tending to say there were the politicians, there were the ministers, and there were the senior people like Keith Johninke, Stuart Hart I suppose.

Yes.

How did you see them working together from your point of view?

Well, I think they wanted to work together, because those fellows got the top jobs because they had some sense of vision for the State, as opposed to the old-fashioned idea of the engineer-in-chief that was really an engineer who, God bless him, was there to deliver the water and he didn't do anything else, and so when you wanted pipes and wires they would be delivered but when he was ready, when his budget allowed; and you needed better than that. You needed something which co-ordinated all these activities so that they all arrived in time for people to be there. When we were at Seaford we opened the first school about twelve months after the first residents moved in. There was a local school at Seaford which they could travel to, but they had their own school. So we quickly found that people came to Seaford because there was the school, the shops were already there, we organised bus services. They actually had facilities that the people in the old Seaford next door didn't have, and people were looking for that. It's the whole holistic planning that actually makes a community. You leave out some of those things and they feel as though they're deprived. In the paper this morning there was an article on one of the northern suburbs, which a group have been looking and found out it's some of the most deprived facilities area in South Australia. Now, it's been there for twenty-odd years. It's not good enough. No wonder people are unhappy when you can't get – the very basic things of life are not available to you. And so I think, coming from the other way, it's all about timely provision of human services that actually

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binds your community together, and that's why the West Lakes and the Golden Grove examples were such good examples.

Moving out of town for a bit, South Lakes – remind me, was South Lakes, that was started around about the time as West Lakes, wasn't it, or a bit earlier?

Yes, about the time of West Lakes. Oh, yes, it's just over forty years ago. Yes, forty years ago we started. Interestingly, again, that, although there was no indenture there, there were a group of people that actually had a vision and Don Dunstan eventually bought a house down there, not because of the development but he thought, 'Well, this is not a bad place to be', and in fact his first wife still owns it or the children still own it.

The local council wanted development, and Max Leiberman and I think a lot of people would say it was a pretty good developer in South Australia, and we took all this group of people down, including Dunstan, and we said, 'Look, we've got this dream and what you see today is – – –.' I mean, a lot of people would say, 'Well, it's not all *that* good', but for forty years ago – it's got a golf club, it's got facilities, it's got everything you need in the town – it was a good little development to hang on to the existing old Goolwa, which at that stage wasn't very big at all, as opposed to some other areas which, you know, you go along and subdivide thirty blocks, you give absolutely no facilities, there's no buses, people have to find their own way to services: that's the old-fashioned way of doing things.

In my career I've seen a few so-called 'golf course subdivisions' where the golf course never gets built.

No. (laughter) Well, we celebrated the fortieth year of the golf club just recently, and we celebrated again – well, I hit off a ball with that, because I built the course. But it was a lot of fun.

No, look, I think bigger developments with better planning are the way of the future, taking a large slab of land – and Buckland Park I guess is a good example, whether it's appropriate to build it there, but that piece of land has been talked about for development for a long while. There have been many, many attempts to do a sort of a plan over it. But you need to do a study of the whole area and decide firstly whether or not it's even worth considering as an extension to the city of Adelaide,

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and to plan it and to plan all the facilities. Otherwise it'll be worse than some of the northern parts, I guess, of Elizabeth.

I mean, Elizabeth is a well-planned place, very well-planned, and a lot of people – still people still refer to Elizabeth, but my own folks lived in Elizabeth and it was a well-planned facility. They had everything they needed there. Sure, some of the people didn't have a lot of money in those days – Mum and Dad's house cost about two thousand, seven hundred and eighty pounds, if I remember rightly – but what a well-planned place it is. We shouldn't be just taking a little twenty-hectare piece of land and subdividing it next to something else; we should be planning, if we're going to plan any more in the south and if we're going to go ahead with Sellicks Beach and those areas, for God's sake let's have a master plan for the whole area before we start, and then you can start developing the thing in a way where in fact the developers actually have to contribute to the buses and provision of buses and shopping and all of those things rather than someone goes in, makes a kill, makes a lot of money and goes off but nothing is provided for the centres or the bicycle paths. Lots of subdivisions with bicycle paths lying on the plan but no paving, no landscaping, no nothing.

Yes.

Crime prevention at Seaford was a big issue. We spent an inordinate amount of time putting together a crime prevention study, and a lot of those things are very simple: like when you're building a park make sure that the understorey of the trees is clear so that there is no place for people to hide, and that sort of thing. If you're going to put in a playground, let it be in a position where it can be overseen by people around there, don't put it in a backyard where developers usually what they like to do is give the worst bit of land in the estate for a reserve, a piece that's no good to build on you call it a reserve. Done it myself at times. But that's not – the reserve should be put in the best possible position where it's easily serviced by a community and the overlooking of that facility is very useful. It does bring other conflicts, of course, like when you put in a half-court tennis court –

Of course.

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– or a basketball ring and the young blokes get over there and they thump, thump, thump until about midnight having shots at goals and people go over and saw the net down and things like that. So there are always those conflicts, but that's a people conflict. The idea of where you put the park should be right; the fact that one silly old man like me used to sit and look out his window and he hated them using it, we should have moved him rather than move the goalpost.

Well, those sorts of conflicts have always been around, Maurie. It's like Rundle Street East with everyone who's shifted in there wanting to live it up till nine at night.

(laughter) Yes. Yes, you're right. Well, we were involved in the East End too, of course – in fact, we had our offices at the bottom end of Rundle Street – and we saw it change, and we didn't move on because we didn't like what we saw; we moved on because we were looking to expand. But it was a great place to live, work and play. I only actually worked there, but there are all those facilities available, which is what a city has to have. Rundle Mall suffers from the fact that it doesn't live beyond nine until six, which is very tragic.

Thanks, Maurie. Do you want to say anything about the Dunstan Foundation itself, seeing you were a founder member, weren't you, on the board?

Yes, I was a member.

You were one of the foundation members of the board.

Yes. Look, I enjoyed my time but I think the reality is we all have a time. You know, your enthusiasm – I suppose when I first started there was a group of like-minded people that had experienced the Dunstan era. Jim Jarvis and I went there at about the same time, and we were actually indoctrinated to the beliefs of Dunstan. I mean, he did so much good in this State. But after a while you find yourself almost getting stale or tired and I felt it was time to go, and I looked at the quality of the people coming on the Foundation and they'd moved on. They hadn't been around in the Dunstan era. All they knew about the good things they heard to inspire them, but – I'm not sure he's still there, Spoehr? A lady, Edwards, from Flinders University – I used to find that I could sit there and almost think I was hearing Don Dunstan's words again: they were people that were passionate about South

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Australia. I think my passion came from the fact that I was inspired by Don and I believed in his humility and the goodness he had about him as a person. But I was dragged there; whereas I was finding the people that were coming onto the Foundation were people that seemed to me were actually living the day-to-day dream of what Dunstan was saying. They weren't being so much led along by Don Dunstan because they didn't know him, and I think that's the difference in the Foundation now and I think it's probably better, much, much better, than when I first started on it. That was my feeling, and I felt that I really wasn't able to make the same contribution.

Well, so the 'new breed', so to speak, are building on the foundation that you and Jim Jarvis and others established.

Absolutely, yes, absolutely.

Thank you, Maurie.

Thank you, Alan.

And there's no more?

No, no, I've been rabbiting too much. (laughter)

END OF INTERVIEW.