Donald Dunstan Foundation
Donald Dunstan Oral History Project
Charles Connelly

This is George Lewkowicz from the Don Dunstan Foundation for the Don Dunstan Oral History Project talking to Mr Charles Connelly on 26th March 2008 in the offices of the Don Dunstan Foundation on the topic of industrial democracy in the Dunstan decade.

Charles, thanks very much for coming along to our offices to do this interview. Perhaps we could start by you providing some background on yourself before you joined the – I’ll call it the ‘Industrial Democracy Unit’, but it might have been titled something else at the time.

Okay. I had come to Australia from the UK in 1966 and my job was I was an industrial engineer and in particular for a whitegoods company here in South Australia. What that means is, what an industrial engineer does – or did at that time – was to design the processes in industry by which things were done, both parts and completed products. So if you needed a casting you would have to get the casting designed and then you would have determine how that was going to be casted, how it was going to be machined or steel fabrication or whatever it was. And we were involved, I was involved, in setting up the systems by which those parts could be made, those parts could be brought together, to build a washing machine, an electric motor, an air-conditioner, whatever it might be.

That, of course, meant that I was dealing directly with the interface between people working and what they were doing, and the history of production engineering, industrial engineering, to that time was very, very mechanistic. One treated the people doing the work, doing the assembly, were almost treated as if they, too, were part of the machinery. That manifestly, in terms of the motivation those people had, how they did it, didn’t work, wasn’t the best answer; there was something better than that. So I began to start questioning the sort of principles on which people like I was working at that time and tried to start doing some different things in that company, not only with limited success but with actual resistance to any form of change.

So I was getting somewhat dissatisfied with that when I first heard about what was then called the ‘Worker Participation Movement’ that was taking place inside the Australian Government – and you, George, know that better than anybody because you wrote the two original documents which precipitated the Government making the decision that they were going to set up some small unit to actually start seeing what might be done about implementing those notions. So at that time ‘industrial democracy’ was not a term that
was being used in the English-speaking world at all, to my knowledge. Thus it was that when the jobs were advertised I put my hat in the ring and in 1974 I was appointed to the Industrial Democracy Unit.

At that time, they had appointed what they called the Research Officer, who was the first appointment, which was Geoff Anderson, and they had also at that time – ‘they’ being the sort of Department of Labour where this activity was deemed to be appropriately initiated – they’d engaged under a two-year contract a man called Lyndon Prowse, who had made a lot of publicity around his company producing pet foods where he had apparently seized on the notions employed in the worker participation notion as to how to run that. Subsequent history showed that that was all very sort of iffy and suspect, but nonetheless he had been appointed as the Director. And Ken Wang, who was another projects officer and I was the sort of fourth person to make up the unit and we then had a secretary appointed. So there was basically four operating people and a stenographer–secretary–assistant. So that’s how it came into being, and that was by about February 1974.

When you got there you just explained you’d been interested in this interface between production and the technical side and the people. What role were you given when you arrived? I know you applied for the job, but – – –.

Yes. Well, that was one of the interesting things, of course, because it was such a foreign concept at that point that people had no idea. So, basically, Geoff Anderson, Ken Wang and myself worked out what was the appropriate thing to do. And I guess we fixed on – I suppose it’s three different strands. One was trying to look at the way small units, a small section of any activity – clerical, financial, retail, mining, manufacture, whatever; in all of these organisations you’ll find they’re composed of small cells with a given task – and we looked at what were the characteristics of how they operated, were they the best, could we provide some alternatives. That was the first one. The second one was the whole business of how management was carried out. Management is essentially a system of decisions being arrived at and then communicated – decisions being arrived at essentially by people who were not going to be the implementers, and then that being passed down to groups of people who were the implementers. Was that system working as effective and might there be better ways of doing that? And the third one was the business of, if you
like, corporate governance. We had a clear idea of how it was currently done; was there a way in which there was better input from the operational level that organised it into the decision-making process at the top? And that first flushed out – I think, in my view – what was the role of the trade union, if any, in these sorts of matters. I had not come from a particularly trade union-oriented background, but this was the first time – for me, at least – this really sort of thrust itself up: this was an obvious issue which had to be addressed. So we began – the three of us, primarily – began to work on that.

I say ‘the three of us’ because Lyndon Prowse had virtually no role in the day-to-day activities of what we were doing. He saw his role as to sell the ideas. Unfortunately, in my view, (laughs) he was a very brash salesman and he had little understanding of the ideas. So, having chosen this superstar to lead the project, he was probably (laughs) the biggest problem we had, quite frankly. (laughter) And much of our work over the succeeding years was trying to undo the harm that this dear man had created. God bless him, the poor man is dead now –

Yes.

– so we shouldn’t be too hard on him; but he did make life difficult.

When you applied for the job, you had these discussions, what was your awareness – and you’ve just mentioned some of the [issues] like the trade union issues –

Yes.

– but the social and economic context of the time and where this idea about industrial democracy or worker participation fitted in?

Well, we’re going back to 1974 and the economy was doing reasonably well at that time. Rightly or wrongly, the massive deregulation of industry had not really occurred. It was beginning to peep over the horizon, but that was about to change. In Australia, we largely made what we used and made what we ate and consumed, and the things that we imported tended not to be primarily – except the sort of luxury top end – tended not to be the things we used but rather the machinery to make it. So we didn’t make much machinery; we imported machinery; but we then used that to make products here that people used. So, generally speaking, I wouldn’t say it was a boom time but things were generally fairly buoyant.
My guess – I could be wrong – I would guess that the unemployment level was about five or six per cent at that time, so employment *per se* was not a major issue; more, it was getting productivity out of the workers and we’d use incentive schemes and all that sort of thing but I think lots of people realised that they were just about working themselves out. People were looking for something else, without quite knowing what that something was, and there was enough information around, from around the world, that the best form of motivation – provided the people were being reasonably-paid anyway – the best way of getting that extra punch in terms of productivity was more about work organisation than it was about carrots. The carrot and the stick have basically exhausted their usefulness and now it’s a matter of engaging people more in what they were doing and that meant a modicum of ownership. And I don’t mean ownership in terms of shareholding, although that was one path that was followed; more that people had the sense that this particular job was theirs, that they owned it as such and they could invest it with their personality, their commitment. So it was those sorts of factors.

And there was a lot being written at that time about these. A very significant book was a book by an Englishman called Jackson and it was called *The social psychology of industry*, which began to really tease out a number of these sorts of issues. So what that meant was there was enough money and room, if you like, around, both in the public service and industry, to actually try a few experiments. We weren’t sort of desperately striving to survive like we might have been another fifteen years further down the track.

**So you’re in this unit –**

Yes.

– and you’ve read these reports that are being done assiduously about industrial democracy or worker participation in management. So what did you understand or distil out of all of these about industrial democracy or worker participation at the time?

That if we could in fact create systems of work where this notion of the personal investment of the people who were doing the job could be allowed to flourish, and if we could have management systems and governance systems which listened to, reflected, adopted, encouraged that input, then we would have much more productive, much more
flexible, industrial undertakings who could respond much more readily to the sorts of challenges that were beginning to emerge.

And was that an agreed view in the Unit, or – – –?

I don’t know that we ever sat down and sort of pinned that down. But I think, yes, I think that that would be generally a shared view. And of course at this time two things immediately became apparent as far as the trade unions are concerned. One was it could be a threat to the trade unions, because if you had very happy, satisfied workers who were being remunerated appropriately was there a need for a union? That was on the one hand. The other hand, that if you had the workers’ voice being reflected through the decision-making processes of the company, then the role and the status of workers would be considerably enhanced, which was what the trade union was about. So there was a dichotomy there for the [trade unions], as there were for many ..... So that was why those outsiders who were looking at us – particularly in the upper levels of the public service, who could never grasp that talking to the unions and having the unions involved was absolutely crucial to achieving even the most minor of changes. And it wasn’t about handing over power to the trade unions, as it was often described, particularly in The News, it wasn’t about that at all; it was about if you developed a new role and relationship of a worker inside the company which he worked for, that had implications for the role of trade unions, both good and bad but nonetheless interesting, which you couldn’t ignore or you could ignore at your peril because it would founder. And that I think over the years was arguably the trickiest thing we had to try and deal with, both with the trade unions and with management in their concerns and worries about trade union power.

So when you look at the management, the – as you just said – concerns about trade union power, what about the power of the workers themselves? Did that issue come up as well?

Well, I’m not sure that you can differentiate between those. If you have got a responsive trade union and you have got a group of workers who are being more effective in expressing their own views and voices in a company, that in fact does have an effect on the union and the union will pick up that – if it’s a good union – and reinforce it. There are, of course, unions which are in fact much more rigid and narrow-minded than that and
it’s about ‘the class struggle’, and they would find that, having bolshy members, was as big a problem for them as it was for the employers, and so that created a particular sort of dynamic. And so there were some trade unions who grasped what we were on about and what was happening and we could work along with; there were others which were implacably opposed, there’s no question about that, implacably opposed. To an extent we were diluting the clear lines between class – not that they have ever been clear, but nonetheless some people thought that there were very clear lines.

What about the boundaries around topics of discussion, that is, unions, wages, conditions – ‘conditions’ may be defined narrowly or broadly, but –

Yes. That’s an interesting – yes.

– then there’s that whole thing about workers’ involvement in decision-making and other things, if you like, budgets, blah blah blah, in a company. Did that come up?

That was particularly difficult because whilst economic times are good there isn’t much of a problem, but if you have got employees involved, for instance, sitting on the board, as was one – as you are aware – was one of the sort of aspects that came out of this whole debate, you have a problem when things went bad and savings had to be made by a retrenchment, by curtailing of conditions and what have you. What was the position of that? And we had graphic example here in that – this wasn’t an initiative of the Unit; I think it was basically a direction from Dunstan, but I could be corrected on that, this is just something I have in my mind – that the abattoir at that time was state-owned out at Gepps Cross and a union representative was put on the board of the abattoir. Union representative, let’s be clear about that: he was not an official of the union; he was a worker at the abattoir who was appointed with the nod of the union to become a director on the board. And that poor man’s life was hell. I can’t remember his name.

Reg Atkinson.

Reg Atkinson. The man’s life was dreadful because at that time the whole meat industry did run into some very serious problems probably from about ’76, ’77, that sort of time, and there were all sorts of – as you know, the abattoir now doesn’t exist. But it was a major employer at that time, very highly-unionised, very militant union for very good and proper reasons, I would suggest, over the past years; but poor Reg Atkinson’s task was
almost impossible because there were significant economic problems for them, really significant actions had to be taken and poor Reg was the meat in the sandwich, he was literally ground. And it was a graphic example of the difficulties of those sorts of situations, and nowhere in the world has that effectively been resolved. It is a contentious thing. As I say, when things are booming, fine; when it turns round and things ain’t so good, it becomes impossible.

Yes. And what was your sense of the captains of industry’s views about all of the stuff that was being announced and going on?

Yes. For most of the employer organisations it was overt or covert hostility and active sabotage. Individual employers varied from absolute, implacable hostility to a reluctant acceptance that things were changing and some things had to happen. There were some employers around town who I think were genuinely trying to work out how this might be done, and two names in particular that come to mind were John Menz of Arnott Mottram Menz – that, Arnott Motteram Menz, had come about by amalgamation of three companies, obviously, but I think Menz may have been the sort of junior branch, as it were, after the merger – but he was still in charge of the factory down on Galway Avenue and they tried very hard to develop a sort of consultative system through the factory with very limited success. But I always got the impression from John Menz that he was very open-minded and prepared to give it a go. And the other one was David Pank of Laubman and Pank – and I’m being very open about my comments here; I presume that you are taking care (laughs) about this sort of being libellous or otherwise – but David was of the old school of almost patrician gentlemen but again was clear-sighted enough to see that there were alternatives which might be better than what was the current management model. So we worked for a long time in Laubman and Pank to in fact set up semi-autonomous workgroups, which is the idea of a group of people working together who make the decisions relative to their own job of work. And of course, because at that time – I don’t know if it’s still true – Laubman and Pank did everything, you know, they ground the lenses, all of that sort of stuff, and it was very small, highly-skilled workgroups, and we tried very hard with some limited success but it never really took off because actually the workers there were very reluctant to do it, to take on those
responsibilities. They saw it as not as an opportunity for them to be able to sort of develop; they saw it more as them being given more work to do.

Yes. Without more pay?

Yes, without more pay. And so it wasn’t that it was a reluctance on the part of management, although there may have been vibes which I was unaware of which gave that sort of signal out; it was much a reluctance of the work people to take on a new way of working as it was management refusing to let it. So it was mixed. But there was much more antipathy than there was modest support, there’s no doubt about that. There’s no doubt about that. That led to this, which was – what’s the date of this? November ’77.

Can you just read out the title?

Yes. This is a little booklet called *Industrial democracy: philosophy, nature and scope*, and it was prepared by the Tripartite Industrial Democracy Committee. That committee had been set up when we were in the Premier’s Department to provide a tripartite oversight of not so much detail but the principles of what we were doing. And I’ve only just noticed now: (laughs) it’s not surprising – I’m just pointing out to George that the three employer members are John Menz, David Pank and Bob Ling, Chairman of Hills Industries, and I hadn’t realised that until I’ve just opened this, I hadn’t recalled that. This was basically trying to give the imprimatur of an across-industry point of view and it sets out a lot of the principles that we had and what I’d been talking about here, about how one might go about, what was the meaning. Because by this time we’re now talking, as I say, the mid-'70s and the worker participation, all of those sorts of things had disappeared and been taken over by the term ‘industrial democracy’, which we imported primarily from North-Western Europe. But it was a recognition of the fact that, if you were honest about this, then you were talking about a change in the power structure within organisations, that the power to make decisions would be much more diffuse than currently was the case.

All right, we’ll look at that later on. I was going to ask about Don’s views about all of this or your understanding of them. But perhaps while we’re talking about Laubman and Pank and some of those, we could just dig into and interrogate some of your methodology when you went into these companies?
Yes. By this time we had developed a series of papers and what have you about what an autonomous workgroup would look like, what a position on the board as a director would look like, what being on a consultative committee or a joint decision-making committee, all of those. And so when we were invited to go into a company we would run a series of – to say ‘seminars’ gives a much more formal tag to what we did – basically discussion groups where we tried to put across some of these ideas to people on the shop floor, middle-level managers and perhaps even senior managers. Then tried to get them to reflect on how relevant or how they could be to their particular work situation and which, if any, of these they would want to start working more with. And we got responses to any one of those three and that’s what we would work with.

More often than not it was the autonomous workgroup and the consultative council because they seem to go much more together, and the reality was that there weren’t too many boards of directors in Adelaide. The boards of directors often were somewhere else. And so that was it. So that was then a matter of either sitting down with the workgroup or sitting down with a representative from across a department if you like to see how that might be brought about in their particular area.

The result of that was in the public service we created – or they created – a number of consultative committees and on occasions we were able to institute or begin to work with a number of autonomous workgroups. In the private sector it tended to be the autonomous workgroup more than anything else and we did manage to begin to kick along a number of those – a plumbing factory, builder spring to mind, there were quite a number of those – and they did have some limited success. But I think what we all underestimated, not only people within the Unit, that what we were doing, we were changing the culture of organisations and that can be done but it can’t be done quickly. And it can’t be done in a piecemeal way. If you go into a company and you take the whatever, the casting area, and you develop an autonomous workgroup in that casting area, the principles don’t migrate across the boundaries and in fact what becomes, that group becomes more and more isolated because it’s different. The sort of metabolism of the organisation (laughs) puts a protective screen around, it’s almost like the antigens going to work, you know. And it does. And so our naïve assumption was if we could begin to get a few of these then dissemination would occur. No, it doesn’t happen. Almost the reverse happens. It’s
seen as alien and threatening to the rest of the organisation. And I’m not only talking about management, I’m talking about the other workgroups. It almost gets sealed inside a skin, which of course doesn’t help that to thrive and over time you get sort of a movement of people in the group – just, you know, retirement, people leaving for other jobs, that sort of thing – and so unless somebody is there continually reinforcing the principles it gets diluted and in the end, without constant feeding and attention, it will collapse internally.

But, having said that, there is no doubt at all in my mind that management today is considerably different than it was then and one of the reasons why it’s considerably different is because of those sorts of activities. It did change the nature of management. It changed the nature of people’s expectations of what they could get out of a job and what that organisation ought to provide for them. So there’s no doubt about it, there’s been a change.

When you’re looking at – well, let’s talk about the companies: what did the top managers say and do and then follow through in commitment, because obviously if top management’s not only talking about it but actually exhibiting, ‘walking the talk’, there’s a better chance of it working, but what was happening there?

The senior management wasn’t often a problem because it was politically appropriate to do, there could well be economic benefits. There were whole reasons why for senior management it was acceptable. But also the chances of the senior manager’s job being changed were pretty remote, okay? Once you came down a couple of steps it was a very different kettle of fish. Through all of this, the group who were most at risk and saw themselves most at risk were middle-level managers. If you had a very effective autonomous workgroup going, then you didn’t need a foreman; and if didn’t need foremen you didn’t need supervisors, okay? And that was very quickly twigged. And it was particularly twigged by AESDA¹ and the Municipal Officers’ Association, who tended to represent precisely those sorts of people, and if you look at that I think I’m right in saying that Colin Miekle was I think one of the union leaders. Yes, Colin Miekle. And, you see, he was the Secretary of the Association of Architects, Engineers and Surveyors – in other words, middle-level management. (laughs) And this is not a reflection on the man at all

¹ AESDA – Association of Architects, Engineers, Surveyors and Draughtsmen of Australia.
in any way, shape or form; that’s what his job was, to rep the interests of those sorts of people. But they were the people who were most clearly threatened, there’s no question about that.

And people like Jackson, who was then the CEO of CSR, was very vociferous and very active in promoting these sorts of notions and there were a couple of other top-notch movers and shakers in industry who were being very pro, but rarely did it actually percolate down into their organisations because there was this massive resistant bloc in the middle.

And when you look at the workers, did you try and identify any potential champions?

No, I don’t think we did that. We were too much head-down. When it came to workgroups we were more concerned about the particular workgroups rather than how could we create catalysts.

Yes. I’m just thinking about change management processes and the sort of broad methodology behind it.

Yes, yes, I think I understand what you’re saying, yes, and it may have been a useful thing to have done; but I don’t think we did that, I don’t think we did that. We would occasionally use somebody from that autonomous workgroup to come and talk to these but it was only at that sort of level, there was no sort of public attempt to create, you know, a ‘worker for the future’, as it were.

Yes. Right, yes. In the Unit overall, was there anybody in particular who was an expert on change management methodologies, techniques?

No, because I think we were before that – if you like, we were one of the thorns in the side which created that sort of thinking to come about and so we were essentially doing it before it was invented.

Right – the practice before the theory.

And it’s fair to say at this time, of course, Prowse had gone. By 1976 Prowse had gone and Phil Bentley came in, and Phil Bentley was a totally different person. He had

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2 CSR – originally Colonial Sugar Refining Company Limited.
certainly had the academic background because he’d come from the Flinders Institute of Labour Studies, and so he certainly had all the sort of nous and qualifications about the nature of industry and what it was about. But Phil’s particular strength was that he operated very much at the level of talking to the politicians, talking to the leaders of industry, talking to the universities – the opinion-makers, if you like, in the industrial community – and that was a role he took on for himself and did very well. Not without treading on a few toes, and there are still people, still around the town, with sore toes, in my view quite properly so, (laughs) but other people may have different views, I’m quite sure about that. There’s no doubt about it, we had greater impact and we had a much clearer understanding of what we were doing after Phil Bentley came, because he – whether by design or just flowing out of what he was faced with – applied much more rigour to what we were doing than had been the case until then, and that was when a fairly significant range of papers came out where we tried (a) to instil our knowledge and put it down on paper so it was some value, but also plagiarise, in the best possible meaning of that word, the information which was coming from overseas. And that was the spark of the Industrial Democracy Conference, which led to that, was to try and bring those two together.

When was that, ’78 or ’9?

’78.

’78, right. Oh, good. Just getting back to Don Dunstan –

Yes.

– and his ideas and views, some of them were fermenting in his own mind and others were being triggered by – – –.

It’s really difficult for me to actually comment on that because there wasn’t a great deal of direct interaction with him. There was a lot of interaction between Phil and he and I think Don’s view was much more at the grand, strategic level and didn’t have too much regard to the actual nuts and bolts about how this might be done but was enormously supportive of what we were attempting to do. So I can’t recall an occasion when there was the latest blow-up in the press or something like that, I can’t ever recall him sort of being miffed
and calling us to account, although he may well have thought that that was appropriate, I
don’t know. But I tended to get the impression that what we were doing had his
imprimatur on it all the time and, whilst he was not conscious of the actual practical
difficulties, he wasn’t silly enough to believe that there weren’t going to be difficulties
and so the fact that we ran into difficulties didn’t appear to come to him as a surprise and
was part of the price you paid for trying to make a change. So we always felt that we
were working with his blessing, as it were, but that was all really the channel to him, apart
from some rare occasions, was via Phil Bentley.

**Right. Now, there was a fairly significant Labor Party State Conference for that. Some of the young Turks got hold of –**

Yes.

– and created this whole new policy and brought the unions into play a lot more on
account of that.

Well, again I think that was the current – there was a group of young Turks at that time, it
was at the time when university-trained people were being attracted into the Trade Union
Movement – and there’s a whole number of those who are still around, of course, many of
them – and began again to sort of systematise what was going on. In fact there was a vote
at one Trades and Labour Council that the Unit should be disbanded and that was because
it was seen that we were undermining the role of the trade unions, which I don’t think was
true, and that led to the ALP³ picking it up. Just as a matter of interest, when I tackled one
of those particular persons some many years later, his comment was, ‘Yes, that was when
I was young and foolish.’ (laughter) But then it’s fair to say that that group also saw
Dunstan as a middle-of-the-road collaborator. They certainly didn’t see him as one left-
wing intellectual, not by a long shot, I can assure you. And in fact they spent more time I
think attacking Dunstan than they did attacking the Opposition. So it was an interesting
time and, as you know, the Trade Union Movement then was very, very different than it’s
ever been since. You can remember the worker–student alliance down at Mitsubishi.

**Yes.**

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³ ALP – Australian Labor Party.
Can you imagine something like that existing today? (laughter) Good God! They were interesting times.

**Did some of that debate get picked up in the Unit?**

Oh, yes. Oh, yes, very much so. We were very concerned about it because, like most of those things, it bore very little relation to actually what we were trying to do and what little success we were having. Again, it was the grand design thing. All we needed to create the workers’ paradise was a very strong trade union movement, you know? Well, maybe. Yes, so you couldn’t not be aware and want to in some way influence that debate, but its actual impact on what we were doing, other than making it easier or more difficult, it wasn’t relevant. You could have a trade union official publicly taking a stand, but when you’d be working in a particular organisation, in a particular bit of that organisation, that same union official would be there representing the local workers and taking a totally different stand, because this was the nuts and bolts and the practicalities of this particular situation. And that is always the case, isn’t it, that political figures take a public stance but when they’re dealing with a particular issue they can behave in a quite different way.

**Yes.**

So in practical terms it didn’t create an especial difficulty, but it was just the general atmosphere, you know.

**Just querying the role of the shop stewards, where did they fit in with what was going on?**

Well, you see, that was where all of these sorts of arguments and views really came to a focus and what we were trying to say to the shop steward – and bear in mind what we’re talking about here, let’s be quite specific, we’re talking about the person who works in the organisation who has been elected by his fellow union members or her fellow union members to represent their interests with the management and make the tie back to the union organisation as such. So the person we’re talking about is actually a worker in the plant. And we spent a lot of time working with people who were shop stewards to try and work out with them how that role might be effectively carried out, and it wasn’t a betrayal of either side, in fact it was a beneficial role to either side, if they could firmly grasp that.
And it’s out of that – that was one of the things, I think, that precipitated the move then towards improving trade union training.

**Oh, yes?**

Because if you look at the history of trade union training it really begins to burgeon at about the same time. The only organisation, to the best of my knowledge – there may have been a little bit going on internally, but the only trade union training organisation in the early ’70s was the WEA⁴ and they had a little cell within the WEA which was about trade union organisation, and they were the first to start running with some of these ideas and I think you will find the first courses for shop stewards were run by Colin McDonald down at the WEA, and that began – I say ‘it’ began; it was one of the contributors to the development of that which finished up by 1979 with the Clyde Cameron College. That’s as far as it went. And also you were getting written into collective agreements was the right to training and that has been enormously beneficial, I don’t think anybody could deny that. And your point was well-taken: it is such a critical role in any development which is taking place in industry that the more education and the more knowledge those people get the more effectively they fulfil those roles, however you might interpret what that role is.

And yes, we spent a lot of time with that and again it was essentially, I think, three bits. One was what the law says about what and who you are. Two, what your rights are, as it were. And three, how you can influence management to creating a more effective workplace, which may be wages, may be conditions, may be involvement and may be all of those three things. How you can in fact both inform the trade union about what’s going on and where it’s going, but also draw from the trade union to enable you to be more effective. So it’s a very subtle and very complex sort of role, but it certainly was crucial to this. And I think the way that trade union training – the way that shop stewards now perform their role is vastly different to it then was.

**Yes – what, before it was more passive – – –?**

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⁴ WEA – Workers’ Educational Association.
Yes, they didn’t do anything until –

Yes, there was a problem.

– such time there was a problem.

Yes.

And it was always about wages, that’s what it was about, whereas it became about that there’s a lot more things than wages. Wages are still crucially important but there’s a lot of other things as well.

**And how did you see management relating to the shop stewards in this evolution?**

Well, again, I’m not sure that we did the right thing here because, as a generalisation, when we started managers liked to ignore their shop stewards; as time went by they began to see their shop stewards as an ally against the trade union.

**Oh, really?**

Because they could do deals locally. Which actually wasn’t against trade unions because in that time, of course, a key trade union practice was to say, ‘Over there they’re doing this; why don’t you do this?’ to an employer. So if you in fact were getting an advantage in one place then the union could use that as a bargaining chip with other employers. So even though that individual employer thought he might have been getting an advantage for his company, as far as the industry was concerned, it was the trade union that got the advantage.

**So that’s pattern bargaining.**

Exactly, yes.

**Interesting, yes. And the workers themselves, what sort of training did they get?**

At that time none and I think that that’s probably still the situation. It was only where we were that training occurred – and that’s putting it too strongly. It was in fact not about any of those issues; it was essentially about, ‘If you are setting up an autonomous workgroup how in fact do you make decisions? If you are sitting on a consultative council how do you inform yourself so that in fact you can in fact be an effective representative? And
what is your duty to the consultative council, ergo what’s your duty towards management?” And so it was a matter of sort of role definition and how they could effectively fulfil those. And it was very interesting stuff, actually, because you were changing the culture of organisations. Without saying, ‘I’m going out to change the culture of this organisation,’ that’s in fact what we were doing.

It’s a bit like the issue of you need to know the question you need to ask somebody to get the further information.

Yes. And there was a lot of that. And what were your source materials, who could you ring up, what were your rights, all of those sorts of things, without us telling them but just, ‘This is the way you find out those sorts of things, and if you don’t find out those things you are at a disadvantage in trying to do what you’re supposed to be doing.’ But I think the whole of that began to – what’s the word? It began to make lots of workplaces more aware that it wasn’t just about wages. And it’s no accident that the changes to occupational safety and health almost paralleled this. About training for the job began to parallel this. There’s a whole series of other things. Even about the status of women versus men, and I think they were all spin-offs which came from people on the shop floor beginning to realise that (a) there was more of importance to them than just the wages and (b) there were means by which they could influence this and make changes. There would be other people would argue vehemently against this but I don’t, because if you parallel – as we often did in those times – developments in Australia through the ’70s and ’80s with developments in the UK, where the few attempts at industrial democracy in the UK had been immediately squashed without any qualm – and the rate of the development in these other issues in Australia was much, much more rapid and much more far-reaching than they were in the UK.

Interesting, yes.

And also, even within Australia, they were more far-reaching in South Australia than they were for Queensland, for instance. Queensland, which had a much longer history, if you like, of Labor Governments than ever South Australia did; but we moved much faster and much wider and in many ways set the pace in our legislation for many of these areas.
You mentioned there were some booklets written about all of this, but was there a manual, like a how-to manual that was ever developed?

Yes, one of those, one of them was about consultative councils, one of those was about autonomous workgroups and there were a few others. I’ve got most of them at home if you wanted to have a look. I brought a few in for you. Let’s see what I’ve got here. (opens briefcase) You might find that interesting.

One title here is *Bringing about industrial democracy within the public service: a radical South Australian response* by P. Bentley and K. Wang. Another one is *Towards a worker participation strategy for Australia* by Philip Bentley. Another one, *Industrial democracy* by Charles Connelly.

And there are a whole series. But given the question you asked me a little while ago – – –

Oh, yes – another one: *Report to Australian Labor Party South Australian Branch by the Working Environment Committee: introduction of industrial democracy in South Australia*, prepared by the Unit for Industrial Democracy, March 1979. So that’s getting pretty late in the piece.

Yes.

**What was the gist of all of that?**

Well, again, it’s much of what we have been talking here and the ways and means and the how and what the implications might be and how we might begin to make some of those changes. I just notice here, looking through, ‘Statutory authorities with industrial democracy activities are: Film Corporation, Meat Corporation, Fire Brigade, Hospitals Commission, Government Clothing Co.’ – remember the Government Clothing Factory? ‘Festival Centre Trust, Jam Factory, State Theatre.’ So there were lots of activities taking place, but each of those individual examples, certainly after the change of government, essentially withered on the vine. But changes had taken place. And even now, as recently as the Rudd election – I’m not claiming it directly flowed from this, but of course one of the organisations nationally who appointed a worker director was the ABC.⁵ This was scotched by Howard but is now vigorously being proposed that it should be re-established.

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⁵ ABC – Australian Broadcasting Corporation.
So it’s still around. And there are good and compelling reasons why you would want to do that in an organisation like that. Now, do you want to keep those?

Yes.

You do?

I’ll come back to that later, yes.

Okay. Oh, the other thing, just I notice the other thing I did: (produces newspaper) I’ve always kept that. This is after Dean Brown’s election.

Dean Brown? Right.

It was the Tonkin election –

Tonkin Government, yes.

– but he was called Minister of Industrial Relations.

This is a front-page article: ‘Worker unit to get axed’ by Greg Reid, it was in The News dated Friday, September 21, 1979. So presumably this was one of the first actions –

Yes. (laughter)

– of the new Tonkin Government.

Yes.

Very interesting.

Yes. I’ll leave that with you, okay, if you want to read that.

Good, thanks.

I would like it, of course, back at some [stage].

Now, just reflecting on the time, what sort of overall strategies – we’ve talked about this a bit – do you think were important in some of this introduction? Like at one time Don was talking about legislation and I think there was something drafted but it was put on hold.

Yes. There was legislation drafted. It was part of the means of making a basis for change. There’s an argument that legislation doesn’t change things where in fact the reverse is patently true. South Australians wear seatbelts because we legislated to make seatbelts
mandatory. South Australians wear helmets when they ride a bike. We’ve made it mandatory. If we had not legislated, a proportion of people would wear seatbelts and a proportion of people would wear helmets, but not everybody. And so you can use legislation to actually make significant changes in people’s behaviour, and it was along those sorts of lines, I think, without us being explicit about that, that the legislation was prepared. The author of the legislation inadvertently – or maybe not – sabotaged it. It was prepared by the Attorney-General –

Oh, really? That was Peter Duncan.

– one Peter Duncan, who was of course a significant figure of the left in South Australia at the time, and at one stage there were a couple of clauses inserted, I can’t actually remember what they were now, which would have basically given government the power to direct companies to do certain things, which was not the way that the legislation was framed, and he had slipped that in and (laughs) it had got to the parliament and it was when the sort of second reading in parliament happened that the focus came in on this and it was withdrawn. That’s my recollection; it might not be absolutely right, but ——. Yes, and so that was it. It went.

At the same time, Barry Unsworth, who was a minister in Wran’s Government, had in fact prepared a very significant piece of legislation which would have legislated for worker directors in all the private-sector companies in New South Wales. The Wran Government fell (laughs) before it was passed.

Oh, well.

But yes, the legislation was there and Unsworth – because he had come from Trades Hall as a minister in the government and he was gung-ho that that was what he was going to do.

Wow. So, just very overall reflections, how would you score, if you like, the success or otherwise of the ——.

Oh, we can’t claim success, there’s no doubt about that. As I say, the things that we managed to do, in practical terms, essentially withered on the vine because of some of the reasons I’ve given you here. But in fact I think the whole movement had a quite
significant effect on the way management is conducted in organisations and the way in which jobs are designed for people to do. I have no doubt. It may well have occurred anyway, but I think it might have been slower, and I think you can see that because you can still draw comparisons with say what happens in Australia and what happens in the UK and there’s no doubt that things are much more – what’s the word? – Sensible and practical in Australian workplaces than I think they are in many English workplaces, even now. And I think that’s where the impact came, not in that we changed Joe Bloggs and Company down the road the way they operated here in South Australia, was in fact the issues were seen to be important, were debated, did have an effect, did make changes, changes which bettered the situation for work people and also bettered the productivity of companies. It really was a win–win situation, in my view. And what a manager could say and make a person do in 1975, in most organisations you couldn’t get away with now, you simply could not get away with, even despite high unemployment levels that we have until the very recent past; you just couldn’t get away with it.

And that’s why, because the workers or the employees have got more tuned in?

It changes expectations. It changes expectations on a worker going into a workplace of what will happen to him, but it also changed the nature of the responsibility that managers felt they had to their work people. I really do think that they have changed. And what we said was going to happen most clearly is the demise of middle-level management. In many industries it’s basically disappeared altogether, and that was one of the things we said. And the other thing, which perhaps I shouldn’t say, which was clearly seen, was the role of change for unions would change dramatically and they would probably lose their coverage, if you like; and I think that has happened, too.

Well, Charles, is there anything that you don’t think we’ve covered this morning that you’re wanting to talk about?

No, no. I’ve enjoyed talking about it, I must confess. (laughs)

Good. All right. Well, thanks very much, Charles.

You’ve concentrated my mind, to a certain extent.

Good. Well, that’s the end of our interview. Thanks very much.
My pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW.