This is George Lewkowicz for the Don Dunstan Foundation’s Don Dunstan History Project interviewing doctor Michael Court on social policy and social planning. Dr Court worked for Ian Cox, the head of the Department of Community Welfare, in the early ’70s and into the mid-’70s and did a lot of work on social planning. The date today is 3rd March 2009 and the location is the Way Lee Building in the University of Adelaide.

Michael, thanks very much for doing the interview for the Don Dunstan Oral History Project. Can you just talk briefly about who you are and how you got into the social welfare and policy planning side of things?

Yes. Thanks, George. Originally, I think it came out of church work that I did in South Australia, I was very active in the Congregational Youth Fellowship and Congregational Men’s Fellowship in the ’60s, not long after I’d been married. I was in my early twenties. I became somewhat critical of church work in the social arenas because it didn’t seem to be that effective.

In ’68 I was lucky enough to win a scholarship to the University of Washington to do an MBA program there, because my original training was in accounting and economics, and I discovered at the University of Washington the Bureau of Community Development, which was at that time an early focus for the community development movement. A group of eight consultants who worked with communities both in the country areas and in the city areas, trying to help communities develop, and their motto virtually was, ‘Every community contains the resources necessary to achieve its aims and objectives, or it can obtain them’. And they had been working with communities up and down the West Coast of the States for quite a while.
I became a research officer for them and I did all my master’s research on the Bureau and what it did, with particular focus on the application of business methodologies into community work. I wrote my thesis on community development on the West Coast. I drew a whole lot of lessons from it. I had been active back in Adelaide in church work, I’d gone to the States quite deliberately to learn about community development, and community organisation. I wrote to Don Dunstan, who had just got into power for the second time in 1970; he responded, was interested in community development, suggested that I come back and talk to people when I got back, which I did. I finished up talking with Ian Cox – I seem to recollect at his home one night – the outcome of that was I started work with Ian the next morning because he was fascinated by what I had to say about community development and basically said, ‘Well, if you haven’t got a job yet and you’ve just come back with an MBA, bring it into the Department and we’ll follow up some of these ideas’.

**That was about mid-1970, was it?**

Late 1970.

**Late 1970 – oh, right, that’s interesting.**

So that’s where it all came from, and I think those ideas that I’d formulated in the States and written up in my master’s thesis really contributed to what I then did for the next five years, which was writing social policy documents, social planning documents, trying to influence what at that point, at the government planning system, was – – –. (telephone rings, break in recording). And so the planning at that time was dominated very much by financial planning in Treasury and by physical planning in the E&WS\(^1\) Department, ETSA,\(^2\) Transport, those sorts of agencies. So really the American influence of social planning, community development, local

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\(^1\) E&WS – Engineering and Water Supply.

\(^2\) ETSA – Electricity Trust of South Australia.
consultation, the ability of a community to do things, were what were informing me and what Ian Cox was very interested in, and my recollection is that Len King – – –. (telephone rings, break in recording) So I guess for that five years I contributed to a large number of committees, inquiries.

We set up – I became, after working with Ian Cox as his project officer for a year or two, I became head of a new unit in the Department we created out of what used to be the Department of Social Welfare, Aboriginal affairs, adoption, foster care, deserted mothers – I mean there was a grab bag of agencies that were put together by Don Dunstan under a general heading of social welfare – and by about 1972 working with Ian as his project officer and with many others we created the Department for Community Welfare with a completely new set of objectives about human dignity, about the responsibility of the community to look after individuals and the responsibility of individuals to be involved with their community.

And from this Community Development Branch that I headed up, I was able to work as a bureaucrat with Len King and with Don Dunstan to help try and give some sort of implementation to their social views. I didn’t see a lot of the ministers because I was too junior a public servant to be doing that, but the papers that I wrote they commented on and I think my views certainly had an influence, and I was probably a minor player because both Dunstan and King were already well-established with their views by then. But it was exciting times for a young man in his late twenties by then.

And where was this coming from, the knowledge about Don Dunstan and the stories he was very interested in – well, the arts and social policy and query about economic policy and whatever, but that’s another area altogether; but was there a big ferment – – –?

Well, it wasn’t another area altogether; I mean, the whole economic development thing, which had become a big thing with Don Dunstan in the early ’70s because I think it was one of the reasons he got crucified back in the late ’60s, that he was too much social and not enough industrial and economic development. He picked up on economic development very strongly from a social perspective, and what we were
talking about very much with he and Len King was that you can’t do economic planning in isolation and you can’t do physical planning in isolation. You have to bring in a social dimension. Unfortunately it got called ‘social planning’ and ‘social engineering’ and it got a very bad press; that’s not what it was really about. It was really about trying to say that every agency of government is there to actually serve the population. It is there to help the community. So it doesn’t matter whether you are running the Transport Department or the E&WS Department or Premier’s Department, you’re meant to be doing it for the people of the State and not locked up too much in an academic ivory tower or a bureaucrat’s ivory tower. So we, I guess, annoyed a lot of other departments by continually pushing “where is the interest in the people of the State”? And that really came from Dunstan and Len King, I mean it was their Fabian orientation, their social democracy orientation. And at that time – I mean, I think the Whitlam Government was elected in 1970?

’72.

’72. There was an enormous amount around those early ’70s of social policy coming out of Canberra, coming out of the new departments that the Whitlam Government had set up and particularly out of the Priorities Review Staff out of the Prime Minister’s Department there, which really focussed on equality, feminism, the role of women, equality, consultation, people planning, urban and regional development, education, housing.

Poverty, yes.

All of those things went together in a package, which I would have called social democracy. And that certainly informed me, it was my views.

And at the same time I had become reasonably active in the Labor Party when I came back from the states with my MBA and got into social welfare, as it was then. I also got into the Labor Party because the Labor Party in 1970 was still trade union-dominated, was not at all really interested in social justice or social issues, it was very much labourforce oriented, workplace oriented, and Dunstan and Len King
were part of a small group of moderates within the Labor Party who were looking at social justice issues: reform of the criminal code, reform of the juvenile criminal code, reform of prisons, reform of social welfare, reform of adoptions, reform of foster care, all these issues bubbled up because they were problems.

Right, and they’d been left by previous governments, yes.

Well, they’d been left. I mean, if you think forward to now, you think about all the cases of child abuse coming out of the Catholic Church, coming out of the state-run institutions. And those state-run institutions were run by Ian Cox and myself and others at that time. A lot of those things were going on. And we sort of knew they were going on, but we couldn’t pin them down, frequently. But we did introduce changes – McNally Reform Centre at the time had warders looking after children, warders. And those “warders”, when we started looking at it, had no training whatsoever and some of them had come in from road construction gangs. They were tough people, looking after ‘criminals’ – and these were kids, some of them nine or ten years old. We did work with the Institute of Technology to totally reform that process. We brought in youth work training, we brought in I think it was called ‘custodial care’ training; we tried to recruit new, younger people into some of these positions. I think we did change the culture in that period quite significantly.

There were many fights. I remember Justice Scales of the Juvenile Court who really did believe in discipline for young people. Those were the sorts of fights that we were having around that time.

My involvement went from adoption and foster care, writing review reports on those sorts of things, through to I think in 1974 I became Director of Social Planning for the Department, and at that time, through the agency of Ian Cox and then Len King and Don Dunstan, I was appointed to a number of major committees: inner city redevelopment, the Hackney project, the MATS Plan. I was made the initial chairman of the Government Rehousing Committee, having argued and written

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3 MATS – Metropolitan Adelaide Transport Study.
papers several times about the fact that a whole lot of people were being totally abused by government policy to build the MATS Plan or to build new schools. But the Government had the power of compulsory acquisition and so the acquisition happened and the Department got a valuer to put a value on the house, which was always fairly low, and a family got chucked out of a community that they’d lived in all their lives, and many of the people were pensioners who got thrown out, and we put the argument from the Department to Cabinet that where a family is compulsorily evicted by the Government the family should suffer no loss and that the acquiring authority, instead of just paying a valuation placed on a property by a real estate valuer, had to pay for the total relocation of the family into a place of similar standing; and that the Department for Community Welfare would be responsible for working with that family to get them rehoused. That worked very well. Alec Ramsay assigned a couple of Housing Trust tenancy officers to work with the committee, and over a period in '74/75 I think we rehoused some – I’d have to go back and look at the records – at least a hundred, perhaps two hundred families, at a cost to the acquiring department significantly above the valuation. And we had many fights with those departments. You know, the Transport Department, Highways Department of the day, building the MATS Plan, would issue compulsory acquisition orders on fifty houses at a time and destroying established communities. So that was exciting, and different.

What was their argument – that’s the transport people: simply the cost?

Oh, their argument was quite simple: the cost of the thing.

Just the cost, yes.

‘You are increasing the cost of this project. We cannot do so much with the money available for the project if you force us to do all this.’ But the recommendations had to go to Cabinet, in writing, and Cabinet accepted every recommendation we made, we had a hundred per cent success rate.

And was that basically because of Len King and Don Dunstan –
I think so.

– and the others just fell into line?

I think so, yes.

Interesting. So when you joined the Department you worked with Ian Cox. What was the feeling in the Department at the time? Was it that Ian Cox had arrived, there were these people coming in, the old social workers – – –.

The feeling was very much as you might expect: the old departments were very resentful. There was a lot of negative gossip in the corridors. The previous Director of Social Welfare had been an applicant for the position and was not supportive of Ian Cox when he arrived. The head of Aboriginal Affairs, who had been a permanent head in his own right, who was brought in under Ian Cox, wasn’t very happy about that. Ian Cox was forty-two years old, full of ideas and enthusiasm about welfare issues; the older men who were in established departments felt they had been passed over. They knew there wasn’t enough money to do the things that Ian Cox wanted to do, they were very conscious of very strict budget limitations that they had. I would have to say that in late 1970, when I joined the Department – as Ian Cox’s executive assistant, to begin with – as I went around doing Ian’s bidding I ran into walls of passive non-cooperation in many, many areas.

However, my recollection, within six to twelve months a number of new positions had been created. The Department had been restructured, new positions were created. Young, newly-qualified people were appointed to senior positions. I remember we regionalised and appointed new regional directors and none of the regional directors was over thirty years old. We set up the Community Development Branch; nobody in the Community Development Branch, which was headed by me, was over thirty years old. Frank Althuizen took over the Correctional Services portfolio; he was under thirty years old. What Ian Cox was able to do, I think, was to free up a whole lot of young people who were already in the Department working in more junior roles but who had ideas and who responded to his enthusiasm – because he was asking for ideas, he was asking for papers from people, he was setting up
committees to work on this and to work on that; it’s something I’ve often said, that 1970–1975, when I went off to do my PhD, there must have been a senior level group of nine or ten people aged between twenty-five and thirty, my recollection is we were all university-qualified, we were all young, we were all enthusiastic, we all believed in social justice, social democracy, and we wanted to “change the world”, change the State (laughter) – and the triumvirate of Ian Cox, Len King, Don Dunstan, allowed us to do it. Especially also in that ’72–75 period, the Bill Hayden, Gough Whitlam, Tom Uren trio also helped. Talking to my students, as I do from time to time, I say, ‘It’s a bit like playing the pokies: you pull the handle and you need to get five aces up on a line’. Well, we can get five aces: we got Cox, King, Dunstan, Hayden, Whitlam, Uren. And suddenly we had access to funds, suddenly we had access to power, voices in Cabinet, and we were able to begin to implement a wide range of social policy initiatives. It was very exciting.

So you could deliver on all this activity, yes.

Yes, we could. And I think I’ve said to you on other occasions, it is disappointing that so many of the advances that we made then – because we’re talking thirty-five years ago – were rolled back in the next decade or two and still haven’t resurfaced.

Incredible.

I read some of the stuff I wrote back in ’72 last night in preparation for this interview. It could easily have been written about 2009. As a community, many of the values and the issues haven’t changed, they’re still there.

Yes. I’ll come to some of them later on. So the Old Guard, they could see all this activity and they could see the debris.

The Old Guard changed. Those public servants who were in Social Welfare, Aboriginal Affairs, adoption, foster care, were there for good reasons: their hearts were in the right place; they had gone into that line of work because they cared for the community, they cared for children, and they wished to ameliorate bad conditions for people. But they’d suffered through twenty-eight years of Playford; they’d
suffered a Treasury that wasn’t really interested in social issues; the whole priority for South Australia for some thirty years had been industrial development, had been building Elizabeth, had been bringing in General Motors and Chrysler’s and industry and all those sorts of things. So they had been used to stretching the piece of string as far as it would go to meet social needs. As they saw that Ian Cox and myself and others were actually obtaining significant increases in budget – my recollection is the budget for community welfare, which, when I went there, was about two and a half million dollars a year, went to something like twenty million in five years and it was an enormous growth area. It wasn’t all new money, some money from other places was brought into the welfare budget; but there was significant expansion. There was significant capital works, there was rebuilding of children’s institutions, there was improvements in children’s homes and residential care, the adoption are. There was a significant amount of improvement. And a lot of funding went into education. Aboriginal education, the Aboriginal Task Force, the Aboriginal Community College, those sorts of initiatives: they all came out of Community Welfare, many of them actually initiated by Lowitja O’Donoghue.

Really?

Because Lois was there in the Department as ‘the nurse’. She was the nurse working in Aboriginal Affairs under John Miller.

John Miller, yes.

She was the nurse. And when I was asked to actually look after the Aboriginal Affairs policy area for a little while, write a paper on the main issues, I can remember Lois – as she was called then, Lois O’Donoghue – sort of took me out and drove me around to a few Aboriginal institutions and showed me just what was happening and it created an interest in me which went on. And we then went on to do, from Community Welfare, a number of significant national initiatives in Aboriginal affairs.
Can you talk about them a bit? We’ll come back to the more general later, but while you’re talking about the Aboriginal—

Yes, okay. Talking about Aboriginal side. We wanted to create Aboriginal leadership. A major issue that we could see in looking at the Aboriginal institutions and reserves, as they were in those days, was a complete lack of Aboriginal leadership. So we had an enormous number of well-intentioned Europeans virtually doing the same as patrol officers in New Guinea: very paternalistic. We thought that we would like to find Aboriginal leaders and give them the ability to influence the political institutions and to lead their people. We spent quite a bit of time talking to the Institute of Technology because they were the people who taught social welfare, social work training – there was a three-year degree in Social Work. While we worked with the Institute, we did set up a two-year group worker training program and a two-year residential care worker training program, so they were completely new programs that the Institute did that we partially funded through Community Welfare money into the Institute in order to change the culture in our residential care institutions. So group work and residential care training were two major initiatives, which did generate into South Australian institutions around the mid-’70s a stream of new graduates in new areas, which was very valuable.

We asked the Institute to set up a degree program for Aboriginal leaders. And I remember this was a long, hard fight because the Institute said that if it accepted people who did not have adequate pre-qualifications they would be lowering their academic standards; and no Aboriginals had Leaving Honours and therefore they couldn’t go into a tertiary program. We argued it backwards and forwards for quite a while and we eventually got them to agree – I think we bribed them a little bit with some government money out of DCW – to accept Aboriginal people who could demonstrate a degree of leadership in their history and that they would be people from twenty years onwards who had a bit of experience. My recollection, we probably got some Commonwealth funding for it as well out of the Whitlam Government. Be that as it may, we finished up setting up the Aboriginal Task Force. We advertised nationally. We had, I think, fifty or sixty applications from around
Australia. We interviewed, we selected twenty. We needed two people to lead the course. We advertised the position of Aboriginal Task Force Coordinator or Leader or something like that, and we got Ross Harris to come across I think from Victoria, and we got another person whose name has gone – we had two people who led that training. It was a two-year training program.

It was full of problems, because the people that we selected did not have secondary education, most of them. Most of them had left school at thirteen, fourteen. They were also very strong-minded people, we selected them for being strong-minded. A number of them were extremely critical of governments of all kinds and what they’d done to the Aboriginal people. There was a very aggressive perception of the failures of bureaucrats to do anything. I mean, if you look now at things like the Howard Government Intervention, these people knew that those things were going on back in the ’60s and they didn’t know how to solve the problems. But we taught them. We actually wrote some new stuff. I can remember when we got them together early on, when we had Ross Harris early on, I was asking questions along the lines of, ‘Well, why can’t we teach them some Aboriginal history to give them a sense of identity?’ ‘Well, there is no Aboriginal history, there’s nothing written.’ What you had was an enormous number of small, tribal groups scattered across Australia with no common language and no written history, and the shared experience was very intermittent. The Dreams of one part were not the same as the Dreams of another part. The Aboriginal Dreamtime differed from area to area. Trying to get a sense of Aboriginal identity was very difficult. I think it still is.

There were no national leaders, there were no national institutions. But we did bring together twenty Aboriginal people, most of whom went on to have a significant impact through the ’70s and ’80s. Elliot McAdam was one of them. Elliot McAdam now is a legislative councillor in the Northern Territory and Minister of Health. While he was here he did the Aboriginal Task Force training. He came from the Northern Territory. I think he went back to the Northern Territory for a while. Later on, when I worked for the Health Commission and was following a lot of these ideas
through in the health area, he applied for the position of Director of Aboriginal Health in South Australia and we appointed him. He came down and, having been a graduate of the Aboriginal Task Force, some seven or eight years later he was Director of Aboriginal Health in South Australia, did it very well for several years and then went back to the Northern Territory. Les Nayda was another one. Les was very active in youth work within the Aboriginal area. A very angry man, but he made a big contribution to Aboriginal leadership around the metropolitan area, including becoming Head of Aboriginal Housing in this State for a period of time. Mary Martin went back to Queensland. I can’t think of any other names off the top of my head. But they have had an impact.

The other thing we did significantly, I thought, was to work with the Commonwealth Government on the matter of how do you get the people in the Aboriginal reserves to become more involved in their communities. And using the community development principles that I’d got from the States I can remember we sat down with Charlie Perkins and John Moriarty and worked through what could you actually do. And the conclusion we came to, in a little working party, that included John and Charlie and a few other people from Canberra whose names now escape me, we worked out that if we capitalise the welfare payments going into a reserve and created a capital sum and committed that to community development projects, we might be able to provide the people living on the reserves with training and education and involvement in small businesses. It was really a small business sort of initiative. So we set up the – I can’t remember, the Aboriginal Development Project or something of that nature, and we hired a couple of people in to run it. We wanted community development experts, there weren’t many in Australia, but we recruited Jim Hullick who was up on the River Murray in Mildura I think at the time, and Glen Valance, who was a Canadian who’d done a lot of work with the Eskimos in the Northern Canada area. And we brought them in to work with – I think we took five reserves and we asked Jim and Glen to sit down with the elders in each reserve
and come up with development projects that we could fund, because we had this pile of money that we could put into things.

**From State or Commonwealth or both?**

I think it was probably fifty–fifty but I cannot remember without going back to documentation. That was very exciting and it went on for two or three years and it was a total failure. A very good example, I think, of goodwill and funding being thrown at a problem, innovative solutions being proposed, but they didn’t work. My personal conclusion as to why they didn’t work was because the people who were left on the reserves at that time had virtually no motivation to want to go into any form of employment in the way we perceive employment. We were naive enough to think that – oh, an example: the Housing Trust, Alec Ramsay and company, said they had a lot of Housing Trust homes on the Yorke Peninsula and the Point Pearce community could have the contract to manage the maintenance for all those houses, because the maintenance of all those houses involved a whole lot of building skills, and the building skills were reasonably rare on Yorke Peninsula, so if we could train a dozen Aboriginal people to do window frame maintenance, replace panes of glass, do roofing, do concrete work, do some minor alterations, the whole business of maintaining a stock of – I’ve forgotten how many houses, three hundred houses or so, quite significant – then they would be employable by local builders and local tradesmen. It was talked through with the elders. The elders were relatively keen and the project started. The Housing Trust actually provided a couple of foremen to train them, and it looked like it would work well. After a year, there was nobody in the project. And, looking back, I think the whole concept of working nine to five was totally foreign to these people. The idea of working for money was foreign, and all the people in that community, in the Point Pearce community, who actually had initiative and leadership had gone. By the time an Aboriginal kid made it to fourteen years old and was bright, he’d left for the city. He’d gone to stay with the Aboriginal community in the city. He’d gone to his uncle or his auntie who had a job at Gepps Cross or something. And so what was left on the reserves were the people who were
most alienated from the European culture, most alienated from things like nine-to-five work; and they were influenced by alcohol and all those sorts of things that we hear so much about these days. So it was a noble experiment that failed, in my view.

And that sort of stopped any further experimentation?

I think it probably did. Later on I know when I was in the Health Commission we established Aboriginal nursing education at Port Augusta and we brought in a lot of young women into nursing. We certainly supported in all the time that I can remember, Aboriginal education anywhere we could. In later years the Aboriginal Community College was supported quite significantly. We worked significantly with the Education Department trying to push Aboriginal education. But no, in retrospect we were somewhat naive about it all. And now you can read Noel Pearson in The Australian every week saying things that probably we should have been saying thirty years ago.

Thanks very much for that. Just to get back to the broad ideas of social policy and social planning, how did you explain or what were you telling the people in the Department first – we’ll come to the wider public service – but –

In the Department for Community Welfare?

– yes, your own department. Well, they were doing all their activities, social work, you name it; why did they need this new thing?

I think the main thing – the way I explained it to people who had social work training was to say, ‘Think about new towns. Lots of new towns are being built in America, in Israel, outside of London. When you go into new towns you know you’re going to have a really high incidence of social problems – youth suicides, deserted wives, domestic violence, single families’. The social work needs in a new town are enormous. I mean, Elizabeth, as a new town, had enormous social problems, our Elizabeth office was one of the biggest offices in the State. Noarlunga was a new town and had a lot of problems. These are planned communities. How come a planned community has more problems than an unplanned community? Those areas which just grow normally and are not “planned” have far less social problems than
new towns. If you look at it, you look at a new town and you see that there is an imbalance, demographically: they’re nearly all young, there’s no old people in a new town. The people who are in a new town are usually low-income people because new towns are usually further away from employment than the old towns. Industry isn’t there yet. The new towns have far less facilities, the schools do not have ovals yet, there are no public telephone boxes – I’m talking about 1970 – the bus routes don’t run easily to where the employment is. The income levels are low, the rate of deserted families is high, there’s nobody to run the local Boy Scout group, there’s nobody to run the local cricket club, there’s nobody to run the football club. The grandparents aren’t there to care for kids after school. There are all these deficiencies in the community. Social planning is about saying, ‘We don’t want that to happen’. It’s about putting the fence at the top of the cliff instead of the ambulances at the bottom of the cliff- that’s what social planning should be about.

When I tried to express it in those sorts of terms, most of the social worker people understood that, so there was a lot of support after the first couple of years. And the fact that I became Director of Social Planning in the Department, meant that there was a lot of support for it; if there hadn’t been it wouldn’t have existed. And certainly Ian Cox, Len King, Don Dunstan, were very supportive of the concepts.

And the links with, say, the policy area of the Premier’s Department, were they helpful?

Not to begin with. But the Monarto thing made a big difference. Bob Bakewell, the then Head of the Premier’s Department, had set up the Monarto planning committee, and on that committee there were people from Highways Department, the E&WS Department, ETSA, all of the physical departments– plus Treasury, of course – and they had been meeting for about six to nine months. Bear in mind, the purpose of Monarto was because we had 3.3 per cent population growth in metropolitan Adelaide, we were expanding rapidly north and south and if the population rate of growth had continued at 3.3 per cent it would have made Adelaide a very unmanageable city. The decision that was taken by the Dunstan Government around
'72, '73 I think, in recollection, was that we should establish a new town on the other side of the Hills. And land was acquired for it (it’s now the Monarto Zoo) on the main road east, the main railway line east, the main traffic corridor; there were quite a number of commitments from industry to put industry there. Woolworth’s, I think, was going to build its major State distribution centre there. But where they’d got to was developing a plan, and a report, which got circulated to departments for comments and I had it given to me to read. It was quite a big, thick report. And I read it through and I was aghast, I guess, given my social background. There was very little reference to people.

I drew this to the attention of Ian Cox, who drew it to the attention of Len King, and I have this vague recollection of sitting down with Len King and Ian Cox one Friday morning. My recollection was Len King arrived in the Department every Friday morning and was there for three hours. Superb minister. He went through many papers each Friday– I would write papers and documents and they’d go to Ian Cox, who might make a few edits and amendments and then they’d go off to Len King, and he’d come in on Friday morning with them under his arm and he’d set them down and I’d get called in for my bits, and he would have read them and he would make succinct comments, very good comments, and then he’d say things like, ‘Well, go away and do it’. That was good.

On Monarto, I’m not quite sure how it happened but I was asked to sit on the Monarto steering committee and also to chair a social planning group for Monarto, which included people from Education and from Housing, who hadn’t been in on the original group, and we spent I guess six months writing the Monarto Social planning Report, which really went in depth into what sorts of people do we want to live in Monarto. Not who will come in response to jobs, but what sort of people make up a community? How do you achieve an age balance? How do we manage to get grandparents? How do we manage to get wealthy people who’ve got time and money to put into things? How do we blend it? I guess it was social engineering, to a degree, but I like to think that it was good social engineering. So we worked for
six months and during that time I think we won the respect of Bob Bakewell and a few of the other people in the Premier’s Department, who began to think, ‘Well, maybe this does sit nicely with what Don Dunstan is trying to achieve and what the Government is trying to achieve’. But it was a new way of thinking for them, it was quite different.

From my viewpoint, unfortunately, the women got onto the Pill (laughter) and the population rate dropped rapidly and the whole reason for Monarto to exist suddenly evaporated.

The two or three departments that were supposed to go over there kicked up.

Yes. So it all went away. But it was a good example, I think, of the social planning effort that you asked about and how people saw it.

I think by the time I got a Whitlam Scholarship in ’75 there was generally more support than resistance. There were still pockets of resistance to the whole idea, but generally – – – (interruption, break in recording)

Thanks, Michael. Were there any particular methodologies being used? Policy development was a developing process, if I can use the words again; but, in say training the people working with you or explaining it to others, were there particular things you were looking for as a template or as an approach to this new thing going on?

That’s an interesting question. I don’t think there was a methodology, as such. I don’t recall using any sort of systematic framework. It was much more, with enthusiasm, ‘How do you manage to implement the ideals of social democracy?’ Which was all about – I think as I said a little bit earlier – equality, consultation, to some extent people power. But there wasn’t actually a coherent body of theory or knowledge that informed it all, in my recollection.

There were community development councils or bodies set up.

There were.

Was that part of this whole process?
Yes, it was. And that was my baby entirely. When I was working in America with the Bureau of Community Development, the methodology – there we go – that was used for a community was initially if a community felt it had a problem. The Bureau of Community Development advertised regularly in community-type newsletters and papers and so on, saying, ‘If you have a community problem, you can talk to the Bureau of Community Development, we can help you’. And so they received a continual inflow of calls from, usually, citizen groups – parents’ and teachers’ associations, civic improvement groups, sometimes the equivalent of local councils – and nearly always it was because there was a major problem in a community. It might have been a problem of juvenile delinquency, might have been a problem with vandalism, might have been a problem that a new road was going to slice through the community or a new train line was going to. Something was a matter of community concern. The Bureau methodology was to allocate a case to a consultant. Each consultant ran five to ten cases, depending on the size of the case. The communities that they worked in were anywhere from two thousand people up to eighty thousand people, quite significant.

The consultant nearly always would work with the initial group and say, (and the method was), ‘You’re too small a group by yourself to really achieve much. We need to bring in all the other community groups, and in order to do that we need to do a community survey. So let us invite other groups to help us design the survey questionnaire’. And so the original instrument always was a community survey, usually with sixty to a hundred questions, which was to be delivered to every household in the community, a hundred per cent coverage. Which meant you had to sit down and work with other groups, so you would get the local politicians to sit down with the local police, the local chamber of commerce, the local Rotary, Apex, Kiwanis groups, and it usually engendered a lot of interest – the idea of doing a survey of our community, to find out really what people think, hundred per cent survey. ‘Well, if everybody helps, we can do it.’ And so you did the survey and questions were asked to gauge the extent of interest in various levels of problem:
problems with roads, problems with street lighting, problems with security, safety, violence, vandalism, whatever the issues were. And then the survey was done and the results were tabulated by the Bureau; they were compared with other communities, because many of these surveys had been done; and out of that, in the process of asking all the questions and so on, specific interest groups appeared: a group interested in young kids and a group interested in juveniles, a group interested in the aged, a group interested in the aged, a group interested in transport. And so you get up action groups in each area.

The action groups received the results of the survey and then had the job of developing recommendations to bring back to community meetings. So the action groups planned recommendations based on the survey and then further – (each project was different), so depending on what was happening in the community eventually it would finish up with a series of recommendations being circulated, put in the local newspaper and being the subject of two or three town meetings, where you would put it back and the community would argue and discuss and endorse actions for the action groups to take. Then the Bureau consultant would work with the groups to start to implement their recommendations.

The biggest weakness that I identified in all this process was at the end of it all the Bureau had created a whole set of local leaders, had done all the research, done all the thinking, done all the consultation, created a groundswell for change, and that was the time when they withdrew the consultant to go to another community; and nearly always, in my experience, within one or two years that whole community effort had ground to a halt because almost immediately the different vested interests started fighting each other. The leadership got burnt out because the group who had been through the process of calling in the consultant, compiling the questionnaire, doing the action groups, going through the town meetings, they’d been involved for two to four years and they’d put in an enormous amount of time and they were burnt out. And the next group of leaders coming in did it differently. They didn’t have the ownership of the project that the original group had, and pretty soon bickering broke
out and the thing ground to a halt. I suspect that’s inevitable, I mean I really do think that these community development efforts start, reach a peak and come down and then you’ve got two or three years of fallow period before a new group deals with a new issue and moves on.

That methodology informed me in developing consultative councils in South Australia. What I was saying then was, we had something like, I can’t remember now, about seventy or eighty local government bodies, and most of them did not have the ability to undertake significant community development projects. If we could get local governments to coalesce into community consultative councils, we could follow the Bureau of Community Development model and not withdraw the consultant. So the concept was that we would put across the State – I’ve forgotten the number – (consults papers) we did seven in 1973 and a further thirteen in 1974[?], we did twenty consultative councils. In each case, before it happened I went and met with each individual council. So I went, addressed the council. I wanted it supported by councils. The consultative council would have a nominee of the local Member of the House of Assembly, two representatives nominated by local government, one representative from our Department and four to eight members of the general public interested in the furtherance of community welfare within the local community. And the whole idea was they would very quickly develop an inventory of community assets, community resources – particularly social welfare-type things – community welfare issues, and they would work to advise and recommend to local governments and the State Government action, but it would be people being involved in it all.

They started, and I think some were very successful, for a year or two. I left in ’75 to do my PhD and was away for three years; when I came back they were gone. They were gone.

Now, I’m not absolutely sure what happened to them. They were resisted by some of the older members of local government saying they were usurping the role of local government, that you didn’t need a local government body and a consultative
council, local government was in fact the consultative councils. I remember arguing with such people early on at community meetings that the track record said that wasn’t true; that there was a methodology, there was an ability, to involve people much more directly in dealing with community issues and such an organisation would help local government develop new strengths, new abilities.

It’s the old three R’s: roads, rates, rubbish.

Yes, exactly.

The ‘S’ didn’t come in.

No, not at all.

Or ‘P’ for people.

So again it was stuff that we don’t do that well now, even, and we were probably well ahead of our time.

You’ve talked about Monarto. Just looking at some of these other I’ll call them cross-departmental projects, the regional growth centres, what was the particular contribution that you and your department were making to that?

It was very much social planning. The Dunstan Government had decided that, besides Monarto, there should be regional growth centres. This was sort of a partnership deal with Tom Uren and the Department of Urban and Regional Development in Canberra. And we had the Green Triangle on Mount Gambier, the Orange Triangle up on the River, and the –

Iron.

– Iron Triangle, yes: Whyalla, Port Pirie, Port Augusta. There were three triangles. There were planning committees on each of them. They were driven out of the Department of Economic Development, I think, the name Paul Van den Berg (Van der Lee) rings a bell. Our input in each case was to really say, ‘If you are going to have a regional development centre which is going to be based upon population growth, then let’s have a social dimension to the planning’. And then we would be
asked, ‘What is a social dimension?’ And we would talk about the needs to accommodate the social welfare issues of the day: Aboriginal issues, women’s equality issues, housing issues, public housing issues. It’s not just a matter of industrial development; it’s a matter that if we are going to build new communities let us make sure that we look at what are the social issues of the time and try and ameliorate them, as we do the industrial development. Let’s not create more issues, because here you’ve got a social welfare department dealing with broken homes, domestic violence, abandoned kids, juvenile detention, youth suicide, a whole range of negatives, and most of those have been created by poor government planning, by poor appreciation of the social outcomes of other projects. Unintended. The unintended consequences of development. ‘So let us make those inputs.’ Which is what we were doing.

This is the gearing-up phase, if you like; what happened on an ongoing basis on some of them?

On an ongoing basis, nearly all of these interdepartmental committees spawned other little working parties. On those working parties we nominated people out of our department. When I was Director of Social Planning I think I had three or four other staff working with me – Bert Surmon, Bert Romo, Andrew Hall, Donald Sarre – all of whom sat in on various interdepartmental committees and working parties trying to put in the experience that they had had dealing with social issues and social problems. Of course, also the DCW’s executive group on which we had the five regional directors and the people who ran the juvenile detention centres and the adoption/foster care people, many of these issues were discussed and debated long and hard at the executive level in order to come up with a departmental position that could be taken to Treasury or to the Health Commission or the Health Department of those days, or to the Premier’s Department.

I think by ’75 we were working fairly cooperatively with Premier’s Department, less cooperatively with Treasury – although, to give Treasury credit, going back to those days, I do remember Basil Kidd and Ron Barnes significantly, and my
recollection of their position was along the lines of, ‘It is the role of Treasury to facilitate the work of the other departments. If Cabinet sees these things need to be done, then we’ll try and help you fund it and get it done’. So we did work quite cooperatively with Treasury as well by ’75.

That’s good. The Redcliffs project up in Port Augusta, Whyalla –

Yes.

– what was the particular contribution there?

It was very similar to the Monarto stuff. It was taking the same work that we were doing for Monarto and putting it into Redcliffs. Again, we were looking at a new town being proposed.

If the development would have come off, the petrochemical.

If it had come off there would have been a community of some twenty thousand there.

And the metropolitan redevelopment plan revisions?

Similar issues. But with the metropolitan redevelopment the rehousing thing became a very important factor. Social planning was there, certainly, but very early on in the metropolitan redevelopment stuff was about how do you rehouse the people who’ve been dislocated. The Hackney project was a particular one, which Alec Ramsay made a big impact on. He chaired the Hackney project redevelopment. And the idea there was to take a very run-down, inner-city area, parts of which you could have described as slum-like, how do you demolish and rebuild a community in an inner-city area? And we went very strongly for a mixture of housing. So, given where it was, and given that there was a pub and the Hackney Hotel was in the middle of it, how do you – I guess it’s social engineering again – how do you convert the pub into a community centre, how do you work with the University of Adelaide to build student housing along the riverbank, how do you work with private sector landlords to redevelop a whole lot of old houses so that they will accommodate old age
pensioners, people who’ve been in the area all their life. And my recollection of that was that we did a fairly good job. There were local government representatives I think from St Peters on the committee, there were Housing Trust people on the committee. The Housing Trust took a very large leading role in it.

**There was a citizens’ group there as well that was pretty active.**

There was, that’s right. That’s right. My recollection of all that was there was a lot of media interest as well, but that it was a useful model for how we might have done things in other parts of Bowden–Brompton and Hindmarsh, and we were very much testing out and developing ideas of how do you balance a population in an inner-city area and how do you rehabilitate an area in a sensible way.

**Was that linked with Commonwealth thinking as well, activity?**

I don’t recall there being any Commonwealth involvement in that one. There might have been.

**The inner-city redevelopment or rehabilitation thinking going on.**

I remember doing work with the Commonwealth and with Tom Uren’s department on the two big community centres, one at Hindmarsh, one at The Parks.

**Oh, yes? Can you talk about those a bit, then?**

I remember being sent across to Canberra by Dunstan and King with two or three other people who I now cannot recall and sitting down with people from the Department of Urban and Regional Development, one of whom was Andrew Strickland, I remember that very plainly, and we talked about this concept that we had developed in Adelaide of combining – a concept which was originally one [where] we wanted to build a lot of new community welfare centres. One of my very early projects with Ian Cox was how do you provide a building which is appropriate for social work functions, and one of my early projects was to actually design such a centre, which I did – my project was to actually establish them. I think I established eight or nine community welfare centres around ’71, ’72, the first of which was
Campbelltown Community Welfare Centre, opposite the Local Government Centre there, and we very deliberately designed a suite of social work interview areas and some office areas and some community areas. We wanted to put one of these community welfare centres – we’d done a template for it – into The Parks, The Parks was in big need; and then we wanted another one in the Bowden–Brompton–Hindmarsh area. We had been doing some work with the Education Department and the concept arose: ‘Why don’t we put a community welfare centre inside a school? And why don’t we put the school and the community welfare centre inside a community centre, so that the school hall, gymnasium, sports field, could be used by the community at the weekend and the social welfare/community welfare activities could be available for libraries, for community activities?’ And so we drafted, I think between Education and Community Welfare, a draft spec for a community centre involving a school and a community welfare facility, and that’s what I think we took across to Andrew Strickland and company.

The result of that was in the ’74 or ’75 budget, I think Commonwealth, we were awarded some four million dollars – that rings a bell with me – two million for The Parks and two million for Hindmarsh.

Incredible.

And there were big documents. The Housing Trust got involved, there was some community-type housing involved, all the various physical planning agencies got involved, and we got to the point where we had all the planning done for two of these centres. Then the Whitlam Government lost the ’75 election, the funding for The Parks had all been approved and was in but the funding for the other one wasn’t and it died. The Parks went on and developed and changed and it’s still there.

It’s still there.

And I don’t know what’s happened to it in the last twenty years or so, but it was an exciting concept at the time. It was quite new. I think it has informed a lot of
developments since at the local government level. Certainly we had people coming there and looking at it from other states.

Are there any other specific projects or initiatives that we haven’t covered that you were thinking of talking about?

There were so many, there were so many.

I just want to come back to a couple of general things. When we were talking informally you were talking about how the new Community Welfare Act was actually conceived and then worked up.

Yes.

Can you just talk about that a bit? And you mentioned the preamble.

Yes. I actually, after that preliminary chat, I went back and looked at that. I’ve got a copy of the 1972 Community Welfare Act. It didn’t finish up as a preamble.

It didn’t, oh.

It didn’t. My recollection – I mean, I remember putting it all together. We were consolidating a number of previous government agencies into a single Department for Community Welfare – I remember the big debate about the word ‘for’.

‘For’ or ‘of’, yes.

Because departments in those days were all ‘of’.

Ofs, yes.

So we wanted the Department for Community Welfare and we wanted a logo. Government departments didn’t have logos then. We wanted a logo, we wanted two people with arms around each other supporting each other. We won that one, and that became the departmental logo for some time. I particularly wanted something like the Declaration of Human Rights up front. So, I think, did Don Dunstan and so I think did Len King, so did Ian Cox. We were having real troubles with the judiciary. The judiciary were saying things along the lines of, ‘The Act says maximum penalty such-and-such’. And yes, they implemented maximum penalties.
We were saying we needed a caring and compassionate Act, and the issue always was, ‘How are judges going to interpret it?’ Because they could interpret it strictly or not. We wanted to have a preamble which basically said that this Act will be interpreted in a manner which preserves human dignity and respect the rights of people, *et cetera*. We had it as a preamble when we took it to the parliamentary draftsman who objected immediately to a preamble because State Government Acts didn’t have preambles. Now, it’s finished up as the objectives of the Act, and it’s not right at the front; right at the front we’ve got the usual, horrible stuff – ‘Definitions in this Act’ – and there’s three pages of definitions, which I always think, ‘Why can’t they just put the definitions at the back?’ Three pages of definitions, and then you get to the objectives of the Act. Now, not all of our original draft got in, but there were still the significant objectives of the Act.

**And this was quite new, this concept.**

That was quite new, to have the objectives of an Act. And I think the rest of the Act was pretty novel, because we were taking that social justice line on a whole series of areas which previously had really been fairly punitive. They’d been regulatory. It wasn’t about supporting kids in trouble; it was about punishing kids who did bad things. And that philosophic change really came in with Dunstan, I mean he brought it in in the late ’60s, when he was Attorney-General, because a lot of these things were under his wing: Aboriginal Affairs was under his wing back in whenever it was, ’68, ’67, ’66, well back there. But he had, as a young minister tasting power for the first time, been heavily-involved in a lot of this stuff. I think that putting together all these bits and pieces of welfare-type things was a Dunstan concept, that he wanted – when he got into power the second time in 1970 he very much wanted a much stronger department, agency, in the welfare arena. And that’s what I got caught up with as a young guy.

**And just in winding up, what would you like to say about Don Dunstan and his legacy in this particular area, or add to what you’ve said already?**
I guess it spans different feelings at different times. As a young man, in my late twenties, with an economics and accounting degree and then an MBA and a huge desire, coming from my church background I guess, to make the world a better place for people in trouble, he was inspirational. He did see the problems, he did want to make the world a better place and he had the will, the enthusiasm, the persistence – and the strength, really – to take on the Establishment, which, while sympathetic, wasn’t really doing anything. And for young people coming from the sort of background that I came from this was inspirational. Here was a leader. Here was somebody that we could support and back and help. I’m sure that there was a great influx of people into the public sector in the early ’70s because here was a government, both federally and state, that was taking a totally different perspective on the business of government.

Later on, the battles that occurred – after I came back in ’78 I joined the Health Commission as Director of Policy and Planning for the Health Commission, still following the same ideas, and with all my PhD work about social planning, social policy, which I started implementing in health. Consultative councils were in welfare; in health it was local boards of health, local boards for hospitals, trying to push the power down to where the actual issues were. Interestingly, I changed from being Director of Policy and Planning to Director of Corporate Finance and Administration, because far more policy was made in the field of corporate finance than it was from the area of policy and planning: what could you get with the money was the big issue when I became Secretary of the Health Commission. I finished up in a head-on confrontation with Treasury, and the Treasury of the day then were saying, ‘The health budget and the welfare budget are expanding far too rapidly. The whole issue’s out of control, we haven’t got enough money in the State budget to deal with police, prisons, education and an expanding health and welfare portfolio’. And Michael Court was sitting right in the middle of expanding the health and welfare portfolio, so I became a real target for Treasury at that time, which was one
of the reasons that I, when I did get nominated to become Deputy Chairman of the Commission, I got rolled in Cabinet. My nomination got rolled.

**Oh, really? When was that?**

This was in the Bannon time. It would have been, I guess, around ’85, ’86, somewhere there. Which was the reason I really then vacated Health and went off to the private sector at that time. I came back to set up Foundation SA, which also then implemented a lot of this social planning type of stuff.

But going back – I mean, later on, it was just I guess a feeling of sadness that so many of these initiatives had been pushed, after Dunstan had gone, were disassembled, stopped, lost. In looking back now, I just feel this sense of dismay, I guess, that around ’78, ’79, this State led the world, I think, in things like social justice, prisons, hospitals, schools, urban planning, and it got disassembled by people who said things like, ‘The expenditure per head in South Australia on education is higher than the national average, so we can reduce spending’. Of course it was higher than the national average. It was intended to be higher than the national average. We wanted it to be higher than the national average. We wanted to be leading the country. But, in my view, project after project, policy area after policy area, got cut back in the interests of things like achieving Triple A ratings.

**Right, yes. All right, well, thanks very much, Dr Court, for the interview.**

My pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW.