

**Bob ELLIS**

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**This is George Lewkowicz for the Don Dunstan Foundation's Don Dunstan Oral History Project interviewing Mr Bob Ellis, who was involved in student politics at the University of Adelaide and in the Student Movement, and also in the area of Aboriginal rights advocacy. The date today is the 15<sup>th</sup> December 2009 and the location is the offices of the Don Dunstan Foundation.**

**Bob, thanks very much for doing the interview for the Don Dunstan Oral History Project. It's an area that we're looking forward to getting some information about yourself and the sort of – I'll call it the 'radical context' and the critique of the Dunstan Government's activities, probably in the early '70s and maybe later, and then some of the work you did on Aboriginal heritage. So, as a starter, can you just talk a bit about yourself so people listening to the interview and reading the transcript know who you are?**

Thanks, George. Bob Ellis, as you said, is my name. I was born in Whyalla in 1943 and came to Adelaide for schooling. I went to Whyalla Technical High School for Leaving (4th Year High School). In those days there was no matriculation in Whyalla so I had to come to Adelaide to do matric at Adelaide Boys' High. Like most of the Whyalla students in those days, I was bonded to the Education Department for four years as part of a teacher trainee program that paid my fees to attend university.

I think I've mentioned that the group from my year at Whyalla Tech was a fairly large contingent of working-class kids from Whyalla and one of the first to attend tertiary study outside of BHP, who ran the town. In those days; most students expected to go into cadet schemes with BHP as engineers, marine architects, accountants and so forth. My dad had actually hoped that I'd become a naval architect with BHP shipyard. There wasn't much future in that, (laughs) as we now know. The Education Department Teacher Scholarship Scheme was the only source of funding for kids of working families in Whyalla in those days, that got us down here.

I was brought up in the post-war days. Money was pretty tight in those days and I used to go rabbiting, fishing, crabbing and so forth to bring in tucker for the family.

**Bob ELLIS**

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**I see that in some of the notes you've given me and that'll be an addendum to our transcript, that you began collecting Aboriginal artefacts.**

That's right.

**Where did that interest come from?**

Well, I think as a result of spending time in the bush and noticing them, and then asking questions about them. There was a bloke called Ben Flounders in Whyalla in those days, a bit of a local naturalist – he was a carpenter, I think, if I remember correctly – who I spent a lot of time with. We went to, say, Ediacara fossil fields collecting Precambrian fossils that are now getting a lot of attention and collecting snakes and birds and all that sort of stuff at about the age of 14 or 15.

**Were there Aboriginal people in Whyalla at the time?**

There had been, but they'd lived down on the foreshore, Whyalla foreshore, in the early days; but BHP and the local government, which was dominated by BHP appointments, forcibly removed them to Iron Knob – rounded them up, destroyed all their homes and pushed them out.

**So what happened to them in Iron Knob?**

They got dumped in Iron Knob and they had to find their way as best they could.

**Really?**

Some got jobs with BHP in Iron Knob in the iron ore business, but not a lot of them. People like Bertie Eyles, Harry Eyles – yes, I think most of the Eyles family were the ones I had to do with at school. Barngarla people.

**And they were kids in the school.**

They were bussed down in the mornings from Iron Knob to Whyalla Tech – from first year on, that is – and then bussed back in the evenings.

**And how were they looked on by the other schoolkids?**

**Bob ELLIS**

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As good sportsmen. I know Bertie was a prefect in the school. So there wasn't discrimination – well, probably was, but it wasn't overt – and when they stood for election as prefects and so forth they got elected and so on. So I wasn't conscious of hostility to them. I think most working-class people in Whyalla at that stage took the attitude that Aboriginal people were disadvantaged, but it wasn't their job to do much about it. And it was the company and company representatives who were anxious to remove them from the town. I think probably to remove the embarrassment of having people in impoverished circumstances living in a public space.

**This was post-mission, was it?**

This would have been probably before I was born, probably in the early '40s – '41, '42 or something.

**So missions were still around and active?**

There was no mission in Whyalla. The nearest mission was at Port Augusta in those days. That eventually got taken over by the Plymouth Brethren so that was a pretty interesting experience, too.

**Really? That's interesting. Taken over in what sense – they ran the mission?**

Yes, they ran the mission; but I've forgotten who ran it first. I think it might be Anglicans but I'm not sure.

**Usually was Lutherans, particularly right up – – –.**

No, that was West Coast ..... and the Moravians, of course, up at Koperamanna ..... – they got kicked out fairly quickly and pretty well the population got decimated.

**You mention your father wanted you to be a naval architect; what did he do?**

**Bob ELLIS**

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He was a carpenter and joiner. He was Secretary of the Carpenters' and Joiners' Union, President of the Whyalla Combined Union Council; he used to be a member of the CPA<sup>1</sup> but dropped out after I was born because he was concerned that he would, I suppose, sort of bring on me (laughs) some odour. But, well – I mean, I never joined the CPA but I was a Marxist and involved in that side of things. He'd lived through the Depression. But his father was a man of fairly conservative views, he was a builder, and so Dad was to a certain degree in conflict with his father, so that was part of the reason why he moved to Whyalla. One of the reasons he moved to Whyalla was, when he was in the CPA, coming home one night he saw a fire in a furniture factory where he worked – this is during the Depression; rushed in, put out the fire and thought (laughs) he was going to be congratulated for it; the next night he got beaten up by the coppers who'd set the fire, (laughs) for interfering. And he thought it was time to leave.

**Gosh, that's no good. And the working-class people around the town and the CPA – I won't call it *your* background, but your father's involvement – – –.**

Oh, it was part of my background. But I think I mentioned that my science teacher, Bob Burns, was a member of the CPA, used to deliver the *Tribune* on the weekends, and (laughs) he always used to say to me, 'For Christ's sake, don't tell the kids at school I deliver the *Trib*', sort of thing. But yes, that was the period of the Korean War so it was a fairly scary time for some people. And of course in Whyalla there were lots of post-war migrants – English, Scots, Yugoslavs, Greeks, Italians, Eastern Europeans. I mention the Yugoslavs, that we learnt very quickly the supposed difference between the Croats and the Serbs: the Croats were seen to be knife-carriers and ex-German collaborators where the Serbs were the goodies. It's no longer the case, is it?

**That was the scuttlebutt, was it?**

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<sup>1</sup> CPA – Communist Party of Australia.

**Bob ELLIS**

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Well, that was how kids sort of took it. And I mentioned there were returned soldiers who'd been prisoners of the Japanese, and at night you could hear them screaming. Yes, things were different then. Noise I think is one of the things I'm very conscious of having changed from those days. And I suppose the other thing was that trade union politics was very rank-and-file – you know, meetings of say the Carpenters and Joiners were held in someone's kitchen or something like that, and they were blokes from work, they weren't officials that now live in thirty-storey buildings and airconditioning and don't talk to workers.

**Yes, more professionalised.**

Yes, that's right. And I suppose the other noise was the sound of hammering, because in the '50s it seemed that everyone (laughs) was adding to the house or building a fence or doing something, and it was really interesting to see the colours of paints and so forth that appeared; they happened to be the same colours as the ships that were in the shipyard and that sort of thing. (laughs) So there was a bit of BHP sort of contributing to the work.

**Getting rid of their 'surplus'.**

(laughter) Yes.

**What were the interactions with the migrant communities? Were they seen as something different?**

Yes. I mean we had Poms both sides of us and I guess the general feeling was that – well, my mum was very close with some of them, but some of them were seen as bludgers and Dad in the Union Movement got a bit frustrated with some of the English and Scots migrants in the shipyard because they were forever pulling strikes for what he thought were trivial reasons. And he thought that the right to strike was important but you used it to achieve some significant outcome, not just because you were pissed off or wanted to do some shopping that afternoon or something.

**What about the non-English-speaking migrants?**

**Bob ELLIS**

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Italians – Italians were good; and the Greeks. So everything was very positive. The Greeks were very prominent around where I lived in Whyalla, I went to school with a lot of Greeks, including people who are now or have been senior people in the Attorney-General's Department – Kourakis is the name that I remember, I went to school with a Maria Kourakis; Azzopardis. Yes, so a lot of Italian and Greek kids at school, too, so we interacted a lot with them.

**Good. So you also got involved with [Australian] Labor Party when you were at Whyalla and you remember – – –.**

While I was still at school, actually, and it was Ron Loveday who was the Labor Member then. He, I think, became Minister for Education.

**Yes.**

As I remember, he was a quiet man; I think a good man, in the sense that he was an honest, hardworking person. My understanding is he was originally from Yorke Peninsula and came to Whyalla without a trade ticket. He had been brought in as what we used to call 'dilutie labour' (as in "to dilute" the trade base), that is people that were brought in to work alongside tradesmen so they'd acquire the skills if they didn't have the full training.

**That was because of a labour shortage?**

I'd say it was, yes. The Party in those days was funny – I mean you got some Lang Labor people who were very anti-Catholic or anti-something, and the Groupers who were out sort of trying to kick the others, and then various factions were playing their own games, so I didn't really find the Labor Party terribly welcoming as a schoolboy. But I persevered and I think I was about that time starting to become aware of the people like Don were starting to appear, and I felt – at that stage, at least – that Don represented change, a welcome change, in the structure. I've mentioned before the sort of rank-and-file elements that were prominent in the '50s, but that had its downside in the sense that quite often it was just routine, there was no sort of direction and no leadership, but it seemed like people like Don and people like that,

**Bob ELLIS**

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there was starting to be some sense of 'We're moving into something' or 'We've got some ideas about what to do'. The old story before, you know, was: 'I know what you're against; what are you for?'

**Yes. What did they talk about mainly, just industrial-type conditions?**

Yes. Things like hospital and whether there's sufficient medical service and doctors, the bus service, whether there need to be changes made to distribution of shops and things like that, establishment of a workers' club, that sort of thing.

**And what was the early awareness about Don? This was a man of, what, ideas?**

Depended on who you spoke to. But with the people I started to knock around with – by that stage I was at university – I think we saw Don as, it's a bit of a cliché, but a breath of fresh air. People like John Summers, Chris Sumner, John Bannon, David Combe – you know, that sort of mob – they generally saw Don as the coming figure and at university we used to invite him quite often to ALP Club and various other forums because he was the sort of person that would appeal to graduates or tertiary students.

**Ideas people.**

Yes. Now, when you talk to people out in the community, weren't so positive; you know, he was a 'black bastard from Fiji' or a 'poofter' and all that sort of stuff that used to circulate in the pubs and around the area. So it varied. But I think in the area where I was most involved at that stage, basically university, very much a plus.

**Your note says you stood for the SRC<sup>2</sup> and you won on a class platform.**

(laughs) Yes.

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

Oh, yes. Well, the appeal was to students at Adelaide Teachers' College, who never voted in the SRC elections because, you know, the University was separate from the

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<sup>2</sup> SRC – Student Representative Council.

**Bob ELLIS**

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Teachers' College and so forth. So I rallied the Teachers' College mob, basically on the basis of 'The university's full of all these college boys, over-privileged, silver spoon and all that sort of stuff, so why don't we do something this time and run some candidates and vote for people who come from *our* sort of background?' And it worked, although it scared the shit out of the Teachers' College personnel. (laughter)

**This was a College SRC?**

No, this was for the university SRC.

**The university one, right.**

College SRC was different, and that's what scared College people, to see that I was running for a university position.

**Interesting. And the college boys hadn't twigged to this or they just didn't have the numbers?**

I don't think they were aware of it. They just went as they always had and expected to be elected. I mean they *did* get elected, too, but it wasn't universally college boys, St Peters and so forth.

**So do you remember your first meeting when you turned up and any reactions about all that?**

Well, I think *I* was probably a bit tentative, I was probably more unsure of the circumstances, than all the rest. But that's when I met people like Dave Grieve and so forth and, as I said, there was Bannon and all that mob.

**Yes.**

I became the Abschol Officer for a time at the University and eventually the Aboriginal Affairs Officer, I think it was, for the National Union of Australian University Students. That was interesting: that was the days of Kirby and all that mob. We used to call Kirby 'The Judge' in those days because he behaved like it. Anyway, and at that time we used to organise for tutoring of Aboriginal kids using university students at Adelaide Uni; and work camps, and I organised two – one at



**Bob ELLIS**

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Davenport Reserve in Port Augusta, which I've mentioned involved Tom Roper, who later became a Victorian Minister for Aboriginal Affairs; Christopher Sumner; and a later camp organised – I didn't attend it because I had a supp exam – but I organised it at Amata, which included Chris Sumner, John Summers, Phil Sawyer, various other people – – –.

**Why was the portfolio set up in the University?**

It was primarily a local version of the National Union of Australian University Students sort of portfolio for Aboriginal Affairs. But Abschol at that stage was a fairly heavily-promoted by universities activity and had some effect, because there was bugger-all happening else in terms of education for Aboriginal kids, so providing tutors and so forth was a fairly significant effect.

**And your visits – well, you mentioned one camp you went to: what were your impressions of the camp when you got there and subsequently?**

Oh, it was appalling. The usual highly-bureaucratic whitefella who thought he was God but the Aboriginal people had been so kicked around the head that they couldn't really organise themselves particularly effectively, politically. I got involved in organising politically in Port Augusta, people like Dick and Rachel Brady. We had a demo when Don Dunstan opened the bridge, the new bridge, at Port Augusta over the Gulf; I think that embarrassed Don, and he knew it was me. And our slogan was, you know, 'We want houses, not bridges', because at that stage the Housing Trust wasn't providing much in the way of rental accommodation for Aboriginal people in either Port Augusta or Port Lincoln.

**Did you ever find out why – was it because it just wasn't on their radar, or – – –?**

Well, I wrote an article, actually, for *On Dit*, which was published, and I was surprised when Don insisted on the head of the Housing Trust responding to it. I found the article but I haven't been able to find the response, unfortunately. But yes, I know that Don was behind that, insisted that an article written by a student in a university paper had to be addressed by the head of the Trust.

**Bob ELLIS**

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**Interesting. And the Housing Trust did respond to some extent.**

Yes.

**What was it?**

They wrote a reply that basically said that – I think I accused them, saying that they were using a particular section of the *Housing Trust Act* to provide housing for Playford-style new initiatives – you know, sort of worker houses and so forth – and they were falling down in providing houses for Aboriginal people in impoverished circumstances. I think there were some changes after that, but I can't remember much about it. And I did help some Aboriginal people move into houses in Port Augusta shortly afterwards, so something must have happened.

**And just at the University, you got involved some more in the Labor Club with the people you've mentioned – David Combe, John Bannon and those.**

Yes.

**How did you find that at the time and also in the context of you're not finding it satisfactory, if you like, and why?**

Well, it was the best thing that was going in terms of providing some sort of political space, alternative political initiative in the area. As I said, I got together with Bannon, Sumner, Summers, Combe and so on. We talked about forming it, and I was pushing for it to be called the 'Labour Club'; they in turn had the numbers to insist it was called the 'ALP Club'. They thought 'Labour' was too pro-communist in its name. I think in those days Frank Walsh was the Labor leader, but Don was, I'm pretty sure, elected in Norwood and was much-favoured.

I know that Bannon and the others used to keep his college tie behind the clubroom door.

**Oh, yes?**

And they were a bit of a cheer squad. About that time Julie and I, I think, were invited round to Don and Gretel's place for dinner a couple of times, probably with Summers and others. I can't remember too much about that, but I knew John had a

**Bob ELLIS**

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bit to do with him. As I said, at that stage I thought that he was a good development in terms of Labor Party politics, and when he was Minister for Aboriginal Affairs he introduced the 1966 *Prohibition of Discrimination Act* – I think he might have been Attorney-General – and took other initiatives, including at one stage I was boycotted or blackballed by the State Aboriginal Affairs Department and I wasn't allowed into Davenport Reserve because I'd criticised them, and so if I wanted to meet Aboriginal people I had to wait outside the gate to talk to them. And Don very quickly, when he got in, cleaned that up. He wasn't into that sort of vindictive politics that had preceded him.

**So in your notes you mentioned Don being 'far ahead of the troglodytes in Parliament'. What were their views, if you can recall that?**

Well, if you've ever seen the debate on, for example, the *Aboriginal and Historic Relics Preservation Act*, you'll realise what I mean (laughs) by 'troglodytes'. I mean, not only did they think that Aboriginal people were effectively disappeared and they were dealing with relics, as such, but when they spoke about Aboriginal people – I mean it was appalling stuff; today even conservatives would avoid that sort of terminology. I can't think of an exact quote, but it was pretty horrible stuff. Don was one of the few people who had a non-discriminatory approach and in fact welcomed Aboriginal people into his office and so forth, which was pretty unusual. You know, it's unusual in terms of what's happened since, too. (laughs) He was unique in some respects – – –.

**Did you ever think about or even ask him about his interest in .....?**

No. I knew what it was, I never had to ask, and we talked about it privately and gatherings and so forth, but he made no secret of where he was at; he demonstrated that in his policies and his actions. Be worth talking to John Summers if you haven't already –

**Yes, I have.**

**Bob ELLIS**

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– because John was involved at that stage, too, and I think he'd confirm what I'm saying, that Don was having a very positive and productive sort of approach to Aboriginal affairs.

**One of the reasons I'm asking is just to dig into this what was really in it for him and the Labor Party, because you talked about the troglodytes.**

I don't think there was much in it for the Labor Party, but, well, I mean he was a lawyer, and things like antidiscrimination legislation I think appealed to him, as it did to us, but even within the bureaucracy – for example, I was employed as a consultant by the Public Service Commissioner's Office in 1970-something to do a survey of Aboriginal opinion throughout South Australia and the aim was to find out what Aboriginal people thought about the State Aboriginal Affairs Department. Fay Gale was basically organising that. And it was pretty obvious what we were going for: we were going to mainstream and Don was, I think – well, he was the Minister then, but that was the way it was going to go and certainly the way that the opinions of Aboriginal people – – –. They hated the Aboriginal Affairs Department. Now, I think where Don was at his weakest was often in the follow-through afterwards, and that's not to say he *personally* was responsible for it, but I don't think his ministers supported him in the sense of following through with things. So you decide to mainstream: you get rid of the full-blown Aboriginal Affairs Department that handled housing, health and everything else, allocate it to Health and Housing Departments and say, 'Right, you're now responsible for Aboriginal affairs'; if the Ministers for Health and Housing and so forth don't do their bit then what happens is Aboriginal people fall off the edge again –

**Yes, that's right.**

– which is what starts the process of them creating an Aboriginal Affairs Department or something similar to represent Aboriginal people because their advocacy in those mainstream departments disappears. So it tends to be a very circular thing. And I think, as I said, if there's any criticism of Don it was that towards the end he took his eyes off the ball and bit and his ministers let him down.

**Bob ELLIS**

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**This is what, the early '70s?**

Yes – I would say mid-'70s.

**You've got that context of the Commonwealth taking over powers.**

Yes, that's true, too; and that was a significant event in Port Augusta and places like that, too. But again Don was seen by Aboriginal people as a great advocate on their part because of the results of the referendum and so forth. Interesting in South Australia because I think we were the only – might have been Queensland – I think we were the only State to have an electorate vote against.

**Really?**

That was over at Ceduna, of course.

**Right, gee.**

That was shortly after the murder and jailing of Stuart.

**Can you remember who some of the Aboriginal leaders were at the time? Like I know you surveyed people, but there were I guess spokespeople or voices calling – – –.**

Harold Thomas, who designed the Aboriginal flag. He designed it when I was working in the Museum with him. There was a young, crippled bloke, I remember we established an Aboriginal – (laughs) we called it an 'embassy' – Aboriginal camp at North Adelaide. His name was Colin McDonald, he's now dead.

**Where was Moriarty?**

Yes, Moriarty was around but he wasn't quite so much the activist. But supportive.

Yes, I remember the Aboriginal flag being flown for the first time ever in Victoria Square on NAIDOC<sup>3</sup> Day by Harold. Anyway.

**Just getting back to that period of the Aboriginal land rights, in your notes you talk about the Aboriginal Lands Trust being set up, the first land rights legislation.**

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<sup>3</sup> NAIDOC – National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee.

**Bob ELLIS**

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Yes.

**Did you come across any of the debate in that about that was a trust on behalf of a number of areas, that debate?**

I wasn't involved in the debate but I was conscious of the debate. I was involved in the sense of Nepabunna and lands up there. There was quite a complex situation in the sense that, within say the Adnyamathanha community in the Flinders, it wasn't like it was one, coherent, single community; it had its own different historical factions and so forth. So that was part of the whole business of the Lands Trust and how the Lands Trust manifested itself. The general consensus seems to be that the Lands Trust never really quite was grassroots enough to handle some of those sorts of detailed issues and subsequently there were problems in the Lands Trust: people going without talking to traditional landowners onto their Lands Trust land, and so forth. For example, in the Flinders the Lands Trust took over an ochre mine, Bookartoo Ochre Mine, which was very famous for the fact that Aboriginal people from all over Australia came down and collected ochre from this place, from the lakes and Queensland and so on. Of course the land, because it was Aboriginal land, was vested in the Trust and then the Trust, one, didn't know what they had, didn't know how to handle it, and it wasn't a great success.

**They didn't have a little sort of sub-Trust mechanism for focused areas?**

Not that I'm aware of.

**Hadn't thought of it. And do you remember the APY<sup>4</sup> discussions about whether they were in or out?**

Oh, yes. I remember camping out in the parklands and all that mob coming down, and Peter Aitken shooting kangaroos up in the Hills — — —. (laughter) Yes.

**But there was some discussion about them coming under the Aboriginal Lands Trust umbrella.**

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<sup>4</sup> APY – Anangu, Pitjantjatjara and Yankantjajara

**Bob ELLIS**

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Yes. We were opposed to that, I remember we were quite insistent that we wanted special –

**Separate.**

– Pitjantjatjara–Yankantjatjara legislation. And if I remember correctly it was Don that in fact provided that. Was that right, do you know?

**I don't think he [did].**

Was he still around then?

**He did the draft and then it lapsed when he retired and Corcoran – – –.**

Oh, yes, and it might have been conservatives.

**And then Tonkin picked it up.**

Yes.

**Then there was a debate about access, mining and stuff like that.**

Yes, that's right.

**And the demos in Victoria Park and whatever.**

I remember it as being in the racecourse.

**Yes, Victoria Park Racecourse, yes. Interesting.**

Well, I was part of the push – I can't remember the names of them now. Phil Toyne, people like that – remember Phil?

**Phil Toyne, yes.**

Pitjantjatjara Council mob, pushing for separate Pitjantjatjara–Yankantjatjara legislation rather than Lands Trust or some other body like that taking it over.

**Yes. And I was talking to somebody the other day about the Don Dunstan period and they said one of the big mistakes he made – well, it wasn't him in the end – but a lot of this land rights stuff was locking out land for mining companies. Can you recall any of the debate about any of that at the time?**

**Bob ELLIS**

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Well, I think we thought at the time that the mining companies had to get their act together before they ought to be let onto Aboriginal land. My experience with Esso and some of those companies at the time was they were absolute cowboys and you wouldn't want to let them anywhere *near* Aboriginal land.

**Right, so they weren't up with the – – –.**

So it was a case of when the mining companies catch up to proper environmental practice then it might happen, but not now, thank you very much.

**And royalties and whatever else.**

Yes, that's right.

**So at some time you went to teach up at Whyalla and you got involved in the SDA – that's Students for Democratic Action.**

Yes.

**You were a teacher, so where did the 'students' part come in?**

Well, I had to work off my bond with the Education Department. I went back to Whyalla for was it two years or three years, and that roughly coincided with the Vietnam invasion. I remember at the time trying to get – what was it called? – a Young Labor Contingent, a YLC, and inviting Don up to Whyalla to talk to people in the Trades Hall up there. I can't remember what the subject was. But Don did, so I was able – I had a degree of influence in terms of being able to get Don to come up and so on. In university back here I'd been involved with setting up SDA – well, I suppose it wasn't so much setting up as immediately post-SDA – and I had to absent myself, but I did come back to do an honours degree first of all at Adelaide and then my master's at Flinders, and then I got involved again with SDA in its various morphed formations and Moratorium campaign, that sort of thing.

**Yes. So you saw, what, the Labor Party not being interested enough or active enough in those areas?**



**Bob ELLIS**

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I watched them gradually move away from it. As we got more radical, they got more careful –

**Right, yes.**

– and John Bannon and people like that, who had been fairly good on the Vietnam War – I mean, they were opposed to conscription and things like that but hadn't been terribly actively in antiwar stuff but were generally supportive of the left – I think got frightened by the tactics that were employed in the demos and the slogans, which became increasingly anti-imperialist and so on, and they argued that we were alienating the public from supporting our view of the invasion and we argued that we needed to tell people just what exactly was happening; there was no use just being pacifist. And so we got further and further apart. I think that's the point where I was furthest away from the old ALP Club blokes.

**And were there any discussions about strategy overall?**

Oh, yes. In the Campaign for Peace in Vietnam and the Moratorium campaign and so forth that was the constant theme: it always sort of tended to polarise. Although, surprisingly, more often than not the Communist Party was with the ALP rather than with us, they saw us as being slightly adventurist, I think.

**I see – uncontrollable, yes.**

Yes. (laughter)

**Where was Lyn Arnold?**

He was the sort of Christian Left. He was involved with a group that were doing a lot of community work in the South-East Corner, they called it the 'South-East Corner Project': essentially pacifist but, because he was of our age group and experience and so forth, yes, I mean he wasn't as old as the oldies who were seen to be conservative and restricted in their ability to adapt to new times.

**And was there talk of radical reform on other policies as well?**

**Bob ELLIS**

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Yes, in the sense that different organisations sprang up that represented different policy views. You had the Communist Party, Marxist–Leninists, the Maoists, and we were called ‘Adelaide Revolutionary Marxist Black .....’.

**ARM, yes, that’s right.**

So yes, different factions who basically sort of – we used to joke that we were the political organisation that the entire organisation could meet in a Volkswagen or a telephone box. (laughter)

**Can you remember some of the discussions like how do you get these messages across to the working class, if you like?**

Well, we used to go down to the wharves. With draft resisters I was running the underground for draft resisters getting out of Australia, so I used to spend a lot of time down on the wharves with the Seamen’s Union getting people on the boats and ..... Hong Kong and that sort of stuff.

**Really? To Hong Kong, yes, that’s right.**

Gus Mok and people like that, remember them?

**Yes – Gus I’ve met recently, actually.**

Really? He’s still going?

**Yes, I’ll talk about him later.**

Oh, you will, please, yes.

**And Peter Wesley-Smith was involved at some stage.**

I’ve got a feeling Bob Hall might have been one, too.

**Interesting. So what happened to that? I’ll come back to the Moratorium in a minute, but particularly that big march – – –.**

I didn’t see much of that, I got arrested the moment I put my foot down on the road. My photo was posted in the watch house, the coppers were told, ‘Arrest him’. So I’d

**Bob ELLIS**

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find that as soon as I walked outside the university gates, step onto the road outside, I was just in the Black Maria and I'm away.

**On what grounds?**

Known demonstrator. They could dream up something later on.

**Were you involved in the discussions about that march?**

Yes.

**And can you recall what was supposed to happen and what did?**

Yes.

**Notwithstanding you weren't there?**

Well, we were arguing with the, if you like, the university lecturer groups – you know, the Harcourts and that mob – for a fairly radical stance, which was to occupy part of the space, perform street theatre and basically slap the whole process down, then resume, keep going sort of thing, and then perhaps try it again and so on.

**This was still peaceful, though, not – – –.**

Yes. The Maoists had developed a chloropicrin gas that they'd tried out on us by dropping it in one of our meeting rooms. I won't mention the name of the person responsible for that, but I do know who it was and he's still around. And of course, in the course of the Moratorium, they dropped this chloropicrin and then accused the police of using teargas. And I think the result of the inquiry into the Moratorium was that 'person or persons unknown' had done it, but we knew who it was: it was the Maoists. So there was a whole series of different [groups].

Part of the problem, too, I think is that when we left there was a speaker van in a clapped-out old ute or something or other that the cops had merely took off the road, which meant communications was basically buggered. Nobody knew what was happening. And from our side of things – not the Maoists or the others – we got arrested so quickly, because we were known demonstrators, that we were able to have no influence whatsoever on what happened.

**Bob ELLIS**

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**Right, gee. And where was Brian Medlin involved in the talking?**

He was starting to get a bit [radical?] at that stage: he was sort of getting more and more involved with the Maoists out at Flinders and Greg – used to be a next-door neighbour of my in-laws –

**The lecturer, O’Hair?**

– lecturer in Philosophy – O’Hair, Greg O’Hair, yes – – –.

**Yes, he was there. So the rest of that is history.**

Well, it’s a very, very confused history.

**And how did you see the Government’s reaction?**

Well, that’s what I thought –

**Police?**

– you wanted to lead up to. Coppers generally weren’t too bad. There were a couple of very corrupt ones, particularly Special Branch mob. You remember the throwing the university lecturer, Duncan, into the Torrens and drowning him? They were all coppers, we identified who they were at one stage, and they were regular puncher-upperers in plain clothes for our demos.

**What, agents?**

They’d come for a punch-up. One had brothels in Glenelg – – –. Don was, I think, exceptionally good in terms of how he handled the police, particularly Salisbury later on; he didn’t interfere with the police but he made it quite clear that he didn’t want confrontation and wanted them to permit a degree of civil disobedience, if you like. So I think he took a fairly sensible point of view, from the point of view of the Premier of the State. Coppers generally weren’t too bad, and I knew quite a few of the coppers. I was involved with scuba diving and running a Marine Archaeology program, so I did a course with the Police Aqualung Squad and knew quite a lot of coppers through that, so I was able to get quite a lot of information about what was going to happen and what they were planning to do and that sort of stuff. And in

**Bob ELLIS**

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later years I made good friends with a man who just recently died, who was a Special Branch copper, so he told me an awful lot about what went on, too.

**Really?**

Anyway, what was I supposed to be answering?

**The Government's response.**

Yes. I think towards the end we became a bit alienated from Don because Don was under pressure as a result of the Moratorium activities and so forth – and the police; and his attempt to induce the police to behave in a non-confrontationalist way, I think he felt that we were putting unfair pressure on him, in the sense we weren't acknowledging his efforts to try and do the right thing. So there was a bit of an alienation about that time. But I think, when it comes to a Premier of a bourgeois State in a capitalist system, he weren't too bad and from our point of view was effective. I mean there are some that say that what you want to do is create the most right-wing reaction you possibly can in the hope that that will radicalise other people; that's not my theory, not my way of doing things.

**Interesting.**

I'm really jumping all over the place.

**No, that's all right. We've talked a bit about the housing issue. Was there anything else you wanted to say about that? When the bridge was opened?**

No. I found a reference to it somewhere the other day, but I've forgotten what that is now. Yes. I think the only thing was that some years ago I got my ASIO<sup>5</sup> records from the library and it was interesting: my first recording, if you like, as a person of interest to the secret police was the fact that I got involved with a group called Campaign Against Racism or something like that – in other words, in those days, to be involved in Aboriginal affairs or be a supporter of Aboriginal people in some sort of public way was considered to be threatening the integrity and interests of the

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<sup>5</sup> ASIO – Australian Secret Intelligence Organisation.

**Bob ELLIS**

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State. I mean I gave them plenty of reasons later on why they should record me, but I just thought that was interesting.

I think I might have mentioned to you that, when I was working with Fay's consultancy doing interviews with Aboriginal people in South Australia on the possible mainstreaming of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, at one stage Special Branch *and* ASIO, I think it was – it was certainly ASIO, anyway – contacted the Office of the Public Service Commissioner to tell them that ASIO had sighted me up in Queensland handing out rifles to Aboriginal people and calling on the overthrow of Joh Bjelke. (laughter) I was a long way from Queensland. I might have done it if I was there! But I certainly wasn't there.

**Did you ever ..... about how that happened?**

Yes, Fay Gale told me – I can say that now because Fay's dead so there's no feedback on her. She said not to tell anyone, but – – –.

**But, what, somebody just decided a fiction or they got you – – –?**

Well, one of the ASIO blokes decided to make a phone call to the Commissioner's office, he called Fay and then Fay asked me whether I'd been to Queensland recently, and I said, 'No, I've been up bloody north interviewing people as you asked. I haven't had time to go to Queensland'. But that's one of several examples where ASIO contacted my employers and tried to get me sacked. I might say that when you ask for those records, which are supposed to be public after a certain period, you don't get those because they were illegal.

**Really? Interesting. And did you tell Don about this or he'd heard about it?**

No. No – well, he might have heard about it from Fay, actually; but I didn't tell him and I don't know what his reaction was, but I didn't get sacked.

**But in your notes you said Don contacted you about a job or if you wanted to apply for a job.**

Yes, I'd applied for a job, this is some time earlier, with Aboriginal Affairs and I naïvely thought I was going to change the world from inside the bureaucracy. And I

**Bob ELLIS**

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told Don that basically I had no hope, I'd been blacklisted. Must have remembered it because, some months later, when he was Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, he rang me up and said, 'Well, want the job? Put in your application now', sort of thing. So he had a memory and he tried to do the right thing.

**Was part of that conversation, 'You know what I get up to and why do you want me in there?' Was it something about – – –?**

No, it wasn't him saying he *wanted* me there; what he was saying was, 'You said you wanted to apply for it and you couldn't and they wouldn't, so I've cleared the way so you can apply now and you won't be unfairly discriminated against'. He wasn't offering me the job on a platter or anything.

**I was just wondering whether the subtext was he wanted to shake up the Department a bit.**

That's quite possible. John Summers, for example, worked up at Amata for a while and he took on some of the Establishment up there, too, and I think got support from Don.

**Interesting. So you said you later worked in the Museum as a curator/manager of the Aboriginal Historic Relics Unit. How did that come [about]?**

Yes. The legislation was passed in 1965 so it wasn't Don's legislation, it was a private member's bill. I think Bob Edwards had a bit to do with the Legislative Councillors, I think, who got the bill drafted. It was the first heritage legislation in South Australia and one of the first in Australia – so-called legislation, I suppose. It did tend to treat Aboriginal culture as a relic, evidence as a relic. What I liked about it is that it provided for protection of Aboriginal marine, industrial, historical and post-European heritage as one package of heritage without separating it, the way they do today. So there's not much of relevance there in terms of Don. It provided for a board. Once that board's time of appointment ran out it was meant to have got reappointed again, because I was able to get quite a few places protected under that, and it required the board to recommend things for their protection, so the only way they can stop you from protecting places was to get rid of the board.

**Bob ELLIS**

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**So you had statutory power?**

No, not in the sense that we could prosecute, but we had quite a lot of influence in the sense that we could prosecute by newspaper or whatever, by sort of showing people hadn't done the right thing. It provided for declaration of prohibited areas, what was called 'historic reserves' within which people's activities were limited – they couldn't disturb, damage, destroy, excavate without permission. So that was one of my first jobs.

I remember Rob Dempsey was one of my bosses in those days and the whole office was full of ALP..... hacks, and I think Rob was a very close friend of Don's. I can tell you some stories, but I won't on tape. Bloody Dempsey. (laughter)

**We've been trying to contact him but nobody knows where he is.**

I might make a suggestion, but I won't. (laughs)

**And were there any big bumps you came across in that job?**

Well, the funny thing was that while I was there I think we used to scare the pants out of people in the Department. I remember once when Dempsey was there I came in, basically walked my way into Dempsey's office on some issue and there was a sort of buzz on the intercom: 'Look out, Bob Ellis is in the building!' (laughter)

**And you heard it.**

Great embarrassment – – –. So that was sort of the attitude. But I was tolerated. Yes. But in those days you'd end up in the Minister's office on a Friday night having a piss-up.

**With Des, yes.**

Yes, Des Corcoran. I can remember Des Corcoran, he was going to move out and someone else was moving in – who was it? I can't remember – and he was standing in his office and he got his glass of red wine and poured it on the carpet. I said, 'What are you doing that for?' He said, 'Fuck the bastard, he can have a stained carpet – – –.'



**Bob ELLIS**

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**Oh, really?**

Yes. So I mean those days you'd go up and see the Minister on Friday arvo and have a beer, and you wouldn't do that today.

**Yes. Was that about work or just – – –?**

Work, life, universe.

**Interesting, yes.**

I think you were probably around in the days when that all changed and it all became sort of security barriers –

**Yes.**

– and no-one spoke to anyone.

**That's right.**

Anyway, I think we've just about – – –.

**We've covered a lot of territory.**

I don't know whether I helped very much with Don.

**Did you want to say anything about – – –?**

All I wanted to [say] I suppose in a summary is to say that people are critical of Don – I suppose they have reasons to be critical of him, too, we're all vulnerable to various things and no-one's perfect, but I always felt that ..... he played a role you wouldn't find today in the sense that – I mean he was working in an environment which wasn't conducive to radical change and so forth, but in that circumstance I think he made genuine efforts and made some genuine achievements, and that he was a bloke whose head and heart were in the right place and his contribution was positive, which is part of the reason why I came in to talk to you, because I wanted to say something positive about Don.

**Thanks very much, Bob, that was really interesting. END OF INTERVIEW**