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A series of dots, .... .... .... .... indicates an untranscribable word or phrase.

Sentences that were left unfinished in the normal manner of conversation are shown ending in three dashes, - - -.

Spelling: Wherever possible the spelling of proper names and unusual terms has been verified. A parenthesised question mark (?) indicates a word that it has not been possible to verify to date.

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Today is the 19th July 2005 and this is an interview with John Hartley. John, could you tell us where and when you were born?

AJR: Yes, Jim. Before I do, Jim, just let me acknowledge that we sit in Kaurna country today. I was born in 1956 in Sydney, New South Wales, Kogarah Hospital.

So can you tell us a bit about your mother and your father?

AJR: I’ll begin with my mother. My mother is an Aboriginal woman, she’s from the Kuku Yalanji people in Far North Queensland. Her mother was taken away as a very young girl from the camps with her parents and later was interned at what was called then the Yarrabah Mission up in Far North Queensland. My mother’s father, Edgar Davis, was an Aboriginal man, his mother was up from around the Cooktown area during the Palmer River gold strikes. His mother was to walk from Cooktown later on with her children, my grandfather being one of them, down to a place called Mosman up in Far North Queensland along the eastern seaboard, where they camped for a while in Aboriginal camps until eventually my grandfather was also picked up by the authorities and placed into the Yaraba Mission. And it was at the Yaraba Mission that my grandfather and grandmother met, after being interned there all their childhood, basically; it was only in their early twenties or after their twenties that my grandfather finally got out. He married my grandmother in there but my grandmother wasn’t allowed out, so he had to wait some time before she was given permission to leave the what they called a ‘mission’ as well. And when they did finally get together again, after the authorities deemed it appropriate, they went to settle in Mosman, and it was in Mosman where my uncles and aunties and my mother was born. They were born round the Port Douglas area of Far North Queensland.
My mother had quite a hard life growing up, schools and things like that, because the racism was quite strong and they all grew up under the Queensland *Aboriginal Act*, which means that you had no – you were at the whim and fancy of the authorities and could have been taken away at any stage. And even then my grandfather’s wages were set about how much he could earn or couldn’t earn, what sort of work he could do, and whether or not he could live in certain parts of the town, whether or not they could enter town after sunset, *et cetera, et cetera*. Often referred to as the ‘Dog Collar Act’. So my mother, during her early years, grew up in quite a, I guess, hard, racist environment, suffering taunts at school but also with the ever-present threat of the authorities and of being taken away – as were her sisters and brothers and uncles and aunts and extended family members.

**What sort of work did your father do?**

AJR: My father was – okay, I’ll skip: my father was born during the Depression years. Not too keen on school and given the Depression put a lot of hardships on a lot of families during them days he left home at thirteen and ‘humped his bluey’, as they said, and travelled all through Australia at thirteen and worked on stations, sheep stations, and in them days sometimes you’d have to walk thirty miles to a different town to get your susso¹ and things. So he done a lot of labouring work. And then at fifteen he eventually ended up in Adelaide where he jumped a ship, and that took him to Jamaica. And he was found out and jailed when he got there, after they caught him; he was then deported to England saying he was from England, so he was deported from Jamaica to England. He was locked up, he became very active after seeing a lot of the conditions on the waterfront and also of the cheap labour of – – –.

**Did he work on the waterfront?**

AJR: Well, at first he was a seaman, he travelled all around the world as a seaman. He was jailed quite a few times for trade union activity as a seaman from the age of seventeen. He’d begun being jailed and bashed and what have you. It wasn’t until the Second World War that he signed on as a merchant marine sailing out of New York docks over in America. It was also in America where he first
joined the Communist Party; and he was awarded a Presidential Citation from Truman for his wartime – for the part he played in the War at the time, and then he was quickly deported under McCarthyism after that for being a member of the Communist Party. And in 1949 he ended up back in Australia, after being taken off the ship in Indonesia and jailed again. And then finally he ended up back in Sydney, after being deported from America, in 1949. From 1949 for about a year he sailed around in the coastal ships and then he came back on land and became an active member of the Waterside Workers’ Federation. He helped to form the Job Delegates’ Association, he became Secretary of that in 1951, I think, until his death in ’64. The Job Delegates’ Association was a rank-and-file association based on democratic structures, and that was to later spread throughout all ports of Australia so it became a very strong tool within the Waterside Workers’ Federation for organising workers on the job. So he became active in the trade union and, as I said, Secretary of the Job Delegates’ Association until his death in 1964.

And he was of Irish origin, and both his father and mother were both members of what was called the IWW\(^2\) back in the early days, and both my grandfather and grandmother on my father’s side were very active in anti-conscription and anti-war movements of 1915 and used to have secret meetings of the IWW in Jack Lang’s sister, I think it was, daughter’s – her and her husband had a bookshop in Sydney, I think it was either George Street or Castlereagh Street, where they used to, out the back, have meetings of the IWW where they discussed world affairs and politics. And my grandfather on my father’s side originally came from Broken Hill, the mining towns. And he was also known as ‘The Broomstick Knight’ because in them days the authorities and the police would often evict people who never had money to pay the rent, because it was pretty hard times, and he had a way of dismounting the police officers from the horse using a broomstick, so he became known as ‘The Broomstick Knight’. But very active within the unemployed movement of the time and standing against all the evictions that were happening to people at the time and stuff like that. So from – I guess, going back to my father –

\(^1\) Susso = the dole, unemployment assistance.

\(^2\) IWW – Industrial Workers of the World.
from the 1950s he became a worker on the wharves here, and he ceased going to sea from that point.

**So obviously very strong connections there with political activism for two, three generations back.**

AJR: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

**So where did you do your schooling?**

AJR: Education?

**Yes, your education.**

AJR: I done that in Sydney. I only went to the end of first form or I was about thirteen and a half, fourteen years old, and then I left school – that was the sum total of my education; I think I inherited my father’s dislike for school authority – and went to work, my first job was I became a ‘tailer-out’ in a timberyard, so I done that for some time. And eventually, after some years, I done some brickies’ labouring and fruit-picking, travelled around Australia a fair bit and also went back up to Far North Queensland into my mother’s country, with my extended family and relations up there, and ended up somehow or another – my mainstay at work has always been labouring, general labouring, and mainly in the building or construction industry.

**So when you started work was it a natural thing to join the union, or did you just become active on the job? What happened there?**

AJR: I was always favourable to unions, so if there was one there I joined it. I’ve been members of the Storemen and Packers, and even at a young age had my say, I suppose, and stood up.

**So where were you mainly – you were working mainly in Queensland – – –?**

AJR: I worked Sydney, Queensland, Shepparton Victoria, and South Australia.

Okay. **So when did you come to South Australia?**

AJR: In the late – 1989 I came to South Australia.

**And the work you were doing here in South Australia?**
AJR: Again was in the building and construction industry. I joined the Builders’ Labourers’ Federation, or the Australian Building and Construction Workers’ Federation, and went to the union office and they managed to point me in the direction where I got a start on a refurbish job in North Terrace, one of the hotels.

**Had you been active in the construction industry before you came to South Australia?**

AJR: Oh, attending rallies and things like that and supporting progressive things on-site, yes.

**What, for your own people or for – – –?**

AJR: Yeah, for both. Yes, yes. And more so when I settled here in Adelaide and made Adelaide my base, that’s when I started to try and become active, and in particular try and advance Aboriginal cause within the Union Movement, yes.

**So tell us a bit about those times when you come to Adelaide, about some of the jobs you worked on and some of the activity you got involved in, in the union.**

AJR: Well, I became quite active as a rank-and-file member on the job. I was doing general labouring work – I don’t know if general labourers exist any more, but anywhere from pushing a broom to digging a ditch to mixing concrete, carrying bricks or driving a forklift, or being on the gate. And, as I said, I became active as a rank-and-file member and it was to my good fortune that I’d met an Aboriginal activist and communist by the name of Peter Robin. Peter Robin at that time was the co-ordinator of the National Unions Coalition with the Aboriginal movement based here in South Australia in Trades Hall, and it was at Peter’s urging that I take an interest and start to raise some of the issues, Aboriginal issues, within the Builders’ Labourers branch down here in South Australia. Some of the issues that we brought to the attention of the union down here I guess mainly involved land rights. One of the first ones was the Swan Brewery site or the Waregal Dreaming site over in Perth, Western Australia, we tried to get some national support for that. We had quite progressive motions and support for that passed through our branch here in South Australia, in support of the Aboriginal people over there.

**Did the union send you over to Western Australia?**
AJR: Well, I was sent over – what happened, Peter Robin had died in the meantime and some Aboriginal people here in South Australia said that maybe I should just sit in Peter’s chair for a little while until they can get someone to run it. And so during that period with NUCAM I went over and spoke with Robert Bropher, spoke to people on the picket lines and just went around to a number of meetings, went to see the Secretary of the BLF over there to inform him as a member of the BLF in South Australia my intentions of being there was in opposing the construction of any buildings on the Waugal Dreaming site. We were hosted around there by the Secretary of the CFMEU, which is interesting in itself because at that time also there was a lot of rivalry between the building unions, shall we say. So I attended a lot of meetings and eventually we done some whip-arounds to raise some money to get Robert Bropher over here to address the United Trades and Labour Council, so we tried to start getting issues more vocally with people and guest Aboriginal people addressing the United Trades and Labour Councils about the issues that had been affecting Aboriginal people.

Also Kevin Bromley, Ron Owens, the then Secretary of the BLF here in South Australia, and myself attempted to form a Deaths In Custody Watch Committee here in South Australia.

What about at the ACTU level, John? What was happening there?

AJR: Well, again, interestingly enough, given the rivalry that was between the building unions – I think it was the CMEU then and the BLF or the ABCWF here in South Australia – I was fortunate in the ’90s to be sent to an ACTU-sponsored conference, ‘Partners for Justice’, and I was sponsored by both the unions, which I found interesting for a couple of reasons because people were able to put aside any

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3 NUCAM = National Union Coalition with the Aboriginal Movement.
4 BLF = Builders’ Labourers’ Federation.
5 Waugal – waterhole created by movement of the Rainbow Serpent.
6 CFMEU = Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union.
7 ACTU = Australian Council of Trade Unions.
8 CMEU = Construction, Mining and Energy Workers’ Union.
9 ABCWF = Australian Building and Construction Workers’ Federation.
differences they might have had to address what is a very important issue, and that is the conditions that Aboriginal people live in and continue to live in.

So I was sent, co-sponsored by both the CMEU and the Builders’ Labourers’ Federation of South Australia, and I guess that was my first major conference. And at that conference – I think it was about four days, three or four days – we started to form friendships and we started to see who was who and we started to see that there were quite a number of Aboriginal people that were still active within the Union Movement, as there’s always been. And at that meeting we started to discuss the role of Aboriginal people, what are particular things that Aboriginal people like to see, and we talked about land rights, about social justice, about children and about the health conditions of Aboriginal people. So that was quite good, I think, in starting to get things going.

Some time later, after the amalgamations of both the — —. I mean, during this time Martin O’Malley [organizer] from the BLF and myself also started to raise issues about the Hindmarsh Island land rights issue. We were both jailed over the actions we took one particular day, and police officers come along – along with other people: I think there was five of us altogether that were locked up on that day for refusing to move out of the way of trucks and what have you, you know – and in between that raising the issue about what land rights is, what it means to Aboriginal people, trying to put across the Aboriginal perspective. Martin O’Malley also fronted the Commissioner at the time and put forward the union’s perspective of [being] supportive of Aboriginal people. And then some time later, after the amalgamation of the two building unions in South Australia, and more recently I became a representative, the national Indigenous representative, to the ACTU of the CFMEU. And during my stay there I was looking at the award wages for Aboriginal people; again, my portfolio was CDEP\textsuperscript{10}, award wages for Aboriginal people, land rights and social justice issues.

\textbf{So obviously you had good and strong support from your own union; what sort of support did you get from the other unions?}

\textsuperscript{10} CDEP = Community Development Employment Projects.
AJR: It’s been mixed, over the years, to put it kindly. And that’s, I guess, a number of factors. But the Aboriginal struggle is one that’s been going on from Invasion, and the colonisation process still continues, and it’s hard to get that across to people, that there’s been a struggle in this country, a human rights struggle in this country, for in excess of two hundred years. And it’s not a struggle that you go home and switch it out like you do when you’re switching out the light and go to bed; it’s a twenty-four-hours, seven-days-a-week lifetime, and unfortunately a lifetime of an Aboriginal person is not very long. But support in the main, we’ve always had the ear of the Union Movement, but for instance when we tried to establish a Deaths In Custody Watch Committee and we called for participation from unions, from the broad cross-section of the unions, we had no response. And I suppose that to me was a bit disheartening. But I think when unions and union hierarchy are informed of what the issues are, when the union members are aware of what the issues are, and that there isn’t a threat, you know, that there’ll be no jobs at stake because we save a particular area or a sacred site, then the support in the main has been good. In fact, the strongest supporters – I’m talking overall – in this country has been the Union Movement, of the Indigenous struggle. And both from my mother’s side, my Aboriginal side, my aunties have been members of – and my mother was a member of the Waterside Workers’ Women’s Committee during the days when they were packing food parcels, and my auntie was also a guest speaker at many Waterside Workers functions on Aboriginal conditions, she was also a member of the Communist Party of the day – so our family has always been active about pushing for human rights issues with and through the Union Movement and people within the Union Movement.

What about the treatment of your people on the job, for example, Aboriginal people? Did you come up against, or did you come up personally against racism or ever had to deal with issues of racism?

AJR: Yeah, there’s been times: in a lunch shed, and in particular when governments and media started to raise the hype about native title and started to create the fear that people were going to lose their house and their farms and everything they’ve worked for over the years. The mindset that that creates in people, workers and the like, has a very big adverse effect, and so in the lunch rooms you’d hear all kinds of comments about, you know, ‘Well, they should have pushed
all the blacks over the cliffs,’ and things like that, you know? And other quite
disparaging and put-down remarks.

How did you deal with that?

AJR: Well, I’d take it to – well, there’s two ways: you can start to address the
person and you can start to talk about the issue, in this instances say native title, and
start to explain exactly what native title is to people, so you take away the fear
content. And then you try and put it in the context, the struggle in the context, that
it’s no different, Aboriginal people wanting to have just a good life, a good, healthy
life, is the same as anybody, you know? That’s all we want, is a good, healthy life.
And so you try to explain really what – you try and provide an alternative to the
propaganda, the mainstream propaganda, the papers. And also you’d raise it at
general meetings, you’d ask or you’d call the union on what their policy was in
regard to Aboriginal people and racism in general. Is it right that members put down
other people on the basis of race? And of course it isn’t; fundamental union policy
doesn’t wear that, doesn’t accept that. And so bringing these policies, unearthing
these policies and keeping these policies alive at general meetings, and also
discussing if things were in the paper at a general meeting about what native title is
and things like that, so that members are informed.

The Deaths In Custody Commission and the number of recommendations that
were made, how do you feel about that whole event, or that whole time?

AJR: It’s not something in the past, you know? It still goes on today. I think
there’s been some window-dressing of the recommendations but there’s been no real
accommodations within the legal framework of this country.

Do you get angry?

AJR: I used to get angry and I used to yell a lot, but I don’t any more. I think
what we need to do is to educate people – well, to focus your anger into a positive. I
think we need to keep bringing up the issues, we need to keep the issues alive in the
hearts and minds of workers, of everyday people, and understand that people are
products of the propaganda that we’re often brought up with. And my father said
once in a speech he wrote that the strength of a union lies in the consciousness of the
rank and file, so we’ve got to try and direct our attentions to the rank-and-file
members of the union so that they understand exactly what the issues are so that people on the job have an alternative to mainstream views of what is and what isn’t. (break in recording)

**What you’re saying, John, basically, is that by dealing with anger, or dealing with it in an angry way, was not actually bringing about a satisfactory response?**

AJR: No, because you can’t go round blaming people for things that they are not aware of or they simply don’t know. A lot of people aren’t aware of, still today, of the conditions that Aboriginal people are living in while we’re sitting here. They don’t understand the conditions Aboriginal people are living in. And so what I’ve tried to do is to develop presentations, PowerPoint presentations, that educate people of the struggle, the Aboriginal struggle; but not only the Aboriginal struggle, the Aboriginal struggle in the context of the Union Movement because there’s been many, many strong and great Aboriginal members of unions and in fact leaders of unions within the Aboriginal community.

**Did you get to meet these people?**

AJR: I’ve met some, yes. Not all, but I’ve met a few, yes.

**Want to tell us about some of those meetings?**

AJR: Even as a young person – I’m going back early ’60s and that, when around our house all there was was political discussion, and of course it was a great time of movement within the Aboriginal struggle as well, it was a great start of organising people through FCAATSI\(^{11}\) and things like that. So I had the opportunity to speak – or not speak, but listen, rather, at a young age to what people were talking about. Not fully understanding it, but somewhere in there it seems to have dropped a seed. And I’m fortunate that within my own family and extended families a lot of them people have been at the forefront of that struggle.

**So did you join a political party at any stage?**

AJR: No. No.

**Why did you choose not to?**

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\(^{11}\) FCAATSI = Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.
AJR:  (laughs, pauses)  I guess because of the inherent structures and bureaucracies within a lot of organisations. And real or not, there is still a sense that the structures within these organisations didn’t really accommodate Aboriginal people. Going back to your previous questions about the Union Movement and progressive movements and political parties, if our – and the Aboriginal struggle – if our overall effect has been one of strength, then why are our people still being locked up in the numbers, why are our people still dying earlier, why are the conditions of our people still appalling?  So yes, there’s been awareness and education, but why is it that we still don’t have fundamental rights that are given to everybody? Why is it now that our people have to say that we’re going to clean the house before we get air conditioning or a pool or things people take for granted? And it’s not so much that people don’t care, it’s that the nature of the beast is that we’re always running from one struggle to the next. And what we’ve got to try and do, what my hope for the Union Movement is, is that our struggle, the Aboriginal struggle, Indigenous struggle, becomes a core part of union structures so that every union member is aware of what Aboriginal struggle is about, and it’s about human rights and we’re all – we all should be afforded them, black, white or brindle. And to see that for us to do things in our own way, in our own terms, is not wrong but in fact a part of that human rights or our birthright. So I hope that the Indigenous struggle, Aboriginal struggle, becomes a core part of the union structure, and that’s what I hope about when I talk to people in the unions or if I address the ACTU or the UTLC or a general meeting: it’s all about getting it into people’s minds and also about creating the picture in people’s minds or taking away the fear and alleviating the fear, and to say that this is about human rights and the union should be involved in this, must be involved in this, not just in a verbal or a lip-service way but in very fundamental ways about how we start to address and bring about some justice for Aboriginal people in this country. And that’s happening. And within the CFMEU we see now that job opportunities and training through the union is happening within the major states. We have in South Australia in the CFMEU here we have guidelines that help us through any land rights issues on construction sites, if any, or should any bones be unearthed during excavation the union has guidelines about how to do it appropriately, with Aboriginal people. And it’s these sorts of structures and things that we have to start to put in place: not as a thought or as a do-good
thing or as ‘Oh yeah, we can do that’, but as a natural part, an everyday activism within the union.

The levels of unemployment for Aboriginal people are extremely high. How do you think we can address some of those issues?

AJR: Well, you know, I reckon if – I’ve said this to them, that I would like to see a delegation of representatives of the union from every state visit every Aboriginal community in this country and sit down and talk to the people within their communities. And I’m sure after that they’ll realise what needs to be done and to do it in partnership with Aboriginal people, together. What the CDEP program –

CDEP is what, John?

AJR: – is the Community Development Employment Program which was brought in, I don’t know, maybe twenty-five years ago, thirty-odd years ago – was a program that got Aboriginal people to work within their communities for the dole, it was a work-for-the-dole [scheme]. It’s a mean-nothing thing, because a lot of the communities are very remote so you don’t have industry climbing over each other to go out there to build up their industries where they need to employ people. So the sorts of things you’d have in Aboriginal communities is cutting grass, maybe some repairs, artefacts and stuff like that, which is fine, but what it was again was placing the fault or blame downwards onto Aboriginal people for the unemployment rates of Aboriginal people – you know what I mean? – rather than building up infrastructure that can employ Aboriginal people, because Aboriginal people are really good workers. So what do you do about it? I’d like to see a delegation of all the top union officials go round, sit in Aboriginal communities, sit in the earth, and talk to people and then they’ll.

Has this been proposed to them, John, or – – –?

AJR: I’ve always mentioned it as a (laughs) –

A challenge?

AJR: – well, as an opportunity, I think, for the ACTU or the Trade Union Movement to learn what is happening within Aboriginal communities, to see it. And if you see some of the things that we see in communities with the young kids and older people and the conditions and the overcrowded – you know, in my own
community they had, until very, very recently, twenty houses, with two hundred people. So it doesn’t take very long to do the sums. So these are the sorts of things people have got to see, not just read about or hear about second-hand. You know, like I say, ‘Don’t believe me; go out and have a look. See for yourself, and when you see for yourself, then you know that these sorts of things shouldn’t exist in a country supposedly like Australia.’

When Don Dunstan was in power here in South Australia, there was a lot of things did change, or there was a lot of attempts to make changes and there was a lot of feeling of hope that there was going to be some significant changes for the Aboriginal people. And I think there probably were. But now we’ve got another Premier, a Labor Premier, Rann, who’s recently sent people into the Pitjantjatjara Lands to have a look and see what’s going on up there. And on the weekend, or this weekend, I’ve just read the article in the Weekend Magazine from Lowitja O’Donohue who’s been up there and has said publicly to the Premier that it’s a disgrace the way the way the state government is actually dealing with our people up there. How do you feel about those things?

AJR: How do I feel about it? Well, you get to a point where you think it’s expected that people would turn a blind eye to it. Because people have been, people in so-called ‘authority’ or who have the opportunity to change things with the stroke of a pen, haven’t. And they haven’t done so for in excess of two hundred years. We say that the colonisation process still continues today, that the grinding-down of Aboriginal way of life and people through foreign policies, through foreign expectations of what others think is good for Aboriginal people, the constant grinding-down of Aboriginal – you know, the taking away of land, which when you take away someone’s land you take away their whole university education system to their children, you know? You take away the language of that country, you take away the stories of that country, you take away how to survive in that country, you take away your hopes and dreams and your thoughts that arise out of that country. You take away your sustenance from that country. So because in our own country they were our – and within our own family relations: they were, our mothers and our fathers, our pre-schools, the land was our primary school, our higher education school, it was our university – you know, how you live, how you get through life, was all there. And if you destroy that, you take that away, it would be the same as me destroying the universities or the schools here. But people don’t make that
connection, you know? It’s the same thing. It’s not that Aboriginal people see it different, just see it as an Aboriginal. It doesn’t mean it’s different.

**It must be incredibly difficult to** – in the way that you’re describing your culture and your learning, it must be incredibly difficult for the younger people – well, I guess anybody that’s now in this present society, it’s almost like you’ve got a foot in either camp. You’ve got one foot in your homeland and your spirituality, then you’ve got another foot in what we’re dealing with in Western society.

AJR: Yes.

**So it’s no wonder, I guess, that people find it so damn difficult.**

AJR: Well, it is. And it takes a long time to work out which is real out of the two (laughs) and to draw your strength from that. And I think everybody has to know who they are and where they come from, and when you start to do that you start to gain strength from that and you start to live your culture. But it is, it’s very confusing for a lot of people.

**So are you still connected with the Union Movement or have you ended your work with the BLF and the CFMEU?**

AJR: Well, I think it’s still ongoing but I’m not in a formal position. But they’ll still call me in for meetings or if there is an Aboriginal issue I’ll go and advise on that or talk about that. Or if there’s a meeting somewhere they might ring me up and see if I’m available to attend on their behalf. Yeah. And previously, also too I was an organiser for a while for the Furnishing Division of the CFMEU as well, and that was done under the Aboriginal Scheme, which was good. But the unions are open to it. But I’m not saying we’ve got to leave it all up to people in the union to know, because frankly a lot of people don’t know. There’s people within union leadership roles that don’t know what Aboriginal people are going through. It’s up to Aboriginal people to keep pushing the barrow in whatever way, in whatever form that Aboriginal people can do it, or to raise awareness or to bring attention. Disheartening at times but you’ve got to keep going. Sometimes it’s like bashing your head against a brick wall.

I guess one of the earlier questions, I asked you whether you joined a political party, my interest there was that you’ve obviously had an influence in assisting people to understand more, but I don’t see the same awareness of our leading politicians, people that actually make the decisions. I think you said earlier that the stroke of a pen could make a difference in many ways, but we’re not seeing
any real change taking place at the top level of the political level. How are we actually going to make that change?

AJR: Well, maybe when the Union Movement sends a delegation round to all the states they might want to take a few of the pollies (laughter) with them, and maybe get their hands dirty and maybe cry when they see what they see. And really feel it. And ask themselves whether the conditions of our people, whether this should be a thing of the day and age that we live in. Let them ask them, you know? Because my answer’s quite simple.

But how do we change what’s in their head to what’s really in their heart, you know what I mean, how do we move that?

AJR: We’ve got to educate, we’ve got to raise the awareness and we’ve got to change the consciousness of people. And we can only do that through educating and through getting out there in the street, to keep the attention and the awareness at a level that people are aware of it. And we’ve got to keep talking, we’ve got to keep driving home what it is. And it’s not a question of ‘you’ and ‘me’; it’s a question of ‘us’. And it’s about continually questioning authority, but not – both individually and collectively – and not just question it, but how we question it. And people have to understand the history of this country, the true history of this country, of how it was born and how it come about. Not the fancy history that we often read about, but the history of the lives and the suffering, and the suffering that continues today, intergenerational suffering. The colonisation process that continues today. The neglect and denial of human rights afforded easily to mainstream society is given a blind eye in Aboriginal communities. It’s like you say politicians, they have like the blinders on, they only see one way; they’ve got to maybe go out and sit in the earth for a while and get their hands a bit dirty and talk to people and come down to earth a bit.

One of the people I’ve interviewed, John, was Ron Owens, who is the past Secretary of the Builders’ Labourers’ Federation, and we were talking about this issue and some of his involvement – he’s not a man that pushes his own barrow in any way, but some of the things we talked about was his involvement and wanting to see an equal go for everybody. How did you see Ron Owens?

AJR: Oh, a great communicator and a man who really understood the questions. And if he didn’t understand them he went out so he could understand
them. And I’ll give you an example of that, Jim, is that when we tried to get the 
Deaths In Custody Watch Committee started here in South Australia, which was 
modelled on the Western Australian initiative, Ronnie Owens went out to meetings, 
he was in Port Augusta or over here at Aboriginal Legal Rights, he went and he sat 
in and he talked to people and he listened to what the issues were, what the people 
were talking about and what they were feeling. And Ronnie got involved and he 
said this to me, he said, ‘Look, this is something that’s got to be set up,’ he said, 
‘because it’s not Aboriginal people that are dying, there’s non-Aboriginal people, 
there’s people of all persuasions dying while they’re in custody, so we should do 
something about it.’ So Ron could always join the dots, he could always see that 
hurting me was hurting him or hurting you, he could put it together quite clearly and 
he could articulate it. Not only that, he’d get off his arse and he’d do something 
about it and he’d raise the question, and that’s what we can do at the end of the day 
is keep raising questions. Ronnie Owens is good value, good value. And then you 
have, if you don’t mind, Jimmy, you’ve got your people like Martin O’Malley, they 
understand the question. Not a question, they understand it. Benny Carslake 
understands the question. But Martin O’Malley again will get up, listen, talk and not 
only talk but act as well, and if they can’t they’ll let you know straight out. There’s 
no beating around the bush. And Benny Carslake: support, always there, never a 
problem. And there’s so many good people in the Union Movement, honest people, 
and they’re with good intentions.

**John, you’ve spent almost a lifetime as an activist, what are you doing right now?**

AJR: I’m sitting quietly in my house thinking about things, waiting for the 
gathering storm, Jim. And I still talk to young Aboriginal people, still try and help 
them out and write letters for them, and I still call into the unions and see what’s 
happening, still keep an eye on it, you know?

**There’s still fire in the belly?**

AJR: Oh, yes. Look, Jim, it’s much quieter and more controlled, but we’ve 
still got to keep asking the questions and we’ve still got to question authority. 
Individually and collectively. How we do it is where we’ve got to put our heads 
together, but we’ve got to do it regardless, we’ve got to do it together. But yes, I’m 
living a quiet life now.
John, it's been a real privilege to have the opportunity to have interviewed you for this project. I've admired, ever since I've known you and your existence in the Union Movement in South Australia, I've always admired you for your vigilance in keeping going, and thanks very much for making this contribution to the Oral History Project.

AJR: Thank you, Jim, and I hope it goes well, mate. (laughter)

The fight will always continue on — — —.

AJR: Oh, perseverance, mate, perseverance is what it takes, yeah. (laughs)

END OF INTERVIEW.