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OH 836

Full transcript of an interview with

PETER HICKS

on 27 November 2007

By Susan Mann

Recording available on CD

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

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J.D. SOMERVILLE ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION, MORTLOCK LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIANA: INTERVIEW NO. OH 836

Edited transcript of an interview with Peter Hicks recorded by Dr Susan Mann at Adelaide on 27th November 2007 for the State Library of South Australia Oral History Collection.

DISK 1

This is an interview between Peter Hicks and Susan Mann at the State Library of South Australia on 27th November 2007. Well, thank you very much, Peter, I really appreciate you being prepared and willing to be part of this project. It will make a very good adjunct to what we've done, I believe.

Thank you, Susan.

So, as I explained, I'll just ask some demographic questions to start off with.

Yes.

So can you just give me your name and when and where you were born?

Yes. I was born in 1950 in Adelaide in South Australia and given the name 'Peter Hicks'. My parents had been Queenslanders, in fact, who had come to South Australia in the mid-1940s, but I still grew up (laughs) of sound mind.

Oh, well, that's a good thing! Did you have brothers and sisters as well?

Two sisters, both a little older than myself, the first one six years older and the other three years older, so I was the baby of the family.

Yes. Was that a good position?

Yes and no. I think I probably had a little too much attention paid to me (laughter) and it may have in early life stifled my initiative a little.

Okay.

Perhaps being the only son also, which in those days often had an effect on parental attitudes, perhaps there were expectations of me that were not necessarily there of my sisters. But I am happy to say that my sisters and I mostly got on very well and have remained very close friends over the years.

That's wonderful. Are they still living in South Australia?

No, neither. Big sister moved to Canberra to live in about 1970 and not long after middle sister went to live in North America, so we've seen very little of her over the years but she does visit from time to time and from time to time some members of the family have visited her. The Canberra sister has stayed on there and we've seen a lot more of her. But it's quite a scattered family and the oldies are now both deceased.

Okay. So your grandparents were Queenslanders as well?

My father's father was a Belfast man who came in his twenties to work as a carpenter just as the Australian building industry collapsed, so he then became a tram conductor and worked in that occupation for the rest of his working life. He came to live with us when he was in his eighties for a number of years, in my youth, which was an interesting direct Irish influence. My father's mother was a Dublin-born woman who also came out to Australia early in life, earlier than Granddad. My mother's mother was a Glasgow woman who immigrated to Queensland and Mum's father, his parents were Irish but he had been born in Australia. So there's a fair whack of (laughs) Irish background there.

Yes. Oh, well, it's always very interesting, isn't it, to just think about where our original roots came from.

Yes.

Yes, where it takes us. Well, really that's the end of the demographic questions, Peter, so I'm going to move into more of your experience during the Vietnam era and, as I said, we'll just take it one step at a time and see where that interview goes. So I was asking you when we first met about – I was very interested about the political mood, as you experienced it, in the South Australian community at the time of the Vietnam War and I wondered what your thoughts were around whether that mood reflected the national political agenda at the time, and if so in what way.

I have a few thoughts there that are both political and cultural, if you like, cultural in the broader sense of people's attitudes, habits of mind. And I'll begin around about 1965 when I was fifteen years old and first began to be conscious of these issues of war and, very soon after, of conscription.

But, as you may recall yourself, in the mid-'60s Australia was just emerging from the Menzies Era. Although some may disagree, I think it's fair to say that some of the hallmarks of that era – not just due to Menzies himself but for a range of historical reasons – some of the features of that era were pretty fixed attitudes towards non-Anglo and non-white populations, including any who may immigrate to Australia; towards the respective roles of men and women; and, in this particular

connection we're talking about, attitudes toward patriotism, which was then seen as a version, I think, of service to the British Empire. And in South Australia, to bring it closer to home, we were just emerging from the Playford Era, which had some similar cultural characteristics, and Adelaide was still very much like a big, parochial country town – some say that that (laughs) is still the case, but I think it's moved a little bit.

Country communities were staid and pretty intolerant of challenges to convention and, despite considerable postwar immigration to Australia and South Australia from Europe and particularly the Mediterranean, xenophobia was pretty entrenched. So I suppose apart from say the arrival of the Beatles and some of those new, unorthodox influences, there wasn't much in the way of cosmopolitan feeling in South Australia.

Applying that to the national political agenda, with respect to foreign policy and military matters, there was still a strong dynamic I think in the populace – mind you, I wasn't thinking all these things at the time; a lot of this is retrospective parcelling-up of how things were –

No, sure.

– but in the populace I think there was quite a strong dynamic that had grown out of World Wars I and II that you didn't question your government's decision about where and when to go to war, that in fact it was noble to go off to war to serve Great Britain or our newer ally, the United States, who after all had assisted Australia in the Pacific Ocean theatres of war against Japanese imperialism. I use 'assisted' there perhaps in inverted commas because the motivation of the US has become the subject of debate in the last thirty years, too. But it was generally regarded as a noble thing to do, some would even call it a sacred duty, to obey the call of the government to go off to wherever they pointed you.

Yes. So how did that reflect your mood? Did that mood differ from your beliefs at that time?

I had grown up in a fairly conventional household. My parents until the conscription business arose had, I understand, voted Liberal and yet they were working-class or trades-level people in terms of social origin. But I think that was not uncommon at the time for people who had a white-collar element in their family to vote Liberal. So there were no influences on me from the family that particularly would take me out of the mood of the time, if you like, except that my parents were very principled people. They had a natural honesty and they expected us to – well,

they inculcated in us a similar honesty and sense of principle, and that as it turned out led me I think to start to weigh up the right and wrong of a great many situations I found myself in in life and the Vietnam War became one of those situations.

So that was me at age fifteen. But by age sixteen and certainly seventeen I was beginning to explore culturally and tentatively to explore politically. By age sixteen I was reading the Beat Generation poets from the United States – Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso and others – who were literary nonconformists and social nonconformists, and I found this an exciting window onto another world. I was also very attracted by the novelty of the music coming out of particularly Britain at the time, music groups that now in fact are often wallpaper music when you walk down the Mall: the Rolling Stones and the Kinks and later on Pink Floyd, the Cream, Vanilla Fudge and a crazy American group called Captain Beefheart. So I started to listen, as in fact my young son now is, not to the pop music so much as the musicians that were less commercial but were really exploratory in their music. I had begun writing poetry – not particularly good, perhaps – at about age fifteen, but I was starting to get published in national magazines by age seventeen. So it was not, I think, odd that I became a devotee of the early Bob Dylan – Dylan as a writer, a writer or poet; Dylan as a balladeer; and Dylan as a political messenger, if you like, you know, *The times they are a-changing* and songs like *Masters of war* and *The [lonesome] death of Hattie Carroll*, a woman who was hard done by by her local master, so to speak.

And by age seventeen in the realm of philosophy I was, in my own time reading Martin Buber, who was a European Jewish theologian and also a pacifist: a book of his called *I and thou*. This had quite a profound influence on me, not because I was a hot Christian or a hot Jew – in fact, I'd started to question Christianity and emerge from an orthodox Christian viewpoint – but Buber was talking about the human-to-human relationship and the human-to-God relationship, if you like, and he was offering a new theological paradigm for looking at non-violent interpersonal relationships. Henry Thoreau was another whom I was reading at the time, a book called *Walden*, which I think is still quite well-read. He was a nineteenth century American pantheist and pacifist.

At the same time, 1967, I began to study Philosophy and English formally at the Flinders University of South Australia, and that university had only opened the year before. It had very small student numbers, it was a very spare campus – the trees were only just (laughs) coming up – but of course there was a high staff-to-student

ratio and quite a lot of interaction between students and staff of a sort that wasn't possible at the more traditional universities. A lot of the staff were young and not burdened by hierarchical constraints and the recruitment of staff in the humanities and social sciences seemed to have been often towards people who had fresh ideas – not necessarily outlandish, but they were up-and-coming thinkers and many of them very high-quality minds. So I encountered some of these people in Philosophy and in English. Also some of the staff of those two disciplines were themselves poets so there came to be periodic readings where staff and students would read as peers, as it were, and discuss each other's work. That, as it turned out, was a bit of a precursor to a deepening relationship I had with a number of staff who came to oppose conscription and the Vietnam War. I would like to think I wasn't merely unilaterally influenced (laughs) by them, and in a moment I'll speak about the thoughts I'd already had during high school with some of my friends.

But it's fair to say, I think – to come back to your last question – that in that period between 1966 and '68 I was increasingly involved in a ferment of ideas and influences and stances that were taking me out of the conventions of my Adelaide suburban upbringing. By the time that news of the student protest movement and the Black Panthers and counterculture from the United States and France and Holland and Britain came here I was ripe, I think, for an anti-authoritarian questioning of Establishment ways.

So it sounds to me as if, if I can just sort of summarise a little, that even though you came from a very conventional household that your parents were open to you questioning and having questions and discussion around ways of doing things –

Yes.

– and then when you were at high school you were telling me that you also had a very good friend that you found that you had lots of similarities with and also a schoolteacher who was also –

Yes.

– quite influential.

Yes.

And so that combination before you moved even into the university scene was – it wasn't foreign to you to be able to start questioning and having those questions.

Yes. That's quite so. Did you want me to enlarge on any of that?

You said that you were going to talk about your high school influence. Would you like to do that now, or do you see that as – would you be okay with that?

Yes, that would suit.

Yes, I think it would be a lovely adjunct as a lead-in your university years.

Yes. Just a note about what was happening in the public or the governmental world: conscription was introduced for twenty-year-old males in 1964, so the following year the Australian Government sent its first ground troops to South Vietnam. In that year I was in fourth year high school. The Federal Labor Opposition under Calwell did in fact initially oppose conscription and the despatch of troops; that position softened a year or so later after Calwell was replaced by Whitlam as Leader of the Opposition. But that meant that there was in public life some precedent, if you like, for opposition to Australia's involvement and that perhaps helped some of us who were young to feel that it wasn't totally beyond the pale to take a similar view.

I remember by fourth year high school at age fifteen conversing with a couple of key friends about Australia's military involvement. One of those friends in particular was of a Quaker family. He and I talked about a lot of things that were more than footy and cigarettes and so on and I remember I attended, off and on over a year or so then, the Quaker meeting house at North Adelaide. I was very impressed by the Quaker approach, which is completely non-hierarchical. There are no priests or ministers of religion, everyone sits in a room and everyone just stays very quiet unless an individual feels moved to speak; so anyone can stand up and speak at any time, and that might be a short or a long reflection or testimony. And they have a very non-doctrinaire and unstructured sense of spirituality, too. So some people who call themselves Quakers may in fact also say that they are not theists, they may be agnostic; but they will believe that there is some greater spirituality that we are part of.

Anyway, my friend took me to these Quaker meetings and there I met a number of Quaker adults and other people my own age and maybe a bit older who were very openly discussing questions of war, Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, and the morality of conscription. Quakers have always been since their origin pacifists, that's one of their hallmarks. So this became part of my normality, if you like, that one could think this way. I mentioned reading Martin Buber and that strengthened my philosophical search that legitimised a pacifist position, and I continued following the Vietnam events over that 1965–66 period talking with

people about what the options were for young men who might be conscripted or who were due to register for conscription.

My parents were aware that I was becoming confirmed in a pacifist view; I don't think they held those views themselves but they were I think emotionally not hostile, they were peaceful people themselves, so they didn't resist my increasingly overt trend towards opposing conscription. Mind you, it was still four years before I was due to register so it wasn't such an urgent issue at that stage.

Sure.

But they were highly-formative years.

In fifth year high school, my English teacher was a young woman fresh from MA studies at University of Adelaide. She was a very open-minded, vital thinker and a very bright woman, and she was only too happy to talk with us out of hours about all sorts of literary matters. She knew that I was beginning to write and so was another friend, Sue, so she'd talk about these things and help us and naturally the political matters of the day were part of our conversation. I wouldn't say that she ever attempted to put views onto us or tell us what to think, quite the contrary in fact; she was another of those great influences who said, 'There is an awful lot in the world to think about; think for yourself, learn the skills'.

Yes.

And this was the great value of the philosophy training I then moved into at university, where they too were saying, 'This is how you can go about thinking systematically. These are the tools. What you do with it is up to you'.

This might be the time at which I could mention that the Quaker friend and I – must have been late in our last year at high school, 1966, or over the Christmas period at the end of high school and before we started university – we thought we needed to do something about providing a way for like-minded young men to get together and talk about conscription, and so we formed an organisation – or a discussion group, really – called rather grandly, I might say, 'South Australian Committee of Conscientious Objectors', SACCO. I've only just discovered in the archives of the State Library of South Australia a little leaflet we put out, although I'd forgotten completely about this event. It reminds me how early, if you like, I'd started to become active in objection to the war. So this little 1966 or 1967 leaflet says:

'Do you object to conscription!
Do you object to war as a method of solving international crisis?

Do you object to the Vietnam War?
Do you object to violence for moral, religious or humanitarian reasons?
If you object for any of these reasons you may not be conscripted.
For information and discussion contact – – –.'

And so on. Those discussion meetings were held at the Quakers meeting house.

Okay.

I don't have a detailed memory of those, but obviously in our minds and the minds of many young men of our age who were looking ahead to when we were twenty, a key question if you had an opposition to the War was, 'Well, what are the grounds of my opposition? Do I register for conscription and take my chances in the ballot and hope that I don't have to worry about it? Do I register as a conscientious objector if I'm balloted up, as a conscientious objector within the terms of the Act and hope that a court accepts my argument? Or do I express my opposition through total non-compliance with the *National Service Act*?' – a stance which brought then a sentence in a military brig.

Now, I've slightly lost my way at this point. Where are we, Susan?

No, that's all right. You were talking about the South Australian Committee of Conscientious Objectors –

Yes.

– that you'd formed with your Quaker friend.

Yes. I think that's as far as I was going with that.

How long did that go, how long did that group stay, you know, active?

Well, my involvement I think must have gone on for no more than a year and that may have been because my Quaker friend and I had gone to different universities and in fact lost touch fairly quickly. It may have also been because I became very absorbed in my first-year university studies. Whether someone else carried it on I don't know. I'd like to think that it was carried on but I truly have no record.

That's all right. Thank you. So now we're back up at university, you're being influenced by the philosophers and philosophy teachings that you're engaging in, plus the English lecturers as well had an impact, by the sounds of it.

Yes – some, in mainly literary ways.

Some.

Yes.

But the philosophers were the main ones, the Philosophy lecturers and the philosophers that you were reading.

In relation to developing a case about conscription and the war the philosophers were a greater influence because it was their job to explore questions of moral philosophy. Not that they were discussing the Vietnam War within official Philosophy seminars or lectures, but if you have a section of Philosophy called 'Moral Philosophy' then it doesn't take much time dealing with some of the historical issues in Moral Philosophy to know that you've got to exercise some of these tools in the life that you're in and not just in pretend scenarios or by reviewing the historical ways that moral issues had been dealt with in the sixteenth, seventeenth or eighteenth century –

Sure.

– which was the period of some of the moral philosophers that we read. But perhaps I could mention the sort of activity that I began to be involved with at university, would that be a good move?

Yes, yes, I think that's a – yes.

As I said, I was a pretty diligent student in my first year at university, which was 1967. I did attend some anti-war meetings, since at that stage the Campaign for Peace in Vietnam had begun in South Australia. It was a relatively small outfit then and there were some academics, unionists and church people on that, and other publicly-interested, publicly-spirited people. They were holding discussion meetings and the occasional vigil, for example, but there were no substantial demonstrations possible at that time because public opposition to the war was still fragmented, or had not yet been organised, and it wasn't a popular stance to take. But by early 1968 things were accelerating quite quickly. In between January and June '68 there was the Tet Offensive in Vietnam which received a great deal of press coverage here. Australian casualties in Vietnam, although never huge – well, one really is too many – were starting to mount up. That had quite an effect, I think, on the popular psyche about the war, that, 'Oh! This is going to cost us', and people perhaps who had lost members of their families in World War II were again thinking, 'Oh, crikey, where is this getting us?' Also the fact that the Vietnamese were not going to fall over and be beaten in a hurry even by the greatest military power in the world was starting to turn the whole thing into what was looking like a protracted and messy struggle.

The ALP Opposition and now Whitlam softened their opposition but were still calling on the United States to try and find a negotiated settlement and also to stop bombing Vietnam, which they had been doing with great vigour. So again there was that little thread of legitimacy still to opposing the war.

Public debate was increasing, the organisation of small rallies by the Campaign for Peace in Vietnam and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and another women's group called 'Save Our Sons', they were becoming regular, and participant numbers during 1968 in Adelaide started to move into the hundreds per rally rather than the previous dozens.

Okay.

Also it was in 1968 that the *National Service Act* was amended to impose two-year civil jail terms on males who did not register or who became defaulters; but those amendments also increased the powers of the government to trace defaulters. It obliged anyone who was asked by Australian Federal Police to inform them about someone who was liable for conscription to do so.

I see.

That is, it made it an offence to refuse to give that information. Ministers of religion and parents of such men were exempted; they must have expected family ruckus if they had placed the obligation on parents, and I'm very glad they didn't because my own parents later became a marvellous cushion between myself and the Australian Federal Police.

In October 1968 John Zarb, who was a Melbourne postman if I recollect, was the first person to be convicted of failing to comply with his call-up notice and he was sentenced to two years' jail. He had registered but had then, upon being called up, refused to go. So he was the first one who ended up in jail under the Act.

And were there protests as a result of that?

Yes.

Yes, there were?

It focused opposition to conscription quite strongly in particularly Melbourne but also in, as I recall, Sydney, Brisbane, to a lesser extent in Adelaide, but there were 'Free Zarb' rallies and 'Free Zarb' became one of several mottoes of demonstrations for quite a long time thereafter.

Because there were several other quite well-publicised at the time, I think, was Bill White and Simon Townsend –

Yes.

– you know, there seemed to be a lot of momentum build as those people were also jailed or taken away.

Yes, yes.

And the main – am I hearing you correctly, Peter, was that the main protest movement grew out of Sydney and Melbourne, or Melbourne and then Sydney?

I couldn't say Melbourne then Sydney, or Sydney then Melbourne, because I didn't know the details of things there. But probably Melbourne because Melbourne has a long, active labour – labour in the small 'L' sense – history and a big history of activism and networks of activism that rise up depending on issues of the day and then fall back and then rise up again. But certainly organisation in Sydney seemed quite strong to us here in Adelaide and there weren't such traditions in Adelaide of public protest except perhaps during the Depression.

Okay.

So in Adelaide the apparatus of public protest had to be assembled from scratch, I think, in a way that wasn't the case for Melbourne.

So how did you do that?

Well, I can't lay claim to having done much myself, (laughter) by myself. But some of the organisations I've mentioned, those little outfits – the Save Our Sons, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the Communist Party of Australia had a little toehold in there, and a number of trade unions – the seamen's union,[1] the wharfies' union,[2] which were separate unions then before they amalgamated much later,[3] and some of the other unions that had a social critique role or consciousness – they were initially doing separate things, and there were some campus-based actions; but it was really the Campaign for Peace in Vietnam who attempted to draw those threads together. That was made up of both constituent organisations and individuals. It had an ultimately huge membership list. But in '66, '67, '68 that was the main organising instrument, if you like, that

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[1] Seamen's Union of Australia.

[2] Waterside Workers' Federation.

[3] The result of the amalgamation was the Maritime Union of Australia.

developed as a coalition of entities and persons opposing conscription and Australia's part in the war.

And you became a member of that?

Yes. Yes, I became a member as an individual, and at least one of the campus groups that I was involved with was an organisational member.

Okay.

Perhaps I'll move to my own involvement a little more, shall I, in 1968?

Yes, that's good.

I began attending to my studies less and attending anti-war gatherings and demonstrations more. This was happening to quite a few of my friends as well. A number of my friends were Drama students or musicians or writers, so they too were getting caught up in these counterculture notions that were coming from overseas. The notions weren't inappropriate to Australia; they never would have sort of taken root in us had the conditions in Australia not been conducive as well. As I mentioned, a number of the staff at Flinders University were involving themselves more and more in demonstrations and it was not uncommon that we'd hitch a ride with them from the campus down to Adelaide, to Victoria Square or Elder Park or University of Adelaide grounds or wherever the gathering was going.

I suppose, to strike a personal note here, I was only eighteen and I was still a reasonably confused young man in all this flurry. I mean, there was a great excitement, but I also had to emotionally keep coming to grips with what was going on. It was a changing world; the challenge of military service or not was looming as quite a challenge; how far to involve myself in these movements, whilst I was tremendously enthusiastic about my studies but not applying myself: so, all sorts of concerns. And I was still living at home with my parents. So like any kid of that age there were things to sort out.

The student counsellor at Flinders University – a chap whose first name was Ian, I can't remember his last name – was an Englishman who must have been in his early forties. As it turned out, as I began talking about this business of conscientious objection and blah-blah-blah and 'What shall I do?' he said, 'Well, I was a conscientious objector in Britain in the Second World War'. He had been imprisoned himself for about the first year and a half of the War, or the first year and a half once he reached military age, but then had reassessed his analysis of the War and decided that because it was an anti-fascist war he should become involved;

and he then became a pilot in the Air Force. He was a tremendous support to me. A lot of our time together was just silence, but I always knew that he was there to discuss anything I might raise about those issues or anything else. He probably will never know how much help he was to me. In a sense he helped me to feel all right about being confused, but he also was another little influence that legitimised what ultimately became an activist stance against conscription.

In those days, as the rallies and marches increased, the rallies very often met at the steps of Parliament House, that was a favourite spot, or went to the offices of federal politicians, Cabinet members, of whom there were two or three in Adelaide then, and the offices of companies such as Honeywell who made napalm and other munitions that were aimed at civilians. But because the rallies were still relatively small we were also very – this harks back to your question earlier about the mood of the time – we were still very vulnerable to attacks by people who supported Australia's participation. So it was very common that an irate individual or sometimes little groups of three or four people whom one would have to call 'thugs' would take us on, and some of these people wore the swastika. By no means the majority of such attacks occurred from these people but we did notice that you would get a small group of people wearing the swastika, sometimes carrying sticks or baseball bats, who would try to get stuck into us. We learnt something about the role of the state and the role of the police, because it was normal at that time for the police to look away, to ignore attacks on us. So we came to see that the police, if you like, didn't play a neutral role or at least that they felt they had a fair bit of discretion when it came to matters of what would normally be regarded as breaching of the law by ruffians.

So why do you think that was?

It was still an unpopular stance that we were expressing. I think it's probably fair to say that members of police services around the world – or at least the world that we knew, the Western world – tend to be relatively conservative thinkers or not adventurous thinkers, and if you think of the quasi-military structure of the police, and the fact that a lot of young working-class men went into the police in those days – working-class men who would have thought that serving your government or taking orders was the right thing to do – it just would have been foreign to their way of thought that people would say, 'No, we don't agree with our government's position and we're going to come out here and do something about it'. But also a lot of us young men were now starting to look a bit funny, you know? Young men with

whiskers and long hair that was creeping down – and in my case down to the shoulders by then – so we were also – to use the insult (laughs) common at the time – we were a 'bunch of poofters', so that was another good reason for getting stuck into us or not minding if someone else belted us.

That changed, of course, by the time two years later of the big moratoriums. I don't know whether the attitudes of those individual police changed but their behaviour couldn't remain the same – although some of the organised police moves on moratorium marches were quite hairy, and I'll mention some of those in a while.

Okay.

In late '68 there was a particular protest action where probably a hundred and fifty people converged on the Department of Labour and National Service offices in Adelaide and sat in their foyer, which made it very difficult for people to get in and out for lunch or any other sort of business. We stayed there and stayed there and stayed there and stayed there, so it was an indefinite sit-in. Around eight o'clock at night the police decided that they would arrest us. A lot of people departed at that point, but it left about fifty people. And I remember a very kindly old sergeant, he much have been in his mid- or late fifties then – he had to do the same thing for every individual: he had to come up and say, 'You are illegally on Commonwealth premises. We are ordering you to leave. Will you leave?' You'd say no and you'd say why, and he'd say, 'Well, we are going to have to arrest you, this is your last warning'. And then you'd go all floppy so it took probably three police them to pick each person up. And they had to do this with fifty-odd individuals, which took a long time and took a lot of police. But it was an early example of how protests started to move towards making things unworkable. That was the object ultimately of the moratoriums, to 'stop the country, to stop the war'. That was the first time I'd ever been arrested, ended up in the city watch house overnight and we had a lively time because we sang anti-war songs during the night and rattled the cell doors and tried to keep our spirits high till morning. I also remember that we were represented, all fifty-something of us, by Elliott Johnson, who was then a member of the Communist Party of Australia and a very fine lawyer – Elliott later became a QC, a Queen's Counsel – and we were all fined, but only a modest amount. That was my first, if you like, serious step into committed (laughs) protest; but not, as it turned out, my last arrest for protests. But I'll stop there; I fear I might be going into too much detail for your present purposes.

There is the event in July 1969 of the 'burning the dog hoax', which I would refer to at some point –

All right.

– and then maybe I could talk a bit about the street theatre activity that I moved into.

Yes, I think both of those would be extremely interesting.

Am I being too detailed, however?

No, no, it's going fine thank you, Peter. No, it's fine. I think I might move you along a little bit –

Yes.

– but this is also, I think this is very interesting and your recall and the fact that you've thought about it and written some notes I think has been really helpful. So that's all fine. So you became, as you say, as you described yourself, a serious protester.

(laughs) Yes.

You were sort of moving into this and during this time your university studies dropped off a little bit?

Oh, they did.

Yes.

That's one of the great misfortunes about this trajectory. I was not applying myself as well as I should and in fact by late 1969 it was obvious to me that I wasn't putting enough work into my studies to do it justice and that I might as well go and get myself a job to make some money.

Okay.

At that stage I was in third year of what was going to be a four-year honours degree in philosophy, but I withdrew – but did return to studies later on, in the '70s.

Okay.

So at least I was honest enough – or maybe the academics were honest enough to say to me, 'Look, mate, you're not quite putting it in, why don't you do something else for a while?' I can't remember which of us made that decision.

Okay, so you left university for a period, anyway, and you got a job –

Yes.

– but kept very involved with the protest movement.

Yes. That of course was late '69. I might stick with 1969 for a moment –

Sure. Yes, certainly.

– as a follow-on to, if you like, that acceleration of protest that was occurring during 1968 and the increase in the proportion of Australians who were now thinking twice about the war. In relation to something you asked earlier about how protest became organised I'll just mention that an entity was formed in the eastern states during 1969 called the 'Draft Resisters' Union'. Sydney and Melbourne remained the main organising engines of that but there were people moving back and forth between Adelaide and those places who kept us in touch with what was going on. That union began to do some quite public stunts including showing people whom the Australian Federal Police were seeking for not registering for conscription, showing them publicly, holding public meetings with the media present, but having it organised so that as soon as the police came anywhere near the person would get secreted away. But the media would already have a story. It was like the old game of 'chicken': standing in front of a speeding car and moving at the last minute.

So the Draft Resisters' Union became, as the Campaign for Peace in Vietnam and similar outfits in other states had become, a coalition that focused protest. The Draft Resisters' Union highlighted specifically the fact that a lot of young men were saying, 'No, I'm not going'. Young men were either doing this by going into the ballot, then conscientiously objecting within the terms of the Act if they were balloted in, and refusing to go if the court didn't agree with their objection; or they were refusing to register at all, which brought the immediate two-year imprisonment if you were caught. So that Draft Resisters' Union became active also in organising hiding places for those who were on the run. I think it was probably loosely organised in national terms, but in terms of any given capital city or provincial city quite tightly-organised among a small number of people. There were people moving around in hiding from one capital to the next over a number of years and some even going to the West, where to go to the West in those days you were virtually going overseas, you know, (laughs) you were disappearing from the known face of the earth. So once again that was deepening the unlawful side of protest, if you like.

Just excuse me, we're just going to have to change the tape, okay?

Yes.

END OF DISK 1: DISK 2

Okay, this is the second tape of the interview with Peter Hicks and Susan Mann at the State Library of South Australia on 27th November 2007. Thank you, Peter. So you were just moving through what was happening for you in 1969 and telling me that – '69 or '68, I'm sorry – and you were saying that the protest movement was gaining in momentum –

Yes.

– and that the union that had been formed to assist keeping men who had decided not to register or who had registered and wanted to be conscientious objectors was becoming quite active.

Yes. I'll just add onto that particular point about people being in hiding. A number of young men in that position eventually needed really to get out of Australia if they were to avoid two years' imprisonment. And I can recall one of my close friends at the time, a chap who'd been living in Adelaide, who was on the threshold of being caught. He went off to Melbourne and left the country on a merchant vessel, and that was a story that was repeated over and over again. Probably some dozens of young men were assisted out through one means or another and most of those involved boats (laughs) since that's the only way you could secretly get overseas. So again that shows I think something of the quality of organisation that rose to the occasion when required. It also shows the commitment of some of the maritime union people who facilitated those exits, about which one probably should say not much more.

So you were going to also talk about the incident about the dog that you were involved with at university.

Oh, yes, that's right, that's right.

Yes.

My friend Phil said to me in mid-1969, 'What about this? What say that we announce that we're going to burn a dog with the same petrol and something-or-other mixture that napalm is essentially made from and that we're going to burn it publicly to show people what napalm does to a human being or any animal?' So we thought about this and worked out roughly how we would approach it and then let the media know. I can't remember just how we let the media know. But I was on Flinders University campus one afternoon and along came two journalists from the afternoon tabloid, *The News* – well, a photographer and a journalist – and they said, 'We're looking for Peter Hicks or Phil So-and-so'. And the other chap – who really, as I say, was the prime mover in this action – was hidden somewhere in the

university at a lecture so I thought, 'Well, I've got to do something to take advantage of the moment. I can't say to them, "Well, do you want to hang around till he comes out of the lecture?"' So I said to them, 'Ah, yes, I'm Peter'. 'Oh, we believe you're going to burn a dog to show – – –.' 'Yes, that's right.' 'Well, would you like to take us to where the dog is? We'd like to take a photo of you and the dog.' (laughter) We had in fact arranged with someone that his dog would be part of this exercise, although it was never our intention to incinerate this beast but simply to set it all up as though that were going to happen. And ironically – it only struck me, the irony, when I was looking back over an old photograph from *The News*, the dog was called 'Plato', which (laughter) had a nice consonance really with the business of moral philosophy and worldview. So I went off to where I knew Plato lived. Fortunately, there he was wagging his little border collie tail, a beautiful black-and-white, sheepdog-style border collie, and I still have a photocopy of what became the photograph and front-page banner headline of *The News* that afternoon. 'Student to burn dog as protest' ran the headline:

> Wide public reaction. A dog would be burnt to death with napalm in an anti-war demonstration at Flinders University tomorrow, a student said today.

And on it went. I was quoted as saying:

> 'People are quite horrified by the thought of napalm being used on a dog but are prepared to condone the burning of humans in Vietnam', Mr Hicks said.

And they must have already tested the reaction of a few people, because the article went on:

> The threat to burn the dog brought strongly-worded protest this afternoon from police and animal lovers.

I can recall that after this headline I received literally hundreds of telegrams at the university saying, 'Please do not do this. We love animals. You have made your point', and so on. But I also received among (laughs) these a great many death threats – literally, a couple of dozen death threats: 'You are gone. You have had it. We will find you', this sort of thing. So over the next few days that was my first need to adopt a disguise. (laughter) I was very careful about where I showed my face for a little while because I was quite clearly shown in the front-page photograph of *The News*.

But even in the last decade, in the 1980s and '90s, I've had people who've met me say, 'I know from So-and-so that you were behind that dog thing. Gee, that was a wonderful piece of street theatre because it really showed the double standards of

those who supported the war'. And that seems to show the moral impact that it had. It showed that a huge number of people could get disturbed and upset about a dog being burnt, but they wouldn't lift a finger even though they knew from the news day by day that people were being napalmed. This stunt helped to bring that message home.

That perhaps introduces the issue of street theatre –

Yes.

– which I became more and more heavily involved with. Some of my friends were Drama students and musicians and, as a young writer myself, I was quite drawn to the idea of making portable theatre, theatre that could accompany demonstrations or come into a rally situation and take off again. To add colour and sound, for one thing, to rallies and marches which are otherwise relatively boring, really. (laughter) And street theatre served, I suppose, two or three roles. Street theatre can be a focus of attention for people who are simply just marching or sitting, waiting for police to move in. It can also, if you do some reasonable scripting, be a way of airing an analysis – in this case, of the war and Australia's role. It can also be a morale-boosting action, it's a colourful and cheerful action that can keep up people's spirits.

The scripts and characters we used were pretty simplistic. We'd have usually a US general or an Uncle Sam figure; a Gorton or a Holt or a McMahon, whoever was the Prime Minister of the day; we'd often use a character who was the misinformed Australian citizen caught in a dilemma about 'How do I think about these issues?'; we might have a Ho Chi Minh representing the Vietnamese struggle or a Vietnamese peasant, a Viet Cong type figure; or merely a Vietnamese peasant figure as the sort of Everyman, Everywoman, in Vietnam whose life was being totally dislocated; and sometimes we used a figure that was the gullible Australian citizen, the Australian citizen who would mouth what the government or some of the more conservative newspapers said, but we'd script it in such a way that that person would get caught up in logical contradictions by someone who kept asking them, 'Well, what about, what about, what about, and doesn't that mean – – –?' The scripts had to be straightforward in the sense that the language couldn't be too complex, you couldn't have too much dialogue at once, you had to intersperse patches of dialogue with song or sound effects, and the characters had to be visually striking – large, *papier mâché* heads, for example, or on stilts to get them up high, and wearing very strong colours. The script performance had to be very loud and clear. The objective, apart

from other roles of street theatre that I've mentioned, our objective in scripting or creating a piece was to set out the counterposed arguments, if you like: to set out the government view and the other views that oppose it and to show that the government's position was based on falsehood and/or on servility to the United States.

So by the time that the second moratorium came around in September 1970 we'd had such good responses to street theatre that we were asked to do quite a centrepiece in Victoria Square prior to the march taking off. Some of us thought, 'Oh, look, we'll be a bit avant garde here. We won't do the same old street theatre stuff'. So we had about twelve performers instead of the usual four or five, so we weren't all that portable. I can't remember the details of the script but I think there was a lot more visual and a lot less dialogue. It was meant to end up with the burning of a giant effigy of Uncle Sam, about a four or five-metre-high effigy, and this could only be started off by dousing it in petrol. So someone sort of did that while people's attention was on another part of the play and then someone else went in and put in the match and nearly lost her hair while she did it. (laughter) And then this massive conflagration, far greater than we expected, carried on, and an adjacent lamppost made of a light metal buckled and eventually drooped into the fire and the whole thing melted. I might have a laugh about that now and at the time I probably thought it was quite spectacular, but in retrospect it was – though unintended – destruction of public property; and that for me, looking back, is a bit of a measure of the bravado with which we did a lot of things. I mean, if we had thought about all the consequences of our actions we wouldn't have done a lot of the things we did. On the other hand you might say, well, without that youthful enthusiasm and that sense of no risk the protest movement may not have been as rich and ultimately successful as it was.

We did street theatre wherever there were gatherings – Victoria Square, Elder Park, Rymill Park – or if there was a march we'd often have street theatre moving along at the front of the march with a couple of musos using portable instruments. But quite often we were invited to perform at indoor meetings or some cafés and live music venues where the owners or the people who ran them were sympathetic to the cause. One event that stands out for me as memorable, as a part of the general protest movement, was the first moratorium in early 1970. It brought the biggest crowd that had ever assembled in Adelaide – ten thousand people was a conservative estimate – and it had been arranged that we would do street theatre.

Well, the entire intersection of King William Street and North Terrace was occupied by these ten thousand people. It was packed in all directions.

Okay.

It was just one big mass of people and they all sat down, plonk. 'Stop the country to stop the war' was the motto. So traffic couldn't go anywhere, there were hundreds of police around but they couldn't get in. The main speakers were of course in the middle and this is where we had our street theatre. I had never – never then and never since – experienced such a tremendous electricity as in that event, performing in such a massive crowd. Only the front rows of people really could have heard what went on, but everyone was aware that we were a massive force of people, that we were for the first time actually shutting Adelaide down. The sense of solidarity was fantastic.

We also knew that sooner or later the police would move in. It must have been probably two or three hours before they did, but this is the other reason why that day is memorable for me. The mounted police were used and, with the help of motorbike coppers who would force a wedge in from the outside of the crowd, they finally got into the crowd some way and then they would start riding their horses into people and belting them with batons. And, as you can imagine, horses being as large and as clumsy as they are, it became very dangerous. If you weren't whacked by a baton you could go under the hooves, and I can remember a pregnant woman who was near me tripping and going under the hooves of a horse, screaming. I don't know what happened to her, I didn't know her, but that was for me a horrifying sight. And it was the first time I'd seen at close quarters the deliberate bashing of people with batons. There were bloody heads all over the place.

Looking back on it, considering the questions of public order, what the then Dunstan Government intended I don't know. One could debate those issues; but it just seemed to me not a very helpful way of going about things to have wedges of mounted police very vigorously attacking people in that way. We had many stories from Sydney, of course, where the police were even more vigorous in many a demonstration with their shields and their even longer batons. (laughs)

Oh, dear.

And that takes me in fact to another memory. I went to Canberra in, I think, 1970 to a National Union of Students' anti-war rally there. This rally was probably only two or three thousand people strong going from the university to somewhere. The Australian Federal Police, which has never been a big force in numbers in Canberra,

brought in New South Wales riot police and they had the big shields, they had helmets, and they were out for a bit of practice. And that's probably the other, the second most alarming brute violence I've seen. Even after they'd broken up this demonstration, which they did very effectively through attacking them, they then pursued individuals and duos and trios with the intention of belting them. A group I was fleeing with ended up in some tennis courts, and some of these New South Wales police deliberately steered people into a corner of the tennis court and then just bang, bang, bang, all over the body, belted them senseless. And I could only think at the time that this was their way of practising their civilian control techniques.

Dear, oh dear.

But it was pretty nasty.

Yes, very frightening too, I would imagine.

Yes.

What happened, what would the protesters have done had the police not moved in? Did you have a plan? You know, so you were sitting down. Was there a plan or was it just to sort of stay there for as long as you could?

Well, speaking generally about demonstrations, the intention in some cases was to occupy the area, say in the vicinity of a parliamentarian's office or the office of the Department of Labour and National Service which administered the conscription machine. At other times it might be just to rally, hear speakers – well, to march, to gather, to hear speakers and then to go away. But the more things moved into the moratorium period, the more the intention of rallies and so on was to disrupt the normal workings of a place, and this of course was at loggerheads with public order laws. So I just say that as an objective fact about the sort of contradictions involved.

Also the moratorium movement contained a huge range of groups in terms of philosophical and political viewpoints. This was a particular feature of the moratoriums, I think, that it was an absolute organisational feat to keep some sort of tactical coherence when you had such a range of views with such a range of ideas. For example, was it a good action if you provoked the police into violence that the media would see, or was a good action one that was entirely peaceful? You had those two ends of the spectrum and everything in between. You had conservative Christian groups and individuals, pacifist groups, student Labor organisations, trade unionists; there was a range of socialist groups that would take part – Trotskyite

groups of which there were two or three, Communist Party of Australia, Communist Party of Australian Marxist–Leninist who were the China-oriented group; SDS, Students for a Democratic Society; SDA, Students for Democratic Action; and some of these people were pretty odious in their attitude to the police.

And in fact something only in recent years that struck me, brought back a memory and made me think. In my present work a few years ago a new colleague came who had been a sergeant of police in those times in Adelaide and later went on to be an inspector. He didn't know about my protest history, but we were talking about his background. He'd been brought up in Mile End as a working-class man – his dad was a street cleaner, I think, with a horse – and he'd been a Labor voter until this time, around 1970. He said, 'I was so upset when some of these people purporting to be Labor voters and spokespeople, some of these academics from the university, some of these lefties, were calling the police "pigs" and insulting us'. He said, 'I was so upset by that,' – and he's a sensitive man, obviously – he said, 'I began to vote Liberal and always have since then'.

Okay.

But I just thought to myself – because in 1970 I was no angel in that respect, you know, I picked up on this cocky stance about we were right and they were wrong and the police were just the servants of the state and blah-blah-blah – I'd ceased to think of the police as human beings. You can't afford to stop thinking about anyone as a human being, otherwise you're off on another tangent. So I have to say that police, I think, were often goaded, not necessarily by people saying, 'Come on, take us on', but by people just being disrespectful. A far better tactic would always have been to be inclusive and to say, 'Our friends, our fellow workers, the police are in a difficult situation. We understand the position you're in and we're going to continue to protest, but we realise you have a duty to do'. Even if they still belted you over the head, it's a much better attitude. But I didn't have that attitude then, I only have it now. (laughs)

But I'll just, if I can, refer to one other incident that stands out in my mind, and I hasten to say that I was not a member of this small group, otherwise the police might be knocking on my door next week. But again somewhere in 1970 there was a group of four or five young men and women who had hoods or masks on and they burst into the offices of the Department of Labour and National Service in Adelaide. They pulled open filing cabinets containing conscription records and poured ox blood over the filing cabinet drawers. It must have been quite an effort to have

actually got in there with buckets and containers full of ox blood, so no-one was expecting them, obviously. It would have to have been based on inside information about where everything was so that they could move in very efficiently. But they got out again before the police came and as far as I know none of them were ever charged. That received quite a bit of press coverage, and it was such a tremendous symbolic action – again, blood, like the dog and the napalm, the blood of animals, the blood of people – and it also of course made a lot of those records unreadable, it did help to mess up their administrative machinery.

Also, whereas the Campaign for Peace in Vietnam in South Australia had been very much a peace-based, pacifist-based, church, Christian values sort of approach, the moratorium movement with its inclusion of some of the more radical elements developed a centre of gravity that was much more towards a systematic anti-imperialist analysis. I think it's fair to say that the view grew – I don't know through what proportion of the overall Australia population – but the view grew stronger that Vietnam wasn't just a mistake, it was part of a series of problems that were going to surface in one way or another or had already surfaced in the way that modern imperialism conducted itself, in particular United States imperialism. A good deal of the fuel for that came from an analysis of capitalism that was based in Marx; but the anti-imperialist view was also held by people who didn't come from a Marxist basis at all but who could see that the United States's activities in South America, for example, from the '50s onwards had involved a lot of manipulation of popular sentiments, had involved installing puppet governments through coups and so on. I suppose my main point there is that by 1970 a lot of the speeches and viewpoints proposed that there was a greater underlying phenomenon that we had to analyse and be careful of, and Vietnam was one expression of it.

Okay. So what did it mean for you to be part of all of this, these activities, Peter?

What did it mean for me? I suppose I thought I was involved first and foremost in a moral battle, if you like: that I was part of what had initially been a small and unpopular, but later large and more popular, campaign to right a wrong. And secondly, being young and wholly caught up these activities, I also felt increasingly, from 1968–71, that I was an active agent in a social transformation that would not only bring about the end of Australia's participation in the war but would reshape the materialistic rat-race. There was quite a sense, among some of us, particularly through the counterculture movement and being a bit carried away with the student revolutions in France and so on, there was this great sense of being, 'Oh! Perhaps

we're part of a worldwide movement that will keep going and transform our societies dramatically'. And at that time that seemed like a good thing, but I'll say some retrospective things about that later. And thirdly, identifying as I did with those youth and student movements in Britain and Europe and the United States – and, for example, with the New Song movement in Chile which Victor Jara, the musician, was a strong part of prior to the election of the Allende Government – identifying with those things, I felt really excited intellectually and I felt artistically buoyed up, that here in little old Australia we were taking part in the sort of cultural renovation that the Beat Generation had been involved in and that all sorts of other new artistic activities were taking forward. I didn't realise at the time how much of a role new artistic technology was playing in all this.

Okay, so meaning new artistic technology like – – –.

Recording technology.

Oh, okay.

Mass marketing. You know, how did Australians get so excited about The Beatles, for example? How did events in the United States that were unorthodox but very newsworthy come to us so quickly and capture our imaginations? In some respects it reminds me of, say, the arrival of jazz in Australia. I've spoken to musos who were in their twenties during the Second World War period who say, 'I can remember hearing my first jazz record when one of the Yankee troops brought it over', or, 'I can remember hearing the crackling of my first jazz song on the crystal set', you know, that sort of thing. I suppose it was a bit like that for us; but the technology was getting much more comprehensive in terms of mass distribution of ideas and the systematic packaging of ideas. I think it's, in retrospect, no accident that one of the leaders of the so-called Yippie movement in the United States, which was a fascinating and vibrant blend of the zany and the strongly political, one of the leaders was Jerry Rubin, who was the son of a merchant banking family, and twenty years later he was to be found quite high up in merchant banking circles himself! (laughter) But during his Yippie days he was involved in many symbolic actions, including throwing lots of paper money – *real* paper money – from an upper-storey building in New York to show how people would scramble and fight each other for these little bits of paper when they got to ground.

Gosh.

So, yeah. But *then*, I was very artistically (laughs) buoyed up by this, by all these new things that we thought we were part of. We felt that we were part of an international set of changes and one that wasn't constrained by national chauvinism.

I might mention also that around late 1969, partly influenced by this anti-imperialist thinking that was entering the moratorium movement and partly because of the logic of my own development, I began to see the importance of a class-based view of societies and nations. I began to appreciate the notion of working-class internationalism, which is always in tension with orthodox nationalism, and this started to add some political complexity to my straightforward pacifist views. About the same time I read something which absolutely blew me apart politically, a book called *The wretched of the earth* by Frantz Fanon. Fanon was a black Algerian doctor, psychiatrist in fact, who had been in the very bloody Algerian fight for independence from French colonialism. He had worked as a doctor with psychiatric victims of colonialism but also he worked with people who were injured in the physical struggle. But along with that he was a very strong supporter of the violent revolution for independence. I don't know quite how he squared that. But at the time the key message I took from him for my situation was that it was all too jolly comfortable for Peter here in Adelaide to have a pacifist position, and was I going to tell black Algerians that they should be pacifists too? So it blew apart the sort of prescriptive universalism of the view I had that yes, we should all be pacifists. It turned my opposition to the Vietnam War to opposition not based on pacifist grounds but grounds to do with the particular origins of that war, and also anti-imperialist grounds: that our government was on the wrong international side and that I would rather be with other international forces that helped to disassemble imperialism in general. So I ceased to be a pacifist. Only in recent years have I arrived again at a – rather different – commitment to non-violence.

So it had very big impact, challenged your thinking at the time well and truly.

Yes.

Okay.

But your last question was 'What did it mean to you to be part of these activities?' What I said before summarises what it meant to me personally – the moral battle side of it, the social transformation side of it and being caught up in a brand new

international movement for change, that kind of sense. Does that answer that to some extent?

Yes, it does. Thank you very much, Peter, it does. So just keeping in that very personal vein, so as a student of philosophy, albeit being challenged on all sorts of levels by the sounds of it, what was the personal impact on you of being required to register for military service to go to Vietnam?

I assume that question is about how anyone carrying out a course of study would be affected by events, by those requirements?

Well, I was actually really wanting to have what it was like for you on a personal level because if I'm understanding what you've discussed so far you actually didn't register for national service.

That's right.

That's right. So in doing that, that puts you in jeopardy, if you had been caught, of going to gaol for two years.

That's right, yes.

Yes. So for you being required to register and making that decision of not to, what were the biggest challenges you faced, once that time arose?

Yes. You're right. Had I registered and been called up I could have applied for deferral of military service till the end of my course. And I say 'applied' because you still had to go through an assessment process, you know, that you were diligent in your studies and all that sort of thing. But because I didn't register, which by law I should have done in the first half of 1970, the practical personal issue became: when will I be charged and jailed, and should I avoid that or should I seek to be arrested in a very public way so that it becomes more media coverage of someone going to prison?

The situation also made me apply some of the philosophical tools that I had been accumulating as a student of philosophy. I mentioned earlier that it's possible to go through a philosophy course and think that it's all about what people have thought in the past and it's all in its own little box and you live the rest of your life not really thinking about it. But it made me realise that philosophy, if you're serious about it, is something that is thoroughly entwined with your life, it's a way of approaching life, if you like. I spoke earlier of my parents having been honest and peaceful people and I suppose there are a number of inherited characteristics or attitudes there which, together with the philosophical tools, made me think that one always has to look carefully at what you're being expected to do or what you're choosing to

do and consider the consequences in moral terms; and that you're abdicating responsibility if you aren't that careful.

As it happened, by 1970, as I mentioned somewhat earlier, I had realised that my studies (laughs) weren't going all that brilliantly and I had thought, 'Well, I'd better go and get a job'. So in 1970 or late '69 I gained a job as a teacher at a school which I shall not mention. I found that there there was a personal consequence to holding the views I did because most of the rest of the staff, which was almost entirely men, were either passively or actively in favour of Australia's participation. My role in the 'burning the dog' business was noticed quite early in the piece by some of them, and also I took to wearing a moratorium badge on my coat; this led to all sorts of unpleasant (laughs) behaviour, I thought. Quite a few of them just wouldn't talk with me at all, but fortunately I had a very good relationship with a lot of the kids.

But, to cut a long story short, I was eventually removed from the school on what seemed to have been a bit of a trumped-up case where I was told there'd been a parental complaint about my style of teaching. There was no evidence provided to me but I was quickly sort of hustled out on suspension from the school. I'd only been there for a term. Some scores of students turned on a demonstration of their own in the schoolyard when they heard about this. They all went out and camped on the oval and had to be convinced to go back into classes. So that was a bit exciting. But I was later brought before the Minister of Education, who personally apologised to me for the way in which I'd treated and he told me that it had been a bit of a set-up because of my political stance. So really, no matter where one went, if you declared your position you were likely to suffer some isolation or more or less vigorous retribution.

So how did that make you feel? I mean, what was the impact on you of that school incident?

I felt confident enough in the stance that I had taken to be able to weather it, in the sense that I don't recall ever thinking, 'Oh, crikey, perhaps I should stop holding these views'. But it did distress me to see victimisation taking place, especially on the basis of a refusal to discuss an issue on its own terms. If people had been prepared to talk about the issues and say, 'Well, this, this and this and I can't agree with you on that', that's fine. But if you walk into a wall of what's essentially a prejudicial position and you're treated like a pariah because of it, obviously one has a personal emotional reaction. I couldn't see why people would cling so strongly to what was essentially a thoughtless position, a position that they hadn't considered and weren't prepared to consider, in the sense of analysing it.

So what about the kids' reaction?

I was pleased to know that they'd liked me (laughs) well enough to respond. More importantly, we were in moratorium days and these kids, whether they were interested in the issues or not, were aware of public upheavals, they were aware that marches and demonstrations were a way of doing things, so they too were starting to get caught up in the dynamics of the time and the excitement of these events. (laughs) So I suppose they were testing their wings, in a way.

So it sort of leads into, although we've covered a lot of it, about – you know, I would like to ask you to paint me a picture of what it meant to be a conscientious objector at that time, but in a sense you've done that to a very large degree already; but can you summarise that for me, what that was actually like?

Of what it meant to be an objector?

Yes, a conscientious objector at that time. You know, you've talked about that the political mood was very much one of conservatism and doing what the government tells you to do and you've described it in some way that people who didn't agree with your point of view or understand it or whatever, for whatever reason of their own, was perhaps a consequence of thoughtlessness – not necessarily being thoughtless but not thinking through an argument – I think that's what you mean.

Mm.

So yeah, can you just summarise that for me? I mean, when you were with your student bodies in the protest movement and your street theatre activity, obviously there was a great buoyancy around that, but when you were taken out of that and put into the school situation there was less of that buffer, I guess.

Yes. I suppose that does bring up the question of how one felt when one was alone, or the isolation aspect of this, because I expected to end up in jail for two years and I didn't look forward to that prospect. I, like anyone else, had some close friendships and I had a burgeoning partnership with a woman at the time, so the question of what would happen to our relationship was there. Yes, I suppose, when alone, quite often the sense arose of having walked into a position of self-sacrifice – not in the noble sense, but in the sense of, 'Well, perhaps I've shot myself in the foot here'. I was never free of misgivings, but I just couldn't see any other way of behaving properly, if you like. And it may be relevant here to distinguish between those who took the path of conscientious objection *versus* those who'd refused to register.

Okay. Just before you do that I'm going to change the tape because we're going to get a little beeping sound in a minute.

Yes.

All right, so let's just hold that thought.

END OF DISK 2: DISK 3

This is tape three of the interview between Peter Hicks and Susan Mann in the State Library of South Australia on 27th November 2007. Okay, thank you, Peter. So you were just starting to talk to me a little bit about the difference between people who failed to register and those that did register but lodged themselves as a conscientious objector, is that right?

Yes. Those who were able to conscientiously object within the terms of the Act, which were relatively narrow, could of course avoid both military service and imprisonment, but that was only if a court, a magistrate's court, accepted their objection. If the court didn't, then of course the person was in the position that John Zarb had been in of having then to not respond, to refuse to serve militarily, and that placed them in the same boat as someone who had initially refused to register for military service. The latter position was mine, because I thought the conscription law was morally wrong; and by refusing to register I was liable to two years' imprisonment.

Sometime in 1971 the legislation was changed to alter the length of national service to one point five years instead of two and the jail period was correspondingly set at one point five. Because I had failed to register prior to those amendments I think I was probably still up for two years, but I'll now tell you what happened.

So from about mid-1970, as far as I can recall – and I'm talking here about personal consequences of the stance I took –

Yes.

– Australian Federal Police officers began calling at my parents' house from time to time seeking my whereabouts. They usually got Mum, and Mum by now supported my stand fully – good old Mum, that's the beauty of being the apple of her eye, you see. (laughter) She would not lie; she would just say she was very sorry but she couldn't help them. In fact, I was present on one occasion when they came. They didn't know that I was there and she wasn't going to tell them, but I heard her in action and it was very good. 'Yes, gentlemen?' And they'd say, 'We're looking for Peter. Does he live here?' 'No', which was correct as I was by then living elsewhere. To any further questions she would just say, 'I'm sorry, I can't help you – and you shouldn't be doing this sort of thing'. (laughter) 'Why don't you leave them alone?' As I said earlier, the Act did exempt parents from having to provide information, thank goodness.

By late 1970 Federal Police were visiting other addresses that they associated with me or with friends of mine so I could feel the noose, as it were, tightening around my neck. I began to take care that my movements didn't expose me readily to the police. I no longer took part in street theatre activities unless I could come and go heavily costumed and that there was no risk of arrest there. If I was in a café or a public place I had to be very vigilant. I took to wearing hats and dark glasses in public, kept making changes with my facial hair. I had had a beard, so I started having a smaller one, or shaving it right off and then regrowing the little one, or having a moustache. And I developed this habit, which I have to this day, of never having my back to an open door. That demonstrates just how much it entered my psyche, I suppose, to be on the run. It was very powerful at the time to realise that you were now at the point where you were going to be collared some time, and to always have to look over your shoulder or take care about where you went and how you did it. It still remains for me one of the most upsetting features of that time. But by the same token it gave me a very considerable sense of fellowship with other people who'd become incarcerated for one reason or another. Much later, in the mid-1970s, I began to lead creative writing classes in Yatala and Cadell Prisons, and I think this experience in 1971 or so contributed to that wish to do something to assist the quality of life for incarcerated people.

I started changing my address frequently, and usually wherever I was staying I didn't answer the door if someone knocked. But on one occasion, at what was my most regular base at Bridgewater, I answered the door one night and there were two stocky gentlemen there in plain clothes but I could tell immediately they were police officers. They asked if Peter Hicks lived there. I said, 'Look, I'm not sure if he's around, I'll just go and have a look', and I shut the door and (makes whisking sound) raced out the back. It was a semi-rural property so I went out the back, over the fence and off into the neighbouring scrub with just a quick word on the way out to the other person who lived there. She, I later discovered, went to the door and told the police that no, Peter wasn't there. I recall being out in that nearby scrub for hours because I didn't know if they would hang around or what. So I crept back in, with great care, late at night. That was the closest I got to being collared under those circumstances. But eventually, around mid-1970, when I was coming out of Adelaide Magistrates Court after appearing on a charge related to street theatre – in the course of street theatre I had been arrested several times for things like obstructing traffic or failing to move on or any law that could be brought to bear on the public order situation – I suddenly realised there was one gentleman behind me

and one in front of me and I was summonsed; which I was thrilled about because I had thought they would take me away immediately. So I had a little opportunity there with this summons. I was due to appear I think in about three weeks' time. That was an enormous piece of luck, in my view, because it allowed me to then decide whether I was going to find my way out of Australia or stay and with others make some kind of spectacle of being in prison. But I chose the former course and found my way, with some assistance, to New Zealand, which one could do then without a passport but one had to be very careful about how one did this.

So I got to New Zealand. At this stage, of course, nobody knew how long the Vietnam War would go on or how long Australia's involvement would last, so I was in a position of exile for an indefinite period. That was a very odd feeling. I only realised once I got away from Australia how fond I was of the place. As a young fella I was still very attached to my parents and I began to feel that gap, but fortunately my budding partnership with my girlfriend was able to continue because she worked out a way of coming with me at much the same time so we were able to reside in New Zealand together. I then worked in New Zealand for almost twelve months in various jobs – postal sorting, house painting, newspaper proofreading. But in New Zealand I also never knew how much the Australian and New Zealand Governments might have some sort of surveillance agreement such that sooner or later they would find any Australians there who were either military defaulters or draft resisters. So I made the decision with my partner to go further afield. At this stage that was quite an exciting prospect, to save a bit of money and be able to go somewhere else in the world. So we went off to England and eventually through France to Spain. I ended up gardening on Gran Canaria in the Canary Islands, except that pretty much as I arrived in the ever-temperate Canary Islands there was a massive, three-day storm and the garden I was to look after slid down the entire volcanic rock mountain (laughs) that the health resort was perched on.

Oh, dear.

So my gardening was not just a matter of tending something that was already well cared for. We had to start again digging soil out of the rock, so that was pretty tough. But I met a couple of wonderful fellow gardeners up there, including an old chap from Honduras, Sebastián, who ate a full knuckle of garlic each day for breakfast!

But to close this story off, about personal consequences, I can recall vividly receiving news of the end of conscription. My parents would write from time to

time, but it was quite difficult to have mail going to and from the Canaries. You never knew whether letters were getting to you or not. But I remember one particular day in early 1973 when we were still in Gran Canaria. I had been keeping an eye on a female goat who'd just had kids after quite a difficult birthing. She was in a little cave and I watched her have her two kids that morning, and then I went back to the main bit of the tourist resort. There was a letter for me from my mum saying, 'I thought you might be interested in the enclosed. We look forward to seeing you sometime', and it was a letter signed by Prime Minister Whitlam, the new prime minister who'd been elected in December 1972. In December '72 the Whitlam Government suspended conscription, dropped related prosecutions and annulled convictions, and so his letter said that my conviction under the *National Service Act* had been annulled. That was a very fine moment.

Indeed.

It was an enormous relief. I think I hadn't realised until then how – well, I had been homesick a lot but I hadn't realised just what a burden the indefiniteness of the situation was.

And it was a couple of years you were away.

It was almost two years all up, yes.

Yes, okay.

As it happens my partner had become pregnant during the later part of our period away and we just squeaked it back into Australia in time for the birth of our daughter in 1973.

So, Peter, tell me how – like you were in New Zealand and you obviously found a way to stay in touch with your parents. So how did you do that without them giving away where you were? Did you still just write letters?

By intermediaries.

Intermediaries.

I would write to other addresses that the police wouldn't be looking for and they would deliver it to my parents –

I see.

– who would come back *via* a similar avenue.

I see. So that was quite innovative that you were able to keep in touch with them, it must have meant a lot to you being such close family –

Yes.

– to be able to stay in touch.

Yes. The extensive support of my parents was not something I had really expected. I mean, I'd become less conventional year by year. I was not just a lad who'd become a pacifist and wasn't too keen on the war; I was an active example of the blowing away of 1950s conventions. But they never overtly criticised anything I did, they just sort of kept coming along with me and tolerating what perhaps seemed to them my eccentricities and fads. To me, of course, I was part of something much more grand. So I have to give them so much credit for being flexible and for being willing to grow and learn themselves. And without their tacit and at times explicit support in these political positions I took I don't think I could have persevered as confidently as I did.

That's very interesting, yes. So what happened politically in South Australia when the troops were withdrawn from Vietnam?

As you might recall, the Dunstan Government years in South Australia carried on from the mid-'60s into the '70s. He brought a breath of fresh air in many, many ways to the state, put the state on a fresh economic footing, brought in fresh artistic life. Because the ALP nationally – the ALP as a party – had by mid-1971 strengthened its stand against conscription and Australia's involvement in the war, it was no longer a minority unpopular stance by the time the Whitlam Government came in. The community was still divided – and I think if you scratch the surface there would still be some division today – but in South Australia there was the sense of a lot of things changing, moving on from the Playford Era. The commitment to the war, once Whitlam got in, ceased to be a publicly-argued issue because everyone had known what they were going to do if they were elected, and they were elected on a very big mandate. 'It's Time' was their motto: time to end some thirty years of conservative dominance. I was overseas at the time of the troop withdrawal in December '72 so I wasn't seeing it firsthand, but I do understand from people who were here that the sense of really raw division in the community had been replaced by a majority acceptance that we should no longer be in Vietnam. A lot of people who had initially supported the war came to think, 'Well, it's not actually getting us very far'. This seemed to be so nationally as well as locally.

That meant of course that, as a lot of other people have conveyed far more eloquently than I can, the troops who did return home were not greeted very well. They were certainly not greeted as heroes and they were not given public accolades,

and I have to say I think that's a really sort of filthy twist of the patriotism sword, if you like. On the one hand – although you've got different complexions of government involved here it's still the same entity – a government says, 'Go and fight those people for us', and then a few years later another version of the same entity says, 'Well, that wasn't too smart, was it? We're not going to give you any particular rewards or recognition'. And many of these men, as I know from some of my friends today who served in Vietnam – and as you would know from your own interviews – many of these men came back seriously afflicted physically or psychologically or both and will never be able to reverse that burden, that horror. So these days I feel an enormous compassion for those who did go, whatever their motivation was at the time, and whose lives have been ruined as a result. That's something, in a sense, that we have in common: we went about it different ways, for different reasons, but ultimately we've all seen that governments come and go, their view of who we should fight and why is very contingent on factors that come and go, and perhaps many of those men would come to a conclusion similar to mine, that it is an individual responsibility when you're faced with a situation like this to think it through, to analyse as much as you can.

As a sub-question under this one of what happened politically, you were going to ask me what the withdrawal of the troops meant to me as a conscientious objector.

As a conscientious – yes.

Shall I proceed with that?

Yes.

The troop withdrawal and the suspension of the *National Service Act* were simultaneous. When I learnt of both of those things I was just thrilled that we were finally out of the war, that the protest movement had achieved its goal and that in a sense there was a moral vindication for those who had put – I was only a minor player – but those who had put in years and years and years of effort and suffered years of public abuse trying to mount decent protest and oppositional movements. So I was thrilled at those events and thrilled, of course, that I could return home if I chose to. I did choose to and, yes, being reunited with close friends and family was marvellous.

Yes, I bet. I bet. I bet your parents were thrilled to see you.

Yes, they were a bit tearful.

Yes. So what happened after that? So one of the things I'd like to sort of start to perhaps pull the interview together around is what's been the effect of your actions during that time on your future life? For example, did your stance or beliefs impact on your future life choices?

I think so. I really had to think about this question when you first heralded it to me the other day because I haven't ever thought systematically about it. But as far as life choices go, yes, I think it has. I was, to use a generic word, I was 'radicalised' by those years growing up between the ages of fifteen to twenty-three in that time of turmoil and fracture and new and revolutionary ideas. I was radicalised and I have no idea now what my life would have turned out to be if there had been no Vietnam War and if Australia had just chugged along in some stable incremental way. I might have ended up being a geologist or an academic logician or something like that because I had a passion for those fields of learning. But intellectually those years stretched me and, combined with the philosophical training I had at Flinders by some very good academic minds, they've developed in me habits that I've kept of analysing my societal environment, debunking myths and exploring political theory and traditions across the spectrum from right to left. Not exploring in the sense of occupying all positions, (laughs) but just in terms of trying to understand political theory historically and how it's used today.

Until fifteen years ago I had quite a few labouring jobs in among various part-time jobs and fixed-term contracts as a writer and community worker. Where possible, I've tried to find jobs that had social justice objectives, if you like, or in some way would contribute to social transformation. So that theme has stayed with me. For example, the first non-labouring job that I got, in 1975, was as the inaugural Arts Officer with the Trades and Labour Council of South Australia. That involved organising lunchtime shows in factories and building sites – musical shows or very short dramas, theatrical shows or exhibitions or films. Often these were relevant to working life or trade union approaches to things; but some were good art that people may not otherwise encounter about other aspects of life. For example, Robyn Archer came on a tour with us through a number of factories and sang songs of immigration. There were workers with tears streaming down –

I can imagine.

– as she sang in Italian and Greek and –

German, she has German as well, doesn't she?

– German, yes, I think so. Inasmuch as I've had a career, I suppose you could say it's ended up being in community development sort of work and in particular

community cultural or community arts work. So from the late '70s right through till the late '90s I've worked either as a project manager for community arts activities or a writer in residence in some context or another – trade unions or schools or country regions – or on oral history work that attempts to depict a community through people's own speech and collected photographs. There's been a bit of a logic to the very patchwork quilt of a job life I've had, and that logic does seem to be to do with transformation of society perhaps in a less radical way than in my twenties I might have envisaged, but to do with redistribution of resources, promoting people's ability to participate in cultural and intellectual life in a democratic way, those sorts of values. I also ended up in the late '90s working as a policy analyst and community advocate with the COSS movement – the Council of Social Service movement – and even later in the '90s joined the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in policy work. That, at least in *my* mind, was largely motivated by the same questions of democratic access to opportunity and analysing issues in such a way as to advocate for disadvantaged or low-income people. I've also continued to produce poetry that is, I hope, life-affirming. (person enters room)

Yes. Just excuse me, I'm just going to interrupt the interview for just a moment.

Is it becoming inconvenient?

Yes, they're going to alarm the building at five o'clock, which is now. So we will, unfortunately, have to wind up, I think, Peter.

Yes.

But I think that we have covered such a lot of ground in the interview which I think is extremely beneficial. Perhaps if you could just in a very succinct way –

Yes.

– could you just tell me how do you feel when you reminisce about this time?

That's the question 'How do you feel about your actions at that time, retrospectively?'

Yes.

I still think that it was and is a rotten thing for politicians to force naïve young men to go off to kill other people on the basis of fallible or dubious or consciously-fabricated political arguments. And even had I been less youthful and more mature,

I still think I would have taken the same conscientious objector stance and probably the ‘refuse to register’ stance. One test of that is that I have two sons who are now eighteen and twenty-seven, and when I think ‘Would I support them in a similar stance if the circumstances arose now?’ I unambiguously answer to myself, ‘Yes, I would, if that’s their choice to go that way’.

And some of the later 1970s self-conscious radicalism I developed – and along with that a certain intolerance, I might say, for other views – I can see was unnecessary. I’ve had to examine that and slough it off over more recent years. And yes, I still think that the best patriotism is an inquiring and analytical approach that asks, ‘How can I make this country a better place?’ And that that inquiry should not be tainted by national chauvinism.

Yes. Thank you.

Thank you.

I’m sorry that we’ve had to just finish that off in such a quick way.

No, there was only one little bit in my notes that we haven’t covered and it was the most lightweight, so I’m happy.

Okay. Well, thank you very much.

I feel well-heard and I hope I haven’t burst the tape.

No, you haven’t at all. Thank you very, very much, Peter.

END OF INTERVIEW.