



Australian Association of Social Workers Inc. (Victorian Branch) 50th Anniversary Oral History Project Transcript of Interview – Bill Healy

Rosie

This is the tape of an interview with **Bill Healy** who has followed a distinguished career in social work and related fields, and is currently Head of Graduate School of Social Work, La Trobe University. Bill will be speaking with me, Rosie Maddick (interviewer), for the 50th Anniversary Oral History Project conducted by the Australian Association of Social Workers Inc. (Victorian Branch). On behalf of the Association, I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this program.

Bill, do you understand that copyright of this interview is shared by you and the Association?

Bill

Yes, I do.

Rosie

This being so, may we have your permission to make a transcript of this recording?

Bill

Yes, you have got my permission.

Rosie

Thank you.

We hope you will speak as frankly as possible, knowing that neither the tapes nor any transcripts produced from them will be released without your authority.

This interview is taking place today, the 9th August, at La Trobe University.

Can I begin by asking you the reasons why you initially became interested in social work?

Bill

Sure. I guess there are two responses to that. One is the background to why I was interested in social work, then there is the more immediate one, why I came to apply when I did.

The background is that I grew up in a family which was historically quite involved with the Labor Party. My father was a member of the Party and had been, I think, a Branch Secretary at one stage. There was a strong sense of working class culture and social justice, and the light on the hill and all that

Chifley stuff. Because I was born in 1941, I have a faint memory of all that doom and gloom in 1949 when the Labor Government got voted out. So I grew up in that kind of household. Secondly, I was coming through the head-hunting scholarship system the Catholic education system used to run. So from as far back as year 7, no, what we now call year 7 anyway, there were scholarships to pick off what they thought were the cream. I would dispute that they were the cream even though I was one of them. Anyway they picked these off, and it was probably those with the best family support to think about study. And so I went through, like my brother before me, through this scholarship system. At the end of primary school you went to a special secondary school where you were force-fed to sit for the Junior Government Scholarship that took you to secondary school, into the Commonwealth Scholarship to university. So given that I was finishing what was called Matriculation in 1958, I was of that generation from working class/lower middle class background, where science was the great dream. This was the thing that was going to unlock the future of the country and individuals' futures and so on.

So I got very good results in matric. and started doing science at Melbourne University. What I found was I spent far more time around the coffee lounges and so on, arguing politics and going to meetings of various groups and so on. So my first year at university was a sensational year, and it was a year that revolved around social issues. But it was a dismal failure. I actually failed every subject in science, partly because I never went to any lectures or whatever. I then dropped out of university for a while and was quite devastated. I mean, this was the first time in my whole life that there had been, academically anyway, a major failure. I guess looking back, I was nineteen or something, I was going through a fairly major personal crisis as a result, or the failure was a result of the personal crisis. I did not have a good helpful social worker to help me through.

I began to get, you know, really compelled to look at myself and what was it that had happened. Why has this happened? I began to sort out, with some help from friends, two of whom were actually social work students whom I met at the university, that my interest actually lay far more in psychology, literature, history and the humanities generally. You have got to remember this was psychology circa 1959 -60, so it was only minimally rats and stats as you would find it now. I was increasingly aware that was where my interest lay. That was where my attention was always drawn. I quite like parts of science. I quite like maths. I quite like physics. But it was not enough to hold me. I was always more interested in these other things. So I started thinking about why didn't I come back into the university and do those things.

Then I decided that I wanted to, in particular, do psychology, because I thought psychology would have the answer to my dilemma of why had I done what I'd done. I had one problem with that. I did not have a matric. language and to get into the Arts Faculty then, to do an Arts Degree, you had to have a matric. language. So what I discovered from my friends who were social work students doing the old Dip Soc Studs, is that you could do psychology without a matric. language, by getting into social work, into the Dip Soc Studs. So, I applied to do the Dip Soc Studs and I still remember going, vividly going, for an interview about it. There was this whole panel, one of whom was Len Tierney. I

was being interviewed about why I wanted to do social work and talking about, I mean in a very different language probably then, but in terms of my interest in people, social issues and so on, which was all real. I did not tell them about the matric. language and this was my only way to do psychology. But they did ask me about the failure in first year science and I said that's because I didn't work. Apparently, Len told me years later, it was the frankness of that response that actually went very much in my favour in getting in. They took a gamble on me. I mean, here was this twenty year old who had failed first year university.

By then I had also got a job in the Social Welfare Department, which is another important factor. The year I started Psychology 1, I had also started working in what was then called the Social Welfare Branch of the Chief Secretary's Department. It is the precursor of all that followed.

Rosie

Flemington Road?

Bill

No, it was in the city. It was in Queen Street when I started and it moved up to Flemington Road sometime later. So I started as an assistant male (Grade 2) in 1962 which was the year I started Psychology 1, as a Social Work student, part time, because I had no money.

Rosie

So that was your first involvement in the profession?

Bill

Yes. So I got involved then and was working in the Social Welfare Branch which really, I think, drew me into social work rather than psychology, though I finished up doing a Psych. major and I have maintained registration as a Psychologist. But you know, I have never really practised as a Psychologist. But I was working in the Social Welfare Branch because I got a job in research and statistics on the grounds that I could do chi squares, because I have a mathematical background, and no one else could. In fact one of the jobs I did was to re-do all the statistics in Len's book on "Children in Care", and I found lots of errors in it.

So I went into there and what I discovered, of course, working in that division, was actually a blessing because I had to roam all around the department. I got to see things. I was a kid coming out of a lower middle class scholarship-focused, all that Catholic kind of privileged school-hood. I got to discover that there were in 1962 over 5,000 kids who were wards of the state. I was appalled by that. I had no idea. It was like blowing lids off my head, you know - plus prisons, plus parolees, plus youth welfare. All of this stuff I suddenly started seeing and hearing. I also discovered when we were doing what we now call quality assurance checks on the wards of state figures, that when we started to search through the files we discovered that some kids were not where they were supposed to be. Many were not where they were supposed to be. Many had disappeared and no one knew where they were. All of this kind of notion of the State as Guardian was revealed, in a large degree, full of contradictions. It was, I think, those experiences that started to drive me to think more and more

about a professional life in social work.

Then in 1963 I started doing my first social work subjects and I actually liked them. I really got into them and I think it was that combination of social work and psychology, because psychology was then heading off into the science world. First year psychology had a lot about why psychology is a science. We used to get lecture after lecture on it. What I found in social work was the interest in people and their problems and the social environment and the fit between it and all that stuff, which really started to turn me on. It was through 1962 -1964 that I was a full time student. Actually I was only a full student 1963-64 because I then got a state government free place. There were university fees in those days, as there soon will be again, and I had no money. My family had no money and I had lost the Commonwealth scholarship. So I was able to do the university study two years full time instead of having to work. So that is how I got into it - a mixture of personal history, and personal crisis and friendships and so on.

Rosie

So you did your Diploma of Social Studies at Melbourne University?

Bill

Yes.

Rosie

What were your areas of practice after you became a qualified social worker?

Bill

Well, because I was working in the Social Welfare Branch, I was a part time student initially. I was out of step and I still had Social Work 3, which was a very big subject in the old Diploma, to do in the final year. I had to go back to work because I could not get another year's leave because it was only part of a year and I had already done the third year of psychology, I tried to do the old Social Organisation B but they wouldn't let me. I can't remember the bureaucratic reason now, but I couldn't do it. So I had to go back to work. I went and saw the guy in probation and parole who was then the Senior Adult Probation and Parole Officer and said, because I had done a placement in there, "Would you employ me as a Parole Officer while I complete this diploma?" and they agreed. I got a job there and because I had done a placement there, they knew me and I knew the system and so on. It was easy for me to fit in there. At that stage I was quite attracted by the kind of world of probation and parole. It was very male, very kind of macho, macho not in the kind of thumping people kind of way, but in the drinking, talking and arguing. It was a very kind of wild and manic place and I was very attracted to it. I could work as a social worker while I did Social Work 3, so that is what happened. So my first job was actually before I finished the Diploma.

Rosie

So your first year of practice was actually the research and stats and then Probation and Parole. And then where after that? What other areas of practice?

Bill

Yes. Well then, I gradually began to burn out in Probation and Parole, and really started to come back to what was, even as a student, my main interest which was the mental health area. So I then, with considerable difficulty, moved out of Probation and Parole into mental health. I had done a placement at the old CWS, when Connie Benn was still there, and she had supervised me for part of that placement. When I was at Probation and Parole I was literally burning out. I mean, I was getting to the stage where you know if stress did not get me, the alcohol would have. I mean it was an incredible environment. We had case-loads of 250 each. I got this magical phone call from Keith Benn, Connie's husband, who was a psychiatrist, in charge of Travancore. He said, "I believe you might be interested in a job", and I said, "Yes, I was". So I went to have an interview which was, "Come around and see Con and me one night and have a few drinks and have an interview", and that was 1968 when I shifted out of Probation and Parole into mental health. I worked there over three years, then I went to Parkville Psychiatric Unit. Then I worked at Melville Clinic, and during that time I did my post-graduate work, and then I came into full time academia in 1975.

Rosie

So it was mental health from 1968 to 1975, and then academia?

Bill

Yes, and then I kept working in mental health on a part time basis for a few years. I've done research training and all those sorts of things in mental health ever since.

Rosie

Can we go onto just in general your social work role? What have been the satisfactions? Having come from that beginning of wanting to be involved for social and political reasons, what then were the satisfactions in your role as a social worker?

Bill

Well, I think to some extent the first few years I got caught up in the personal. I mean I did come from that political background or social political background, but I also came with, you know, this major personal crisis. I was also of the generation that started, through education and social change generally in Australia, to merge into the 60's and all of that - the whole sense of self, identity, purpose and future. I got married and started having children very soon after getting married. You know, life became fairly demanding.

For the first few years I actually worked very much as a caseworker. I loved that and I got enormous satisfaction out of that work, particularly at Travancore. I still say, twenty years later, that Travancore is probably the best job I ever had, in terms of day to day satisfaction. We were creating a new agency. It had been an intellectually disabled, or what they call mildly retarded residential centre, and it was shifting to a day outpatient and inpatient centre - the first inpatient program for disturbed kids and families. That was why Keith recruited me. He was recruiting people to start a new program and it

was fantastic. I mean we had a sense of carte blanche, of you know writing, and I started drawing on people like Bettelheim, who had run the famous child psychiatry unit in Chicago and so on. We had the sense of being pioneers. It was heady days.

So although I was primarily a case worker, I was always interested in programs and policies in the agency, and because of where we were located we were also trying to find ways to outreach to the western suburbs and to what was then around Ascot Vale and Flemington. This is pre yuppy days in 1968. Keith and Connie were both members of the ALP and had been very involved in all kinds of things. I was also through Keith on an advisory committee to Moss Cass. Moss had an advisory committee on health policy. These were heady days. So a lot of the political policy and social justice stuff was still there and very connected to the work I did.

But in reality, I think, the great satisfaction in working at Travancore was building a new program, designing it, arguing it out and modifying it. All of that was fantastic. But there was also just the joy of working with kids and families because in psych programs it is the children who respond so dramatically to interventions. I mean this is almost trivialising it, but a kid would turn up on referral manifesting what could be described often as psychotic symptoms, but certainly serious behavioural problems, and we worked extremely well as a team. There were various people in the team - psychologist, social workers, occupational therapists. Teachers, to a lesser extent psychiatrist. They were always our bete-noire, except for one whom we worked very well with. We would get so excited about the assessment phase and sorting it out with the family. We used to involve the family. We were pioneering family therapy. We were pioneering individual service planning with the families involved in those discussions. But we did not call it that. We did not have that language then. So we used to get quite spectacular results occasionally, in terms of intervention with the school, manipulation of the school environment, work with the family to change patterns of behaviour with the kids, and you would see the kids being transformed in very short periods of time. I loved that and I had very young children at the time when I was working there. I had one child aged about 2 when I went there, one born soon after and the third one born a couple of years later while I was working there. So I was working in this world of child and family whilst being involved in my own child and family.

It was also the days when Colin Benjamin was launching the regional western stuff and I did some work with him in that area. He used to say, "Bill, I'll look after the politics, you look after the cases". I know I was working at the Parkville Unit when the Whitlam government came in and I got quite involved. The shift to Parkville Unit was done for a number of reasons, not the least of which was income. By this stage I had three young children. My wife was working part time. We had limited income and there was no senior position then at Travancore. But there was one at the Parkville Unit. In those days I used to need to change jobs about every three years, despite the fact that I have been here now fifteen years. So I was wanting to move. I was getting restless. Parkville Unit attracted me because I had then started doing my M.A. and Parkville Unit offered me an academic environment, in the sense it was the Professorial Unit. So I was attracted to it for those reasons as well. Plus it was

significantly greater income. I hate to admit it but it was a sole social work position and I was attracted by that. Working at Travancore, as I said, the great joy was having a sense of being able to shape something. Some of the other hospitals were already well and truly shaped and there was no room for somebody coming in, whereas at Parkville Unit I was my own boss and my own team. But it was the academic environment and a chance to learn within a psych. teaching centre, a research centre, about adult psychiatry, and so I went to there.

Working at the Parkville Unit also had lots of satisfaction again with a mixture of policy and program and also individual work. I had started supervising students at Travancore and enjoyed the teaching role. Then at Parkville, because it was a teaching hospital, I used to have five social work students on placement at a time. I used to supervise them in a mixture of group and individual supervision and loved it. I was the only social worker and the five students would become, in effect, crisis social workers to all the teams. This was particularly during the old three month placement that we used to do, but also, to some extent, during the extended three days a week one. So I got quite a lot of satisfaction out of teaching there.

But again it was policy stuff and I got involved in policy committees. Again with the ALP I was on an advisory committee to two Shadow Ministers for Health, around psychiatric policy. It was in that context too, when the Whitlam government was launched, that I was a part of the group based at Parkville who wrote the proposal for Melville Clinic, the first community health program.

So all along there has been that personal political kind of interplay.

Rosie

So then you really did fulfill some of the things that initially interested you.

Bill

Yes, very much so. That is what kept me in it.

Rosie

What about frustrations in your social work role in mental health or other areas?

Bill

Lots of frustration. I'd better be careful how I phrase this. The easy bits to say are that a lot of that early time was when Bolte was the Premier of Victoria and Menzies, Holt and Gorton were Prime Ministers. So it was the Liberal hegemony like we are living through again now. There was intense frustration about change. The mental health services were in the dark ages. I mean they were still totally dominated, despite a lot of the reforms that Cunningham Dax had brought in in the late 50's/early 60's. The sense of the kind of decay and demoralisation in the psych system was dreadful in the late '60's into the mid '70's. I was fortunate because I worked firstly in child psychiatry, but in a particularly innovative unit, and then Parkville Unit was really up at the cutting edge, because it was part university and part mental health.

But I could see through all kinds of contacts with other social workers the misery of the system and the misery of the life of the people in the system. You have got to realise that in 1968 there was still several thousand people in psych beds in Victoria in all of the institutions.

At a personal practice level, the frustrations are often around the place of social work within the professional hierarchy of psych services. So structurally social work was always in a vulnerable position within psych services because the doctors ran it, and the nurses really ran it and social work had to carve out a place within it.

Again I was partly lucky, partly the way I chose it, to work at Parkville Unit because I was expected to be something more than just the social worker on the ward. I had to be involved in work with medical students and DPM students, the trainee psychiatrists doing the rounds. They were ecstatic when I took groups of social work students because that fitted in with the mission. I did some research and writing and they loved that. Part of my interest in being there on my own was that I used to have lots of frustrations with my mental health social work colleagues. That was partly because of the old tradition of psychiatric social work, which by then I had realised was, in my judgment, a very narrow one. It was very clinical.

It was about that time that Len, in a classic Len manoeuvre, recruited me because I was a part time post-graduate student. He recruited me in to teach. Initially it was to give a couple of lecturers in psychiatric social work. What it turned into was I had to co-ordinate a whole subject as a part-time lecturer, with his subtle encouragement. So I turned the course from psychiatric social work into social work in the mental health field, and that must have been about 1971. That was an expression of my ideas but also of my frustration with the old system. Now, I had great admiration for some of the old PSWs, the old psychiatric social workers. Two in particular I knew quite well, Madeleine Williams and Madeleine Crump, were just sensational clinically. Partly because of their kind of personalities, those two were always quite interested in policy. But I found the old medical model very narrow. They were in a sense a version of the medical model. They were a very Freudian version of the model. Now I was very much a Freudian kind of social worker, but had begun to move way beyond that, and found that very frustrating. That was one area of frustration with colleagues.

The other area of frustration was a kind of prissiness amongst some of the mental health social workers of the time. They were always complaining about the doctors, you know, "The doctors won't let us do this, and every time I try to do something the doctors won't let us, and the doctors don't respect us", and I used to get really frustrated. In those days I was more prone to angry outbursts (verbally) than I am now, and used to get really upset at meetings and say, "Well if you bloody well go and do something instead of talking about it, then you might earn their respect", and that was one of my lines. That was a source of great frustration to me. Part of the reason for working on my own at Parkville Unit was that I wasn't having to work with other psychiatric social workers. Now that is a slightly appalling admission, but that was a very strong factor. I might say that the social workers who worked at Travancore, several of whom I had recruited when I was working there, were people I had

recruited and I knew and I enjoyed working with, but I am talking about the general kind of body of social workers.

Rosie

I would like to leave satisfactions and frustrations for a minute, but want to go back to it later if we have time, because I am conscious that I haven't talked about the academic part. I would like to just go through some of the other stuff and just see how much time we have. But that is great.

Bill

Yes, sure, please do.

Rosie

Have you been involved in the AASW?

Bill

Yes, I joined when I was, maybe when I was a student. I cannot remember now but certainly soon after graduation I joined.

Rosie

And are you still involved?

Bill

No. I think they had student membership, but I cannot remember to be honest. But we had contact with them. I joined and became a member of the state council in the second year or third year. I think it was called state council in those days. It was a committee of management anyway, Victorian Committee of Management. Somebody headhunted me, although I cannot remember who it was now, to represent the new graduate or the younger practitioner point of view. So I was on that for maybe two or three years and then moved on to a position, must have been late '60's/early '70's, on what was called the Federal Executive of the AASW, and by virtue of that I was a member of the Federal Council. I was a member of that for some years. I was a member of the Federal Executive when all the restructuring was going on, when the split happened to the professional organisation and the industrial.

So when I joined, the AASW had industrial registration, and some of the grand old dames of social work had got that, like Betty Dow and I think Marj Awburn and some of those people. They had forged that in order to get improvement in industrial conditions and then salaries and so on. So when I joined that was already in place, but increasingly there had been this tension between the professional interests and the industrial interests.

Elery Hamilton-Smith and I actually were involved at some point in all that, in a project to move towards something which was more equivalent to the sociological association with a broad membership eligibility. With AASW support we wrote out a survey to see if people wanted to move towards a College of Social Workers or some grandiose title we had for it. It had some very good

ideas in it. It was to be more like BASW in England. That has a much wider eligibility for membership. This was seen as a way of trying to retain both the professional interest and the policy/industrial kind of interests in the one body. That did not succeed. The membership in that survey were very clear, and this was a point of frustration for me, in that what they wanted was protection of title above everything else. Therefore they wanted a professional association. It is almost like they were saying, "We will pay them the money as long as they look after the professional title interests and what goes with it, so that we can be protected in our work". What Elery and I were on about was breaking that down and having a much broader definition of social work, so that welfare workers, youth workers, all kinds of people could have been a member of this and all people with interests in social change generally.

Rosie

Is that when they established the ASWU?

Bill

Well, that was in that time. What we were doing was some kind of middle row between the two. I was on Federal Executive and Federal Council when the ASWU was established, when that split occurred. It was around 1972/73/74. Colin Benjamin was Federal President and the federal office was based in Melbourne. That is how I got involved, because the federal office was in Melbourne. So most of the Federal Executive Committee were, if not all of them, Melbourne-based. Then I finished up being Deputy Chair, then Chair of that Federal Executive Committee, and was Chair of it when all the split stuff went through. So that must have been in the mid '70's, when that was all going on. So I was very involved, like enormously involved in terms of time and hours and meetings and so on.

Rosie

So what were the benefits of your involvement in the AASW for you?

Bill

I think I learnt a lot about organisational politics and I learnt a lot about federalism because the branches were going in all different directions. I learnt about the difficulties of social change and yet some of the potential of social change. I learnt a lot personally about my ability to kind of hang in around debates, issues and really pressured political debates and so on, which I did not have too much sense of. I learnt a lot of a disappointing kind about my profession, I would probably be less agitated about it now than I was then.

I think one of the reasons I drifted away from AASW and lapsed as a member was this sense of a narrowness of definition that so many people carry about what AASW could or should be. It was very much almost out of the critical sociology accounts of the problems with professions. They become too involved with protecting their own territory and warding off competitors rather than doing what I wanted to do, which was much more building knowledge, building activities, taking social action, all of that kind of stuff. So I was very disappointed. This was in the '70's when Whitlam was in power and there was optimism about change and all that kind of thing, and here was this sense of an incredibly

conservative professional body.

The union which I retained links with for quite a while sort of petered out for me, partly because when I went to work at the university I joined a different union and I did not see any point in being a member of two unions. So I learnt a lot of disappointment about the social work profession in terms of its conservativeness during that time.

Rosie

Do you have any views on the future role of the AASW?

Bill

It's a bit difficult for me to say because I am not a member, which I feel some embarrassment about, being a Head of School. I have been intermittently a member over the years. I would join then I would lapse and then I would join. My wife Marg is a member so she still gets the journal and those kinds of things. So our household has a membership if you like. I would want the AASW to be much more involved in social policy development, social change, the things that I have perhaps always wanted it to be involved with, but also in building practice knowledge. I think what I have learnt in the last umpteen years is that the way of dealing with the need for protection of title is better done through building, through research and other activities, building credible knowledge out of what people do. That is what will ultimately gain far more protection, if you like, but certainly security of a social work position in the world, when it can demonstrate over and over again what it does and how it does it and with what effect it does it. I would want the Association to do more in those two areas. Now as a Head of School, I also want them to continue the accreditation process, because I think it is very important. It is certainly important sitting in the Head of School's office.

Rosie

And that is the process where by?

Bill

Social work courses at universities get accredited.

Rosie

Bill, can you tell me about the major issues and debates that were significant in your professional life in social work?

Bill

That is quite a question, Rosie. We have covered some of that along the way, the personal/political and the tension between, the connections between and the contradictions between. That has been, in various guises, a debate running for all of the time that I have been in social work, for me, and it has certainly been around. I guess one part of that when I was first in it, was the kind of Freudian, the psychoanalytic social workers versus the then emerging more change-orientated social workers. When I did psychology the subject that I loved the most was psychopathology, which was a huge final

year subject, and was very very much a Freudian psychoanalytic-based theoretical subject. So I emerged from the university in full flight. We could psychoanalyse anything, and I was going to be the world's great therapist. So that whole debate around the knowledge base and was it about personality, life history, or was it about social conditions, social structural issues and so on. That tension is one particular version of the personal/political. I think I was fortunate to enter the social work profession in the mid '60's when that kind of debate was being transformed by wider social changes. So I was able to get caught up in all kinds of things and in a sense bring bits of me together that were otherwise at risk of splitting off.

The debate around "What is social work?" is a topic that drives me up the wall. I have threatened that if I ever go to another conference and someone stands up and says, "But what is social work?", I am going to scream and say, "Go off and have your personal voyage of discovery about that, but most of us know what it is and please go off and think about it and do it". So that has been a debate, that kind of constant identity crisis of social work, which I must say I have never had much myself. There are two reasons. One is I think that it is constantly evolving anyway, so stopping and trying to define it in that way has got to be understood in that context. The other one is that you will only know by doing it. It is like the old Mao Tse Tung aphorism, that you can only discover the world by trying to change it. So the only way you will know what social work is is by trying to do it. I don't mind people talking about "What is social work?" but what I really object to is that being used as a kind of justification for not doing anything. You know, we don't know what it is, so we will have to work out what it is before we can do anything. That's the bit that really drives me troppo.

Other debates have been about the nature of the professional association and what should it be and we have touched on that. That was very hot in the '70's when the split occurred. Leading up to the split the debate was intense around, "Is it a professional body, what does that mean? or Is it an industrial, political activity kind of thing?"

Another debate concerns the nature of social work education, given I have spent the last nearly twenty years in that - "What is the relationship between the academy and the field?" and I have actually written about that. I have been very interested in that area.

There's debate about the place of social work within large bureaucracies. Should social work be running the bureaucracies, or should they be just the professional providers of services? I mean, I've lived through so many changes in that area. That alone is a fascinating topic. When I joined the old Social Welfare Branch, it was actually the start of what was called the professionalisation of social welfare in Victoria. Alex Whatmore had written a Whatmore report which had said there could no longer be the old Children's Welfare Branch run by the administrative public servants with a few social workers scattered around. It had to be fully professionalised. The first professional heads were appointed to the different divisions, none of whom initially, I think, were social workers, but they gradually did become that. All those positions were gradually filled by social workers. I then saw, in the late '70's, what was meant to be the full flowering of the social work hegemony in welfare, which was from Director-General Ben Bodna down. Everybody at every level, just about, was a social

worker. Now when you look at it, from the coming of the Cain Government, ironically, in 1982, came the rise of the generic manager, and so you have got the generalist generic managerial kind of hegemony now in Human Services.

So I have seen all of those waves come through. But that debate about, "What is the place of the professional in the public organisation?" has been a long running debate, and it is clearly still not settled. I think we might be entering into another phase of it where, hopefully, the professionals will become even better organised and focused in the way they challenge the role of the managerialists. So let's hope that happens, because in my judgment it is tilted way too far in the other direction now. So that's not to say that there wasn't a need for better management. But there's also a need for keeping the policy objectives and a substantive content of the thing at the top, rather than being, in a kind of terribly reductionist way, turned into just the selling of a service to a consumer. I mean, I think that is such a reductionist view of it all, it's ridiculous.

Rosie

What about debates in mental health?

Bill

Just before I get to that, the other one which has been a debate which has been there, and always I think more subterranean than public, has been the debate around gender. I remember well an AASW Victorian Branch annual meeting, back in probably about 1970, where somebody giving the formal address said at one point, "One of the challenges for social work is to recruit more men into it because no profession can be built on a majority female base". Well, you can imagine how that went over. There was certainly debate that night about it over the cups of tea later and in the various pubs and clubs of Carlton. But that debate about social work and the way it is gendered takes many different forms and is rarely debated adequately. One form it takes, that does get some attention, is that to this day it tends to be still, almost like a parallel, but a caricature parallel, of the old gender relations. That is, the women do all the dirty work at the front line and the men take the senior positions and become professors. That kind of gendering of roles within social work is still a major issue. But also the fact that recruitment into social work still runs at about two thirds/one third female to male. What does that mean? What does that mean about community perception or what does that mean about the way it is understood in the public sector and in policy circles? That debate does not get out enough. It does not get fought over enough and I would like to see that done more.

Mental health stuff has been, a lot of it has been that prissy stuff around, "Why don't social workers get a fair go?" But I have also seen lots and lots of fantastic social workers working in mental health. They have carved out territory that was not being done. They have taken seriously that sense of working on the social context of the patient. Now non-medical people are on the brink of being able to recapture a lot of territory, partly because of the way the services have been restructured and they are supposed to be community-based, although there are still major problems there because the hospitals run them.

Also, in terms of a lot of the research about outcome, the best outcomes in mental health are around accommodation, employment, income, social networks, and all of that, not around the nature of the diagnosis and not around the prognosis based in clinical judgments. So there is a chance to reassert the primacy of the social dimensions in terms of improved outcomes and recovery. So social work is potentially on the brink of having enormous possibilities. All the time I have been in mental health services, social worker after social worker has known that, has worked in that way, has done those things and have been quite major influences in the way that the whole system has moved. From time to time, even collectively, social workers have been important. The Association of Mental Health Social Workers was a terrific development. The way social workers got their voice heard in various policy forums in the old Mental Health Authority, and so on, was a great success. There has been some stunning performance in that area.

The other debates have been around the deinstitutionalization, the shift into the community and all of that. But through all of those debates has been the power of the medical profession. My argument is, "You don't grizzle about it. You take it on". You take it on directly sometimes, but in a less direct way you take it on by generating you own profession's ideas about what is to be done by developing programs, by doing things that expand the possibilities for the consumers, rather than narrow them down to medication.

Rosie

Can you tell me more about social work's role in the deinstitutionalisation debates?

Bill

When I first joined mental health in 1968, I started going to some mental health social workers' meetings, whatever they were called then, and there were the beginnings of some debate. It was more then around the intellectual disability area, because intellectual disability social workers and the mental health social workers were all in together. The pioneers in deinstitutionalisation were actually intellectual disability people as a group. I mean, there were individuals in both who were different. They were in a sense a ginger group within Mental Health Social Workers around deinstitutionalisation, so they were important. There were individual social workers and some of the Association of Mental Health Social Workers actually took quite lead roles.

I was by this stage working in the Unit and was a member of the Association of Mental Health Social Workers, went to their conferences and so on, but was not involved so much in the day to day stuff. My impression is that there was a core of people who really took strong leadership roles, I am not sure whether the wide group of social workers in mental health were fully behind all of that. I mean social workers were not immune to what was true for nurses and what is more publicly said about nurses, that closing of institutions puts your jobs at threat.

There are also all kinds of industrial issues that go with closing institutions, and they are not to be taken lightly, nor should they be the basis on which such a move could be blocked, as it was for many years. So I think social workers in my judgment,

probably as a group, with the exception of individuals and that kind of leadership core in the Association of Mental Health Social Workers - I think my judgment would be, for reasons which are understandable, too many social workers were too cautious about deinstitutionalisation. I mean they were not alone, most of the professions were and I think that has been a pity because I think social work had a chance to address that more forcefully than it ever did.

Rosie

Can we go onto significant changes that have occurred during your professional life?

Bill

Do you mean to me personally?

Rosie

Well, it's a funny question isn't it. I suppose it touches on some of the things you talked about before.

Bill

Well, I will say some things that we have not covered. I mean I am assuming that a lot of it is covered by what we have talked about.

Some things we have not covered is the growth in social work. I mean people forget. When I was a student, towards the end of my student life and early work life, I reckon I knew every second social worker in Melbourne, personally or by sight, and I could find almost anyone of them fairly easily. So if I needed to know something about some particular resources, like housing or something, I would ring up Fred Nerk or Mary Jones or whoever, because you knew them. It was a very intimate, very personal social network that I joined, and in many ways that was great. Now I am kind of staggered by how many of us there are, all over Victoria. If I go to an AASW conference or something (I went to a state conference last about three years ago) I walk into the room and there are lots of people I know, who particularly are former students, and there are some people I grew up with in social work or whatever, but there is a vast great sea of people that I have not got a clue who they are. I have had the experience of standing up in front of an audience to give a paper and looking over and thinking, "Am I in the right place?", because twenty or thirty years earlier I would have known just about every face in the room. So that growth is incredible.

The other thing that has been incredible is the spread of social work out into all kinds of locations. So there are social workers scattered everywhere - from Federal Parliament, some of the most senior bureaucrats in Canberra. Tony Ayres, whom I did some of my social work studies with, is head of the Defence Department, one of the big mandarins of Canberra. In fact I don't think he ever passed social biology. He failed it three times as I remember. You know, right through people kind of went off into personnel practice and moved off into management. The rise of social work is into management. So while we do talk about the managerialist taking over public welfare in Victoria/Australia, many of those are actually people who grew up in social work. So people like, at the Victorian level, John Rimmer, who is now responsible for the Department of Multimedia under Stockdale. John is a social worker

originally and he is into that kind of world, Victorian multimedia policy and stuff. There are people who run businesses who have left social work to be all kinds of things. It is that kind of spread of social work. When I joined most of the people that were in it had been in it all their professional life and finished up retiring out of it. I came in when there were all these grand dames around all the hospitals, and the big voluntary agencies and so on. That generation was incredibly committed to their work and to their profession, and they just lived out a life in it and retired basically.

These days it is incredibly more mobile and dispersed and there are a million social workers rather than one or two. Now I think that is in most senses very healthy. I see our graduates leaving here and almost all of them get jobs within the first few months. Many of them finish up going off into jobs if not then, later, which you might never have anticipated. T

The other thing I have seen is the growth of the kind of academic industry around social work. When I did it there was one school, which had an intake of 75, I think, and that had just been expanded enormously when I went in. That was an attempt to get men in too. I mean that is one of the reasons I got into it, because I am male. It's ironic, isn't it. Now there are six social work schools in Victoria, which is far too many. But there are six schools and there must be an intake of 300 every year or more. If you add up all the schools in Victoria maybe it's more than that. So there has been a big growth in that way.

There are publications, research, the kinds of things that people do here for example at La Trobe, all that research and writing. There have been in the last two or three years, four or five books come out of this Department. People write books. I mean we never used to. Len wrote a book when we were students. Norma Parker and someone in Sydney, who were old pioneers, wrote a book. These were big events, and then I was involved in writing chapters in books coming out of conferences over the next couple of years, and we thought these were landmark things. But now people are churning out books regularly. So the whole knowledge industry around social work has expanded enormously. All of that is by way of saying that there have been a lot of gains in that. We have become a much more significant group of people in many ways through that. We have lost a lot of the kind of conviviality and the sense of intimacy that the profession used to have, and the benefits that went with that in terms of practice, because you could pick up the phone and call anyone. But also in terms of a group of people would get together to do something pretty quickly, to write a policy, or to do a position paper or whatever, now it seems to be much more dispersed.

Rosie

Do you have any more comments on your own particular area of expertise within social work?

Bill

Just to reinforce the mental health stuff. It has never been more important for the social dimensions of the experience of psychiatric disorder to be pushed to the forefront. It has never been more important, but the need and opportunity is great.

The second thing is the other area that we have not talked about, where I have some expertise, or two others I suppose - public welfare in general, and working in bureaucracies. I would like to do a lot more work in that. I have indirectly talked about the need to build a better challenge to the bureaucratic system, to reassert the knowledge, values and skills of professional workers back into the core of decision making about how departments run, rather than be merely people who deliver the service or units of service. So I want to do a lot more work in that area, and I think that is again an area of potential opportunity.

Rosie

Would you work in a bureaucracy or would you do it from a university?

Bill

Well, I work in a monstrous bureaucracy here. No, I would do it as a project.

The reflective practitioner, I've got very interested in, or have been actually for many, many years. That connects for me to the practice-based research but of a particular kind. That is the discovering, identifying, validating and celebrating the practice that people do every day, and the getting of that through a reflective process of reflecting on your work in action. We have been trying to build that through one of our Masters programs here, and I think that is another area which needs a lot of encouraging. I find the practitioners coming to do Masters still tend to think of research as an alien thing, something they have to step out of their normal role and do, like a survey or even a more quantitatively based kind of thing, more co-positive as co-research. What we are trying to increasingly encourage in the Masters program, certainly some areas of it, is the notion of the reflective practitioner – Well, what do you do? How do you think about it? What can you discover about what you do? What can you, therefore, build out of that? What can you change? What needs to change? I mean, there is terrific potential in there and it's beginning to happen. Part of it is that social workers have to be encouraged to engage with that kind of process as a research and a practice research process, rather than this notion that research is something alien that they have to do separate from their normal work.

So they're three areas, and the fourth area, which is actually more particularly to do with the mental health stuff, is that I am building towards a new obsession which is around community relations with community, because that has got lost. It was very strong in the early days of Melville Clinic in the mid '70's with the community health movement. But it has been fractured by this "delivering a unit of service" obsession that was in Health and Community Services, and only working with the seriously mentally ill and all of that. Somehow it was assumed that the community would somehow just go along with it. Well, it hasn't. There is an enormous challenge to work with community and to think about working with community, and I am hoping to get on to that in the next few months.

Rosie

What are your views, Bill, on the future of the social work profession?

Bill

I hear lots of people telling me, and they have been telling me for years, that it is about to collapse. Next year it will be the demise of it and so on. I mean sooner or later it may. In one sense I don't care if it does, provided that the kinds of things that it's interested in doing keep getting done. So for me the greatest benefit of the social work profession is that it keeps community and government focused on social issues, including at the personal level right through to the community and policy levels. So if you can find something which will do that, I will happily go on with it. The other thing I hear is that social work is always being attacked for getting it wrong, and I think that will always happen. We may as well just learn to live with that. Child protection is a classic example. Social workers get abused for stepping in too early and removing kids or fracturing families or whatever. On the other hand, they get abused for being too tardy and not saving children's lives, or some other hysterical drama or thing. It is difficult, messy, problematic work and that means we will always cop flack because we are dealing with people and their lives, and you can't control that. You can only work with it. That's what attracts me to it. That's the exciting part and therefore I have learned to live with the kind of social work abuse that goes on.

On the other hand, I do think that social work will continue because that work has to be done, and despite all the threats and promises of the demise of the profession, it has kept growing. Graduates keep getting churned out. Graduates keep getting work. I went to a VICSERV conference last week. That area of the non-government psychiatric rehabilitation support services did not exist 10 or 15 years ago, or it only existed in a small way. There were 200 people at the conference. A third of those at least, maybe more, 40 or 50% of them were social workers. I knew lots of them who were former students or people I know, and that's terrific to see. That's a whole area of expansion to the programs of agencies which are still largely close to the grass roots, and there are a lot of social workers in there making it happen. People recruit social workers into those jobs. I still get lots of phone calls about referees, calls about graduates or former graduates going into those kinds of jobs. So there is a whole area that's opened up that did not exist 10-15 years ago, and this keeps happening all the time. I know the doom and gloom about the economic rationalists now being in power, both in Canberra and the State. True, there will be cuts, there will be reallocations, there will be movements, but there will also be growth areas. Everyone gets agitated about drugs these days. There is a whole of growth area in the drug area. Psych patients living in the community is a growth area, because community, fuelled by that monstrous "Herald-Sun" from time to time, runs campaigns against "Psycho killer let loose - kills mother" or something. So there is all of that which has to be, from the State point of view, managed, and that is where social work gets recruited in. The challenge is that we don't become mere managers of what is seen as the flotsam and jetsam of society, that we actually hang in there with our professional knowledge and commitments and values and actually think about change, not just keeping it quiet. But for those reasons there is always going to be a need for social workers or something like them. So I don't see why we would not occupationally survive.

Rosie

So it will be a healthy sort of future for social work professionally?

Bill

Provided it can keep its sense of what it is about and not lose it in all of that, because social control is a growth industry and social workers are pushed into a lot of social control work, and if that is what you get paid for, it is difficult to be different. But that also means you need a very strong profession to protect workers, but also to argue and research and so on.

Rosie

So a profession where the work is done in a pro active, change focused way, with what you talked about before, in terms of reflective practitioners, and the luxury or the essentialness of having some research and back up.

Bill

Absolutely. But understanding that you are in a policy context, which is about containment, control, keeping the lid on the problems of capitalism. You know what I mean. That is ultimately what we are doing, but that is not all we are doing. Whilst we can still do the things that we want to do and which our clients by and large want us to do, then I think we have got a terrific future.

Rosie

Was there anything else that you wanted to say? How are we going for your time?

Bill

I am just about out of time. I don't think so. No, I think that is about it.

Rosie

All right. That was superb Bill. Thank you very much.

Bill

Pleasure.