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COMMITTEE WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Transcript of an interview with

ERNEST BRIDGE
b. 1936 -

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INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with the Honourable Ernie Bridge for the Parliamentary History Project and the Battye Library Oral History Unit.

Ernest Francis Bridge was born at Halls Creek in 1936, the first of seven children. His father was of European and his mother of Aboriginal descent. The little schooling he had was mainly by home correspondence and did not include secondary level. He became head stockman on his father's cattle station by the age of fourteen and head drover of a cattle droving plant by 1954. He was also a jockey, riding his first winner at fourteen. In 1959 the Bridge family built a shop in Halls Creek for the purpose of selling meat from their station, as well as general goods. Ernie Bridge butchered cattle and dressed the meat as well as working in the shop. In 1960 he married nursing sister Mavis Ida Granger and they have four children.

In 1962 Ernie Bridge became a Councillor of Halls Creek Shire Council when the seat became available due to his father's death and he was President of the Shire from 1965 to 1979, facing racism for the first time over this appointment.

He became involved in Indigenous affairs over a number of years, being made an inaugural member of the Aboriginal Lands Trust in 1972, a Commissioner of the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission in 1974 and a Commissioner of the Laverton Skull Creek Royal Commission in 1975.

In the late 1970s he was approached by the Labor Party to stand for the seat of Kimberley. A controversial result led to a bye-election, which was narrowly lost by Ernie Bridge. In 1980 he stood again and became the first Aboriginal elected to the Western Australia Parliament. He held the seat until 2001, as a Labor Independent from 1996. In 1983 Labor won and held power until 1993. Ernie Bridge held a number of portfolios during that time, acting variously as Minister for: Water Resources; the North-West; Aboriginal Affairs; Small Business; and Agriculture. He was the first Aboriginal Cabinet Minister in Australia. As Minister for Aboriginal Affairs he was involved in introducing 99-year leases for Aboriginal people around the State. As Minister for Water Resources he worked passionately for a pipeline from the Kimberley.

Ernie Bridge is a self-taught guitarist and singer of bush ballads; he performs with his sons Kim and Noel. He has sung at the Grand Ole Opry and appears regularly at the Tamworth Country Music Festival.

Since his retirement from politics Ernie Bridge has directed his energies to two organisations. He is President of the Watering Australia Foundation, established in 1995 and dedicated to improving Australia's long-term water supply including a Kimberley pipeline. He is also the founder and director of the Unity of First People of Australia, which provides two main services: promotion of a Diabetes Management and Care Program, delivered to remote Indigenous communities; and an Indigenous Skills Preparation and Recruitment Program to improve the prospects of Indigenous people entering into a professional career within the Western Australia Police Service.

The interviews were conducted between June 2003 and October 2004 by Anne Rogers. There are ten tapes.

Tape One Side A	Page Number
Name, date, place and circumstances of birth. Reflections on individual capacity.	1,2
Bridge family background, family enterprise, station life and employees.	3,4,5,6, 15,16, 17, 168-171
Mother's background. Removal to Moola Bulla.	6,7,8
Father, Kimberley horses and family education.	8,9,10,11
Tape One Side B	
Family and education, abilities and aptitudes.	12,13,14
Station and family life, knowledge and skills.	15,16,17,168,169,170,171
Public office, Shire Councillor and President	18, 31
Stockman and jockey.	18,19
Establishing business enterprises, Halls Creek.	19,20, 21, 22, 23
Tape Two Side A	
Building and expanding enterprises and family life.	24,25,26, 27,28, 29
Death of father, 1960. Marriage to Mavis Ida Bridge (formerly Granger).	29,30,31
Responsibilities as Halls Creek Shire President. Approach by State and Commonwealth Governments regarding Laverton royal commission. 1974.	31
Aboriginality and public office, conquering racism.	31,32,33, 34
Crown Minister for the North West, Member for Kimberley.	35
Tape Two, Side B	
Holding office, Halls Creek Shire.	36
Aboriginal Lands Trust membership.	36
Indigenous empowerment, Whitlam era, Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Land Fund Commission. Land ownership by Aboriginal groups in 1960s. Accomplishments.	37,38, 39
Commissioner of Aboriginal Land Fund 1974, Aboriginal Lands Trust of WA (Tonkin Government),.	40, 41,42
Expanding family businesses. Kimberley pilot. Co-royal commissioner to State and Commonwealth Governments' Inquiry at Kalgoorlie and Laverton.	43,44,45
Tape Three Side A	
Background to royal commission into police interception of Aboriginal convoys from Wiluna to Laverton 1974-5. Outcome.	47, 48,49
Decision to enter parliament. Life beyond politics.	50,51,52
Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal award for services to Halls Creek Shire Council.	52,53

Table of Contents

BRIDGE

Entry to politics. First election 1977. Election day events. Electoral defeat. Electoral defeat overturned. Call for fresh election.	53, 54,55
Loss of second election. Voting disruptions. Police arrests.	56
Election won three years later. Transition in attitudes.	57
Tape Three Side B	
Arrests at Turkey Creek. Aboriginal voting rights. Significance of Bridge's entry to politics.	58,59
Transition to politics. Parliamentary mentors.	59, 60,61
Family move to Perth.	62
Parliamentary life and Kimberley electorate, practical applications.	62,63,64
Portfolios, Water, Aboriginal Affairs, Agriculture.	64,65
Water and State needs (covered in detail later).	66, 98-105, 112-123
Burke Government and political change. Land rights. Public attitudes. Conflict resolution.	66,67,68
Tape Four Side A	
Aboriginal issues facing State Government in the early1980s.	69,72
Background to Nookanbah confrontation. Government interventions, outcomes.	69,70,71,72,75
Kimberley Land Council formed. Skull Creek royal commission.	72,73
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. Community sector involvement.	72,73
Government treatment of indigenous people. United Nations and human rights discussions, Geneva. Mobilisation of Aboriginal people and international support. Government responses.	73,74
Gordon Downs Station and Ringers Soak land claims and community development. Mabo native title claim and High Court decision	74,75
World Council of Churches delegation. Premier Court's response.	75,76,
Bridge enters politics at a critical time for Aboriginal people	76
Significant changes for Aboriginal people. Ngaanyatjarra Council. Election of Thomas Newbury, Wiluna 1985.	77
State Government and Commonwealth Government input regarding Aboriginal people and Aboriginal land.	78

Table of Contents

BRIDGE

Bridge inaugural member of Whitlam Land Fund Commission. Queensland Government and State resistance. Carson River property and Aboriginal stake holding.	79
Tape Four Side B	
Background to Seaman independent Inquiry into Aboriginal land Rights.	80, 81, 83, 84,85
Burke Government land rights legislation. Mining industry support. Opposition by Bill Hassell, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. Bridge chairs committee receiving Aboriginal group submissions. Legislation defeated in upper House.	81, 82,83, 89, 90
Support for Aboriginal communities. Terra Nullius and resistance to change. Cultural intrusions. Land rights in WA and lack of High Court ruling. Failure of Seaman Inquiry.	83,84,85
Bridge's 99-year leases proposals. Transfer of Government land reserves.	86,87
Criticism of Burke Government by ALP members. Political environment 1970s-80s. Mining industry support for land rights. Determination of Aboriginal interests.	88,89,90
Tape Five Side A	
Police and indigenous people. Police training and education. Role of Aboriginal officers.	91,92,93,94, 188,189, 190, 191
Aboriginal people in custody. Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Commission.	94, 95,96, 97,98
Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. Bennett Brook gas pipeline and Robert Bropho.	98, 99
North Dandalup Dam.	100,101,102, 118,119
Tape 5 Side B	
North Dandalup Dam. Andrew Mensaros, opposition. Water Authority and outcomes.	101, 102
Burrup Peninsula and Aboriginal position.	102, 103
Swan Brewery controversy. Aboriginal equity.	103,104
Public recognition of sacred sites and associated phenomena.	104,105,106
Native title processes. Noonkanbah station. Burrup Pensinsula rock paintings.	107,108
The Aboriginal Enterprise Company 1986. Brian Burke and Cabinet. Aboriginal Economic Development Office. Contribution by Bridge.	108,109, 110,11
Tape Six Side A	
Minister for Water Resources. Allocation of portfolios. Burke, Troy, Wilson, Tonkin.	112, 113

Table of Contents

BRIDGE

Water shortages. Historical neglect. Rural needs and state resources. Water restrictions 1987-88.	113, 114,115
Envisaging the Ord dam – Newman – Perth water pipeline.	115
Water Authority discussions. State water needs. Ensuring water supply without restrictions.	115,116, 117, 118,119
Water Corporation and Water Authority projects.	118, 119,120,121
Tape Six Side B	
Rural water strategies. Bindi Bindi, Miling. Commissioning schemes to meet need. Premier Wise and agricultural water supply 1940s.	121
Funding Bindi Bindi scheme.	122,123
Bridge (Minister for Agriculture) overseas visits. Russia, Libya, Gaddafi, Tripoli, Benghazi. Evaluating water.	124,125,128, 174
Libya, Russia, and agricultural development. Vladivostok visit, initiatives, investment. Loss of ministry. Court Government closure of Vladivostok scheme. Intraco negotiations.	125,126,127,145-6
Sarawak Government water project and WA Water Authority. UK water agencies.	127
Kimberley pipeline feasibility.	128
Watering Australia Foundation platform. Bridge as president.	128,129,130, 178,180,181,182
Tape Seven Side A	
Watering Australia Foundation.	130,178
Support for Kimberley water scheme. Lawrence as Premier. Alston cartoon. Water sources.	130,131,132, 133, 159
Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Minister for Small Business portfolios. Aboriginals and enterprise. Commissioning and developing small business offices state wide.	133,134,135,136
Diabetes and chronic diseases programmes.	135,136,138,182-187, 192-195
Aboriginal enterprise company and Lord McAlpine. Bridge re-development as Aboriginal economic development office. Developing Broome. Burke Government relationships.	136,137,138,139
Tape Seven Side B	
Bridge selection as Minister for Agriculture, Senior Cabinet Minister. Themes. Reflections.	140,141,142
Carmen Lawrence and underwriting the wheat crop. Wool industry crisis. Other agricultural threats.	142,143, 144,145
Russia, Vladivostok, Singapore and Western Australia investing and trading.	145, 146, 147

Table of Contents

BRIDGE

Minister for the North West. Ord regional development.	147, 148,149
Tape Eight Side A	
Minister for the North West. Kimberley Land Council.	150,151
Aboriginal Development Commission sale of properties,1988. Misdirected campaigns by <i>The West Australian</i> .	151, 152,153
1990 Bridge opposes Labor Party policy on homosexual laws. Voting pressure and conscience votes.	153, 154,155
Reflections on Labor Party leaders. Ron Davies. Colin Jamieson (deceased). Brian Burke, Peter Dowding, Carmen Lawrence, Richard Court, Geoff Gallop. Regrets on leaving politics.	155,156,157,158,159
Support for and rejection of water scheme. Reflections.	158, 159
Tape Eight Side B	
Reflections on Party leaders. Ian Taylor, Jim McGinty, Richard Court.	160,161,162
Reasons for leaving Labor Party. Independent. Kimberley representative.	162, 163,164
Moving on from politics. Mexico visit. Diabetes medical conference.	163, 164, 192-195
Reasons for leaving Labor party.	164
Reasons for leaving Kimberley electorate.	164,165
Order of Australia medal, 1993.	165
End of political life. Reflections.	166,167
Tape Nine Side A	
Role of country music. Looking after cattle. Singing, playing, recording, touring. Slim Dusty. Value of stories.	168,169,170,171,172
Music and precedence of political life. Plans. Slim Dusty.	172,173
Grand Old Opry Nashville. International visits as Minister for Water Resources. Concert pinnacle.	173,174
Dolly Parton video clip. Eddie Mabo High Court challenge song. Production. American awards.	174,175, 176
Cathy Freeman Kimberley tour. Children, ballads and schools. Contribution of music and links.	176,177
Tape Nine Side B	
Priorities after leaving politics. Limitations in office as Minister for Water Resources. Watering Australia Foundation. Nookanbah and diabetes.	178,179,180,181,182

Table of Contents

BRIDGE

Unity of First people of Australia (UFPA). Diabetes management, lifestyle transition. Looma Aboriginal community projects.	182, 183
Setting up community programs.	183, 184, 185
Noonkanbah community changes.	185
Diabetes prevention program, community involvement. Unity of First people of Australia regional Entrepreneur of the Year finalists 2003. Initiatives since Noonkanbah, 2002.	186,187
Training indigenous people as fully commissioned police officers.	188, 189
Tape Ten Side A	
Police recruitment successes.	190,191
UFPA other areas of concern.	191,192
UFPA Diabetes program presentation and 24 th World Congress of Paediatrics, Mexico. International linkages. Diabetes and marginal groups. Importance to Bridge.	192,193, 194,195
Closing words.	195

TAPE ONE SIDE A

This is an interview with Ernie Bridge held at the office of the Unity Of First People Of Australia on the 5th of June 2003 with Anne Rogers.

BRIDGE My full name is Ernest Francis Bridge. My date of birth is the 15th of the twelfth [December] 1936, and I was born in the old town of Halls Creek.

AR Now, Mr Bridge would you please tell me the circumstances around your birth?

BRIDGE The recollections that I have about my birth I attribute to the people that were with my family at the time - these were Aboriginal people that worked with Mum and Dad -[and I think, to some extent, my father as well]. It goes a bit like this: that my father owned a property in the Bungle Bungles as they're well known in current times. It was only a very small property, a small piece of land that he'd sort of set himself up on as a squatter, as they were known back in those days, and of course went out there with my Mum and helpers. The story was told to me that my Mum either came into [prepared for labour], or was in the early stages of labour, on the property, when a decision was made that she would need to ride by horseback, into the hospital in the old town of Halls Creek.

AR How far was that?

BRIDGE I think it would probably be the best part of a couple of hundred miles; it wasn't a short journey. It was out near a place called Grants Creek, and from my recollections Grants Creek was in excess of a hundred miles from Halls Creek and the Bungles are a bit beyond there again. That is approximately the distance - it may have been a bit less, but somewhere about that.

The story, as revealed to me, is that my Mum undertook this ride - being accompanied, of course, by others - arrived in the old town where there was

the nursing post that was in existence then, and gave birth to myself; then of course stayed there until she was discharged from hospital. Not knowing precisely how many days that would've taken, but going back again into that part of our history, the confinement of mothers into hospitals and having children led to a lengthier period of stay in the hospitals than you see today. There wasn't this two or three-day turnaround back in those days; they stayed for two to three weeks sometimes. So it could well have been that period of time in the hospital, and then, as I understand it, after that, of course, Mum and Dad and people that accompanied them into town, went back to the property in the Bungle Bungles. That's, as I understand it, how it all started.

AR She wasn't even on a cart, she rode on a horse?

BRIDGE Yes. The story is that she rode on a horse. There was no buggies or wagonettes, or anything of that kind, that my father owned or possessed, so it would've been riding on a horse in a stock saddle, into the town.

AR Remarkable endurance, I would think that she had.

BRIDGE Yes, but again, not inconsistent with stories that flowed through to reflect lifestyle patterns of the days gone by. There were some pretty heroic things that you can associate with the individuals of those days, and when you compare them with our thinking today, almost unbelievable in our understanding of the nature of what took place. We live in a very much more.... I don't know whether it's the awareness or our lack of fully appreciating individual's capacity in times of need. I think that probably lacks the depth of appreciation in modern times, that it had as a part of its process. I think people were more inclined to see that as being a capacity achievable by somebody rather than you would be thinking today.

AR So you feel we're less aware now of what our possibilities are?

BRIDGE Very much so. I know in my case, my thoughts have changed in my life, that put me in a position where I'm now very, very sensitive, and very careful and concerning about the things that our children are potentially able to find themselves being subjected to. Yet I can tell stories of kids, back in those days, who really just took it in their stride. The other thing is that the parents didn't seem to make the same degree of fuss and concerns that we associate now with trauma and difficulties and concerns. But I think it's a good thing because, you know, today it's a different world. The tempo back then was just so many degrees slower than what it is today, and I think it's about falling in line; I think society has taught us that if you adapt a responsibility towards many things in life then it's about adapting to the changes and the drifts of lifestyle and living, and I think our duty towards others. It all becomes very much more intensive. There's a far greater call upon us individuals to be duty bound to other people's interests today than there ever was back in those days, because individuals could manage better, see - there was a smaller population; less pressure, less activity and less complexities because of that. Yet the attributes of the people back then were just as good as they are today, in physical and in sort of mental terms and capacity terms. So, if you look at it that way, they were well able to, whereas I think today the modern generation are less able to.

AR If we go back then to those early days, could you tell me something about your father, what his occupation and background was.

BRIDGE My father came from a big family. The Bridge family has always been big, mind you. My immediate family was a large family and other members of the Bridge family and their family and lifestyle patterns have always shown a large group of people coming into those families. I think it's traditionally, historically.... If you go back through the Bridge family from the very beginning in this nation's history, you will find that there's always a lot of people involved in the family structure.

So Dad came from one of those family groups. They established a bit cattle enterprise in the East Kimberley at a place called Springvale. It was a jointly-owned property by the family, you see, and they endeavoured, for a number

of years, to run the property successfully and in a way in which it would provide for the large family requirements, but then discovered as the years unfolded, that that wasn't quite the way it was emerging, and then there became sort of family sensitivity and pressure and a lot of that, the difficulties that a single property was creating for the aspirations and the interest of the family, generally - which again is part of normal family behavioural patterns. It seems to me, from talking to my father and remembering the things he used to say to me, that he decided that he wanted to make the break, and when he made that break he went out then on his own, and as a result of that he engaged in contractual work as a means of receiving an income, as well as taking up this small piece of land in the Bungle Bungles because this small piece of land in the Bungle Bungles was never going to be terribly viable.

AR I'll just interrupt for a moment. How small would you consider "small" in the Bungle Bungles?

BRIDGE I've got to say I really don't know. I cannot put an acreage, or a hectare to the land because I really was never given that information, but –

AR Smaller than the normal station?

BRIDGE - smaller than the normal stations because the stations up there, in the main, were very big properties; they were one million acres in size, 500 000 - you know half a million acres. You know a quarter million acre block in the Kimberley in pastoral terms was not a very big area. This area was less than that, so it was smaller again. But, to the extent of acres, I could not tell you.

AR And when you said earlier that helpers went from the station with your parents to Halls Creek, I was wondering how many helpers there would be - how many the station would employ? It wasn't just a matter of employment was it, a lot of people would have lived on the station.

BRIDGE Not a lot. My father would have had a small group of Aboriginal people that would have worked with him and travelled with him, and virtually lived with him wherever he went, you see. There was a person called Arthur; there was a person called Mulligin; there was a lady called Niter, and others that I remember that travelled with my family constantly. Wherever Dad went in pursuit of doing something, that was his band, they travelled with him.

AR As he did his contractual work?

BRIDGE Yes. Oh yes. They would have worked with my Dad, you know, a big part of his life. A big part of my Dad's life, that small band of Aboriginal people would have been with my father and my mother - and us, as we grew up. So it wasn't sort of a rotational thing, where there were large groups of people coming and going; it was back in those days the dedication and the dedication of the Aboriginal people towards their bosses, saw them maintain a longevity relationship. If you said to me, "Well, put a number on those who were out there", I'd have to say probably six, eight or ten people, in that order.

AR And it would've been as a matter of course that they went to Halls Creek to accompany your mother?

BRIDGE Well I think as a matter of concern rather than a matter of course. That's the other thing that I recall about those early days, the affection and the support of those people, like the ones I've referred to, was just so very strong - day or night they were always attentive to the needs of the family. They were terribly, terribly dedicated to loyalty. And so, it would be nothing for that kind of person - that kind of indigenous person - to ride day and night to go somewhere with a message, or to seek help or something like that. It was just a sharing process that you just never see today.

AR Was it partly because your father was a good boss?

BRIDGE Well it would've had to have a big factor in it. To gain that extreme degree of commitment and loyalty from the indigenous people back

in those days clearly had to be based on their profound belief, trust and liking of their boss, and so I'd say that would be the reasons for it.

AR The Bridge family were a European family?

BRIDGE My father, European, and my Mum part-Aboriginal Australian. Mum was known as a part-Aboriginal in whatever we might use as a terminology.

AR And she had lived nearby had she?

BRIDGE Yes. Mum came from a family **at** a place called Alice Downs, which is just near Halls Creek and again, in the direction of the Bungle Bungles. So she emerged within that community and was also assigned, to a period of time, at Moola Bulla, which was then a native settlement operation where a lot of the young men and women were taken from their families and assigned to Moola Bulla - under, what is now known as a wrong policy - but a policy that was, back in those days, deemed to be an appropriate policy.

AR So your mother was removed from family, was she?

BRIDGE Yes, she was removed from her family.

AR Did she speak much of that?

BRIDGE She did. She spoke to me and my brothers often about it, in recent years, before she passed on. She spoke in glowing terms of the benefits that she felt came out of that process. My Mum would never ever, even on any occasion, reflect harshly on what had happened in terms of her early preparation.

AR Had she been able to maintain contact with her family when she was taken to Moola Bulla?

BRIDGE Yes, oh yes, I think the contact was still there, and the connection, difficult though it might have been in terms of transportation and lack of that. I'm not so sure whether there were total restrictions - or removal to the point where no contact with the outside world was available to them; I don't know if it was quite like that at Moola Bulla. I'm not able to talk accurately and reliably speak about that - but I've got to say I'm not well enough informed to be able to make judgment about that.

AR But she herself was not judgmental about it?

BRIDGE Mum herself always spoke positively and never negatively, about that process. So that was interesting, and I think that may reflect itself in the characteristics of the extended family that followed, took upon Mum's influence, in life. Mum was a very, very special person who just would not criticise anything much, and maybe if she had a criticism or a pain, she certainly didn't reveal it to us - about that experience.

AR Her maiden name was Parnell.

BRIDGE Sarah Parnell, that's right.

AR Where did your parents meet?

BRIDGE I imagine in that area, but I'm not quite sure of the actual location. My father then would have been actively pursuing a range of things, like doing contractual work, working this little property in the Bungle Bungles, and he certainly had departed from the Bridge family of Springvale, so he was on his own. He may have in fact met Mum at Moola Bulla settlement. I don't know, he may well have met her there.

AR She was not sent out to do work in service from Moola Bulla?

BRIDGE No. To my knowledge, no. Mum did not speak in hurtful terms about her upbringing in the context of her being assigned to this settlement at Moola Bulla, plus, as children growing up. There were other ladies about the

same age as Mum, who were on Moola Bulla at the same time, who similarly did not reflect harshly upon that period. That's where it's very difficult to make judgment, reliably, upon what the allegations and claims that have flowed, are all about. It's very difficult for those of us who are free of that to really be able to say it was as bad as that, or, it's an exaggeration for purposes and other reasons.

AR And I guess, each individual's experience.

BRIDGE That's right; each individual's experience. One thing that can be said that is a very reliable statement, all of those people that I remember - men and women - who went through that period of being at Moola Bulla station - Moola Bulla settlement - all emerged in life as extremely talented and extremely responsible people, and held down significant careers in their lives. When I think of Trooper Bedford, as a man, I don't know if I saw a better man for Halls Creek than Trooper Bedford; he was an outstanding individual. When I think of people like Sandy Rivers, I think of George Carter, I think of my Mum, I think of Mrs Brown, I think of Mrs Rivers and others, Mrs Bedford, those ladies were extremely, extremely responsible and people who society really had a great regard for. So it's an interesting period. I was picking out there those people that I understand did well, but then there may be a group of others who could tell a different story, you see - which I'm not privy to.

AR What sort of a man was your father?

BRIDGE Dad was, in body terms, in physical terms, he was a big man. He was [almost] six foot in height, he was solid in build, but he was an exceedingly caring man and I think that's the thing that made him very special and I think endeared him to the indigenous people. He was very loyal to them always, all through the period that I recall Dad working with the members around him. He was also, in a general sense, very loyal to society. He had an interest in the wellbeing of others and he displayed that throughout his life, and I recall that, uniquely talented man. The one thing I would say that my father was, perhaps the most gifted and talented individual that I've met. He

had no education at all - not even a day in school - my father, and yet he could capture a theme, he could visualise a plan, he could conceptualise a strategy for things to happen to improve the wellbeing of the family, that was very, very remarkable. He had that ability to be able to see things in advance. I say to you that I think that that's something that I picked up from my father. I have found life has offered me the same capacity, that you can read into the distance beyond you - the horizon that's well out in front - and you see a clear picture of how the lay of the land is and can be and should be. It's a special thing, you know, and it's nothing that you bring upon yourself; it's there or it's not there. Wisdom is valuable, but wisdom is valuable in different ways to that.

AR So he was a man with a big picture?

BRIDGE Absolutely, and not only a big picture but always a preparedness to make a decision to support an action plan. Just to give you an idea of one particular course of action that I remember fondly: I remember him saying to me, as a little boy, and to the stockmen at the time, "These horses that we breed in the Kimberley are very robust, very enduring animals, and they are very hardy, but they're not fast enough to wheel the cattle that we're chasing and wanting to bring into our stockyards. They lack that turn of foot that's necessary to overcome that problem." He said, "I reckon what we should do, I should go to Perth and I should buy a racehorse - a retired racehorse - as a stallion, bring that horse to the Kimberley and introduce that horse into our breed of horses." I recall that he said he was absolutely ridiculed when he put that proposition to most of the cattlemen up there and station owners. They said, "It's a silly notion because these racehorses have very thin fine legs to be able to gallop fast, and what will happen, you'll get this new breed of horse up here with these thin legs and fine galloping action, but they'll break down - they won't be able to handle the rough terrain of the Kimberley country." He said, "Well I don't think so." He said, "I think a combination of the little, sturdy Kimberley stock horse and the influence of the thoroughbred racehorse will make a very good mix"; and it turned out that he was correct. We produced, on our property - and it's still recognised today - the finest stock horse in the

Kimberley, because he was still robust, he was still enduring, but he had a bit of speed - and he could turn those cattle. And so he was happy about that.

AR You mentioned that he had no education.

BRIDGE That's right.

AR What was his view on education for his children?

BRIDGE Very strong, very strong. I think it's like a lot of people who have missed out on something. Generally people who have missed out themselves on something tend to say when their children come along, "I'm going to make certain they don't miss out." You know it's a trait within people, I think, having missed out themselves.

AR You were a long way from school, how did he go about helping you to have an education?

BRIDGE Well in my case he was so strong about me getting a schooling that he made inquiries, I recall in the early days of considering my schooling - I was an awful student to try and get to go to school. He contacted the Christian Brothers in Geraldton, I remember that. He was serious for me to go to Geraldton to receive my schooling, but he found that because I hadn't gone to primary school and to a level that would enable me to go to Geraldton, that was not possible. He then planned for me to go in to Derby State School - primary school - for education; and that was the very limited extent of my education really - that period in Derby.

AR Did you have correspondence lessons before –

BRIDGE That followed. I went in to Derby, initially.

AR And you had to live in Derby?

BRIDGE I had to live in Derby and we had to arrange for me to be put up somewhere by people who offered boarding. It seems to me that there was just not that settling in that I adjusted to; I always wanted to go back to the station.

AR How old were you then, when you went in to Derby?

BRIDGE I would imagine probably seven or eight years of age, something in that sort of age bracket.

AR It would've been a great wrench.

BRIDGE Yes, I never settled down; never quite settled down and always found a reason why I had to go back to the property, but largely, for silly reasons, going back to the property to muster cattle, ride horses. That was the reason, rather than being back necessarily with the family.

AR It sounds like freedom.

BRIDGE Yes. So after a while he gave up, found it too difficult; and then my other brother was then about to gain a form of education as well - my next brother, Ben. So it was decided then, well look one way that Ernie and Benny can achieve a degree of education is through enrolling for correspondence.

END OF TAPE ONE SIDE A

TAPE ONE SIDE B

AR I've been talking to you about your father and I haven't actually asked you his full name.

BRIDGE My Dad was Ernest Kimberley Bridge –

AR Named for the Kimberleys.

BRIDGE - and born in Halls Creek.

AR You've mentioned one brother. How many siblings do you have?

BRIDGE There's two sisters, Margaret and Ethel, and then there's Ben, who I just referred to, and then there is John, Peter, and another brother who is now deceased, our youngest brother, David, passed on a couple of years ago.

AR And you are the eldest.

BRIDGE I'm the eldest, yes.

AR So when you went back and started learning through correspondence, who taught you?

BRIDGE The way these classes were available to families on properties, or in remote areas like the Kimberley, was that you enrolled the student down in Perth with the Education Department, and then they prepared the papers for each of the days in a week, on a two-weeks rotation basis. So each two weeks it would be a round bundle of documents [and they] would arrive in Halls Creek and would be collected by us and brought to the station. Somebody then had to supervise the teaching. In the very first instance, my Dad and Mum engaged an old man, who was a friend of theirs, called Joe Williams. Joe Williams lived nearby and he offered to do that work for myself

and Ben, my other brother. That happened for a number of months, and then there was something that happened. Maybe Joe had to go away or something like that, but I know there was then a situation that came about where he could no longer exercise or supervise our schooling, and then our Mum - our mother then took over that role - my Mum - and she attempted to educate Ben my brother, and myself, but with not a great deal of success because we wanted to go riding horses, and we wanted to do this and we wanted to do that and something else. It was a hard assignment for my Mum but she persevered with it for quite some time and then that, again, then came to an end. It was then that external areas of schooling were contemplated by the family then - by Dad - Derby in the early days of my opportunity to again go to Derby for further - which I never ever.... That didn't happen. I never revisited Derby; did not return. In the case of my brother, just about then there was a Government school that was built in Halls Creek - in the town itself - and so he was able to attend the local school in Halls Creek once that commenced operation, along with Margaret and John. Peter and David and Ethel, the younger members of the family, went elsewhere for their education. Peter, for example, came to Geraldton, a high school in Geraldton where he could attend there, and David came down as well - from my recollections.

AR It was very difficult for your family. Did you ever feel disadvantaged by your lack of formal schooling?

BRIDGE No; no I did not. I've never felt disadvantaged. I was only chatting with a fellow the other day - we were just discussing things quietly, you know - and I said that the thing that I'd never felt really a major disadvantage with is that lack of formal education. But I think there's a reason why that's happened. I've tried to come up with why, and I've concluded that the reason it hasn't been an impediment is that I've always.... I've had the capacity to get people with those skills and those resources, around me to work, and to do that. It's a psychological capacity, and it's a special gift, I think, that people can mobilise [the] people with those skills to do the things you would otherwise be doing yourself.

AR It certainly never held you back –

BRIDGE Never held me back –

AR - from taking on projects from early in your life.

BRIDGE - and taking on positions. When I became a minister, it was never an impediment; and nor should it have been because I had the ability

....

AR Indeed.

BRIDGE So no position, or no part of a career, as far as I'm concerned, was impeded through that process.

AR You've spoken of mustering and horses. Did they play a very big part in your life?

BRIDGE Oh yes, and still do. There's no doubt that, once a horseman, always a horseman, no doubting it. They say, once a bushman, always a bushman; well I'm not quite sure about that. You know I've seen people who once were bushmen, or once were city people, but made a massive transition in their life. But you don't make that transition once you become embroiled, and you become a part of the stock scene; that's a permanency of your life. You reflect upon it all the time; you portray it in words that you express; you use it as a means of communication; you talk about your riding boots; you talk about the stock horse. If I was to say to you today, "Let's go out and do something", I'd probably somewhere say, "Let's get on our horses and ride together"; it's a turn of phrase that relates to a lifetime that is shared; it's a permanent thing. To me, of course, it's been a powerful thing. I found my career as a cattleman, as a man on the land, as a man on properties, has been profoundly valuable because I've inherited enormous practical know-how from it.

AR Being able to deal with situations as they arise, is that what you mean, that type of thing?

BRIDGE Yes, that's right. It was interesting, you know - I've got to say there's a measure of truth with this, even though we'll say it with tongue in cheek - an old man said to me, when I was only a little boy about the issue we're now discussing me; he said, "Young fellow", he said "When you grow up", he said, "I'll tell you something you should never forget." He said, "You'll find the human race is like cattle. They think much the same." I thought how silly that was, but as I think about stock now, I've got to say there's a similarity there.

AR Could you take it a little bit further? In what way do people respond?

BRIDGE I suppose it's in the sort of mental approach to things, you know, more so than the physical things. I think physically, there's no compatibility, but you see animals.... When I used to be in the stock camp, you'd observe your stock very well and you would see the characteristics that flowed through from individual animals, and there's no doubt that each one had a different character - characteristic.

AR And you could anticipate how different ones would react.

BRIDGE You could anticipate how different ones would react, and that's the connection that he was talking about - upon which, from his experience, he cited, and I - thinking about it in my life - have associated [with] that situation. Very true.

AR When you were growing up, what sort of family life did you have? A lot of it was spent in the outdoors; what sort of things did you do together as a family?

BRIDGE Lot of time together, because we were on our property, see, and because of being confined to the running of properties and/or doing things such as the times when my father went out doing contract work, it meant that you went out as a team, and so you stayed as a team. So whether we were on our property, sort of stationary, or we were on our properties but doing outside work, it meant that there was this mobility of the team always –

AR The team was the whole family?

BRIDGE Yes, the whole family. So the early days of our upbringing and growing up, there was no doubt there was a large period of that time when we were together. I suppose it only started to drift away from that theme as we got into a stage of becoming adults, and then our lives started to take different directions and be inspired by different priorities and emphases.

AR And within the family did you have particular responsibilities?

BRIDGE I always had most of the responsibilities thrust on my shoulders, by my Mum and Dad. Dad sought to encourage me, from a very early stage of my life, into assuming areas of management, of decision-making and responsibilities. So I went through a period where I started to assume certain responsibilities in my Dad's business as early as [eight or nine] 10 years of age.

AR What sort of decisions would they be?

BRIDGE Well things like, for example, when we used to do wood cutting - wood chopping - for the station's needs, my Dad would ask me to drive the truck out to gather the wood, with six, or eight or 10 men, and their axes, and doing that sort of work.

AR And you were the one to tell the men where to chop?

BRIDGE And I was the little tiny boy who told the men how to cut the tree down and how to stack it on the back of the truck. That was a duty that my father entrusted upon me and for which the men respected that; they took instructions from me.

AR And if they disagreed they didn't show it-

BRIDGE If they disagreed, Dad would deal with them; he'd chastise them. So that's just the sort of way it developed. Other things - I became involved in stock work, at an early age. See my father even gave me - for me to manage in my own right - a droving plant, when I was about 17 years of age.

AR When you say "plant" that would be a number of horses?

BRIDGE That's the number of horses and a team of men to go to a station, within some area of the Kimberley, to take over the responsibilities of driving - or droving - those cattle from that property to the abattoirs in Wyndham.

AR And how long would a journey like that take?

BRIDGE Four weeks, six weeks. That was very early in my life; I was a boss drover.

AR So at 17 you were boss of men, probably in their 30s and 40s?

BRIDGE Yes, easily - varying ages. So I had that sort of very significant head start in life given to me by my father, encouragingly being placed upon my shoulders, by my father.

AR So you were ready for each responsibility that he handed you?

BRIDGE I was ready for each responsibility he handed me, but I also feel, if I reflect upon my life in general, each of the responsibilities that I took on in

latter stages of my life, I was always well equipped for the duties. When I went into local government for 18 years, I was well equipped to be a councillor. When I took on the role of Shire President for 15 of those years, unchallenged, I was equipped to be a Shire President. When I went into politics, I was well.... There'd be very few people ever who were better equipped, and better trained, and better prepared, to be a politician, than myself because I'd had that blending of business, family, community and practical knowledge, all blended in to my early - the early period of my life - but in that early period of my life the fulfilling of all of those things. I went in - and that's where I found also.... When I was assigned to becoming a minister by Brian Burke, I found my time as a minister very, very easy - and I stamped my own sort of position on my ministerial career, and that was why, because I had that experience, that knowledge, that confidence, and the ability to get people to work for me. Again, as these men worked for me when I was **ten** [eight and nine years] of age, so I found in my partnership with the farmers, for example, the pastoralists, and the indigenous people; in a political world I had the same support.

AR You must have learnt a lot of skills at a very early age; how to get people to willingly do what you wanted.

BRIDGE Yes.

AR There's no way that you can do that through skills other than really good communication skills from such a young age.

BRIDGE And I would have gained that sort of way of approaching the situation, from my father, because my father obviously was very good at that.

AR So you were a stockman at a young age. I believe you were also a jockey for a time.

BRIDGE I was. In the days when we were on our cattle stations we liked horses and liked racing horses. My Dad was the trainer in those days and I

was the jockey. I was only a little skinny rat, and I was fortunate that at the age of 14 I rode my first winner at a race meeting in Halls Creek. It wasn't one of our horses; it was a racehorse called "Myra", I think it was. The horse was owned by the Moola Bulla station, which was a nearby property. The management of the station asked if I would ride this mare in a race at a race meeting in Halls Creek; I rode the mare and won the race. So that was my successful entry into a racing career as a jockey. Then I rode continuously until I just simply got too heavy, about six years after that.

AR Did you travel far afield, or was it mostly around Halls Creek?

BRIDGE We travelled.... No, mostly around Halls Creek, but we did visit Fitzroy Crossing, a nearby town, and a couple of goes at a picnic race meeting that was operating back in those days, called the Negri race meeting, but basically, that was it. We didn't venture down to Broome, we didn't visit Derby or Wyndham; it was really Halls Creek. We weren't interested in the circuit as such. It was a funny game; it was a hobby for us and something that we enjoyed - the annual fixtures that came around at Halls Creek. I think I won the Halls Creek cup when I was probably about 18 years of age, from memory; I think it was about then.

AR So you didn't get too heavy for a few years?

BRIDGE No, no, I was still okay then. Mind you I won the Halls Creek cup on a horse called Salt Cara. He was a big, grey horse that was bred at Anna Plains station, near Broome. My father acquired him and I rode him. We won all of the feature races with him; he was really a top horse. I remember winning the Halls Creek cup, and our weight was 12 stone three lbs - which was a huge weight; and they worry about eight stone now. So I was starting to get up then. I had to have lead in the lead bag to have enough weight in the saddle, but that was short-lived; I grew out of that small stature.

AR You said that you were a very close family until, as you grew up, you moved into different interests. How did you move away? What interests took you further away from the family property and the family?

BRIDGE Well there's a period before that really and it follows on from that period when we were on the station and some of my brothers and sisters were away being educated, right. There was a very strong decision taken by my Mum and Dad that the property that we owned would not cater and provide for all of us as a growing family, and no doubt my Dad remembered his experience at Springvale years before that. At this stage of my life I was then being given these responsibilities and duties that he was handing down to me. So Dad would talk to me a lot; he would consult me in many of these sorts of ideas that he had in the back of his mind. I remember him saying to me, "As your brothers and sisters leave school and come back here, this property is just not going to be big enough for everybody; we're barely able to make ends meet now and it will be worse when everybody wants to derive some money" - an income. He said, "What I think we ought to do is to look at establishing a business operation in Halls Creek" - in the nearby town. "That way we'll set up a business. We'll offer the opportunity for members of the family to become engaged in its operations and the business will produce an income that will complement the station income in providing resources for all of us." I thought that sounded pretty good. He said, "One of the early things we ought to think about doing is to go into a butchering business in the town because" he said "we've got cattle on the property and if we can utilise our stock numbers to provide the supply of meat for sale through our shop in town, it would be a good combination - you've got the station and the shop working in tandem." I said, "Yeah, that sounds good, but where are we going to do it; how can we do it? He said, "Well the supply that's going into Halls Creek right now", he said, "happens to be by Moola Bulla station supplying once a week to a few consumers in the town" - what they do there is they have a lot of these white flour bags - they were white bags back in those days. Flour was produced with white bags inside - the interior - and externally the hessian bags. He said, "They just seem to have a lot of these white bags, and they just cut up slices of meat, and they just take it in and do a weekly round of drop-offs." He said, "Why couldn't we do the same?" I said, "We can easily do the same." So he negotiated with the Moola Bulla management and they said, "Look, you take over the butchering business. We're not interested in it.

If we can get out of it, we'd be happy." So that's how that started. My Dad negotiated a deal with the nearby property, that we would take over the supply of meat to the town; and for a period of time we operated in the same manner. We would slaughter our cattle, on the property, and then we would do the actual cutting up of the various slices of meat on a carcass, weigh it, put it into a bag and have a label on it saying it was for whoever it was for; and each week we would then do the run into town and drop off **the orders-**

AR You had pre-orders?

BRIDGE Pre-orders, under a pre-ordering arrangement. So we did that for a while and then, as we were getting excited about that business –

AR This is the early 1950s?

BRIDGE Yes. As we were getting excited about that process - it might have been about the middle, not necessarily the early 50s but somewhere - the idea then came forward - I'm not sure whether it was myself or my Dad or somebody else brought forward the idea, but it did emerge - why don't we acquire a block of land in the town and build our own shop, where we can actually do the distribution of the meat supply in the town through a properly developed butcher shop, with the freezer, refrigeration, counter for sale, and all that sort of thing. It was agreed that would be our next step. My Dad said, "All right, what you've got to now do is go to Perth. You've got to go down there and negotiate for the purchase of a large building that is capable of becoming a butcher shop and other things, and purchase all the equipment - a chopping block and refrigeration facilities, counter fridges, and all the works that made up a..." He said, "You go down there and you negotiate those things, make the purchases, and then we'll proceed then to establish this butcher shop. I've got the land; the block of land's been acquired for it." I remember coming down and going through that exercise down here [Perth]. Malloch Brothers were the company that we acquired the building material from. They were well known suppliers of machinery and that sort of equipment to a number of people in the Kimberley, so they were well known to

us. In terms of the other equipment, like the refrigeration and counter fridges, that was done by myself, using other companies as suppliers. This all happened and the material was dispatched up to Halls Creek. Then, of course, it became necessary to build the shop.

AR I'll just interrupt for a moment. Had you been to Perth often before?

BRIDGE No.

AR You found your way around for that project.

BRIDGE Yes, found my way around.

AR Was that daunting?

BRIDGE Oh, I did not remember it as being daunting, no; I remembered it being difficult to know how you went about purchasing the articles, because there were several people wanting to sell us the building (?)- it wasn't just Malloch Brothers, alone. They were there wanting to do a deal with you, so managing that area was always a bit trying.

AR How did you come down? Did you drive down?

BRIDGE No, I flew down on a plane.

AR So then you had transport to cope with as well.

BRIDGE Yes, but I recall, I stayed in the old YMCA building right in the heart of the city, near Barrack Street and Hay Street, in that area there - or Murray Street - so I was right in the city itself; it wasn't as if I was coming in from one of the suburbs; it was a matter of walking around and dealing with the suppliers. The hardest part was dealing with the bank manager to get him to provide the finance that would enable all this to happen.

AR In Halls Creek?

BRIDGE No, here, in Perth. We were banking then with a bank called Bank of New South Wales, as they were known as then. That was a bit tough. I had to have a few meetings with the bank manager, but he eventually agreed, so we got the funding.

END OF TAPE ONE SIDE B

TAPE TWO SIDE A

This is Anne Rogers interviewing Ernie Bridge for the Parliamentary History project tape two, on the 5th of June 2003.

AR Ernie, you were just saying about the new business, you had been to Perth and bought all the things that you need and then –

BRIDGE The material was shipped to the north, to Wyndham, and then brought down by transport to Halls Creek. Then of course it became necessary to build a shop and to put the building up and do all of the things necessary to establish the operation of our shop.

AR And your father left all this to you?

BRIDGE He did. Mostly. I had the responsibilities of that planning. It is an interesting thing. As we were contemplating how we were going to go about building the shop we came up with the difficulty that if we engage a building contractor he will not be Halls Creek based because there is not anybody here. We are going to have to bring somebody in from outside and it was going to cost a huge amount of money. I ran into an old Aboriginal fellow called Jack Marshall one day and I was talking to Jack about us building this shop. Old Jack said to me, "Ernie, you and I can build it. Don't worry about getting contractors in." I said, "Do you reckon?" He said, "Yes, we can." We set about building the shop, old Jack and I. We found with the lifting and the toing-and-froing with all the pieces of equipment that we needed another person to make it three. There was a mad fellow there. He was a wild and woolly fellow called Bill, in the town. A good hard working man but a wilder sort of bloke you would not see. He offered to come over and help us. So between Jack, Bill and I we built the shop. We put all the concrete foundations in. We worked out how you constructed a building and we actually built the entire building the three of us.

AR Wooden frames and -

BRIDGE Metal frames and wooden purlins and rafters and all that sort of thing. It was a very big place. A huge building in those days.

AR You foresaw that it would be more than a butchers shop?

BRIDGE Yes, that's right. We were thinking then of eventually having soft drinks, confectionery and those sorts of things for the children at the school. That is how we set it up. We had to manufacture the bricks for the purpose of building a cool room chamber in the shop where you could bring in your carcasses and hang them up. We naturally bought the refrigeration counter fridge from Perth because that was pre-built down here. We set about doing that. The only difficulty that we ran into . . . we were not capable of constructing a brick frontage to the shop. We just did not have the skills to do that. We had to engage a couple of brick layers to do that for us at the very end and they put up this 30-foot wide by about 20-foot high frontage of bricks (a big construction) that represented the front of our shop. However, everything else we did and once we got it operational we started trading.

AR What other businesses were there in town?

BRIDGE There was a general store then that was operating successfully and had been for a while. There was a gallon licence business that was also operating where they were selling liquor and they were basically it, from memory, but there were other businesses that followed. We were the first, in terms of the range of products that we sold through the shop. It became a multi-type of operation. We went into groceries as one part of the business. We went into drapery as another part of the business. We ran an airlines agency as another part of the business. We were the very first ever to introduce ice cream supplies in the town. We did that by contracting the supply of ice cream out of Darwin and it was air freighted down to Halls Creek on a weekly basis with MacRobertson Miller Airlines. That was an interesting experience as well because they had these large insulation bags up in Darwin that you could put these cans of ice cream into and they were pre-frozen over

night and then put straight onto the aeroplane and sent to Halls Creek. Invariably they got down there quite soft.

AR So you were in direct competition with some things with the general store and then you added anything that you saw was lacking in the town, in a sense.

BRIDGE Yes, that's right. We pioneered a range of commodities into the town that had not existed previously. The ice cream was one example.

AR Once the shop was operational, what was your particular role? Did you work in the shop or did you direct others to work?

BRIDGE We all worked in the shop at the commencement of the shop.

AR "We all" being the family?

BRIDGE My Dad in particular, not so much mum. Mum was caring for the family (the children) but my Dad and I and my brothers and sisters all took a turn at working in the shop.

AR Did the family then move into Halls Creek to live?

BRIDGE I think, initially, no. From my recollections, in the very early stages of our operations we were still living on our property, out on the station.

AR So how far was that to travel?

BRIDGE Twelve miles; it was not very far. My main role, the role that I sort of undertook for years and years was the shop operator-come-slaughtering man. I used to go out and do the slaughtering of the stock on the station and convey those carcasses into the town and then perform the cutting up, the supplying and the selling of that meat the following day.

AR You must have worked very long hours.

BRIDGE Yes, a bloke said once, “You work 40 hours a day, 10 days a week.” He was exaggerating with the [chuckles] . . . that wasn’t bad.

AR So you did not get too much rest?

BRIDGE Because of that travelling in and out and the frequency of travelling from the property to the town we operated on that basis for sometime.

AR You said initially all the family worked there. Did that gradually shift?

BRIDGE Yes. As we went into the early 1960s I became married. That meant that the wife and I then became involved in the business as well as other members of the family. My wife played a significant part of working in the shop. We chose to find a place in town where we could reside. We then took up residence in the town.

AR And then someone else took up the slaughtering or was that still done on the property?

BRIDGE No, I still continued to do that.

AR You still went out to the property often?

BRIDGE Yes, I used to do that. As a matter of fact, our second boy Noel used to finish schooling at about half past two, he would grab himself two biscuits and he would go and lie in the vehicle waiting for Dad to go out to do the slaughtering. He did that day in and day out.

AR So it was every day you went out to the property?

BRIDGE Pretty much every day. We had the airlines to manage as well. They used to come in about four to five times a week back in those days so we used to meet the aircraft and deal with the passengers and the freight that came in from off the aircraft. It was a sharing thing but the other members of the family all played their part in all of that sort of work.

AR So you not only were an agent for the airlines, you also took responsibility for meeting the passengers?

BRIDGE Yes, we had to go to the airport, meet the passengers and of course you had to facilitate departing passengers. That all took place down at the office shop. You would receive the people in, check their baggage, their weights, process the manifest for presentation to the pilots at the airport, receive the incoming cargo and then return to the shop and have that available for people to collect. Dozens and dozens of cartons of freight.

AR So the work that is now done at an airport you did in town?

BRIDGE Yes, we did in town. We were very much involved in the dispatching and the processing of passengers in an airline operation. We did that for about 18 years as agents of initially MacRobertson Miller Airlines, then Airlines WA, then Ansett WA and so on. It then became Ansett at the very end. We went through all that period.

AR So you had a long relationship with the airlines.

BRIDGE Yes, in the order of 20 odd years.

AR With the soft drinks and ice creams and then the general store and the drapery and the butchers and the airlines, how many staff were you running with all of that?

BRIDGE There was my wife, mostly through it all, and my brother Benny, the next eldest. He was there for a lot of that period of time. My brother John

was there for a considerable period and our other sister, Margaret was also involved in a period of time with running the shop.

AR So it was very much family.

BRIDGE Yes, the younger members of the family did not get into that because they went away to school. They were schooling elsewhere so they did not actually run the business.

AR Was that and the property all run as a big general –

BRIDGE As a combined operation.

AR Yes, as a combined operation and then wages paid to the individuals?

BRIDGE That's right. My Dad by then of course had deceased. By this time in the history of where we were heading to now with my story, that was about when my father passed away.

AR Around 1960? Around the time you got married?

BRIDGE Yes. Just after we got married.

AR I would like to go into that a little bit more. Could you tell me the name of your wife please?

BRIDGE Mavis Ida Bridge

AR And her maiden name.

BRIDGE Mavis Ida Granger.

AR And where did you meet?

BRIDGE Mavis took up a posting under an arrangement with the Australian Inland Mission to work as a nursing sister at the Halls Creek hospital. She came from Goulburn in New South Wales with another lady and they both came to Halls Creek to take on a turn at nursing sisters there. It was during that period of her working as a nursing sister at the hospital that we met up and the marriage followed that.

AR So after your father's death, did your mother continue to live on the property or did she remain in Halls Creek near you?

BRIDGE She came into Halls Creek . . . I am not quite sure about that. Certainly, Mum did not live on the property to any extent after my Dad passed away. I think it is reliable to say that her entire period in the Kimberley after that was spent in the town, in Halls Creek. After some while she met a friend and they became partners and he had a business out of Halls Creek about two miles (four or three kilometres), in which he carried out a lot of repairs and maintenance work. That is where she was basically living during those years.

AR Was your father a fairly young man when he died?

BRIDGE 62. Too young.

AR And was that through illness.

BRIDGE Through illness, yes. Both my Dad and my uncle Frank (dad's brother) . . . I think their untimely deaths were because things were not recognised as medically necessary to be dealt with until it was too late. That is something you can associate with many people who have passed on. Lives that have gone unnecessarily.

AR Do you mean that he did not heed warning signs or just did not have –

BRIDGE He did not particularly yield to many warning signs. Dad was a fellow that was very afraid of going to see doctors in hospitals and things anyway. I imagine that if he had something that was bothering him, he may not necessarily have told us.

AR After you were married you continued to work with the family shop.

BRIDGE That's right.

AR Did you remain there for many years.

BRIDGE Yes, quite a number of years but there were other responsibilities that I then took on as well. For example, when my father passed away he was at the time a councillor on the Halls Creek shire council. He was the deputy president of the Halls Creek shire council. There was a view that was put forward by the community that I should stand for council to succeed my dad. I did that and I then became a member of the Halls Creek shire council. That in itself brought about extra responsibilities and duties and a lessening in terms of dedicated time that you could devote to the shop as opposed to dealing with these other things . . . that sort of started to get me into other duties [things]. Then three years after that I became shire president of the Halls Creek shire council. With that came some fairly major civic responsibilities. Following that I was also approached by the State Government and the Commonwealth Government to consider being appointed as a royal commissioner on the Laverton royal commission that was being set up in 1974.

AR I would like to go into those in more detail in a little while. Just going back to being approached to stand as a councillor, you already had heaps of responsibilities and were established as a solid businessman in the town. Was your part aboriginality viewed at all or were you simply seen as a person? Was it unusual for a part Aboriginal to go on council (that is really what I am asking) at that time?

BRIDGE I suppose the one time in my entire career, right up to now, when the part aboriginality factor emerged quite nastily in my life was to do with local government. When I became a councillor there wasn't much said or done or a great deal of negativity that flowed. I was just another councillor. But when the decision was made and a group of councillors sought me out to stand as the shire president there was really some pretty shocking things that followed that decision. The president that was president there was one of those people who felt he was the king of the Kimberley in his own right, which he was not but he had that sort of attitude, and I think he felt that nobody should step in his way. Because he was a pastoralist, he had the support of a few pastoral people within the local council electorate and also another person that was in the town itself. They became quite incensed about things when I was nominated on the day of the election for president and succeeded. It came as a terrible blow to those people, including the outgoing president. There was a number of procedures put in place to bring about my demise. One of the group got the idea that the way they could get rid of this bloke is to check on his eligibility because it can be argued that he is a illegitimate child coming from an Aboriginal mother with a non-Aboriginal father.

AR Illegitimate in what sense?

BRIDGE They would not be married. The Aboriginal woman would not be married to the white man. The white man would have simply just lived with my Mum.

AR Is that what had happened?

BRIDGE No.

AR No, I did not think so.

BRIDGE So they went through the processes of checking the marriage registrar of my mum and dad and discovered that my mum and dad were officially married, so the illegitimacy factor was dispensed with.

AR Would that actually have been something that could have disallowed you?

BRIDGE I think so. It could probably have deemed me to be ineligible to hold the position and office of shire president. So they missed out on that one but that of course then brought about some very traumatic periods of hostilities. I had a small band with me and I had my determination. They had ruffled my feathers and I was there for the long haul and the fight. They found that it was a decent sort of a fight; but they persisted. The other thing I remember them doing . . . when the documentations were being prepared by the shire clerk at the time, there were two sets of declarations that you had to make. One was a declaration which we all made year in and year out of declaring that you shall take the oath and then become a councillor and do the duties of a councillor. By law there was another document that said that now, as the president of the council, you undertake another declaration. In all of the years leading up [to that time] that second declaration had never been filled out by anybody. It was a procedure never undertaken in Halls Creek. But in the shire clerk's wisdom, he cottoned on to this and said, "We've got him because he has not signed the second document." The shire clerk called us in and announced to me, "I've got to tell you, you're not the president. You have not fulfilled out all of the obligations, duties and declarations and, therefore, I have to declare that you are no longer the president. What I will do is we'll get the other president back in, the president that has been disposed, and let him adjudicate at a special meeting in which we inform the council of this outcome." We had that special meeting and that decision was conveyed to the council members. There was a period then when I was tossed out because of that technicality. But we then went to another meeting in which another fresh attempt at appointing the shire president took place. Of course, when we went through the second attempt, I got in again. I was put forward successfully and then all of the documentations were then filled out there and then, which made official my position as shire president.

AR How did that affect you, that first real brush with racism?

BRIDGE It is a funny thing. I did not react angrily. I just wanted to fight these terrible people. It wasn't the racism factor; it was the nastiness. For example, one of the people from one of the stations who was a supporter of the other camp so to speak made the comment to one of the councillors who was supporting me that, "You know, we have a great shire in the Halls Creek shire. The only thing that is wrong is that you have got 'a boong in the chair.'" A boong in the chair. That hurt. I have got to say that that was a very spiteful comment that lingered in my system for a while. It was a funny thing. When I had those things that really incensed me I always thought to myself I am better than that, and the day that I allow myself to be brought down to their standard and their level is the day that I lose a notch or two in my ability to perform. So I reacted differently. I suppose my life has always been based on the fact that I always said if you want to be equal, you really need to be better than the next person.

AR Do you think it partly came from your mother's pride and dignity?

BRIDGE Mum and dad never ever raised the issue of racism at all.

AR And in your other dealings it hadn't come up?

BRIDGE No, it never came up. We were well respected as business people in the town. We got on real well. We played in all the sporting events. We were involved in cricket, tennis, basketball and rifle shooting; you name it. The family was engaged in all of those things. This was a new thing for me to suddenly find there were these angry people out there that had a view that was quite nasty because they did not want an Aboriginal person in the chair.

AR And it was public office that brought that to the fore

BRIDGE Yes, it was public office that brought that out. We rode that out with the strength of some very solid people who stood by me. The other councillors were very strong. Then, of course, I then went through a period of time where those very same people [small chuckle] walked into my

environment as the Minister for the North West, member for Kimberley and a minister of the Crown, in years to come. I looked at those people as they were there flustering around wanting to be good people. I thought yep, every dog has his day [chuckles] and so it was all very rewarding in the end. I think it is for that reason you should never really get too hung up on the nasty things, you know, about racism, because there's a water shed and a balancing mechanism that eventually flows.

END OF TAPE TWO SIDE A

TAPE TWO SIDE B

1st July 2003

AR Ernie, you spent quite a few years on the shire council and as shire president. What sort of skills did you learn from that?

BRIDGE I suppose the greatest area of learning that I achieved in my time on the council was administratively. I became involved almost on a daily basis in dealing with and discharging matters to do with the workings of the council. Therefore, there was a lot of time when decisions had to be made by me as shire president subject to those decisions being ratified by a subsequent council meeting. So you really needed to know a fair bit about the issue or the subject and have a good understanding of how the council collectively would view the approach to that matter. That taught me early in the piece that you really needed to become quite administratively aware of the procedures of local government. I went through that learning curve that I am sure was highly valuable for me during that period of time in my life when I also ran our businesses and in subsequent years. More so when I came into politics and particularly when I was a minister. I have always been of the view (and I have maintained this view) that I was pretty well groomed to be successful as a politician, prior to entering politics, because I had that long period of training, skilling and developing knowledge, and the local government period of my life was most important in that respect.

AR And then you became involved with the Aboriginal Lands Trust. What did that entail?

BRIDGE It was when the late John Tonkin was Premier and there was a policy to create the Aboriginal Lands Trust. The idea of the lands trust and its functions was to have a large number of areas of land in the State vested in that trust so that a group of Aboriginal people who were members of the trust would have the responsibilities of determining to the extent that they could, what should take place on those parcels of land. In the course of setting up the inaugural membership of the trust I was invited by the Government of the

day to become a member along with Ken Colbung, May O'Brien and Peter Coppin and several others that escape my recollection now. We became the inaugural member of the Western Australian [Aboriginal] Lands Trust. It has been running for many years since and, in varying ways and degrees, it's functioned. But that was the purpose of my appointment.

AR Had there been anything similar to that before or was this a completely new –

BRIDGE No, it was absolutely new. There had not been anything like it previously. It was a very innovative and a very worthy decision of government to create such a framework for, I guess, the greater empowerment of the indigenous people in dealing directly with matters of land issues. It always had some degree of political or government shackles (so to speak) around its neck. It was not fully autonomous but certainly had decision-making capacity and I am sure that over the years of its existence it has served the indigenous people of this State well.

AR Was that the beginning of the buying up of stations for Aboriginal communities?

BRIDGE No, that was to do with the management of the existing land holdings on behalf of indigenous Western Australians. The commencement of the buying up of the properties for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people came about with the creation in the Whitlam era of the Aboriginal and [Torres Strait Islander] Land Fund Commission, which was a separate and a Commonwealth body. Again, I was one of the inaugural members of the formation of that body.

AR Was much land owned by Aboriginal groups in the 1960s?

BRIDGE Very little. There were areas of land that were set aside as reserves, set in place for the use and benefit of Aboriginal people, as it was termed.

AR So they became more able to take on the responsibility of the reserves?

BRIDGE That was the idea of the formation of the trust. The State still held jurisdiction over those reserves because they were created by the State. They were not freehold titles to the indigenous people or even land in perpetuity back in those days where the indigenous people could reliably assume that they would be there forever. There were negotiations by State Governments over the years that saw changes made to those areas of land, even though they were fairly permanent (the reserves) and were structurally in place for the use and purpose of indigenous people in terms of A reserve nature.

AR Up until then it seems to me your life had been as a business man. Was it around that time that you started to become involved in Aboriginal affairs or causes?

BRIDGE Yes. I would think one could associate my involvement with indigenous issues and indigenous causes coming about through my involvement in the local government scene. Once I became shire councillor in Halls Creek I was then confronted (as you would expect) by local government members to deal with a range of issues. There were many issues that came before council and this led to a widening of my interests. My interests then did not stay within the confines of the Halls Creek shire district so to speak. It became more of a state issue and then, eventually of course, a national issue. I put my commencement of interest in Aboriginal interests to the time that I became a shire councillor.

AR At that time did Aboriginal people start turning to you to help right what was happening?

BRIDGE Significantly so. It has been a period ever since then right through and currently is the case that there is always the plea and the interest of Aboriginal members of our community to seek my help, opinion and advice

about many things. My family always had a very good standing with the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley and I imagine that my father, when he was alive also had many instances where the Aboriginal people would seek out his help, advice and guidance. It was just based on that very profound trust that the Bridge family have always occupied in their relationship with Aboriginal people. It goes back beyond my time that development of trust.

AR You said there was a close relationship with the people on the station as well.

BRIDGE Yes, as far back as I can recall as a young lad, certainly even before my time, the stories of the relationship between the Aboriginal people and the Bridge family was quite profound. That trust has flowed through. It is there where ever I go in the State today. There's never any lack of trust in terms of people's preparedness to communicate with me. It meant a lot of work and a lot of hope and aspirations being felt by the people that they could come to me. They had a fair chance of a good hearing and the possibility of resolution.

AR What sorts of things could you do or did you bring about through your position in the shire?

BRIDGE I think the most profound singular thing that may be one could attribute to the changes that came about would be largely to do with my mere presence on the council. As I felt was evident when I went into politics, I felt that within the four walls of the Parliament House was a very much more understanding or a less aggressive attitude being displayed by politicians towards Aboriginal people than before I came into the Chamber. I read through the *Hansards* that exist in Parliament and I was able to scan through the debates of the yesteryears and there were some pretty horrific things said - unbelievably wrong, damaging and most inappropriate. Now I reckon just the mere presence of me being in a council situation and, subsequently, in a political arena had a softening impact on the wide ranging dialogue and debate about Aboriginal people in this nation. I would attribute that as being a

very big contribution that I have made since I have come into the public arena as such.

AR In 1974 you became commissioner of the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission. What did that involve? Is that what you mentioned before?

BRIDGE It was but I did not sort of detail it to you a while ago; maybe I should tell you now. About the time that the late John Tonkin's Government created the Aboriginal Lands Trust of WA came a decision at the Commonwealth level that they would create an organisation called the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission. That body was set up quite deliberately to acquire property around Australia and to then have those properties vested in those community groups that sought ownership and occupancy of those areas of land. Our job was to travel extensively throughout Australia and to meet with the communities in these areas and to hear of their interests in areas of land and to negotiate their purchase on their behalf where that could be done. It was really about ongoing pastoral operations rather than . . . we weren't interested in vacant land. It was mainly to acquire operational properties or semi-operational properties that, with funding support, could be made to be useful for the community's needs. It was set up. There were four other members and myself who made up the membership of the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission. Professor Roley (now deceased) was the chairperson plus an Aboriginal from the Watty Creek reserve near Wave Hill. There was an Aboriginal person from Sydney and there was a retired bank officer (I think he is probably deceased now), the late Neville Amy who was the other member of the commission. We operated for a number of years. As a matter of fact, I only went off that commission (ceased to continue) when I became the member for Kimberley.

AR That seems a very small group to be making decisions around the whole of Australia.

BRIDGE It was small and it was very difficult for us because we had to travel a lot.

AR Yes, it would have taken up a lot of time.

BRIDGE And we had a tremendous lot of paperwork to deal with because, as you would appreciate, once it became known by the Aboriginal people around Australia and the Torres Strait Islander people that here was a funding body that was capable of purchasing land on their behalf and making property available to them with support funding, then we were inundated with requests. That meant we had to travel extensively, which we did. But I have got to say that in that period of time that I was on the commission we were successful in negotiating approximately 42 purchases on behalf of people throughout Australia. It is interesting to note that I was talking to Ken Colbung some years ago (subsequent to my days on the commission) and he said to me, "I was recently reading a report and information associated with the [Aboriginal] Land Fund Commission and I saw in all of those 40 odd decisions to purchase, information showed that just about in every instance the commitment to purchase was moved by a motion of a fellow called Ernie Bridge and seconded by other members of the commission." I said to him, "It's interesting how you should have picked that up because I said to myself when I became a commissioner, we have a wonderful opportunity to assist the people who have been denied suitable land needs in this country historically". I was going to make every post a winner during my period of time of catering to their interests. So I pushed and I argued that wherever it was reasonable and it was appropriate that we do not hesitate but to purchase. I have got to say, as I reflect right now, that I am very proud of what I did for the people. It was very substantial.

AR Were you very restricted with finances?

BRIDGE We were restricted but not very restricted. I've got to say the Commonwealth provided resources to allow us to make those decisions and provided resources for the ongoing cost of operations and maintenance in a reasonable sort of degree of funding, it was not anything that was overly substantial but it was appropriate. As I reflect now on the period of time that

the land fund commission was in operation, I am not aware of there being any properties that were acquired that had to be relinquished because of a lack of support subsequent to the purchases. I think those people are still out there today occupying those properties and taking advantage of those purchases. So generally speaking, we were accommodated by funding.

AR What would be the highest things on your list when you were looking to purchase for a group?

BRIDGE The key thing always was to see where we could find a commercial capacity, an economic base in other words. That is of course why Neville Amy was on. He was a professional, an economist and a bank officer. We had somebody highly qualified to look at the sources of information that we had, the history and the background of these operations. We found in many instances of course that we bought very good properties. You take, just for example, in the Kimberley, Noonkanbah, which is a highly recognised self-operating property today, was acquired by us during that period of time that I was on the commission. There were some outstanding properties in Queensland. There are a couple today up in the gulf country that are running now efficiently and effectively and they are major pastoral holdings. There were some good purchases made always with a view of looking at an economic base but not, in the end, rejecting the outright needs of the people solely because there was not absolute proof of economic capacity. We needed to look at their social needs, their community needs and, really, the framework of the community's existence as part of that whole consideration of purchase, which we were able to do. That of course is where I came into it. I went into the process in going through that period in local government that I mentioned previously where I gained that knowledge. Also, being a pastoralist myself and living a life time in the pastoral industry, there were lots of things that we would share in our contribution to the decision-making process of that organisation.

AR So everything really fitted in, your past experience –

BRIDGE Particularly Neville and myself. I think Neville and myself were the key players in terms of knowledge, experience and understanding and being able to guide the decision-making process correctly. We both had good ability to do that.

AR What was Professor Roley a professor of?

BRIDGE I would like to be able to tell you but I am not sure.

AR I wondered if he had a special field that fitted in.

BRIDGE He clearly would have done to have been given the position but I do not recall what was now.

AR All those activities sounded like full-time work, but in the meantime you also opened up an open-air picture theatre in Halls Creek.

BRIDGE Yes, that's right. It was an interesting experience for me. There was a block of land adjacent to our general shop, the Bridge family operations, that became available to my wife, Mavis, and I, quite separately from the family. We purchased this block of land which was adjacent to the shop and we decided on acquiring that piece of land that it would be good to create an open-air picture theatre for the town. Previous to that there were weekly shows held in the school grounds conducted by the schoolteachers and it was just a little projector out on the flat with no seating, just people coming there with their own seats and blankets and that sort of thing. We felt we could do better so we talked with the parents and citizens and the school people about the possibility of setting up a proper constructed picture theatre and they said it would be great, they would like to see it happen. So that's what happened. I was involved again, as I was in the construction of the shop, in the construction of our picture theatre buildings. We engaged another person to design a screen (a local man) and we made our own bricks so that the toilets and that sort of thing could be manufactured locally. We went about setting it up and then when everything was in place, I had to come

to Perth to obtain a licence to operate the projectors, which I did. I came down and sat for that. Then we purchased two projectors and away we went and for a number of years we conducted a local open-air picture theatre running twice a week. We used to show on a Friday and a Sunday evening.

AR Did you run the projector yourself?

BRIDGE Yes, I ran the projector myself and my wife used to take the collections. She ran the till down the bottom of the building and people came in and we created seating by constructing seats that were made of metal and pretty hard timber to sit on, but at least they were robust and durable in the way they could sit. That was what we did for many years really until a few years before I got into politics and then other people ran the picture theatre for us during several years. There were several other people having a go at doing it as well.

AR And you expanded also into a service station didn't you?

BRIDGE Yes, that is correct. There was a service station which we acquired, initially in a shared partnership arrangement with another couple and after a little while they wanted to get out of the operations and move on so the wife and I acquired their interest. We ran the service station as our own service station for a number of years and sold out of that about the time of my entry into politics. We also had a short period of time when we had a share in the local hotel in Halls Creek. That wasn't for very long but it was there for a period of time and then that was sold into other interest and the syndicate that we were a part of sold our interest out and then split up the dividends and we ceased to remain as hotel proprietors.

AR There was not much that happened in town that you weren't involved in.

BRIDGE No, that's true. You could say that.

AR Ernie, I believe it was around that time you also learnt to fly a Cessna.

BRIDGE That is correct. I was sitting as a co-royal commissioner (if I could use that term) with two other members that were appointed by the State and the Commonwealth Government to conduct the inquiry. When we went to Kalgoorlie to take evidence there we sat in Kalgoorlie for fairly extended periods because the incidents that we were investigating had taken place at Laverton in the Goldfields. Apart from spending about a month initially at Laverton taking evidence from the people there, the other extended period of time that we spent on that commission was at Kalgoorlie. While we were in Kalgoorlie I got talking to the local flying instructor and I said to him, "I would like to arrange in between sittings an opportunity to go out and to gain some knowledge of flying." He was happy to do that. I did that but it was only a short period because about the time I started flying in Kalgoorlie we changed the schedule of our sittings and came to Perth. For a big period then of the completion of that inquiry the work was done in Perth. I went out to Jandakot and spoke to Transwest who were then conducting a flying school and they agreed to undertake to have me go through my training to become a pilot and that is what took place. What would happen is about 6 o'clock in the morning I would go to Jandakot and do about an hour's flying and then get ready after that and come in and start sitting at 9 o'clock for our day's hearings to take evidence and all that sort of business. Then, when we knocked off about four in the afternoon, I would then take off again in a taxi (or however I could), go to Jandakot and get in the last hour before last light of flying out there. I did that for weeks and weeks on end (apart from the weekends) any day that I had free time, any time of the day. I eventually got my licence. I bought a brand spanking new aeroplane in the process of getting my licence. I had not got the licence when I purchased the aeroplane but they assured me that I would get my licence so I could invest in advance, and that is what happened. Eventually when it all ended and the inquiry concluded I flew this lovely aeroplane up to Halls Creek being the proud owner of a new 182 Cessna.

AR Did it make life much easier for you.

BRIDGE It certainly did. The plane was very, very useful for the sort of life we had up in the Kimberley. The other thing that was good was that our children at the time were attending school in Alice Springs and it was easier to fly from Halls Creek to Alice Springs to visit them.

AR Was that the most convenient school for them to go to?

BRIDGE At that time but then later on we transferred them down to Perth where the boys went to Wesley College and the girls went to St Mary's College. There was that transition made but initially it was Alice Springs that they went to.

AR And you would fly to Alice Springs to visit your children?

BRIDGE Yes, then I made a number of trips to Perth as well in the plane and, of course, countless trips around the Kimberley. I regularly flew around the Kimberley. It was very good to own an aeroplane up there at the time.

END OF TAPE TWO SIDE B

TAPE THREE SIDE A

This is Anne Rogers interviewing Ernie Bridge for the Parliamentary History project tape three, on 1st of July 2003.

AR Ernie, you mentioned the royal commission that you were involved with. Could you give me the background to the royal commission, why there was a royal commission and how you came to be involved?

BRIDGE I think it was either late 1974 or early 1975. It started late 1974. A situation had erupted at Laverton where a convoy of Aboriginal people were intercepted by a convoy of police officers. It is fair to talk about a convoy of police officers, because there were police recruits sent there from Kalgoorlie, some from Perth and other areas to strengthen the numbers of the local police officers in dealing with what they thought would be a disturbance in the town of Kalgoorlie brought about by Aboriginal people travelling through from Wiluna and other outlying centres for law-making ceremonies beyond Laverton. Somebody had conjured up (as was proven by the royal commission's evidence) a wrongful story that the police could expect trouble in Laverton when the convoy reached Laverton. So there was a pre-determined build-up of police officers.

AR Was there as large a group each year moving for law-making ceremonies?

BRIDGE It was a traditional thing that had gone on for years and years. It was a yearly event. Anyway, when the day of this event came about, the police were assembled in the town of Laverton and on the outskirts of the town of Laverton. They had positioned themselves to deal with this convoy of Aboriginal people. As the convoy came down it was confronted by the police at a place called Skull Creek, about four kilometres out of the township of Laverton. It was a very, very nasty situation that evolved. The vehicles were stopped by the police. The people [the Aboriginals] were tossed off the vehicle by the police and thrown into police paddy wagons by the dozens, so much so that in one case a paddy wagon load of people was so heavy

towards the rear of the vehicle that the front wheels left the ground with the weight of numbers in the back of the vehicle. All of their [the Aboriginals'] materials such as flour bags, sugar and tea were torn and thrown all over the place. Almost the entire number of people in the convoy (several truck loads) were arrested, thrown into the paddy wagons and taken to the lock-up at Laverton. They were immediately charged for disorderly conduct. Charge sheets were made out by the police charging this person, some other person and some other person with disorderly conduct. They were all put in the lock-up and held in the lock-up until the following day when the police considered the nature of the charges and realised that they could not charge anybody with disorderly conduct beyond public premises. These people were four miles out of the town so they were wrongfully charged under that section of the police Act. They immediately went about setting up a new set of charge sheets and the new sheets showed that the people [the Aboriginals] were charged for resisting arrest and attempting to interfere with police in the course of their duties, which was false. That led to outrage, controversy and protest from the local people, the Aboriginal people, the Aboriginal legal service and community welfare officers. That necessitated a couple of investigations to be carried out. In the end, the people insisted that there be more than just internal investigations.

AR I'll just interrupt for a moment. Was this a larger example of the sort thing that happened anyway? Did this type of police behaviour happen almost as a norm at that time and this was simply a much more glaring example of it?

BRIDGE That's right. There was a greater number of people. I think there was about 30-odd arrests out of the people who were on the trucks. So it was just a big group of people that highlighted the inappropriate conduct of the police and, therefore, in the end it led to the State and Commonwealth Governments agreeing to a joint royal commission. The State was reluctant for a long time to engage itself in setting up the royal commission. But the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator Cavanagh simply issued an ultimatum to the Court Government to say, "If you are not prepared to go in a

joint royal commission with us (the Commonwealth) what we will do is to conduct our own royal commission.” That led to the State Government and the Commonwealth Government mutually agreeing to setting up the investigation. When it came to choosing the royal commissioners for the purpose of the inquiry, the State appointed the late Gresley Clarkson, a retired judge as the chairman of the inquiry and myself, as an Aboriginal person, to act as a royal commissioner. The Commonwealth appointed a QC called Elliot Johnston from South Australia as their representative on the inquiry. The three of us made up the membership of the royal commission. We ran for 12 months conducting investigations at Laverton, Leonora, Kalgoorlie and Perth. The findings, of course, were that the police acted inappropriately. There were false charges that were laid initially and fabricated second charge sheets prepared. That was the outcome. The people were wrongfully arrested and arrested without any cause or need or any purpose or reason whatsoever why police intervention was warranted at Skull Creek. They were merely going about a lawful process and they were driving through (they were not going to go into the town, as a matter of fact they were going to bypass the town). They were on the way through to Wiluna and other places for these law-making ceremonies at the time the arrests took place.

AR That was a really big thing to have a retired judge, a QC and you.

BRIDGE Yes.

AR What did you learn from that?

BRIDGE An enormous amount of experience came to me as a result of that period of 12 months sitting with those eminent people, as the retired judge and the QC from South Australia were. Both wonderful people. That in itself was important, but the whole process of a royal commission and what you go through in dealing and managing, I gained such good knowledge that in the end when the chairman took ill down here in Perth, I actually officiated the proceedings of the inquiry for about a week or two weeks down here in

Perth, along with my fellow colleague. There were only the two of us. I was given the responsibility of managing and directing the proceedings of that inquiry. I had got to the point where I could do those sort of things, you see, as part of my work. It was very substantial, but I think the key thing of all things that came out of my experience on that royal commission was the very determined position I then adopted that I would need to go into politics, if I could, to deal with this issue of the injustice and total unfairness that Aboriginal people were the victims of in our society. And it was a very compelling part of the process that convinced me and led me to making a decision to go into politics. I think perhaps without the Laverton royal commission, it's likely that I would not have entered politics at all. That had a profound impact on all of us. I have to say, as I think of it now, I am very grateful that I had that experience and the motivation to go where I finished up going politically in life.

AR Yes, that was an extraordinary experience. How did you choose which political party?

BRIDGE It was an interesting thing. Quite some years before the Laverton royal commission (something like three or four years prior to that) the then federal member for Kalgoorlie, the late Fred Collard used to regularly visit Halls Creek and Kimberley Downs. In the course of one of his visits up there he said to me "Have you ever thought about entering politics"? I said no. He said "I think you should". He said "You have worked here for a long time successfully as the shire president, you've got a good grasp of things politically and the Kimberley needs somebody like you, a local person born and bred in the Kimberley to represent the people of this area in State politics. You should think about it". That was the first time that politics had entered my mind to the point where I thought about it. But nothing happened until during the course of the Laverton royal commission. I recall one day I had a visit when we were in Laverton from three Labor Party members of Parliament. They came to see whether I'd be interested in standing for the Kimberley seat in the next election. I sort of said that I'd think about it and that was the extent it went to up there. When we shifted to Perth, I was again approached by

members of the Labor Party. I remember Don Taylor and Bob McMullan, who is now a senator in the Commonwealth Parliament. I think the late Colin Jamieson was with them. They came and saw me and had another go at enticing me into politics. So I started to get a bit keen about it. That sort of was the starting point. That is really how it came about, that I entered politics under the banner of the Labor Party.

AR It had been a Liberal seat for quite some time, hadn't it?

BRIDGE Oh yes, it had been a Liberal seat for 12-odd years prior to my entry. I have to say that at the time I had a particularly good working relationship with the Premier, Sir Charles Court. He was keen to talk to me about the possibilities of me going into politics in the sense that he had learnt of me being approached by the Labor Party. We talked about it and he made some complimentary remarks about how I might succeed if I ever got there so I always remember that; that was encouraging. I think he would have been prepared for me to have changed camps at the time. I got the impression he thought I was probably going to be a good member for Kimberley. But that wasn't anything that we got serious about.

AR You felt more drawn to Labor policy?

BRIDGE Only because I had been approached by them. At that stage I hadn't made any real comparisons. I hadn't gone through the policies to the extent that I was able to define clearly the difference in policy. It was more of a desire on my part to enter politics, because I always said, if I'm going to have any impact at all on behalf of the people that I now want to represent, I've got to go into politics to achieve that. There was no point being an advocate beyond the corridors of Parliament. You had to go in.

AR It was to do with a desire to help indigenous people rather than any ideological -

BRIDGE Absolutely. And that ideology factor in politics has never struck a real cord with me. All through my political career (in the 20-odd years I was in politics) I never placed a great deal of emphasis on my attachment or relationship with political ideology. I always felt I was there to represent the interests of people, irrespective of what their background was and irrespective of what their politics was.

AR And you could do that regardless of which party you were in.

BRIDGE That's right, and that became evident in subsequent years as I worked, particularly as minister, because, I've got to say to you, the people who have given me profound support and encouragement through my career as a politician have really been the people who would in their own lives be very conservative voters. Very conservative voters, but they have been profoundly supportive of me. So it worked, see? My non-attachment to a political ideology enabled me to span the area of people's needs and interests and to represent them equally. I am grateful that I have seen a life in politics. That is the image that I've left (that is the image, of course, that I first of all I created) to achieve what is now left as an image beyond my life as a politician.

AR Ernie, before we move onto your political career, you were awarded the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal. Can you tell me about that?

BRIDGE Yes, that was, I guess, in recognition of my work as a councillor and President of the Halls Creek Shire Council. And it was for that reason that I was recognised for those efforts and awarded.

AR Presumably not every shire president was awarded one though.

BRIDGE [Chuckles] Oh no. I think it was quite selective back in those days. The awards now seem to take on greater numbers. You learn of hundreds and hundreds of people now getting awards. But I think it was a bit

of a rarity back in those days. So it was a privilege and it was a special honour, of course, that has a listing in my recollections of events of success.

AR That showed you had special achievements in your particular role.

BRIDGE That's right. That's the way the people who award those categories would have described it anyway.

AR And then once you'd made up your mind to stand for Parliament, the first election at which you stood was interesting. Was that in 1977?

BRIDGE That's correct, yes.

AR Can you tell me about that?

BRIDGE Yes, interesting would be a very mild form of the days that were to follow. It was one of the most unbelievable periods, I think, in politics. It is doubtful, if ever, the extent to support my endeavour of entry into the political arena and the extent of attempting to deny me entry into politics was experienced by the community of the Kimberley. Previous to my entry they had not really had any great interest, especially the Aboriginal people. I mean, very few Aboriginal people had ever voted in elections prior to my becoming endorsed as a candidate. Naturally on my endorsement -

AR Because they couldn't see any purpose?

BRIDGE Well, that's right, and people didn't engage them in politics, electioneering and campaigning, so it just went that most of them were not enrolled on electoral rolls. They really could not see any useful purpose in voting anyway. So it just didn't command a great deal of their interest and attention. But suddenly on my endorsement to seek a seat in Parliament representing the Kimberley, there was this massive surge of interest that the Aboriginal people displayed, to want to vote for me, one of their own persons

and a locally born Kimberley man and all that sort of thing. So that was all very good. I mean that sort of preparation was fairly straight forward. But when it came to the day of the election, there were some very, very unbelievable events that occurred. For example, the Liberal Party, in its wisdom to retain the seat, engaged five solicitors to travel to the Kimberley in the early hours of the morning of election day. They were instructed to arrive in the Kimberley at about 4.30 am on the morning of the election. They would be transported to a destination and a polling place, which they'd be informed of on their arrival at Derby, which was the stopping off point back in those days of flights that went from Perth to Derby and on to Darwin. They were instructed (as it was proven by the Court of Disputed Returns subsequently - so this factual stuff I am telling you) to present themselves in a polling booth, which was designated to them, and they were to go about the technicality of the law to such an extent that they would deny as many Aboriginal persons a vote in the election.

AR How were they to go about that?

BRIDGE Well, they went about it in many many forms but I will make reference to one graphic example. Details and an outline of procedures are contained in the electoral Act, you see. In the course of total compliance technically with the Act, questions were required by the lawyers of the presiding officers to ask the people as they were coming through. And if they said, for example, "Have you voted elsewhere today?" and the Aboriginal person did not say no in the affirmative, and muttered some answer, the lawyer would intervene and say that person hasn't made a definite affirmative action so he has to be rejected. That person was not allowed to vote and was thrown out, so to speak. There was an elderly person in his eighties who came into the polling booth at Halls Creek and when he was asked by the polling clerks about his age, he said "I am a real old man". The lawyer intervened and said "Well, that's not an answer, so you must reject him". He was told to leave the polling centre and go out. Those are sorts of examples of the horrific intimidation and the whole environment and atmosphere of the polling centre. Aboriginal people actually went away crying with the stress of

it all and did not vote. In the case of Kununurra, the local police officer came to the polling centre and said to the Aboriginal people on the Saturday morning about half past seven (prior to the 8 o'clock commencing of poll) "You should all not be assembled down here. You should all go away and come back on Monday and vote", and all that sort of thing. It was pretty horrific stuff. It was unbelievable conduct really, which I think everybody, including members of the party, regretted in subsequent years. Things had got right out of hand. Certainly the lawyers, I don't think, have ever [forgiven] themselves for that process really.

AR I believe there was a 44-gallon drum of port -

BRIDGE That was the next election.

AR It was a real tribute to you in a way that you were seen as a terrific threat if they had to go to those lengths.

BRIDGE Yes. What took place, of course, at the end of the wash-up, I was defeated by 80-odd votes. I should have won it by about 2 000 [votes] as it turns out, but I lost by about 80 votes. Then I called for the results to be overturned in the Court of Disputed Returns. And that's what took place. We then had a Court of Disputed Returns take place and the findings were that I was denied a number of votes, well in excess of the numbers that I'd lost by and so the court ruled and declared that there should be a fresh election.

AR So that court highlighted what had happened.

BRIDGE All of the things that took place were highlighted in that Court of Disputed Returns. It's summarised in the information that is contained in the transcript of the Court of Disputed Returns.

AR I imagine that they did regret what they'd done if it came out publicly.

BRIDGE Yes, very much so. And then of course what happened is that we then went to a second election. One of the tragedies of the second election for me was the fact that the people were humiliated to such an extent at the previous election, that many of them could not face up to another go. And so I lost by 80-odd votes the second time around. But the election that followed those events - in that second round was when the 44-gallon drum of wine was delivered to Turkey Creek.

AR Yeah, I think people find that hard to believe now. Could you just tell us a little bit about it?

BRIDGE Yes, there was again a pre-determined decision taken by the workers of the Liberal Party, as opposed to the Labor Party. They had concluded it seems that I was close to winning the election and that what needed to happen was to try and target a major polling centre and try and disrupt the extent of votes in that location so that that would give them a chance, maybe, of pulling off the election, you see. And so a couple of these fellows in Kununurra in their wisdom said, "We'll deal with it. What we'll do is, we'll head up there with this 44-gallon drum of wine, we'll get there in the early hours of the morning and wake everybody up and get them so drunk that they won't be able to proceed in any voting anyway, and so we'll disrupt the whole poll that way".

AR These were Liberal supporters who decided that?

BRIDGE Yes, Liberal supporters. I don't know if it even was a strategy of the Liberal Party; I don't think that's ever come out. But certainly they were out there to oppose me anyway, so I can only assume they were Liberal Party supporters. But it didn't work. When they got there they started handing out buckets of wine in little containers and there was a bit of a fight that took place amongst a couple of people, the police were called in and the whole thing was disrupted [chuckles] before the poll started. So the attempt failed abysmally in the early hours of the morning. [Laughs] It didn't work. But that was what the purpose was, to get everybody so drunk that they could not vote when it came 8 o'clock in the morning and the poll opened. Pretty awful stuff, isn't it?

AR Yeah.

BRIDGE But then the interesting thing, of course, is the three years after that, at the next election, I stood again and, of course, won easily. And that was when everything changed. Once I got into politics - it is interesting you know, there was a very profound resistance and fear of my entry into politics that seemed to be held by a lot of locals. But once I got there and became the member for Kimberley that all dissipated to a considerable degree in a very quick time. The rapid transition of attitude was quite dramatic. It was just that fear of the unknown, I think. You know, it was sort of a savages mentality, Bridge represents the savages of the country, you know - black fellas. You can't afford to take the risk with those people having power, you know, that very stupid negative and quite irrelevant and inappropriate conduct. It went through the system up there. The political atmosphere in the Kimberley was shrouded with that sort of crazy thinking. It was before my success, but it certainly did not continue to be the case after I got into politics and certainly there are no examples of that at all in the subsequent elections I contested right through until I retired.

AR That fits with what you said earlier about your presence - simply being there changed things.

BRIDGE Yep, that's right. The sort of things that went on during those election days in the Kimberley were absolutely extraordinary. For example, the local minister for Housing . . .

END OF TAPE ONE SIDE A

TAPE ONE SIDE B

BRIDGE Tom Stephens was arrested in Kununurra and transported into the police lock-up in Wyndham.

AR What had he allegedly done?

BRIDGE He was allegedly involved in some inappropriate conduct that was associated with the election and the poll and the general lead-up to the election. At the same time, a lady called Jenny Scott was arrested in Kununurra and taken into Wyndham lock-up with a little baby in arms. Stephen Hawke, the son of the former Prime Minister, was arrested in Fitzroy Crossing.

AR All at election time?

BRIDGE All at election time, allegedly claiming that they had been involved in persuasion or coercion and all of those sorts of things of the Aboriginal voters.

AR So because it was the first time that Aboriginals in large numbers had turned out to vote -

BRIDGE Yes, I think there was a massive difficulty. There was tremendous difficulty that non-Aboriginal people had about the right of Aboriginal people to express a view in political terms. Historically, of course, that's been Australia. They didn't have voting rights until, as you know, the middle of the 1960s and then for many many years they weren't even encouraged to become enrolled. There was always this historical feature of Australia's time of development where it seems that there was no encouragement and certainly almost downright resistance to the Indigenous people having a place in the political arena. Therefore, because of that, they were not encouraged to assume any place in the process where they could exercise a vote. I think that highlighted itself very prominently in those early days of my entry into politics in this State. If you look at history and think

about this uniqueness of my entry into politics, it's probably not hard to understand that, because up until now I am the only Indigenous person of any Government in Australia (certainly in WA) who has become a minister of the Crown. They have them now in the Northern Territory administration, which is not quite Government. It was pretty unique and it was very different.

AR So there you were the first Aboriginal member. What sort of a response did you get when you entered Parliament from other parliamentarians?

BRIDGE Well, I think very good.

AR That antagonism didn't flow through?

BRIDGE No, the antagonism did not. There was a couple of members of Parliament who held some animosity towards me and highlighted by their body language. I think that remained for many years in terms of those couple of individuals. But in the main, politicians from all quarters and from all sides of politics seemed to accept me quite positively once I entered politics. I found good support and encouragement in the political arena. The extent of viciousness that was evident in the Kimberley certainly didn't follow me into politics, as such, when I entered Parliament. We had a few stoushes in the Parliament, but they were different things and were not necessarily associated with that period in the Kimberley.

AR Yes, they weren't stoushes to do with race.

BRIDGE Political stoushes. There were one or two occasions when I think race featured in the parliament debate. There are only one or two members of Parliament that I would say, in my opinion, if we talk about being people being racist, they certainly were, in my experience. But that's about all.

AR Did you find that your experience in shire work had prepared you for life in Parliament?

BRIDGE I didn't quite sense it in the days when I was a backbencher. I sort of saw politics as being quite removed from the functions of local government to the extent that it was different, you know, it was all about point scoring and politicising issues. It was all about a number of other things that went on in the lives of politicians, not always, in my opinion, directed towards the needs of people and the concerns of people. So that was a uniquely different situation. I thought basically in local government most of the time councillors were engaged in issues that directly related to the interest of their constituents. There was no doubting that. I saw that demarcation line as being the real apparent difference. I thought to overcome that by concentrating my focus on my constituents, that I was there to represent the Kimberley people. I was there to represent all people irrespective of what their background was and I was going to concentrate on that. There was a concentration on my part that enabled me to manage what I saw as the difference of approach by people in politics as opposed to local government. But on entry into the Cabinet ranks, is where I then realised and discovered my preparation in local government was quite profound. I was able to quickly understand issues. I was able to engage myself in assertive ways in dealing with the heads of the departments about matters that came to me for attention because I had that background. I could question them, I could challenge them, I could query them. That was all very important because a minister's not much good if you don't have that background. If you have to rely always on opinions and advice that is tended to you, you're really only a puppet. That experience and that decision-making process that I was about in the 18 years in local government (15 years as shire president) was highly important for me as a minister. And it is there that I noticed and respected and understood that experience as being very helpful for me.

AR When you first went into Parliament, was anyone, or more than one person, a particular help to you?

BRIDGE No -

AR Given that you weren't interested in the political side of things in a way, who helped to guide you in the way the place was run and so on.

BRIDGE Oh yes, there were really good people in the Parliament and in the Labor Party. There were really good people. People like the late Colin Jamieson was very good. He was very supportive. I think he took a personal interest in my entry into politics. He felt when he campaigned for me in the Kimberley that it was a worthy pursuit, you know? So there were personal areas of interest. The late Ken McIver was another person who took a lot of interest in me and the late John Harman. They had a personal linkage with me. There was friendship and a profound amount of relationship beyond politics that they shared with me. I suppose it was through their stewardship and nurturing of my early areas of involvement that was very profound, you know? I have to say that there were a couple of people on the Opposition side who were also very good in that way and we got on very well together. We had a good friendship. I'd go to the bar, for example, and I'd have a chat with them. I found it difficult to understand how there was a resentment and resistance about sharing ideas and yarns and that in the bar at Parliament. You go in with your own colleagues and don't dare congregate with anybody else. I found that to be difficult, and I broke that.

AR Who in the Liberal Party would you count among those?

BRIDGE The late Cyril Rushton was very good. He was what I would have termed a friend. In subsequent years when he was alive, the late Andrew Mensaros. There were others as well who appeared to develop an attitude and a friendship with me that certainly did not bring the Kimberley scene into our relationship. I liked that and they were people that I had an opportunity to talk to freely and we spoke freely. There were members from both sides of the House that I would say were helpful in giving me that early support and encouragement and enabled the development of a country boy,

notwithstanding the fact that I had gone through a long period in local government, to make the transition into politics.

AR Did your family move to Perth with you?

BRIDGE Yes. Once I became the member for Kimberley, the transition was then made and the family moved to Perth. In the very early days of my time as the member for Kimberley, we were still resident in the Kimberley at Halls Creek. I used to work on the basis of coming down for sittings and then I would fly back on the weekends. But I found after a while that it was an impractical way of being a member. You found that you were having to deal with aircraft schedules. You spent a lot of time travelling and, above all, it was the inability to communicate about matters that was the biggest frustration. You had to rely on telephone systems that were not working all that well back then. I said to myself that if I'm going to genuinely and effectively represent my electorate, I had to get down here where the action is. This is where the decisions are made, this is where all of the lobbying has to take place and so the decision was made to move to Perth and to reside down here. I am sure it was the proper decision because I was always there where the action was. You always had to do that. For example, when I went into Cabinet, as a cabinet member, I always had to go in on the basis that I was against 15 or 16 cabinet ministers whose interest they put forward was about their own electorates or issues. You were in competition with your colleagues. It is not right to say everybody is in concert because it is not the case; you have to fight your battles. I always had that view whenever I went to politics, first and foremost came the Kimberley electorate and its constituents, and nothing was second.

AR Did you go up there on a regular basis so that people could come to you with their problems?

BRIDGE Oh yes, very regularly. No more than 10 days apart. Every week almost without exception all through those years. I made sure that that took place. I believe that I created a unique precedent in terms of travel and

the exposure of a member to the electorate. Before I came into politics, those of us who resided in the north did not expect that the local member would be seen as frequently as I was seen. But I felt it was important that I set in place this trend. It's followed on. Everywhere you go now you see that sort thing emerging and even to the extent that people are required on entering politics to set up their offices in the electorates that they represent.

AR So in those early days, were you given a sufficient amount to cover travel?

BRIDGE It was always tight; the electorate allowance was never overly generous. The airfares were very good. You had unlimited travel on the commercial flights so you could go off as many days in the week as you liked. Commercial travel was always very good. The electorate allowance was a bit tight. It is a lot better now. There is the policy nowadays that demands upon new members of Parliament to establish their electorate office in their electorate. I don't hold for that view. I can't see how I can be effective sitting in an electorate office in Halls Creek in the current political climate that prevails in the metropolitan area, because this is where the action is. If you're wanting to make representation to a senior officer on a personal basis, you have to walk down Hay Street to talk to that person, or that person comes to your electorate office. Ringing on a phone from Halls Creek is not the same. Phone conversations do not clinch too many deals. Personal contact has an enormous amount of impact. I'm not one that believes in the theory that you put yourself into a remote location because you're showing the electorate that you care for it. What is the point of having an electorate office in Halls Creek when you have Kununurra, Broome, Derby and other places?

AR The Kimberley is the extreme example, isn't it?

BRIDGE That's right, and you're just as close to them being in Perth as you are in Halls Creek. It is a wrongful theory. In my opinion, it is a less than constructive theory.

AR And you found that people were quite happy to contact you anyway in Perth?

BRIDGE That's right. I think the results of my election successes are indicative of that. I continued to increase my margin as I went through my career. People weren't disillusioned because I had chosen to set my electorate office up in Perth.

AR A few years after you entered, Brian Burke became Premier, didn't he and your party was in power.

BRIDGE That's right.

AR What differences did that bring about to your work?

BRIDGE Oh, a lot of difference, because you have a Government in power, as opposed to being in opposition. You see, I was only a backbencher in those early days of my political career. With your own party in government, you have the advantages to be able to have resources at your disposal that you would not otherwise have available to you in opposition. I guess it's the support mechanism that being in government offers a member of Parliament that is highly valuable in your area, both as a backbencher and then, of course, naturally when you become a minister. That was the big difference that I experienced.

AR The portfolios that you were given, were they ones you particularly wanted?

BRIDGE No, I was surprised to be approached by the Premier and asked if I would consider taking on a ministerial responsibility. It is interesting, even though I agreed that I would, the other thing that needs to be said about my entry into the ministerial ranks is that for the first six months of my ministerial responsibilities, I was only an honorary minister. They had to increase the Cabinet by two positions to enable myself and Gavan Troy to become official assertive ministers. The process had to be such that the honorary status that

I was given in the first instance would be accommodated by an official ministerial position once extra numbers were created in the Cabinet. That was about six months after I was invited to become an honorary minister. At the time that I was an honorary minister, I worked under the substantive ministers who were for water, Arthur Tonkin; for the north west, I think it may have been Keith Wilson, but I am not sure; and, for Aboriginal affairs, it was certainly Keith Wilson. But effectively what those ministers did was to say "Look, even though you are only an honorary minister, you run the portfolios as the substantive minister. As far as we're concerned, you know all about these portfolios". From day one, I really was given an assignment by my superior minister, so to speak, to assume total responsibility for the management of those portfolios. And that's what really took place. It was only a formality exercise six months down the track to have the honorary tag removed and the substantive position of minister recorded.

AR The north west and Aboriginal [Affairs] seem fairly obvious ones [portfolios] to have been given. Did water appeal to you at the beginning?

BRIDGE It was funny. Brian Burke came to me (he was preparing the list of names for the Cabinet) and said "You would expect that I'm going to give you north west and you would expect I'm going to allocate Aboriginal affairs to you. But I want you to take on water resources as well". I said, "Fair enough; if you want me take on water resources, I will". But I hadn't expected it, I wasn't aware of it and I hadn't certainly talked about it, it just came out of the blue. But I'm very thankful to Brian that he made that decision, because I think, without a doubt, the water resources portfolio offered me a wonderful opportunity to do a lot of exciting things for the State in that period of seven years. It remains clearly now a profound legacy and a measure of the success of my life as a politician and as a minister, the events that have been put in place in my time as minister for water resources, without a doubt. Agriculture was very good. The next election, I think it was, I was given agriculture as an additional portfolio. That was a good portfolio in terms of the importance of agriculture to this State. But in terms of being able to contribute

to the interests and needs of the people, the water portfolio was really outstanding.

AR Did your interests lie with problems of water and the country more than with the metropolitan area?

BRIDGE No. I think centrally I became very involved in the interests of the metropolitan area. I've never really lost that interest, even today I continue to advocate how the solutions and needs of correcting the problems of Perth's water needs can be attended to. It has always been a focal point of my attention in the bigger picture, so to speak, in the visionary lateral thinking approach to the State's need, Perth has always occupied an important position. In terms of just meeting the needs of people, the just needs of people with a reliable water supply as a basic infrastructure, the country did have a lot of my attention given to it. There are countless projects out there running now that were created during that period. As a matter of fact, it is often said in the country by farmers and others that there's never been known to be a period of time in their recollections of the State when there was such huge development of water schemes around the State as took place during that period of my ministry. I think that's probably a fair comment. There are 180-odd plaques out there with my name, bearing testimony to the people and myself working together to develop water supplies. There wouldn't be too many politicians who would come anywhere near that score. It was very unique. Probably it was outstanding because of the people who worked with me. It was them as much as me as the minister that made all that happen.

AR I'd certainly hope to go into all of that in more detail further on. What was it like being in the Burke Government? It was a big change from what had gone before. It was young and there seemed a great sense of excitement. Did you feel that?

BRIDGE Yes, there was no doubt being a minister in the Burke Government was an exciting period of my life. It was exciting for the reasons that I always felt that Brian Burke was a very good Premier. There's no

doubting that, notwithstanding all of the things that evolved in this State since his elevation to the Premier position in the State Government. He had great natural ability to be a good leader. He had a good brain and was quite alert at reading the play. He just seemed to have an ability to get on with his colleagues. You felt good about working for the Premier. In my opinion, he displayed great characteristics as a good Premier. It was good working for him and with him.

AR Did you ever find that you had a conflict of interest or had to make really hard decisions as Minister for Aboriginal Affairs?

BRIDGE Certainly hard decisions. There is no doubt there were many times when I needed to address that issue. But not conflict. If I can say this without being self-imposing and boastful, I always had the ability to be able read the play between resolution and conflict and to straddle that line effectively. I was able to bring the feuding forces together generally, almost on every instance. Often I'd bring these people into my office and I'd sit them down in the office and I'd say "Listen here, I'm not about seeing fights. This is not about a brawling business; it's about a resolution. Now you sit in this office with me and we work it out. There's got to be a solution, there's a way around it". I found that if you took that strong line with people generally, you reached solutions rather than conflict and continued conflict. I have to say I met those hard decisions but there's not any instances that I'm aware of where I could say the controversy or the conflict was overpowering.

AR Yes, because land rights could have been very difficult.

BRIDGE I rode in the middle of the land rights debate every which way I went out into the public arena throughout the whole State. We had public forums. Terrible things were said. I recall once in Port Hedland when a young bloke walked up to me and said, "Mr Bridge, you talk about land rights for black fellas. Have a look at this can of beer I've got in my hand. It's not black is it? It a different colour to the mob you're advocating. One day you people should all be like this can of coke, never mind about this black fella rubbish". I dealt with that. I just said to him "Well, you know, if you feel as if that's your attitude, that's your view mate, but I don't support you and you've

just got to accept the fact that I don't support you". You know I could I have got off the podium and gone and whacked him under the chin. But that wouldn't have done any good because he was only a featherweight fellow and he would have flown through the wall probably. You just have to be practical. You've got to read the play and turn it around. In the end he was embarrassed rather than me being angry, you know? I think my dad was attributable to that quality, but I followed his footsteps. There was a couple of times when Robert Bropho got a bit agitated with me. But I never found myself in a position where I couldn't sit Robert down and say "Hang on Robert, you might like to get angry, but I can tell you I can be just as angry as you and what's that going to do? Let's get down and sort things out". We did that. When I went through that Bennett Brook dispute about the gas pipeline with him, in the height of controversy with the SEC wanting that, we finished up with no difficulties at all and they have a gas pipeline that runs under Bennett Brook now and everybody's happy. There were examples of controversy, but generally speaking they were not matters that, in the end, I had difficulty in resolving.

AR You used mediation rather than confrontation.

BRIDGE I think the other thing is that in the main people have trust in me, you know? They knew that I was there for resolution rather than harbouring conflict. A lot of politicians, of course, don't do that. They go in with a pre-determined position and their body language reflects that. Of course, people pick up and away they go. I've had angry farmers fighting each other almost, come into my ministry office when I was the Minister for Agriculture, and go out being as happy as Larry. We had some controversy about the sale of the Midland sale yards, which were highly controversial issues in terms of the varying forces out there, not controversial as far as I was concerned, but certainly as far as the vested interest of people out there. I used to get them into my ministry, sit them in there and say "You're not leaving here until we've resolved it". It worked.

TAPE FOUR SIDE A

This is Anne Rogers interviewing Ernie Bridge for the Parliamentary History project tape four, on the 30th of July 2003.

AR Ernie, today I would like to talk about the Aboriginal issues that were facing the State Government in the early eighties. I am wondering if we could start with Nookanbah - your recollections of what happened there.

BRIDGE It was a horrible scene at the time of the Nookanbah dispute because of the mobilisation of so many of the local Aboriginal people in fighting the cause of the position which the Nookanbah people were wanting the government to accept; that was, that they were fearful that there would be disturbances that would be brought about by the activities of the mining operations, particularly with the drilling, and they begged upon the State Government at the time to respect that concern and to work with them through ways in which it could be avoided. Because of the emotional strength of their argument, and I guess the traditional and spiritual belief and strength of the argument put forward by the local Yungngora people at Nookanbah, they were able to gain enormous backing and response from a wide range of areas of the community and, therefore, there were many people involved. Of course, that sort of all came to an end when the convoy reached the Nookanbah location and there were those arrests that were undertaken by the police within the near proximity of Nookanbah itself.

AR I wonder if you could give me a little of the background of that, about the convoy.

BRIDGE The convoy was a number of trucks - large prime movers and road trains - that were employed by Amex - I think it was the company - in the movement of their drilling equipment from down in the south west, down in Perth, up to the site at Nookanbah. Originally there was a local fellow called O'Driscoll who was supposed to do the drilling. When he put his equipment on site, he met the opposition from the people there and was confronted by

their resistance to the work being done. He chose then to pull out; he removed his equipment from the location within that area known as Pea Hill and went back into Derby. It was at that stage that the government said, "We are not just going to leave it where our drilling contractor is withdrawn, but, in fact, we are insisting that the drilling contract be completed." That is when the other company became involved in the operation. So there was this large convoy of these heavy haulage operations transporting this equipment from down here up the Great Northern Highway. They were met with protest rallies, road blocks and all kinds of things on the way at every given point. There was massive resistance by the community generally. In Broome, for example, it was a horrible scene at the roadside - that is, where the road bypasses Broome. Then, of course, when the trucks eventually arrived at Nookanbah, there was a sit-in protest that was carried out by the people themselves. They effectively sat themselves in the middle of the road in a river bed. That was intended to stop the trucks from going in, you see. So the police then carried out arrests and arrested those people who were part of the protest. It cleared the way for the trucks to continue with the equipment to the location at this drilling site.

AR The incident at Broome, was that with protesters from further south who had gone up there?

BRIDGE A combination - protesters from the south, a large group of people from Broome. But the days leading up to that confrontation were badly handled in my opinion. I think the government ministers who were in charge of that exercise at the time took a fairly bloody-minded approach to it. Then in the end the pain of protest and the lack of a resolution forthcoming from the people just made it such that the government became quite defiant and really exerted their powers and influence and capacity as a state government, and of course it led to that confrontation. I was always of the view, and I am still of the view today, that had it been handled differently, had they been prepared to say to the people, "We appreciate your concern; we understand your concerns; and we have got to sit down and try to work out how we can still do this exercise without necessarily causing you any high degree of concern and

pain.” If you think about the attitude of the people back then, you would expect that they would have been prepared for resolution, but it became a stand-off warfare virtually. The might of the government of course prevailed in the end.

AR You were very new in parliament at that time, weren't you?

BRIDGE I was, but I was right in the middle of all that. I went up there on a couple of occasions and talked with the people under the bower shed at Nookanbah at the height of that disputation and always got a very responsible position being put to me by the people. I said that to the government ministers. Fred Chaney was then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the federal government. Ray O'Connor, as deputy premier, as he was then, had a number of discussions with me because he was in charge of some of the activities. They appeared to understand. I thought Ray O'Connor's attitude was capable of allowing a resolution to be gained and I think Fred Chaney desired that. But I think as far as the premier of the time [was concerned], he was not. Unfortunately, I think both minister Hassel and minister Grayden really did not cotton on to the theme at all.

AR Hassel was Minister for Aboriginal Affairs?

BRIDGE It may have been police, I think. I am not sure.

AR Grayden?

BRIDGE Grayden was environment, I think. I am not sure of their positions, but they played a leading role in representing the government's position. They really were, in my opinion, the wrong people to try to adjudicate over a conciliatory process being arrived at; it was too dogmatic. “You simply have to toe the line because this is good for everybody in the country and, as Aboriginals, you have just got to recognise that” - that sort of attitude. It just did not break the shackles of resistance. So it led to that nasty scene, which of course has become documented in history now as the

Nookanbah confrontation and I think has left a fairly nasty stain in terms of the relationship between that group and governments and particularly the community at large. I think it is something that when it is referred to by conversation even today has a measure of regret associated with it.

AR Regret by?

BRIDGE By the people generally. I do not think that community at large liked what happened at Nookanbah.

AR In a way though didn't it strengthen the position of Aboriginal communities? It was really the first big confrontation, wasn't it?

BRIDGE It was, and it led to a number of things. For example, the creation of the Kimberley Land Council was born out of that confrontation and the nature of things that went on with the Nookanbah confrontation. The land council is viewed in all kinds of ways by people generally in society, but for whatever that might be, their opinion, it stands to reason that the Kimberley Land Council has been quite a significant voice since then. It was put in place for purposes to highlight the views of the indigenous people and the need for governments to recognise these views.

AR That would be the body that the government and communities would communicate through?

BRIDGE That was always the purpose of the Kimberley Land Council, to be an advocacy body reflecting and representing the true position of the Aboriginal people in terms of land matters. It has taken on, I think, other forms of activities in recent years, which are not necessarily as directly related to land issues alone, as its origins were about. But that is just the way things happen in politics; they do go down modified versions of intent, so to speak, as they grow older. That has happened. Then you have that. The other thing that happened in the middle seventies into the eighties was things like the Skull Creek royal commission. It was about that time that that

incident came up. So there was the manifestation over a 10-year to 15-year period of a range of issues that in one way or another convinced a range of people, be they Aboriginal people or governments, of structural changes that needed to be made. I guess ATSIC was one that came out of all that as well. I think ATSIC was an unfortunate mix of a bad minister at work introducing a program. I have always said that publicly, I continue to . . . I do not think that Gerry Hand as the minister then handled the concept of ATSIC at all well, but then there may be a case to say that his intention was decent and was genuine. But the way in which he went about it was always fraught with danger in my opinion. Of course, nowadays the realisation of those wrongdoings and the early creation of it are now manifesting themselves and coming back to kick everybody, including the Aboriginal people. So there were a lot of changes made, a lot of hostility, a fair degree of bad feeling and a heightened degree of the loss of trust of any kind. But it has continued, see. Over the years it has not even diminished that much. Nowadays when you look at the upheavals of ATSIC at the moment and you see the things that are being said for and against, you see that issue of true trust, true recognition, still being question-marked. It hovers there in the way in which people adjudicate over processes from the minister right through the process to the bottom end of the scale or from the other way, from the community at the grassroots level through the administrative processes of their representation to the higher level of government decision-making. Trust is still an issue that has not been sensibly put to rest. It is more to do with the way in which the processes are being conducted than that of the non-Aboriginal society and the Aboriginal society never wanting to work together. That has never been the case. There has always been a desire by all sectors of the community to work in a conciliatory way, to work as best they can together in harmony, but it is the players, the actors, the advocates, the decision makers, the influential people, the people who drive the system who have been responsible for that lack of the bridging of real trust. So it is ongoing. Whilst it was bad back in the eighties, it has not diminished all that much at the early turn of 2000s.

AR Another thing that began with the Nookanbah crisis it seems was the highlighting of government treatment of indigenous peoples to the

outside world. There was a delegation to the United Nations subcommittee on human rights in Geneva at that time.

BRIDGE Yes, there was no doubt that the Nookanbah issue, the confrontation and the extent of it, was a big, big issue in Australia. Because of that, you did get a mobilisation of the indigenous people and their supporters. We have got to go internationally to start to say the things about our country that need to be heard.

AR Do you remember what sort of response there was to that?

BRIDGE I think there was always positive response. I think when they went to those conventions they got a good hearing.

AR The government seemed very unhappy.

BRIDGE The governments of Australia frowned upon them and criticised them, and said that they would not go outside Australian shores: "If they had a problem to solve, they should just deal with us here." Tragically those are the shortcomings of government. The governments, irrespective of their persuasions, make a lot of blunders. They create a lot of blunders for society's needs. Then when society reacts in a way that governments do not like and they start to venture overseas in support of their interests, of course, the governments then criticise vehemently that course of action. So it is just a typical parliamentary reaction, and I suppose will continue on while we have politicians in those places of influence and protecting their little patch. It all comes down to one fundamental thing when you think about politics. The greatest thing is to protect your little patch because you want to be there the next day, you want to be there the next year.

AR Soon after all of the Nookanbah dispute there was a new one at Gordon Downs station.

BRIDGE Yes, a small one, at a little place called Ringers Soak. It was not that big - nowhere near the Nookanbah dimension. That again was about a piece of land that was being claimed. It was more the claiming of an area of land for the purpose of developing a community. Whereas the Nookanbah one was quite different; it was touching on traditional rights and the government's capacity to apply their decree for any purpose however they wanted to apply that purpose.

AR I suppose the Ringers Soak one highlighted what was to become the whole land rights problems and Aboriginal people being dispossessed and forced off the station.

BRIDGE Absolutely. If you were to trace the chain and the linkage of those individual issues in a chain of command, you would find they probably all had their origins towards supporting the Mabo native title claim as well. In the end it was not just Eddie Mabo alone then who was fighting that issue. He fought the issue of injustice to do with the Meriam Islands, and he won that battle without the support of the Nookanbah disputation. When it came to the then governments responding to the High Court decision and saying that there is a legitimate need for us now to respond to the High Court rulings on the native ownership issue or indigenous issues, first-Australian issues, then all these other factors would be brought into the equation.

AR It all built up.

BRIDGE It all built up.

AR Around that time there was a delegation from the World Council of Churches that seemed to get Premier Court's back up.

BRIDGE Yes, they came into the exercise and he got quite angry about their involvement. Again, I think it is this whole thing about the empowerment that politics provides individuals. They go too far with it. It is not an infrequent thing that politicians abuse their power. They assert a degree of authority

beyond what is a reasonable measure of their role and duty as a politician. So you get that kind of thing; you get an individual who ventures out, and because of their own personal thing, not necessarily for the good of the nation or the people, and they say quite strong things. Of course, they are a power that can be quite strong.

AR Did you meet up with that delegation?

BRIDGE No, I had not met with them.

AR Also in 1981 there was a decision to make departmental files relating to Aboriginal affairs difficult to access. Do you remember that?

BRIDGE It is the kind of thing that the Aboriginal people and their advisers and supporters were saying for countless years. It was in fact happening in the government anyway. So I suppose it was strange to think that suddenly they would put something in that would be harder again to access the information, because it was never that freely forthcoming anyway; it was always been kept. The Aboriginal people basically have been kept in the dark. That is the real truth. How you want to interpret that truth is a matter of personal opinion, but, you know, they went through a long period without being citizens of the country. It was only in the middle sixties that they became citizens of the land. So when they were not citizens they were told nothing. In the many years following the granting of citizenship rights under that referendum, they were still not told very much, and they still were not treated as being anything other than non-citizen individuals. So there is a long history of that keeping away from public scrutiny information to do with the indigenous people of the State.

AR I suppose your entry into Parliament was at an interesting point in time, because it would have taken some years for the Aboriginal people to become more aware of their rights generally. I think you came in at about that time when they were beginning to see that.

BRIDGE I am sure that a consensus taken of the indigenous people who understand that period of my entry into politics and the range of things that have followed it would agree that there has been a range of fairly significant changes. I mean, the opening up of the franchise in local government elections, for example, where Aboriginals could vote in council elections was something I was involved in and instrumental in bringing about. Before I came into the political scene it was unheard of for an Aboriginal person to be in local government. The reason why it was unheard of, unless you were a ratepayer owning a property, as I was with my family business, you did not get a vote, so you could never get on council. There were those sorts of things that are not now recorded in history but should be, of the importance of the opening up of the adult franchise in local government, because if you look around the State now, you will see many Aboriginal people occupying positions in local government, and there are several who have gone on to become shire presidents, following in my footsteps. I was the first ever, but there have been others who have followed since this. Josie Farrer, who has been the president of the Halls Creek shire for a number of years. There are others you could talk about. They have had people who have got local government and shires established in the remote region of the State - the Ngaanyatjarra Council, which consists of all Aboriginal people, virtually. So that was a fairly significant transition as well. That was to create a better understanding and an opportunity of more information being disseminated and the recognition of the people's legitimate role in being a part of the mainstream Australian society. There have been huge changes that have come about since, I suppose, the commencement of the eighties.

AR In 1985 I see Thomas Newbury in the Wiluna area. Do you recall that one in particular?

BRIDGE Yes, I do. I knew Thomas very well.

AR Could you explain a bit about that situation? There was some anger, I think, about his election.

BRIDGE Yes, it was again a localised form of anger. There was disputation and divisions that were created out there, but, again, he was elected, and he was an Aboriginal person. It has not always been plain sailing, mind you, for those individuals who have had the opportunity of getting into positions of influence. The Aboriginal people have constantly faced -one thing that I think has been regretful and very sad in a way - they have preoccupied themselves in many instances with this tall poppy syndrome mentality, where if there is an Aboriginal person who is elevated through the ranks to an important position, there is something wrong with that. There is either something wrong about the individual or that person has got there by means of other wrong doings that have elevated that person, because they are not back with us sitting here, throwing the bullets of criticism. So the tall poppy syndrome has always been a negative as far as Aboriginal progress is concerned. It is still in existence today. You see the disputes that are going on right now within our communities, and you can trace them back to a large extent to this mentality, this syndrome of tall poppies and the attack of fellow indigenous people on those seemingly - seemingly - doing all right. That was the sort of thing that Thomas Newbury was up against. We have all had a go at that. I had plenty of that thrown at me over the years. It never diminished right through. I probably got it from all colours and creeds.

AR I think Thomas Newbury's was slightly different from yours, in that he was not living in the town, was he?

BRIDGE That is right.

AR He was not seen as part of the mainstream.

BRIDGE That is right. That was his disadvantage.

AR The State Government seemed reluctant to allow the Commonwealth Government to have any say in Aboriginal people and lands.

BRIDGE In the early life of the organisation, which was set up under the Whitlam Administration, called the Land Fund Commission, of which I was one of the inaugural members, we went through a period of significant acquisition of properties throughout Australia. I think in the period that I was there, before I stood down to become member for Kimberley, we acquired some 42 properties Australia-wide. Apart from the Queensland Government's absolute resistance to any proposals to make land available to the Aboriginal people or the Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland, generally speaking, we had a very good run, and there was a fair degree of cooperation that seemed to flow from the States as well, but then progressively the States hardened up. I think it is probably because they saw the extent to which land was suddenly being converted into Aboriginal ownership from non-Aboriginal interests, and there was a range of strategies put in place to obstruct the orderly processes of transfer. I think the Carson River property is a good example of that. The Commonwealth Government in its wisdom had to restructure really the way in which the new negotiations were taking place, to persuade the State Government into agreeing. That, I think, then became a bit of a pattern. I think the people's ability to acquire properties for a while was tough, but then in more recent years it has been very much relaxed. There have been a lot of acquisitions made in subsequent years.

AR The Carson River station, that was one that the government obstructed the Commonwealth Government processing.

BRIDGE That is right, into the ownership of a newly established entity in which the Aboriginal people had a stakeholding position. I think all those sorts of areas of resistance have been tamed more significantly in recent years.

END OF TAPE FOUR SIDE A

TAPE FOUR SIDE B

AR Ernie, would you please explain to me the background for the Seaman inquiry on Aboriginal land rights?

BRIDGE Yes, I am able to do that, Anne. When the Burke Government took the decision that it would explore the possibilities of land rights being brought into this state through a legislative program, through legislation in the Parliament of Western Australia, it, of course, had the obvious reaction from the Opposition led by a famous Mr Bill Hassell who fought vigorously against that being even remotely considered.

AR Wasn't he the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs?

BRIDGE Yes, he was.

AR You would think that he would have been there to –

BRIDGE He should have been the greatest supporter of it, but instead of that, he was the most ardent knocker or opponent of it. Anyway, Burke, to his credit, stood strongly about his position and the State Government's position and, of course, said that, subject to information being collated and consultation with the Aboriginal communities around the state, drafting of legislation would be undertaken by the State Government and introduced into the Parliament enacting native title. With the need for consultations to be undertaken extensively there was a need for an organisation or an operational arm of the government to be able to oversee that process. So, instead of it being run out of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet or the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and/or some other department, Burke chose to set up the Seaman inquiry to go out and to collate the information, so it was an independent process of talking to the community, talking to the groups of people, gaining from them what their interpretation of land rights was to them and what reasons they would want a State Government to enact legislation for that purpose. That is how the Seaman inquiry came into being; it was really to gain the understanding of the lack of land tenure in the eyes of the

indigenous people and the need for there to be a legislative framework in place to correct that imbalance. Seaman went about that for a lengthy period of time. Then, at the end of his investigations and inquiries - consultations is probably the better word - he prepared a report for the government.

AR You played an active role in the inquiry, didn't you?

BRIDGE Yes, I played the role of a chairman of a supporting committee. There was a small group appointed by the premier. There were about four of us, from memory, and I was the chairman of that committee. The committee's role was really just to receive submissions from various Aboriginal groups and to recommend to the government funding support. Our role was really just to collate this information to make a judgment as to the bona fides of the applications and then to report to premier and cabinet, and then the funding to support their ability to make representation to Mr Seaman would follow. The funding was to enable them to do their homework, prepare their grand plan and their arguments and put forward those arguments to Mr Seaman as he sought information from these various groups. Our job was to ensure that they were resourced to do that work. That was our role.

.AR Did you travel around to do that?

BRIDGE No, we did not need to travel around because the funding applications would come centrally to us here in Perth. We had an officer who would collate that information and do the investigations and get the background information as to why the submission was being put to us. If we needed to go out and satisfy ourselves as a committee, we did travel, but we hardly ever did that.

AR So something they needed was to put together these submission, was it?

BRIDGE Yes, to put their case in a calculated, properly constructed way, and then to go in to Seaman when he visited their area and to say that we

were wanting to support land rights and the reason why we wanted to support land rights, and, "We want you, Mr Seaman, to hear us. It is contained in this outline that we have prepared for you." There were other things, like transporting people from one location to another location, and things like that. For example, if the hearings were in Newman, then people from Jigalong probably wanted to be assisted in transportation, or from Punmu community or Cotton Creek - those sorts of things. It was not just about written submissions; it was about generally making it possible for these people around the state to have a realistic opportunity to present themselves to Mr Seaman.

AR Was the outcome satisfactory?

BRIDGE The Aboriginal people of the state would say no, simply because land rights was not carried by way of legislation; there was legislation drafted and there was legislation entered into the Parliament by the then minister, Keith Wilson, who was Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. It was debated in the Assembly and was carried in the Assembly, but it was rejected in the upper House. So no attempts were then made to reintroduce the legislation; Burke then left it at that.

AR Does that make it a wasted effort, do you think?

BRIDGE Probably not. A lot of that information that was prepared for that Seaman inquiry, I would have thought was very valuable information that guided people and assisted people in the bigger picture that was to follow; that is, the native title issues that are now being confronted by the nation. There is a lot of historical data that came out of the Seaman inquiry. There were very good reasons, so much so that the mining industry supported the passage of legislation in the Assembly; we had the mining people lobbying the Assembly.

AR Why was that?

BRIDGE Because they thought it was only a decent thing to do, that if you had a race of people in this state who were clearly denied legitimate rights to land, that was, even with the mining industry having no doubt a very important interest in the process, they were still prepared to live with the recognition that land rights were a fundamental part of the system that needed to be addressed. So they supported us to that extent. But all of that, including their support, had no influence whatsoever on a hostile Council, as it was, and they canned it very quickly. It did not see the light of day in the upper House.

AR It would it have helped clarify for the communities, I would think, their rights and ways of going about making those heard?

BRIDGE Very much so. There were in many instances very professionally constructed submissions. To that extent they had professional people helping them in that process. Just as they now have legal people helping them with submissions on native title. So with all of that support of interested people who could articulate a line of thinking, it was helpful for the indigenous communities to have that support. It no doubt brought out more clarity, more awareness and the greater extent of where their rights were being effectively denied. So it was a good thing. There is no doubting that historically Australia has shockingly denied the indigenous race land tenure. It is a brutal indictment. Terra nullius is the most disgraceful, immoral part of our whole history, when the word says that nobody occupied this land before western entry into Australia. It is brutally, disrespectful, immoral and everything, and yet we had a nation that lived with that and was happy to live with it for 200 years.

AR And enormous resistance to changing that.

BRIDGE Enormous resistance, and look at it today. Even today, after we have all fought about the unbelievable horror aspects of terra nullius, you have still got the resistance going on; you have still got lawyers on behalf of governments making it almost impossible for genuine native title claims to be given the endorsement that they warrant. To be honest with you, it is so

brutal that you have almost got the inquiries, the investigations, the anthropologists and professional people going out there and inquiring as to how people made love up gum tree logs and things like that. It is abhorrent. The intrusion into cultural lives that native title has brought to bear because of Australia's resistance towards the genuine and proper acceptance that the indigenous race of Australia is entitled to a legal recognition and a proper recognition of their rights to land and the process that ought to be made in a decent way to deal with it - not in a hostile way, but in a decent way.

AR The journey towards land rights has actually brought more humiliation.

BRIDGE There is no doubting that - no doubting that. There are some instances where it is almost too hard to describe the extent to which the indigenous people are subjected to go to, in government inquisitorial means, to deny them a legitimate claim in terms of land. It is almost frightening. We did not quite have it as bad as that in the Seaman inquiry days because there were no land rights granted. I imagine that had it been granted, we would have gone through the very same things that they are being subjected to now under native title.

AR So even though these issues were very prominent at the time, it was still more exploratory - the mainstream had not really taken it on board that this was going to be there to stay.

BRIDGE That is right. You see, you did not have a High Court ruling like Mabo had that said, "You're right, Mr Mabo. Terra nullius is false, Mr Mabo. We support your view, and we are going to declare accordingly in the High Court." The land rights debate did not bring that judgment to bear; nobody got to that stage. Probably that may well have emerged had land rights been agreed upon, mind you, in the Western Australian Parliament.

AR When the legislation did not go successfully through, was the Seaman inquiry then seen as a waste of money?

BRIDGE No, it was not, and I will tell you why it was not. Because of my role as the chairman of the Seaman inquiry liaison committee, which is what it was called, the premier of the day, Mr Burke, said to me - no, not quite right; I am ahead of myself here. When I became Minister for Aboriginal Affairs subsequent to that period - I was not a minister then; I was only a backbencher - then in the years that followed with my time in politics I then became minister. One of the very early portfolios I was given was Aboriginal affairs. I was an honorary minister for Aboriginal affairs for six months, and the substantive minister was Keith Wilson, but Wilson took the view that I knew more about Aboriginal issues than him, and he gave me a free run at it. He said, "You act as if you are the minister and just come to me if you need some support and some substantiation of a course of action" and that sort of thing. Arthur Tonkin did the same with water. They both sort of handed over those two portfolios to me from day one; there was no such thing as this honorary business for six months - it never happened. Burke came to me early in the piece and said, "You know, we failed to deliver on land rights. That has caused an enormous amount of sadness and bitterness to the Aboriginal community in this state. It is a tragedy that it finished up like that." He said, "You know that we attempted to put it through the Parliament. We were unsuccessful." I do not know how strong Brian was about it, mind you. I do not know deep down in his soul how he felt about land rights, but, anyway, however he may have felt as an individual, he was the premier of the State Government that first sought to enact land rights. So we will give him full credit for that. There is no reason not to do that. He said, "I would like you to think about a way in which we can try to address this problem, this land tenure, non-access to land by Aboriginal people, and see if there is a way that we can administratively deal with helping them. So you think about it and come back to me." So I did that, and I had legal people working with me. As a matter of fact, there was one person working with me - Phil Vincent, a lawyer - who used to do things for me. He was my personal private secretary at that point in time. I said to Phil Vincent, "The premier has approached me about seeing if there is a way administratively, or in terms of a regulatory process, and if we could come up with something, he would support it." Phil thought about it for a while and he would come back and talk to me and go

away and he spoke to others. It became apparent that through a change brought about by a change in regulation, which did not require Parliament's approval, the minister of the day could actually make available to the people land under what was known as the 99-year leases. It was for a period of 99 years but, in a sense, in perpetuity because 99 years would ordinarily mean that. We came up with this formula and put it to the premier. He agreed with it. So for the duration of my time as Minister for Aboriginal Affairs - those three years that I was there - we went about the making available of land to these communities through the 99-year leases.

AR Was that land not leased by somebody else before?

BRIDGE It was land that was held in reserve by the government being transferred out of a reserves status into a 99-year lease status and then made available to the applicants who were wanting that land, and so it became effectively freehold title to that group of people.

AR Was that often land that they had lived on already?

BRIDGE Always, yes. Always. There was an enormous period of hand-overs. I went through 100-odd in my time. When Judyth Watson, who was the subsequent minister to me, was in there as Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, I think she said to me some years after that they had got up to 130-odd.
[laughs]

AR This happened quietly without general awareness?

BRIDGE Quietly without general awareness, without hostilities of the Parliament and no controversies, because it was something that we were perfectly able to do, it was quite legitimate and it was quite an orderly process of the functions of government. Of course, the people out there still have that today. You take the Ngaanatjarra council - the central reserves -

AR They are still doing that?

BRIDGE They are not doing it now but they still have it. Even those who do not have native title have got that. As a matter of fact, I was told recently by one of the officers from out at Ngaanatjarra in the central reserve that they had had a legal opinion from a QC in Victoria last year that said, "You don't need to get too excited about native title. The land you have got now is as good a tenure as you will ever want. You are on very safe grounds with your 99-year leases. Feel good about it."

AR That really came about through Burke giving you that ability to just sort it yourself?

BRIDGE That is right. He said, "You go out there and come up with an idea. Now you run with it and you sort it out."

AR Did the old, so-called native reserves fall into that as well; people actually came to own the places they lived on?

BRIDGE Yes.

AR That is wonderful.

BRIDGE They had total control and jurisdiction, whereas as a reserve, as you would know, they did not have that. The power of attorney with reserves was vested in the Crown, so a minister would make the decision, but once it was converted to 99-year leases, that all went. It was a magnificent formula. It was little known of but profound - profoundly proven. It opened up the avenues of land tenure that are out there now. Even with other areas, like out stations and all that, many of those have been granted 99-year leases.

AR That is something to look back on with a lot of pride.

BRIDGE Yes, that one is special. The pride about that is not just the securing of the land in terms of legal control and the legal capacity to determine, but the fact that it offered that enrichment of their life styles that

could follow it, because they could make decisions and they would be reliable in their decisions. Now programs still follow. The diabetes program again is about ownership of the lifestyle of the people, so that they determine how their diabetes is going to be managed and so on. The police one - getting these people into the service is the same thing. That sort of approach that I adopted early in life has found its way all through my political life. It sits there. If you followed it with a scan, you would see it going all through the lifestyle.

AR I look forward to asking you about your present day ones later on as well. Even though Burke was pushing for land rights, it seemed that he came under a lot of criticism over the defeat of the Bill and that some high profile ALP members quit over that.

BRIDGE I think that the criticism was ill directed at the premier. I think the ability of any premier to have land rights enacted in this state at the time of parliament as it was then, with a hostile upper House, was an impossible mission - just simply impossible - because it did not matter what you said, how you said it, how crucial it was to the community's overall interest, that group of people who made up the upper House membership at the time was not going to listen to anything along those lines at all. People will criticise and will continue to criticise Premier Burke for failing to have that legislation passed, but I was never prepared to criticise him. I think it will ill-founded, the criticism that was levelled against the premier, and I think it was inappropriate of those so-called high-flying Labor Party people to quit the party, because they had not cottoned on to it correctly. They were driven by emotives, emotional means of thinking about it. They probably had got to the point where they felt absolutely certain themselves that here was a good chance of success, when in fact there was always going to be a slight chance of success.

AR Given the Council?

BRIDGE Yes, given the Council. You were never ever going to change the stance of the Council, even if it was every citizen in Western Australia. I guarantee if they had taken a poll and there were a million people in Western

Australia that were counted and all except one person out of that million said they wanted that legislation to go through, that Council would have accepted that one person because it suited their position. When you have a parliament that is structured like that, how do you get legislation through. It just does not happen. Burke sensed that. I do not know if people understand but Burke was a very intelligent, very astute politician. He knew what capacity he had of success or not. Had he reintroduced that legislation, we still would not have got it through. They would have still canned it.

AR So he assessed the situation and allowed you to go the back way.

BRIDGE He could say that, which I think was very clever - which was very clever.

AR Is there any more you would like to comment about land rights, Ernie?

BRIDGE I suppose it is fair to say that given the political environment in the seventies, eighties and some part of the nineties, it was always going to be almost, well, impossible for a Labor government to get legislation through the Parliament enacting land rights. Had the Liberal Party chosen to do it, it would have gone through, because the Labor Party would have endorsed it and supported it. It just happened that while the attempts were made, Labor, as you know, occupied a fair bit of the government during those years, for a number of years from Burke's time of entry right through to Carmen's period in office. There was a long period of Labor government when there was a big push towards land rights, but it was always going to be very difficult because of community law. Whilst the mining industry supported us in the Parliament through the period of time that the Bill was in the Parliament, mostly they were hostile people towards land rights. I think for all the wrong reasons. They have always seemed to be of the view that you have got to have that land that is vested in the Crown as the premium source of land tenure where it gives them, in their opinion, unbridled capacity to do the things they want to do.

AR Exploration with mining.

BRIDGE Yes, an unbridled capacity to do exploration with mining. The truth of the matter is that no industry should have unbridled access, but they still believe in that concept. They still steer that wisdom generally within the mindset of a society. So it was tough days. I think the one good thing that has come out of native title in more subsequent years is that the mining industry and other industries that are now occupying themselves in having access to land have come to the realisation that whilst you might not like it, you have got to live with the fact that you cannot have unbridled access to land. That is the big shift now.

AR And the ground work was laid back in those days.

BRIDGE Absolutely, and what they do now is to try to be more, I guess, conciliatory in their discussions with indigenous interests and with the governments. So it was tough days back then; it is easier days now, but it is still tough. They still go out there and ask the families what they do up the gum tree log looking for witchetty grubs and all that sort of business, how did they do it, on what basis, which clan group did it. It is all just mind-bogglingly intrusive.

AR Is this, do you mean, when there is a process of getting permission for mining going ahead?

BRIDGE No. When there is a process of determining and proving the connection/rapport between the people who are claimants and the traditional land. It is a white man's way of determining that connection; it is not the Aboriginal way.

AR It seems the person in strength has the ability to do that.

BRIDGE Yes, that is right.

END OF TAPE FOUR SIDE B

TAPE FIVE SIDE A

This is Anne Rogers interviewing Ernie Bridge for the Parliamentary History project Tape Five, on the 16 of September 2003.

AR Today, I would like to start by asking you about police and indigenous people, and the issues that you have seen over the years.

BRIDGE I suppose it can be said that I had a very early introduction into the relationship between the indigenous people and the police, and it came about through observing the nature and the attitude that was displayed by police officers when it came to their relationship with Aboriginal people who were assisting the police in respect of many important, ah ... hunting ... exercises in search of escapees and also just to generally support the police in the conduct of a community environment. If I can sort of highlight one particular instance. In these early days of my involvement, there were Aboriginal people who were known as black trackers. They were known as black trackers because they had an identified role which was placed upon them by the community; that was, that because of their skills in tracking people down, their skills and knowledge of the bush, the country, the general terrain and the location and geographic factors of those areas of the State, they were perceived to be people who would have a very strong chance of being able to retrieve either people that had escaped from lock up or were out on the run and being wanted by police. These Aboriginal people were particularly good at their job. These black trackers were certainly very skilled people and were very much responsible for many a successful attempt by the police to capture people sought by them. It occurred to me that because of that unique strength of their ability, their support of the police and their recognition by the police of the value of their work that there would always be some special regard given to these people as ordinary citizens and just people living in a community. But I was absolutely astounded and aghast really to witness one particular incident, for example, which probably was many, but I happened to witness this one, where this Aboriginal person was wanting to be outfitted in khaki uniforms and also [wanting] to wear a badge

on his hat so that he could look like a policeman. He could be seen as having some status and he could be seen to be somebody who would, through that process, be able to communicate authoritatively with the general run of the community. I was surprised when he was told by a police officer, in my presence, "By day you work with the white policeman and you conduct yourself in the way in which a white policeman wants you to behave. By night you are an Aboriginal person. You have no authority. You have no status. You have nothing. Therefore, you go back to your camp and you just be a good guy in your dwelling until we need you when you report on call tomorrow morning, and that is the way, you have got to remember, is how we perceive your role working along side of us and on behalf of the community." I thought then, well, this probably clearly highlights and portrays the sad fact that in the hearts of police officers generally, they do not have much of a regard for the Aboriginal race.

AR So he did not even get his khaki uniform.

BRIDGE He got his khaki uniform but never his badge. In recent years, they have changed that style to where now you have currently Abpolos, who are liaison police officers who wear uniforms and have a medal attached to their cap. That signifies they are an enforcing person of the law. But back in those days it was not the case, and I think that notwithstanding the fact that even today with the medals and the badges and the numbers that are assigned to police officers who are Abpolos who are not fully commissioned police officers, there is still a demarcation of the assertiveness of that person in the minds of the police officers. I think that 50 odd years down the track, there has only been a slight change of attitude. I think the in-built class distinction mentality of an ideology of the police service still exists today, and it is a sad thing that it does because I feel that whoever it might be that has a law enforcing power, whether it is a police officer, politicians or some other person in a society, there should never be, never be an assumption that in dealing with people who might seem to be of a less stature than yourself that there is necessarily a measure of guilt that you associated with those individuals. It shouldn't be taken for granted and as a right that because they

are in a socioeconomically less advantaged position that there is a perception of some wrongdoing by those people. I think this is where the police service generally, historically, has made a hell of a blunder. I think they have never, ever got into this framework of teaching police officers that they have enormous powers but, at the end of the day, they are there to serve the good of the people, not necessarily to be preoccupied in attending to the conduct of the less good people, and maybe those people in our society who it might be perceived to be of ill will. The goodwill of the people is just as crucial a part of a good police officer as the ill will members of our society, but I think the police officers generally have never been taught that fundamental. They have never fully exhibited it anyway, and that is why sadly there is this strong-held view in society that there are some good police officers. People will not say every policeman is a good policeman. People will say there are some good police officers. I think that's a pity. I think that almost every police officer who has been commissioned to become an enforcing officer ought to generally be a good person. Their training, their background, the requirements of the delivery and the handling of power should ensure that those individuals are of an integrity, of a calibre, of a capacity, to be very good. To be very good. If you said to me, "Of 100 people who are police officers, what would you say ought to be a reasonably accurate - using the theory of one bad apple in a carton can damage the image of a carton of apples - if you said to me apply that in terms of numbers of police officers in your mind", I would say of every thousand police officers there should never be any more than 10 at the most that you could put in that wrong category. Now sadly, it's not the case. It's not the case. There are officers whose ill will, inappropriate to really manage power, sees that category being significantly higher than one out of every 1 000. I think it's reflected itself historically then in terms of the police's relationship with the Aboriginal people, because they have always been deemed to be of the socioeconomic lesser group in our society, for whatever the circumstances might be that you can associate that to, irrespective of how you come to that conclusion. It's a fact of life. I think that they've been given a pretty tough and a pretty bad run, over the couple of hundred years of the history of Australia. I think all of the steps that are now being taken to correct those sorts of attitudes and that kind of conduct, by codes of conduct, are not

before time, and they need to be aggressively pursued by the hierarchy of the police service; aggressively pursued and to leave no margin for error.

AR Are many Aboriginal people becoming police officers so that they are actually at the same rank as regular police officers, or is it mainly still community liaison?

BRIDGE Up until the last 12 to 18 months, that was entirely the position, but, fortunately, through a program that I personally have become engaged in, in cooperation with the WA police service, and I have to say in respect to this particular program, getting good cooperation from police officers, we are now changing that set of circumstances. In the short period of this program which is known as the skills training and enhancement program for entry into the WA police service, we've been able to successfully see about eight Aboriginal and people of ethnic origin go through our program and successfully enter the police academy. We are currently looking at the possibilities of several others going through with the current group that we have in training now. So there is a shift now, in my opinion, that is starting to, for the first time, address and target and to deliver to the WA police service a pool of personnel, in terms of indigenous background and background of ethnic origin, that accommodates the diverse police force in WA. The police make strong play of having a diverse police service in WA, but it's still very top heavy in terms of people of European descent. So we've got to balance the ledger a bit more yet to be talking about a pure and a properly developed diverse police service in WA, but at least now we are making significant strides down that pathway.

AR Of course, while there have been problems with indigenous people not being recognised as any sort of equals in the police force, there have been appalling incidents by police and the whole system upon Aboriginals with problems of the desperation of Aboriginals in custody. I wonder if you would like to comment on that?

BRIDGE I'll comment because it's a feature of their conduct that's saddened me. I, for many, many years, have said to police officers, "You

don't need to conduct yourself in such an aggressive, intolerant way towards the Aboriginal problems. Sure, there are those who commit crime, but you know you can manifest crime if you go about it the wrong way. You've got to remember as a police officer you can actually orchestrate a wave of crime by the misconduct and the lack of regard that you accord to people. They rebel, they react, it's a chain reaction of the human race. So try and be as decent as you can to them. See them as closely as you can as being human beings and deliver a greater degree of tolerance in dealing with them." The days of just chucking people here, chucking people there, tossing them into paddy wagons left, right and centre and then taking no account of their interpretation of what their conduct was prior to arrest is just not on. It's a false process of the effective law enforcement of the law. I believe there's been a shift there, mind you. I think that what the police officers were able to get away with 30 or 40 years ago they've got no hope now of even remotely trying to get away with. Society, not just the Aboriginal response, but society has come in and said we feel in the best interests of unity of harmony and of goodwill there has to be a re-focused approach taken by law enforcing officers of our society, be they police officers or whatever you like to term them, and, to that extent, I have seen the changes. But you know, through the years it has just been unfair. It really has been unfair, and I do not say that as somebody who has got any hang-ups. I have no chip on my shoulder. I have no axe to bear. I'm saying it as a very practical measure of what I term are the processes that I've seen happen and I've seen evolve over the last 30 or 40-odd years.

AR Do you think that the Aboriginal deaths in custody commission brought about many changes for Aboriginals in prison?

BRIDGE I think it did. It highlighted the severity of that problem and because it was able to highlight the outrageous set of circumstances of so many people dying in custody that there just had to be a series of strong measures taken. It's a shift in cultural behaviour you see. My view is this: wherever you get something that brings about for the better - not for the worse but for the better - a shift in a historical or a cultural part of the society, then it's always got to be said to be good because it's an improvement. You

shouldn't always just simply say, "Well look, let's measure the outcomes of how great these inquiries were and how good the recommendations were." You miss the point by always . . . and sadly as a society, we've missed many points because we're very strong on outputs and outcomes to measure everything, and if you don't see an outcome, you say well nothing's happened. But if you get a psychology factor brought to bear by some process where there is a shift of mind in society to the better, then it's a good thing. The deaths in custody inquiry created a mind shift, and to that extent there was a cultural shift, and a cultural shift in a nation is a good thing. So it was, in my opinion, a proper course of action that needed to be embarked upon and to be processed.

AR When I was in Port Hedland, a centre was set up where people who had drunk too much were taken there to be looked after for the night instead of being taken to a police lock up. I wonder if you see those sorts of initiatives as being a part of it?

BRIDGE Was that a sobering up shelter was it?

AR Yes.

BRIDGE Well again you see, people will speculate or will debate as to the value of such a facility, but, if you look at it objectively, it offers a facility beyond being locked up and incarcerated to the victims, and it's for the victims that that facility is set up. It's the victims who go to jail if there is not something alternative available to them. Given that it's an alternative to being put in a paddy wagon and thrown in the lock up, the answer is that they've had a useful purpose.

AR And in those places they were treated with respect.

BRIDGE Absolutely.

AR I wonder, were there many other initiatives of that nature?

BRIDGE Yes, I personally had the privilege of opening one in Halls Creek, and there have been a number of others as well that have been opened and set up by Governments. They all have a measure of importance in my opinion, and I get back to this point, I say that in the context of not always being absolutely blinded in the view that you have to have clearly defined outcomes otherwise these facilities are failures. Society makes a hell of a blunder that way, and, sadly enough, the politicians are pretty weak on in that realisation. They are inclined to want to talk about outcomes too, and definitely the bureaucracy of all Governments are just hooked on outcomes, outcomes, outcomes and outcomes. To me, that's why a lot of times, of course, society isn't as good as what it is or should be. Given what I've said about my experience of the conduct and the relationship between the police and say Aboriginal or indigenous Australians, statistically speaking, records reveal that a lot of indigenous people commit crime. The records of a nation can say to you, we, as police officers were duty-bound to act. Here are the records. Here are the statistics. Here are the details that justify the severity, the strength of our pursuit and engagement upon the indigenous race. But you see that is very false because it's the socioeconomic background of a race of people who've found themselves in an absolutely impossible position at times to be able to conduct themselves or to appear themselves to meet the standards that society beckoned upon them. Those people suffered because of that, and you see what happened then because they were caught up in some small offence initially, it became then a progressive process, other offences, other offences, and very soon these very innocent individuals, harmless individuals, being deemed by virtue of their records as being criminals. That's, in my opinion, also been a very unfortunate part. In other words, I've seen very innocent people in my lifetime becoming goaded by the law to the point where, in the end, they have become criminals in terms of their records and the statutes of the law and its application to those individuals. That to me has been, in my opinion, quite false, quite unkind and I think history has reflected nowadays upon that, of course, as harshly unfair and rightly so.

AR After you became Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, there was some sort of controversy over a proposed gas pipeline at Bennetts Brook and a sacred site being there. Could you explain to me about that?

BRIDGE Yes, there was for a while, before I became personally and directly involved, significant controversy. Robert Bropho and his people opposed quite strongly the placement of a pipe carrying the gas across the Bennett Brook stream, saying that the Wagyl was there and that it was going to interfere with the existence of the Wagyl, the spirit of the Wagyl. For a while it went on without me being involved in it. There were departmental officers effectively working through with the Aboriginal people, but almost . . . when I say Aboriginal, largely driven by Robert Bropho, and they sought to try and reach a solution of a kind in respect to that gas pipeline proposal, but it continued to be an impasse. One day, Robert Bropho rang me at my office. I don't know whether he thought that I would respond to his invitation or not. I think he was probably just testing me. He said, "I'm ringing you as a minister because I think you should make the effort of talking to me directly about this problem, and I'm not getting anywhere with the bureaucrats. They're not getting anywhere with me and we're not going to resolve this issue because I'm not going to give an inch and they're not prepared to compromise. I think you, as the minister, should become involved." I said to Robert Bropho, "Okay, I am happy to become involved. How do we go about it?" He said, "If you're interested in the issue, you'll meet me at five o'clock tomorrow morning on the banks of Bennett Brook, near the stream." I said, "I'll meet you at five o'clock on the banks of the Bennett Brook stream." So that's what happened. I went out there. It was pretty dark. It was a wintry morning, dark, and, anyway, when I got to the location, sure enough, Bropho is standing there. Just he and I. I said, "Look, just give me exactly what you are concerned about Robert. Tell me in your opinion how we can deal with the thing because we want to reach a solution to it and so that I've got something to work on from your perspective, then I can go back and talk to the government's side of it in terms of an internal source of advice that I can obtain." He said, "Well, look, this is the way I reckon it can be done and we can overcome it." He put a couple of theories to me. One was to run the

pipeline directly attached to the overpass concrete roadway that exists there, the bridge that carries the traffic. One was to go down about 100 yards below the vehicle crossing [where] we were standing at the time of our discussion and to say that if we could get the pipeline underneath the water at that location, which was only a very narrow section of the creek, then that would be the other way of doing it and that way it would not interfere with the flow, and so forth. But he would not have it going over the top. I went down and I had a look at that location with him and I thought because of the narrow nature of the siting that there was a real logical or practical solution that could be arrived at. So I got a bit interested in his point of view. I saw some logic in what he was on about. So that was fed into the system and eventually, of course, that was the resolution. In the end, the technology that was put into effect by the people constructing the gas pipeline met Robert Bropho's requirements and accommodated the transfer of the gas on the other side of the creek across to where it needed to go. That was my involvement in that. Whilst there was a fair bit of work that still had to be done following that early morning discussion between Robert Bropho and myself, in the end, I think we can associate that meeting as being largely attributable or responsible for the resolution that came about. It came about because I, as the minister, went out there and was prepared to listen to him, as cold as it was, freezing in a cold bleak morning, dark as anything, to the point that I heard him, and because I heard what he had to say and understood what he had to say, we found a solution to the problem.

AR Do you think it was a bit of a test getting you to go out there at five o'clock in the morning?

BRIDGE Absolutely, he was bluffing when he put that challenge to me, but he underestimated my desire to go and meet him on-site, but it turned out to be a good thing in the end because they were never going to come together. The shadow sparring that had taken place prior to then was never going to see a resolution to that gas pipeline.

AR Do you think that the bureaucrats were not really prepared to take him seriously?

BRIDGE Not only that, they were not capable of trying to think of another way, another technology. They were blinkered on saying that the nature of the gas pipeline as it's designed now doesn't allow for these other variations. But what we said to them was that they were going to have to allow for them, otherwise the pipeline doesn't go through. I had the very same experience on another matter. It was the same with the building of the North Dandalup Dam south-west of Perth. The Water Authority, back as it was then, said to me, "There's no way we can make . . .

END OF TAPE FIVE SIDE A

TAPE FIVE SIDE B

BRIDGE It was the need for an adjustment in technology that brought about the resolutions that saw the Bennett Brook gas pipeline in place. It simply came down to that. My visit to the site on the day and to confront the issue directly with Robert Bropho was a big factor, it was a telling factor.

I had the same experience on another occasion in dealing with the construction of a major dam south of Perth. When the Water Authority approached me about the construction of the North Dandalup Dam, it immediately brought about significant reaction from people in that area. They learned of the Water Authority's approach to the minister seeking his approval to construct the dam and, of course, I was immediately lobbied by many people, including a very good friend of mine who was a mate of mine effectively in the Parliament, the late Andrew Mensaros who I admired and we had a good relationship even though he was a Liberal and I was Labor. The late Andrew Mensaros came to me one day and said, "We have learnt that the Water Authority wants to build a dam down at North Dandalup. Now what we would like to appeal to you to do is to make time available to come down to the location on the . . . I just cannot remember the location, anyway it was down there to be able to see and witness what was going to take place in terms of the future of that river system that operated beyond the catchment area of the North Dandalup Dam and to see the damage that would follow if the dam was constructed. I went down and actually they arranged to hire a boat for me and they took me up the Murray River in a boat to the location and then I had a large public meeting down there. Again, they sold to me their logic. I could see they had very sound reasoning in wanting to oppose the construction of that dam.

AR So who was involved in the opposition there?

BRIDGE The community generally down there, led by Andrew Mensaros and others. After a long period of debate between the Water Authority and myself, I give them an ultimatum and said, "I will not approve of the dam going ahead if you're not able to show me that there's going to be a percentage of the flow downstream that shall be maintained." They said, "Minister, it's a

crazy request because we're not in the business of building and constructing dams that offers a flow downstream. That's not our business. We're about catching the water and then redirecting the water to the areas of demand." I said, "That may be the case but I'm telling you I'm not going to approve of that dam unless there is a way in which you can change your technology to accommodate my request. I have heard what the public have said and I believe they're right and I'm sitting steadfastly behind them." So that's the story. They said, "This almost means the end of the dam proposal. There'll be public outcry." I said, "I don't care. That's the decision." The Water Authority came back to me about a month or so afterwards and said, "What we'll do, we'll put a gauging station on several parts of the river down from the site that we've selected for the dam and we'll allow these gauging stations to be in place for 12 months so that we can gain some appreciation of the normal flow that would flow down that river. Then, at the end of the 12 months, we'll see if we can come up with a proposal that accommodates you as well as meeting our planning requirements." Twelve months down the track they came back to me with a nice little plan that said they have now been able to incorporate into the dam and the construction of the wall an outlet valve that would ensure a certain percentage of water flowed down the river forever and they could accommodate that with the technology that they had available to them, and would I now agree to it. I went back and spoke to the community at a big community meeting and they all said, "Great idea. Go ahead minister and approve of it."

There was another occasion where I saw an adjustment to technology capable of being put in place to accommodate a very practical and a logical request to government.

AR Thinking of that type of thing, did the first Burrup Peninsula development come about under your ministership?

BRIDGE No.

AR You had nothing to do with that one?

BRIDGE No, I had nothing to do with that one.

AR Robert Bropho has been involved several times in protests about sacred sites and he's often painted as a troublemaker. Do you have any comment about that? Obviously, he had good ideas when you met him at Bennett Brook.

BRIDGE Yes, he was very good at Bennett Brook. He was not aggressive. There was just he and I out there mind you, he didn't have an audience or a TV camera to be able to play his game to. I found that when you got Robert Bropho into an environment that I often tried to manoeuvre him into, that is, face to face with me to see how tough he was, he was a very constructive person in many instances, but he very often played the media role and not always in the interests of the Aboriginal people. There were things useful in what he was an advocate of on behalf of the Aboriginal race, but there were many things about what he pursued that were personalised ideals and ideology rather than necessarily in the best interests of the broader indigenous community's position with the broader non-Aboriginal society. He tended to, I think, provoke hostility there quite often, which was unnecessary. He was partially good but not outstandingly good as an advocate of the Aboriginal cause.

AR Although you weren't personally involved in the situation with the Swan Brewery, what would have, to you, been the best outcome there?

BRIDGE I think the problem with the Swan Brewery is it became just too hostile, the environment, by the stirrers so to speak, not just the advocacy of Robert Bropho and his group. You had non-Aboriginal people down there on the brewery site walking around with Aboriginal flags, and they were provoking a hostile environment down there and, I think, that, if anything, caused a lot of the problems that emerged from within the context of the endeavours and attempts of goodwill that everybody tried to engender into that resolution process. At the end, I am not sure what you could say was probably the best solution. An Aboriginal equity in the Swan Brewery development to me made good sense. I think that the fullness to the extent of

that being practical was always going to be the best scenario rather than a minute percentage of it or none at all, or total rather than a percentage. I think with facilities of those kinds, there's the balancing mechanism of how you best serve the indigenous people in the overall context of the things that are designed to support the broader community. I think it's nice for Aboriginal people to feel an ownership, an equity and an engagement in that process that we can all look down upon with great pride and purpose because, at the end of the day, you don't work too successfully in isolation or in separation.

AR Do you think there's a bit of an opportunity lost there?

BRIDGE I think so. I think there's an opportunity lost and I think it was lost because of the excessiveness of the hostilities that were engendered down there. I think a lot of non-Aboriginal people have a lot to account for there, and one or two of the radical Aboriginals whose purpose was to just carry on quite irresponsibly rather than constructively, and I guess being goaded to do so by these non-Aboriginal elements that were down there.

AR So you don't think it was helpful, non-Aboriginal people supporting the cause?

BRIDGE Some of the people down there, not all. Some of the people that were there on a regular basis were not helping the cause at all in my opinion.

AR Can you think of any other incidents about sacred sites that you could tell me about?

BRIDGE This is not an incident but it's a historical feature of the Argyle diamond mine. I think it needs to be recorded because it's a significant, significant event. In the early days of the mining company wanting to gain support and endorsement from the local Aboriginals up there in that area of the Kimberley, they confronted difficulties. They confronted difficulties because the barramundi dreaming site was identified as the most purest, the

most clearly defined sacred site that could ever be viewed in terms of the way it simply was. It was a perfect example of a sacred site.

AR Could you tell me what . . .

BRIDGE It looked it. You could picture this location as being very much something that a race of people would see as a sacred location. It had all those characteristics.

AR And that was a part that was going to be . . .

BRIDGE Demolished. Demolished, destroyed. The company and its personnel realised this. However, there was a decision by the company to proceed nevertheless. I recall one day being approached by a mining prospector who was working for the company up there and he said to me, "We would like you to consider coming to the location and giving us your view about what you thought the site was. You're an outsider. You're not caught up in the controversy at the moment and the conflict, and we would appreciate very much your view." I was picked up by a helicopter from Halls Creek and taken to the location of the barramundi dream time location. It was interesting, when I landed at the site this gentlemen greeted me along with another person. There were two men. They said, "The reason why we would like you to have a look at this site is that because, in our opinion, we believe it's a genuine sacred site."

AR Could you describe the site to me?

BRIDGE It had the sign, it had the image of a barramundi fish sitting on a rock formation. It was the rock formation that resembled or looked like a barramundi, and it was attached to larger areas of rock formation. It was sort of just protruding there. It sort of just looked out over the landscape. It looked very, very, very much impressive but also genuine. They said, "We would like you to tell us what you think." So when we went to the site and had a look at it, it left nobody with any doubt as to what we were then interpreting a sacred

site, to the best of our knowledge and experience. With that, the company then sought to try and engage the community. They brought representatives down to Perth here to have meetings with them. They engaged themselves in many meetings up in the Kununurra location and in that general area in an endeavour to try and reach some basis of agreement as to how they could proceed. Then, in the end, of course, operations began, and so saw the end of the destruction of the barramundi dream site.

In latter years, I met up with the two gentlemen who met me that day, and they have always contended in their discussions with me that it was a very sad and hard decision, it was a tragic decision to see the need for that destruction of that barramundi site . . .

AR They were Argyle employees, were they?

BRIDGE Yes. That was a sad one really.

AR Were any Aboriginal groups involved in that, or had those people been shifted elsewhere?

BRIDGE They were involved in the processes that followed and continue today to be a part of the economic parts of the mining construction. There was monetary recognition and adjustment made to accommodate the aspirations of the people but in terms of the site itself, that is no longer there. In the years that followed, that early experience with the barramundi dream time site and the range of other sites that have been documented as important, the public generally have now tended to believe that such sites exist and that it wasn't necessarily a visual identification of the characteristics of the site that should be seen to be the measuring stick for sacred sites but there are other important phenomena such as relationships, traditional links, burial grounds, where people were born and all those sorts of things. As this whole historical development of the importance of sacred sites has gained prominence in our society, it's become a lot easier to recognise them when people point them out because they associate the relationship between themselves as a group of people in that locality with the historical connections

of that piece of land. As I have gone through, for example, the more recent native title processes at Noonkanbah station and helping the community up there (the Yungnogora race). I have had a further learning curve through that experience of the delicate way in which you have to give recognition to the people about sacred sites. It isn't true to say that they are all manifested for economic and financial gain. There is a traditional, cultural, tribal and a heritage linkage between those areas of location and the tradition of people that is important and has a true link and a firm link with those areas of the land. I think it's good that Governments now treat them seriously and treat them for the importance that they are and to reach decisions and outcomes with the indigenous people that best manages what happens to those sites. I think at the end it's a matter of agreeing upon a good managed outcome rather than disputation and legal imposition of rules. I think the legalistic imposition of rules is not the good way to go.

AR Do you think though that sometimes it is necessary to have (for want of a better word) the confrontational approach to raise awareness to a concern if the Government is not listening or does not appear to be . . .

BRIDGE Absolutely. There's no doubting that and there's no doubting the other thing that the Governments simply have not listened over the years. It is a shocking record of the denial by Governments and of the political process towards these sort of important crucial parts of an historical and traditional feature of the lifestyle of the indigenous people. Why deny those things? If they were here before white settlement, surely there must have been some linkages with these areas for purposes that were important. We as decent Australians should not have had any difficulties in recognising those things but we have been driven, to a large extent, as a society by, in many instances, wrong reasons, and then some of the instances to do with sacred sites have been very much for the wrong reasons.

AR I've seen the wonderful rock pictures at the Burrup Peninsula. Do you have any thoughts about how that's been handled?

BRIDGE There's been a good attempt made, I think, up there by and large. I think that people have appreciated the value of them. I don't think I can be too critical of what's happened there. I think to some extent now the paintings up in the Kimberley have similarly met with a responsible recognition of their importance.

AR In 1986, the Aboriginal Enterprise Company was formed. Could you tell me about that?

BRIDGE Yes, Brian Burke was the Premier at the time, and Brian spoke in Cabinet about what capacity the State Government may be able to generate in assisting with the development of an economic framework that would support the plea and the promotion of economic incentives for indigenous people. In other words, not just to say everybody is going to get out there and do things. Aboriginal people have got to become involved in the enterprise world and, so, if you don't do those things, you'll fall by the wayside so you've got to get up and participate but, in fact, have a professional source of support by way of an infrastructure that the Government could create. The creation of that economic enterprise unit was for that purpose. It was set up with a board and an administration and a certain amount of money, small amount of money, and the ability of the small amount of money to be distributed to help those projects that were identified by that organisation as being worthy of funding. I then was given the responsibility, after a year or two of that operation, and actually changed it quite dramatically after it come over to my portfolio. It was in Brian's portfolio as Premier at the start and then transferred over into my portfolio as Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. I set about giving it a lot more strength and a fair bit more autonomy. We set up what became known as the economic development or economic "something" office . . . anyway, it took on a better . . . It was called the Economic Aboriginal Enterprise in Brian's day and I changed it to the Aboriginal Economic Development Office, and it's still operating today. So it's down there in the government. It still has a featured part of the economic programming and it has served, I think, a pretty useful purpose. I think there's a lot of small businesses that have emerged out of its advice and help to them, and has

created a network of small business enterprises around the State for which Aboriginal people have been the beneficiaries. That was important in terms of meeting this economic shift that has always been put forward in advocacy by government as a pathway Aboriginal people need to follow. We gave them an engine to help in that facilitation.

AR In what ways did you change it from what Brian Burke had set up, apart from the name?

BRIDGE The main thing that I was able to change it to achieve, was greater autonomy and a greater focus of the relationship between it and the participants out there. I simply said, "Those of you who are working in the office now have a direct link to me as the minister and I have a direct link between you and the participants out there." It was that sort of structurally direct linkage between a minister of the Government, the officers running the show and the personnel who were beneficiaries at the other end, and it took it away from being caught up in a bureaucratic function of government.

AR What sort of enterprises came about from that?

BRIDGE There were any number of varied . . . there were some people who went into machinery operations, others went into transport operations, people went into growing fruit and vegetables. There was even a case of becoming involved in the wine industry. Certainly, in terms of training and employment of people and small business running sort of delicatessens and shops and things like that . . . it had a very wide-ranging membership.

AR So some was in Aboriginal communities and some was in mainstream in society?

BRIDGE It was more in mainstream really. It was for the individual person rather than the communities you see. It was for the individual family man who said, "Look, I've got a family and I want to get off the dole, or I have a family and I have been working as a contractor and/or an away labourer. I

have worked for 30 or 40 years. I have been pretty steady in my capacity to work. I would like to now set up my own enterprise.”

AR And often the banks wouldn't look at these but . . .

BRIDGE That's right. The banks wouldn't look at them . . .

AR So you offered the money and the training and advice . . .

BRIDGE And the stewardship. And of course a lot of those businesses are running out there today.

AR And the financial help was in the form of grants or gross loans?

BRIDGE Both. There were some instances where loans were provided, but basically grants, and I think in more instances than not, repayable loans. If you look at the records, which I haven't got, you would find that probably 70 per cent of the allocations of funding were probably on a loan basis that they were required to repay the debt.

AR And then that money could be rotated to somebody else.

BRIDGE Exactly, it was another good way of helping people to become good at running their businesses, because a grant without repay of course is a handout, and they weren't look for that. You see most people who have participated in the economic development programs as such were people who wanted to in an independent sense, run a successful business where they met their debts and they repaid their loans and they operated in a commercial world.

AR You mentioned Ernie that the people didn't want handouts. I know there was a move to overcome that feeling on the communities as well, could you talk about that?

BRIDGE There's always been individuals that have resided within communities that have had a desire to look at setting up their own business quite independent of the community structure, but they had not been provided with the opportunity in the past. So the program again offered such an individual scope to be able to say, "Well, look, I've now got something special that I would like to go into, in terms of an economic base, and I would like to access this funding and the support of the Government through the economic development office to be able to help me charter that plan." There were those individuals who came out of the a community environment who similarly were given assistance and guided into making a change to their lifestyle in terms of their economic base and setting about seeking to do what their aspirations and desire was; that is, to go into private enterprise, to be independently responsible for their lives and their families and also to be able to survive monetarily in terms of what their activities were. It was a blending of people from the mainstream and some members from the communities as well.

END OF TAPE FIVE SIDE B

TAPE SIX SIDE A

This is Anne Rogers interviewing Hon Ernie Bridge for the Parliamentary History project tape six, on the 16th of September 2003.

AR In 1986 you became Minister for Water Resources. Had you had any particular interest in the whole idea of water resources before that?

BRIDGE I suppose I have always had an interest in the availability of water, simply because my life was one where on our stations in the Kimberley my family had encountered droughts, times of droughts, and we saw the devastation of drought on your herd of cattle, and we saw the very difficult times that lack of water created. So I was one person who was always going to believe and recognise the importance of water and its value. So that was nothing new, but it is interesting; as we were going through the processes of being interviewed by Brian Burke for cabinet positions, and I at that stage was only going to be an honorary minister - I was not going to be a substantive minister - I had to wait until Parliament enacted legislation that created two other positions in the Cabinet, which enabled myself and another person called Gavan Troy to be able to become substantive ministers. So Gavan and I for six months at least of that period were just honorary ministers. But it was interesting; when I was called to the Premier's officer, to Brian Burke's office, he said, "I just want to talk to you about portfolios that I am now allocating, or divvying up, to various ministers." Now he said, "Naturally, the north west portfolio you'll have, because that is an automatic one for you to take on. The Aboriginal portfolio is another one that you should at least at this stage become involved in with the substantive minister which is Keith Wilson." He said, "There's another portfolio that I am also going to ask you to become involved in." He said, "That is the water resources portfolio." I was taken aback. I thought, "Why would he want to get me engaged in that portfolio?" He said, "I would like you to take that on. At the moment Arthur Tonkin is the substantive minister. You can act with him." So that was my first induction into the water scene in a prominent way, in a significant way, and I then started to think about it and dwell upon it. Nothing much happened until I

actually took on the portfolio. An office was set up for me, and effectively from day one I was a substantive minister with all of those portfolios. The so-called substantive ministers really handed the reins over to me. Keith Wilson handed the Aboriginal portfolio across to me, and Arthur Tonkin definitely handed water over to me, so I was really in charge of those from day one. Very early in my life I was exposed to the shortages of water supplies to many locations in Western Australia, because very early in the piece I decided to go and to see at first hand what the circumstances were out in those remote areas, and particularly in the case of water, because there was a very strong measure of representation by country people to me to say, "You are a country minister. You are a country bloke. You will have a good feeling and an understanding of water requirements and the need for supplies to be reliable, so we want to invite you into our locations, our location, regions", and all this sort of thing. So I was absolutely given a list of travel arrangements that a kangaroo could not hop over, you know. Everybody saw me as their man of the day; he was going to fix all things. But I responded to that, because I thought, "That's good. That's the sort of support you need, you know, going into it." So I travelled, and I remember the very first visit I made was to a little place called Menzies in the goldfields. When I attended a meeting at Menzies and saw the scene up there of the water supply to the community, I was absolutely staggered by the inappropriate nature of the water supply. I thought, "How could government simply allow this kind of second-rate, third-rate service to be maintained in a community, small though it might be, as Menzies?" That sort of got me starting to then really think hard about water. Then, as I went into other locations in the State, the same kind of people would trot out their stories about inefficient and inadequate water supplies and the lack of care and attention by Governments historically. I mean, in the case of some places 120-odd years of endeavour to get a water supply, and still nothing. So that is how it all started to jell with me. The other thing that jelled with me is I thought, "I am the minister in charge of this portfolio, so I have a lot of ministerial capacity to do things. Whatever I do, I have got to take advantage of that." It is a unique position for a bushman, a country bloke with a portfolio that deals with water, to take advantage of the opportunity to look after his constituents; that is, the entire state rural needs. So I built up

this strength in my resolve about water. I educated myself; I convinced myself; I inspired myself; and I pepped myself to the big job ahead, that I was going to be all things that water meant to the people of this State. Now, of course, 20-odd years or so, or 12 or 15 years down the track, it is all there now. History shows that all of those exciting, early, mind-setting preparatory stuff all had a place and a purpose and a outcome, but to trigger off I guess the most notable of all those endeavours was my turning to how best we could use the water resources of our State to help in that context. It was interesting how it came about. Just prior to the summer of 1987, I think it was, or 1988, the Water Authority officers came to me and said, "In the 1970s we had water restrictions imposed upon Perth, and it is likely that we are going to ask you to agree to the imposition of water restrictions again in Perth this summer, even though it is 10 or 12 years ago since they were last put in." In the meantime places like Menzies and others all had restrictions on anyway, but simply because of inappropriate equipment, you know; these poor supply regimes that one experienced out there. But that angered me, you see. I developed a sort of hostility in my mind about the deceit and the lack of attention that Governments were giving those people, expecting them to live with inadequate water supplies. So there was a building up of agitation in me. When the Water Authority people said to me, "We are going to come and ask you for approval to impose water restrictions", I said, "I just want to say this to you: you are going to have a hell of a job getting me to agree." They said, "Why is that?" I said, "I've come from a background of understanding the effects of drought. I have lived through that in my life. I've already witnessed the pretty shoddy deal that we are giving many country towns and residents. I believe we've got to do better in the delivery of water than simply impose water restrictions."

AR Were they proposing restrictions in the country as well as Perth?

BRIDGE That is right - everywhere, all over the place. So anyway, they said, "All right, we've heard what you've got to say. At this moment we are not asking for your approval; we are just really letting you know that it is likely to be the case. So about that time I flew up to Kununurra in the Kingair aircraft

that the Government had under contract, to attend ministerial engagements in Kununurra, you see. On the way back, when we left Kununurra airport the plane took off and then did a big circle, almost over Lake Argyle, in setting its course for Perth, see. So I witnessed Lake Argyle under the wings of the aircraft - that massive amount of beautiful water. Then I sat in that aeroplane quietly on my own - I was the only passenger in the plane - for three hours or so between Kununurra and Perth, you see. It was four hours as a matter of fact, I think it took. During that period of time I looked out the window and I saw the landscape under me as we were flying over Newman and places like that. Just there I got out a brown envelope that I had in my folder with me, and I drew a line, the map of Western Australia, on this envelope, and I outlined the Ord dam, the Argyle dam, and I then had a pipeline running from there to Newman, where we were flying at the time, and then I took that pipeline on down to Perth. I finished the diagram by just outlining WA and this big pipeline running through the centre of the State.

AR So the dream began very early in your ministry.

BRIDGE Very early in my ministry, sitting in a aeroplane on my own above the lands of the Pilbara near Newman. When I got down to Perth - this is the interesting thing - this dream was really structured then. I did all the little things that would be, the benefits that would flow, you know, the opening up of the inland, the infrastructure that would go in, the towns that would develop, the schools and the transport system - all those sorts of things that made you excited because you knew there was a reliable portable source of water that was suddenly going to be there available. That is all documented. I've got the envelope in my records. So when I got to Perth, I thought about it and said, "I am going to call Jim Glover in." Jim was then the managing director of the Water Authority - Jim Glover. So I did. I found Jim a very, very good bloke. I got on well with Jim. He was a decent sort of a person in my opinion. He was not a very hardened, rigid, strict bureaucrat; he was a different kind of a public servant. It was interesting. I got Jim in, see; I got my office to call Jim in and to get him into the office. I said to Jim, I said, "You know, Jim, you came to me a little while ago, a few days ago, informing me I

might be talking about water restrictions, and I told you that you would have a hell of a job getting me to agree.” I said, “I’ve been thinking of something that’s going to solve our problems, Jim.” He said, “What’s that, minister?” I said, “I’ve just flown back from the north in an aeroplane, where I left the scene of the Lake Argyle water, flew over the landscape of the Pilbara and came to an area and to a city that was likely to be finding a water problem. I reckon what we do is we grab that water from the north, Jim, and we marry it with the needs of the southern area, link them together in partnership - the needs of the people of Perth, the water that is available up north - and then in between, Jim, you and I develop an infrastructure program in the interior of the State that will throw it open for development. What a grand idea.” He said, “Minister, it sounds exciting, but I have got to tell you what - I do not think we can achieve it.” I said, “Why is that, Jim?” He said, “Because I know for a fact that the water would be too dear.” I said, “What I would like you to do is to do me a briefing. You do a ministerial briefing of the cost of this, and show me whether it is too dear.” So Jim must have sensed my passion then, because it was only a day that he came back with this half-a-page briefing, mind you; it was nothing. He walked into my office and said, “Minister, you know you asked me the other day about a briefing on the water supply of the north to the south.” He said, “I’ve done the briefing for you.” I said, “Have you got it here now?” He said, “I just want to say before you read it, minister, it is going to be too bloody dear, minister, and no bugger’s going to pay for the water.” This was his Australian adjective. I said, “Why is that, Jim?” He said, “It’s going to cost \$10.50 a kilolitre, and no bugger’s going to pay for it, but here it is.” So I left it at that. I said, “Right, thanks, Jim. That’s the advice anyway.” But for some strange reason I did not believe him. I guess it was because of the smallness of the report, see. It was no bigger than that; it was barely a half a page. I thought that if they’ve got all the statistical data available of the costings and all that, they’re going to give me a lot more than that. So what Jim Glover did, he recklessly tried to fob me off, along with his other officers, and they failed to do so. So then I got my bristles up, and I set about driving the vision. I have got to say that is how it all started. I believe that that vision, whilst that vision hasn’t necessarily seen the Kimberley pipeline evolve to this point of time, it will in due course. The vision has been

the catalyst upon which there have been significant efforts put into place, and it has elevated significantly the issue of water, because the issue of water just never cracked a mention before my days as a minister in the Parliament. I have got to say, as far as my predecessor is concerned, Arthur Tonkin, he never had much interest in it. He saw it as an insignificant part of his ministerial duties. So the vision has worked significantly for this State, even though we are still running into problems in terms of resolutions. The only reason why we are continuing to run into problems is because the authorities do not see the need to deal with a big State with a laterally planned program - in other words, a big-scale project to deal with it rather than the short-term, fix today for tomorrow's needs ideology of the water supply services of the State Government, and that is the only thing that stands between us, having adopted the vision and shored up the State for the next 50 to 100 years. That is how that all commenced and how it all sort of had its origins. Of course, today we are still as ever embroiled in the debate. The exciting thing in my assessment is that 97 per cent of the public of WA, to 98 per cent of the public of WA, all support that vision 100 per cent.

This is Anne Rogers interviewing Hon Ernie Bridge for the Parliamentary History project tape six, on the 18th March 2004.

AR Ernie, last time you mentioned that although your vision of a Kimberley pipeline was seen as too expensive, it had acted as a catalyst to highlight water needs. Would you please explain what measures you were able to implement, bearing that in mind - that you came back with this vision and it was not received very well but it alerted people to needs?

BRIDGE I suppose it was only not received very well by some cynics and some vested interest operators within the Water Authority for reasons better known to themselves. There has always been a major degree of community support and endorsement for the vision. That has never ever changed in its strength over all those years, and today it is still a talking point wherever I go. It seems to me that the public at large have thought about the future of this State and have been able to say to themselves, what is the requirement of

this State 30, 40 or 50 years down the track? When you contemplate that sort of thinking and reasoning, it must strike of logic that you need to be talking about a long-term, large approach to water supplies. If you are thinking about it in that way, and we should be, then it just stands logical that the large river systems of the nation have got to be tapped into. It is just crazy and unwise of a nation - not just crazy but unwise of a nation - to continue to rule out of the prospects of utilisation, the waters of these large rivers, based upon environmental and ecological grounds. That alone is not sufficient argument. There is the needs of a society that have to measure alongside those priorities. So what we have been caught up with is the indiscretion - I would go so far as to say that - of officers of the Water Authority originally, and now the Water Corporation, in not being able to adjudge a strategy approach for the future. They have lived in an environment of a short-term, week-by-week, month-by-month approach to water needs, and that has constantly meant that we have always been in trouble, as we have now if you take as of today. This State's been subjected to water restrictions now for about six or seven years continuously - as a matter of fact, I think since the days that I left the ministry. The incredible thing, and the ironic thing about it all, is that when I was minister for seven years, you would not have thought there was too much difference in those days to what has occurred since those days. There was never any serious contemplation by me that water restrictions would be introduced. I never ever seriously gave that plan a great degree of my interest. I had it put to me by the Water Corporation operators, but I simply said to them that I was not going to cop it and that they had to go out and do things differently. You know, that is what happened. There were many things that were done in this State. There was countless water programs introduced throughout the regional areas of the State. There was a range of other initiatives undertaken by the Water Authority to deal with the metropolitan water requirements. We got on with the business of providing an assured water supply to Perth, the surrounding areas and to a large number of towns and communities within Western Australia, without having to contemplate the imposition of water restrictions.

AR Would you explain to me how you went about that or what some of the projects were?

BRIDGE I said to Jim Glover, who was then the managing director, as crudely as this, I said, "Jim, while I stand here with my R.M. William riding boots on, you will never get me to agree to water restrictions. I've come from a lifetime of seeing droughts and the impact of droughts. Now, do you think you are going to coax me into now as a minister agreeing towards water restrictions?" I said, "You would have to be kidding. So you go back there, Mr Glover, and you use the resources of the Water Authority to do other things." I have got say this, Anne, it clicked in a very well-structured organisation. There was the competency level over there, the skills to be able to develop and create new programs. They were forced by my decision as minister to undertake those sorts of alternative strategies. Resulting from it was, just for example, the commitment to build a dam at North Dandalup - one example. There was the Harris Dam - the construction of a dam. There was a series of other smaller-scale water catchment areas that were put into operation. So it was a sort of commitment to saying, "Well, we are going to have to do these other things rather than asking the public to forgo important water requirements in the name of water restrictions." It is really an administrative and a management approach, Anne, and that is all it was; it was just that when they were required to undertake certain other sorts of planning, they were well capable of doing it. I do not see any difference today. I think that the same thing should be applied today. The Water Corporation should never be allowed to get away with the nature of its existing policies. They are crazy; they are short term; and they will continue to subject the Western Australian citizens to a permanency of water restrictions. I think that is an absolutely intolerable situation. When it is all said and done WA has a million population. It is not a big number compared to other cities of the world, yet we are here subjected to water restrictions, in some instance very harsh water restrictions. So that speaks for itself. The sooner that politicians at the high level of government come to their senses and just say, "There has got to be something wrong with the advice we are getting, with the policies of the Water Corporation, who is the water servicing deliverer within the State, and we are

going to insist on some changes in terms of their programming". That will open up the corridors, in my view, of revisiting like the Kimberley pipeline. It then factors in as an exciting option. I have also got to question the long-standing views of the Water Authority back then when I was minister, which I disagreed with them and argued relentlessly about, and now the Water Corporation, about all this abundance of water, which is supposedly in places like Yarragadee formation. I have always questioned that, right from the beginning, and I still remain very sceptical about that source of water. The reasons why I am always sceptical is that during the days when the Water Authority, and now the Water Corporation, have continued to trumpet the resources of the Yarragadee formation, they have gone ahead and asked Governments to help them to identify dam sites, which are sensitive environmentally and in terms of the ecology, and other impacts on people within those areas; they have pursued government support and agreement to construct dams in those locations. I have thought to myself, "Why would they want to do that if all of this water underground existed, which would environmentally be a lot easier to be able to extract?" So it just did not jell with me, and I think today it still does not jell. But it is a tool for those cynics to use to continue to argue against, reject and to trumpet out, the inequities of the Kimberley pipeline in terms of cost, feasibility, practicality and people's ability to pay for the water.

END OF TAPE ONE SIDE A

TAPE SIX SIDE B

BRIDGE In asking me a couple of minutes ago about the issue of water, I went on to talk to you about the strategy to do with essentially the large, the visionary approach, but it is also important to remember that during that period of my ministry there was the creation of the rural water strategy, which was an initiative of myself that emanated out of the ministerial office and was endorsed wholeheartedly by the rural community and supported in terms of the logistics of its development by the Water Authority. That was an amazingly important strategy because what that did was to take water to many of the remote communities which had previously not had a reliable water supply. I will use a couple of examples, which highlight the value of this scheme. A little town called Bindi Bindi, which is next to another small town called Miling in the wheatbelt area - were the very two first communities that were given access to water under this rural water scheme. I went out there when I first become minister and had discussions with the people of those towns. Then I subsequently had the Water Authority provide me with advice of how long these towns had been arguing for water needs. In the case of Bindi Bindi it had gone on for 120 years, and for 120 years the authorities and the politicians and the Premiers and the Deputy Premiers and the ministers all went to those little towns and said in their response to their visit, "Thank the CWA ladies for the wonderful morning tea and the cakes which were provided, but unfortunately, like in the past, we are still not able to progress to any further extent your application for the Government to build a water scheme into your town. It simply does not stack up economically and, as such, we are not able to justify funding. We will put it on the agenda for next year, and no doubt we will revisit the issue in the future." Now that went on for 120 years. You know, when I was returning from one meeting that I attended at Bindi Bindi and Miling, I was sitting in the aeroplane - our chartered plane - on the way back, and Jim Glover, the then managing director of the Water Authority, was in the plane with me - it was a charter. He turned to me and he said, "Minister, you've caused me some bother at the meeting today." I said, "What do you mean by that, Jim?" He said, "Well, you gave those people some hope that they might get a water supply." "Now," he

said, "There's only four subscribers there, minister. We can never justify building a water supply into Bindi Bindi." I said, "Jim, is there such a word as 'needs basis'?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, on that basis, and under our rural water strategy, they are going to get a water supply." Now, I said, "What I want you to do, Jim, is not to tell me that they do not justify. I want you to tell me how you are going to go out there and design a strategy and a plan that links Bindi Bindi and Miling to the comprehensive water supply scheme, which will mean that in the end they will have a permanent and reliable water supply." Now, Bindi Bindi was commissioned by myself; Miling was commissioned by myself; and so were countless other communities, even places like Gibson way out on the coastal areas around Esperance, and Balladonia way out on the trans' line. They all received water supplies and are in possession now of reliable water supplies through that rural water strategy. That was a tremendously important strategy. It was the closest of any programs that had been put into operation in this State to that which was activated by the late Premier of this State, Frank Wise, back in the forties. He, as Premier of the State, created the initial comprehensive water supply distribution to agricultural areas. I have always contended that the closest that any attempt since then to providing the sorts of water requirements of these country areas was this water strategy. You know the other interesting thing, and it is a pleasing thing, that even today, years after its introduction, and allowing for changes of government where political priorities and preferences are at play, that scheme is still running; it is still being supported in the case of change of Governments and administrations today. So I think it has stood the test of time.

AR How did you make it practical to get water to a place like Bindi Bindi where it had never been seriously considered before?

BRIDGE Well, the way I made it happen is that I said to the Water Authority, "Can you look at your budget, your entire annual budget, and see if you can prune off several million dollars", which I would have a discretionary capacity to direct into schemes and areas that I came into some agreement with with the local people, whether it was local government or the farming

sectors and community leaders. The other thing I said what we could do by us putting that funding aside and me then going to Cabinet and saying to other cabinet ministers, "The Water Authority is putting these funds up front. We'd like a matching contribution by other sources of funding." The other thing I thought we would do is we would then go to the Commonwealth and we would say to . . . the minister of the day was the Attorney General, Gareth Evans. Gareth Evans, whilst he was seemingly not a country type of person, was a very sympathetic minister when it came to water-related issues. I thought if I went to Gareth Evans with this deal, that we had allocated these funds and can the Commonwealth make some contribution, we would have a nice package. What I would then do is to go out to the communities and talk directly to them about their water needs. In most instances, you see, where the unique difference was with this plan, because it was being presided over by myself as the minister, I could go to a meeting in a given community; I could deal with them about the critical issues of their water needs; and then I could design a proposition. For example, I could say, as I did in Bindi Bindi, "If you are able to put forward your support in kind, through the availability of some farmers digging some of the trench work, maybe a backhoe, front-end loader or small D4 being used in certain strategic areas of the laying of the pipeline, I can give you a guarantee here at this meeting that the cost of \$240 000 for the installation cost of the project, of connecting you with the comprehensive scheme, will be picked up under this rural water strategy." That was where it was such a magnificent plan, because I could there and then sign off on a deal. Of course, the people all thought this was just great: "We'll dig trenches; we'll put backhoes in place; we'll drive trucks." That is what happened. Of course, there was this tremendous expansion of these activities all over the State. It was getting the people to work in tandem, and for us, because of that sort of funding we had set aside, to be able to make decisions immediately on the spot, so to speak. That is how it took place. It was wonderful, you know, Anne, to be able to go to a meeting and to say to the farmers, "I've been here. I've heard what you have had to tell me, and I have got to tell you I agree 100 per cent. You do not have to work hard on convincing me as the minister that you are right. But the exciting thing is so long as you are able to make some kind of contribution to the scheme, you

and I can settle the deal here. We do not need to further investigate or explore a means by which we come to that decision; we say it here, we have struck the deal." They really liked that. So that is how many, many projects found their way into operation.

AR During your ministry, Ernie, you actually went overseas and looked at some large schemes in other countries I believe?

BRIDGE I did. I've got to tell you an interesting thing about how that came about. As Minister for Agriculture I met a delegation of people from Russia who were out here on other things, not water-related strategies, and they became interested in agriculture and things like that. They invited me to visit Russia and to meet up with their officers over there and their administrators and leaders. That was one of the ways that all started. The other thing was, just prior to that there had been a visit to WA of engineers who were engaged in the great man-made water scheme in Libya - the big scheme which Gaddafi had authorised the construction of. These engineers got talking to me about the Kimberley pipeline and got very excited about it. They said, "The Kimberley pipeline is a superior concept to our Libyan concept because you are drawing upon surface waters that are replenishable by seasonal factors, whereas we in Libya are drawing on the underground aquifers of the Sahara Desert which are non-replenishable sources of water. Therefore, we are very excited to hear of your ideas of a similar plan in the size of it, but a very much better project. What we would like to do is to invite you to visit Libya so that you can see what we have done over there, and it might help you in the furthering of your ideas about the Kimberley pipeline." So I went, some little time after that, to Libya, and I was given an opportunity to visit their big scheme. I went to Tripoli initially and then to Benghazi. I was then taken down to a location in the Sahara Desert where the bore fields were created to provide the source of water, you see. It was very exciting to see that project. It got me more excited than ever about our plan, because of the sheer volume of the things that were part of building a pipeline. You had this massive employment of people. You had this technology of the highest order about pipe construction, pipe laying and designing. So it was all exciting stuff.

I went through that experience in Libya, and then I went from there across to the United States where I was interested in looking at the Colorado River system - the major, big water supplies in that area, which, to a large extent, are delivered through an aqueduct system, not pipes, through open channels which they refer to as aqueducts. Again, just seeing the sheer volume of the Colorado scheme was very exciting. But there was all the other things about those schemes that was exciting, like the man-made reservoirs that turned out to be large lakes. You had all that wild life; you had all those birds on these big, large dams, you see, which were designed as part of . . . which we would see happen in the case of the Kimberley scheme, you see. You would not just have an underground pipe running from the north to Perth; you would have those service reservoirs on the way, which would create enormous significance in terms of the ecology, wild life, bird life and that sort of thing. So that all was very impressive. I saw again ample justification to think about the big vision for this country. So that really just consolidated my way of thinking about the large-scale approach to Australia's water needs, and it remains today unchanged.

AR You mentioned that Russia invited you as well. Did you take them up on that offer?

BRIDGE Absolutely I did, yes. That was a different visit, it turned out to be. It was another time then. That did not fit in with the Libyan and the American visit. The Libyan one was for the purposes of engaging Western Australia in supporting them in the development of an agricultural industry base or service in Russia; it was about that. What they said to me over here, "Vladivostok is on our agenda for development now. We want to create commercial operations in Vladivostok; we want it to open up as a city. We reckon that trading would be highly beneficial to the people of that region. For that reason we would like you to come and talk to us." So I went over and flew down to Vladivostok. I had officials accompany me, so it was all well planned, you know. We got into Vladivostok after flying for about 12 hours non-stop on one of their big planes - it was not quite 12; I think it was about nine or 10; but it was a long time anyway. Then there was a range of

meetings that were set up for me to take part in. The result of that was that I thought, "Here's a wonderful opportunity to get in early - get in first as a matter of fact." The Japanese and the McDonald's and others were hovering around the scene, but they were not able to get there; the Russians were keeping them out by policy. But they wanted us in. They gave me an entree to go in through our goodwill relationship that we had forged with them. So I said to the Ag' department, "Can we initially look at creating a trading post in Vladivostok under the generous offer of the Russian officials?" So they did some homework on it and eventually said, "Yes, we could. You could have a small trading post created where we would engage some officers - not necessarily send them from here, but we would engage them - to set up the operations and initially look at a barter trading form of business, because of the lack of currency, and to see if we could crank up something in that order." So I said yes to that. It was not a big investment; it was about \$270 000 or something of government money that I committed to the creation of that office in Vladivostok. We started it up and it was going really good and was starting to develop a really good sort of interrelationship between the supplies in Australia and the sources of need in Vladivostok. Then what happened was we lost government. I lost the ministry, and to my unbelievable amazement - not unbelievable, but to my amazement - the Richard Court Government on coming into office, under Monty House's ministerial stewardship, closed the office down, withdrew the staffing and the facilities that were there. So it just came to a grinding halt.

AR What sort of things were being traded there?

BRIDGE A lot of vegetables were being looked at for needs over there, and things like butter and cheese. It was in that sort of food line that we initially looked at the requirements of that area. We were speaking to a range of suppliers over here at the time. It was a steady process because of the lack of finance. The barter trading was a very difficult kind of system to get in place. As a matter of fact, to make it happen I had to engage a Singaporean-based company to come in as a three-way approach to the negotiations in the setting up of that operation to make this happen. That again, through a

company called Intraco, which are operating out of Singapore - they came in as a third party to the whole deal, put a person in Vladivostok alongside our officer, and started to negotiate things on the basis of this barter trade dealing between them, the Russians, the suppliers etc. I think that it had enormous capacity to be a big supply area for Australia or intake of supply for Australia, particularly Western Australia, but it was blown, and, of course, we are not there now.

AR Going back to travels with water, you visited Sarawak to open a water project.

BRIDGE Yes, that was a different kind of deal really. That was a deal that had been developed between the Sarawak Administration, the Government of Sarawak -I suppose, its water authority, agency, within its Administration - and the WA Water Authority here. They engaged the Water Authority here in Western Australia to develop a plan that would have relevance to assisting them in bringing water into places where the villages existed. They were keen to get water supplies into those remote locations. So they asked the Water Authority if it knew of a methodology and a way in which that could be done. So the Water Authority went about planning this concept. My role was merely to take it across and, as minister, formally hand over the technology to the Sarawak Government, and that is what I did. When I was in the UK and talked with the water agencies in London about their service to the community and the methodologies that they were utilising, that was just sort of information gathering by myself. Then we went to America where I told you about the Colorado scheme and being keen about that. We also looked at the underground system down in Austin in Texas and up through on the way to Navajo country, and just saw what was going on in those areas. Again, this was basically just for general knowledge. But in terms of a particular project that I particularly identified that I wanted to learn more about, it was two really. It was the Libyan project and it was the nature of the Colorado scheme, because both had significant parallels with a scheme from the north to the south of this State.

AR What were the things that you learnt there that made you feel that the Kimberley project really was feasible?

BRIDGE The conclusion that I came to was that the Kimberley scheme was a relatively simple scheme to commit to. That has always been the overriding view that I have had. Here we are talking with hesitation, and in fact with a non-committal, to a relatively simple scheme to construct. Those two big schemes reinforce that. I mean, the Libyan situation was extracting water from great depth underground and then pumping it in two 4 metre pipes thousands of kilometres. The American was the utilisation of aqueducts, travelling at rapid speeds and channelling water many thousands of kilometres; both of them running and operating very smoothly, very efficiently and without problems. So it just stood to reason that if we really got serious about the usage of our large surface waters of the north, we could do it without a great deal of difficulty and we could shore up the State for its future. Looking 100 years plus down the track, we would not in any shape or form have to contemplate any water supply worries at all. That to me just seemed to be such an exciting part of my visit, and I guess the consolidation that those experiences brought to me in my thinking of the value of the Kimberley pipeline. Very rewarding, very exciting, highly fulfilling, but in the end, very justifying is what I could say was my experiences. I have continued to say, Anne, how on earth can we be so, so backwards in our thinking that here we are grappling right now with our inability to cope with the water demands of the State. You know, it is just beyond any form of logic to my way of thinking.

AR You have not let go of this over the years, have you? On retirement from Parliament, you immediately got involved in another project - not another project; another way of attacking this. Can you explain about that?

BRIDGE Yes. I created a public company called the Watering Australia Foundation. The purpose of the creation of the Watering Australia Foundation was to provide me with a platform, or a vehicle more so than a platform, a vehicle that would enable the community at large to continue their interest in this scheme and for me to be able to respond to that interest by having a

vehicle that would facilitate meetings, opportunities to talk at public gatherings, and be identified as a public focus for a continued argument and support for the development of this scheme. The Watering Australia Foundation as an entity has been doing that; it has been there as a vehicle, and myself as the president of it, of course, now is identified in that category, and which makes it a lot easier for people to be able to share their interests with me, and also to be an advocate of the cause of water-related issues, not just the Kimberley pipeline but indeed other issues as well, and upon which Governments acknowledge the Watering Australia Foundation as an entity. So it is a good public vehicle for that purpose.

AR No longer bound by bureaucracy.

BRIDGE Not at all; free of all of that. It straddles all the political boundaries, and very, very good.

AR Does that have a large input by big companies?

BRIDGE Not as large as I was always hoping it would be. It has enormous community support right around Australia. You know the people in New South Wales and Queensland do take advantage of the Watering Australia Foundation in the promotion of issues that they want to be canvassed in the national sense, in the national sense. .

END OF TAPE SIX SIDE B

TAPE SEVEN SIDE A

This is Anne Rogers interviewing Ernie Bridge for the Parliamentary History project tape seven, on the 18th of March 2004.

BRIDGE I, on setting up the Watering Australian Foundation felt, that because of the independent nature of the company and the very bipartisan face that it presents, that we'd get a lot of support from the corporate sector. I've often talked about the need for these visionary approaches. But it hasn't been forthcoming and that's been, to me, a very great disappointment. I found that the major corporate players are very, very hesitant about investing in projects where the community at large materialistically gain from that investment. It gets back to a great preference being given to the interests of their shareholders and their strategies of operations, and so I was wrong in thinking that they would be great supporters apart from being advocates. They are pretty good advocates. They will tell you, they'll tap you on the shoulder and tell you every day how you should push ahead with this godsend. They're not short on that sort of support. But when it came to sponsorship and funding, they've always been less than the public. Local government have been very good - local government Australia wide. They have come on board with the watering Australia foundation and have been pretty good supporters of it throughout its life to date, so I have to say in terms of local government support, that's been very good. Community support has been excellent. But corporate support has been less than what I would have thought we could have expected.

AR The water board didn't give you support with your Kimberley idea. What about Burke?

BRIDGE Well, Burke did not oppose the scheme at any shape or form, nor did Peter Dowding in the period of time he was Premier. But the person who came out and gave it very strong endorsement was Carmen Lawrence. Carmen as the Premier of this State was the strongest ally that I have had from a Government position, from a political position in this project Australia wide, without a doubt. The only other person that's publicly gone on record as

strongly as Carmen about supporting and endorsing this project has been Bob Katter. Bob Katter and Carmen I single out Australia-wide as the two politicians who really became identified publicly and was keen, and satisfied to become identified publicly, as great allies of myself and in support of the vision.

AR Do you think it might have anything to do with Carmen Lawrence having come from a dry wheatbelt town herself?

BRIDGE It could easily, but the other thing that I associate with Carmen's interest is that Carmen really thought a lot about the needs of the people of this State. Things can be said about Carmen and her public life and her political life, but nobody will sway me from my view that Carmen Lawrence is an excellent politician and she was an outstandingly good Premier. She cared for the people of WA. Carmen was the type of person if you went to her with a good proposition and said "Premier, you know this is a deal that substantially assists the people out there." She'd back you; she'd support you. As she did when we had to deal with that very serious problem of the underwriting of the wheat crop some years ago when she was the Premier of the State. That was a decision that she agreed to support, notwithstanding the fact that she would have been given some very strong advice that it was a very risky proposition. So that's where that sort of special politician is required in terms of the public's needs within a society. The corporate sector can cater for their needs in terms of the commercial world. They have the resources to do so; they have the technical capacity to do so; and they have the sheer wealth of finance to do so. So they can look after their shareholders that way. But when it comes to the ordinary run of the citizens of a nation or a State, you need politicians who have got the strength and the fortitude to stand up and analyse what's best for those out there - not me here - those out there. And, of course, Carmen had those qualities, and that's where to me she stood out and, as I say, her and Katter are the only two apart from myself who you could record as being politicians who clearly, clearly demonstrated their endorsement of this concept. And was prepared to go publicly on record to state it. The others have all sort of sidled up to you and said "I like what you're on about;

this is a wonderful scheme, keep on with it Bridgie, you gotta keep there Bridgie, don't let anybody set you aside." And then when you turn to them and say "All right, well look, ride alongside me. Get on a good stock horse and ride alongside me." You would find that they never located that good stock horse. And that's been a big, big impediment as well.

AR How come you never gave up?

BRIDGE Because it's a deal that you don't give up on. It's the right deal for the people of the land. It's the right way of bringing about solutions for the people of the land. And it's the most practical way of doing all that on the land. So you don't give up. You just say that that's what it's all about. I've figured, I've cottoned onto the right way of dealing with things and so I shall be relentless in my pursuit of that plan and it's not . . . You see the other thing Anne, it's not a difficult thing, you don't agonise over it. You don't feel under stress or pressure, or you don't feel as if you're terrorising yourself. It's a challenge that's exciting, it's stimulating, it's vibrant, it's great because it's just so right, it's so proper. So there'll never be a day in Ernie Bridge's life when I will abandon that vision. That vision will walk with me side by side to the day I pass on.

AR You have a cartoon in here by Alston, with Ernie Bridge digging the pipeline, and that seems to sum up, you in the trench alone digging like mad. It seems to sum up your whole approach to it, to believe it so utterly –

BRIDGE And me saying that they'll agree with old Ernie Bridge in 60 years time when the water is flowing - he worked it out right, didn't he? [laughter] He had the spirit of our endeavour pretty correct in that cartoon. And of course the wonderful thing about it in Australia, in WA, and if you look at the evolving nature of Western Australia's future, you just happen to know that it's going to happen. There's no way it will not happen. It would be nice if it happened for you and I to share some of the water, that's all. That's what I'd like to see, 'cause the State needs it now - not 50 years from today, but now.

AR And you don't think desalination is the answer, obviously?

BRIDGE No, no. I've always been dead against desalination and I'll continue to be against it. I reckon if desalination was a drinkable source we would be drinking it years ago. It just doesn't gel to me that we've got to turn to that source when we've got such enormous replenishable resources of surface water. I would say explore desalination to the fullest extent if we did not have the availability of surface water, because you've got no option then. You've got maybe perhaps just desalination as a long-term strategy. Have a look at it and see if all these complications that I associate with it can be overcome. But when you don't need to do that because of the abundance - I mean have a look at the floods of the Kimberley this year and the Pilbara. You know, half a day of flooding up there is more than about 20 or 30 times Sydney Harbour. Just immense amount of water. Where's it all gone? Its all disappeared out into the sea. So desalination is a crazy man's thinking in an environment where you've got all of that water that's there available to us. It's not a wise man's thinking; it's a crazy man's thinking.

AR It seems to me that your duties as minister of various portfolios overlapped, and I'm wondering about being Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Minister for Small Business. It seems to me that there are some efforts to help Aboriginals become involved in mainstream enterprise. Could you tell me about that?

BRIDGE Yeah, well you see I think those portfolios were often referred to just as you've described, as overlapping each other. But there isn't such a thing as an overlapping of portfolios if you're a competent enough minister. Because if you take the constituents that you represent in respect to each of the portfolios, they have a rightful place to be represented. That's the first thing, and then you judge from that need to represent them where it all fits into shape. I have said all along, if we are talking about the advancement of the indigenous race in this country, don't continue to trumpet out social reforms, welfare programs, with a few crocodile tears and say we are going to

significantly change the status of the indigenous race. We will not. They've had a pretty good period of this sort of programming for the best part of 200 years. So we've had a lot of practice at it. And what we need to be now doing is refocussing our way of thinking in pursuit of plans to help the people. One of the good ways is to integrate as much as we can people into competency levels of work. If you've got a bunch of say non-Aboriginal operators who are highly successful people and they are interested in lending their interest and support to a lesser sophisticated Aboriginal entity, then cultivate that relationship - see if you can get it to work, because it's a great benefit to the indigenous people to have that support. It gives them a means by which they're going to advance their competency levels, their technical skills, their business skills, their sense of purpose and all that. So I saw Aboriginal affairs and small business as working in tandem really rather than in conflict. And so they were good portfolios to work that way, because most of the business people that I had dealings with subscribed to that line of thinking. They were prepared to sort of say "We'll spend time talking to the people who are obviously struggling with what they want to do," and I was able to encourage and motivate a range of Aboriginal operators to similarly take advantage of the support - the genuine support - of these non-Aboriginal people, rather than say - cynically - "Those white fellas over there are not interested in us; anything we do, they're not interested." I tried to cut down that barrier and I think to a large extent that took place with the setting up of those small business centres and offices around the State that were created during my time in that ministry.

AR Could you explain to me how they worked?

BRIDGE I think there was about 11 such offices, small scale development offices located in towns like Broome, Carnarvon, Geraldton and other places. The idea of those offices were to provide like a one-shop type of operation where these competency levels of whole offices were employed in those areas. Also the competency level of the people locally who participated as committee members in those operations could be made available to the range of business interests around the town, not just Aboriginal interests but non-Aboriginal interests as well. So there was quite a few of those; they were created during that period of my ministry. As a matter of fact, I opened

several of them myself, actually commissioned them. That was one sort of clear way in which I tried to have this message of cooperation of the endeavours of coordination put into place.

AR Did people come along to those offices with ideas that they had and receive help to set it up?

BRIDGE Yes, that's right.

AR Advice and training.

BRIDGE That's right. That's still happening today. If you look at the functions of those offices, they still to an extent provide that service a bit, that support base to business, irrespective who runs those businesses. That was another fairly good period of time too. One of the things I suppose that I always felt in my life, and I still do today, that if you're looking at good changes to be put in place, they need to be evolving, creative or unique in the construction of them, in the development of them and the application of them. They mustn't mirror existing sources of thinking of policy and planning. They have to be different. In other words, you have to go outside of the loop that you're thinking, because traditional practices maintain very much of a non-creative formula. It's like it was 10 years ago: a few little modifications, but basically everybody sticks very rigid to what the rule is. And the rule has been often very damaging. So you have to go outside the loop. I've always been of that view and of course it's found its way more recently into the diabetes program, which I now operate. We're operating with enormous success and it's because it's deemed a non-medical approach to the control of these chronic diseases and it's because of that it allows the right thinking to emerge about prevention and intervention. And if you don't allow that right thinking to encompass prevention and intervention, then you're always stuck with the medical model where everybody who may have diabetes, everybody who perhaps in the future is potentially likely to be a diabetic, relies upon the medical formula to deal with it, rather than taking corrective or preventative actions in advance to prevent diabetes ever occurring. So that was outside

the loop thinking. But proving now to be just so very very fundamentally successful. It was the same with the water. We talked about our rural water strategy outside the loop. The water scheme from the Kimberley, outside the loop. Setting up of those small businesses, outside the loop.

AR Can you think of any examples of success story or a particular success story that came from one of those enterprises, from one of those offices of small business?

BRIDGE If I could answer that question perhaps a little later on, I could refresh my recollections of it, because there is no doubt our records will tell me of an example that I can highlight to you in this interview, rather than me just now thinking of one in particular. I do know they were . . . I opened, commissioned the one in Derby, the one in Broome, the one in Carnarvon, I think the one in Geraldton, for example.

AR There was an enterprise just before you became minister, Ernie, the Aboriginal enterprise company chaired by Lord McAlpine. Could you tell me about that one please?

BRIDGE Yes. This was an initiative of Brian Burke's as the Premier. He wanted to see the Government put in place an operational arm of the Government that gave genuine support and encouragement to economic enterprise development in terms of the indigenous interest, because there were a lot of people who had been advocating this as a way forward for the indigenous people, and there were a lot of individual Aboriginal people who said they wanted to partake in such development. But they'd always struggled because most of them just didn't have that background themselves in business terms, and a lot of the support that was being provided by Government wasn't specific to that sort of area of need, but just a [unclear] generalised approach project. He thought we we'll create this little unit under the stewardship of somebody like Lord McAlpine, select a few people who would make up a good board membership of the unit and set it up. So he did that. And then when I - this was before I assumed the responsibilities of

minister - when I became minister, it came over under my portfolio and for a while it continued to operate. But after some time I refocussed its operation and give it a sort of what I thought was an elevated nature of operation. I created from out of it the Aboriginal economic development office as a defined operational structure within the Government with capacity to make decision, with a budgetary capacity to help people in need of either expertise, assistance or funding assistance. And so it moved from the McAlpine plan into that sort of office structure. And it's remained as such up until now. That economic unit still is a part of the office of commerce and industry or trade in the current office - Government. So yes, it served a purpose. There's no doubting that it created the first framework upon which we could move into what I thought was necessary shift, and to give the organisation greater autonomy in its own right, because under the McAlpine deal, it really didn't have much teeth.

AR So was it similar then to the small business enterprise centres in the towns that you were just talking about?

BRIDGE Excepting in . . . yes, to some extent there was some similarities there. The small business centres were, I think, better focused and there was somebody that was assigned to operate them and to make them work. And then there was the voluntary nature of the people like your shire presidents and others who were businessmen, business people, who would partake in the functions of those small business centres. So that's where it was better, they were better. They had immediate access to a lot of competency in terms of people's business know how, which the economic development office didn't quite have, you see.

AR Do you think that Lord McAlpine with his high profile helped the North West in the long term?

BRIDGE Yeah, I think it's right to say he did. I think he . . . there's no doubt that the emergence of his identity as a person, as a personality, and the methodology in which he talked about building Broome for its special

characteristics, were very refreshing things in terms of Broome's identity and Broome's way of thinking. So there was this again, you see, getting back to this out-of-the-loop approach. McAlpine came in with fresh ideas, but different ideas, not traditional ideas, of building, of creating business, of focusing business, of getting the community engaged in participation. He came from a different way of way of thinking, you see, and for that reason there's no doubt he was a valuable part of that period of Broome's history.

AR Did he fit in well with Burke's way of doing things also?

BRIDGE Yeah, he seemed to . . . he appeared to fit in very well. He was well regarded by the Government. Certainly he was very, very much supportive and cooperative with us in terms of our Government way of dealings; he fitted in very well. Conservative bloke with a very flexible way of dealing with things, that's what you could describe him. So he was good.

AR Can you tell me what other enterprises that there were at the time for small business? Sorry, enterprises may be too big a word –

BRIDGE That's fine; I think I'll attempt to answer that. There's always been a lot of individuals, not so much community groups, but individuals who have been keen to set up their own business, whether it be truck haulage contractors, machine operators, farmers, shearing contractors, yard building contractors - you name it - there's always been the individuals who have aspired, who have believed that that could do well in business and have aspired to making a go of things. They've always been undercapitalised almost to a business operation and they haven't quite always had the competency levels that experienced business people possess, who have gone through the hard knocks over many years of endeavour and have gained the knowledge of how you really have got to operate the stringent nature of control. These sorts of entities like the initiative of the McAlpine arrangement and subsequently the economic development offices that I set up, was designed to help these individuals to look at the best way possible forward to assist them in going into business. From there it was always felt

there was a greater capacity to success than would otherwise be the case. So there's always been that requirement there you know, there's always been the requirement to help the individuals who wanted to make a go of it themselves. Of course, strategically this has always been a good plan because it's very, very difficult to talk about economic development of a community-type situation. You've got just huge numbers of people that you have to consider - the diverse interests, the complexities of running a community and so forth. So invariably it comes down to the individuals having to do it anyway. So that's where these structures have been valuable and a lot of . . . I think there have been quite a number of individuals. If we could only just sort of have a checklist of their operations today in this State, you'd find that many of those that are pretty successful today found the basis of their successful entry into business through the initial support that came out of these programs.

AR And I imagine that support would often be help to formulate a business plan.

BRIDGE Help to formulate a business plan, access to say a good businessman that's operating his own business and access to a retired businessman who's got time on hand to dedicate a lot of energy and help in giving guidance to these operators as they have undertaken their task. That's what came about.

END OF TAPE SEVEN SIDE A

TAPE SEVEN SIDE B

AR You've already touched on a couple of points from your time as Minister for Agriculture. If we could go back to the beginning of your ministry in agriculture, what were your thoughts at first with being handed that one?

BRIDGE Well, I was comforted early in the . . . assuming that responsibility by the Premier of the State, Peter Dowding. Peter was very strong in putting to me the need for me to take on the portfolio of agriculture, and he explained with a lot of commitment and precise reasoning why, in his opinion, I had the right sort of qualifications to be a good Minister for Agriculture. He said, "You have a good standing out there with the people. You've had a lot of experience yourself on the land" and he said, "It just seems to me that it's also an elevated area of ranking in the Cabinet, which immediately sets you up as a senior Cabinet minister, which is important for your own personal achievements and interest, and it elevates the importance of the ministry too because of your capacity to be a good Minister for Agriculture, linking that with the portfolio's importance in the Cabinet, you've got a wonderful opportunity to service the people well in this State." I've got to say I went into it pretty confident that things were right. As I now reflect upon my life as a politician, and my work as a minister, there was no doubt that I clicked very well with the requirements of the Minister for Agriculture. It suited me down to the ground. I think the everlasting impression that's out there today of the importance of the work that I did when I was minister, just simply substantiates the natural linkage between myself and the requirements of the Minister for Agriculture to serve the people in agriculture in the State. The mix was perfect. The background experience coming off the land, it just blended in. When I talk to the people out there, they were speaking to one of their own. The other beautiful part about it, Anne, when they spoke to me at a gathering in the bush, whether it was under a gum tree or was on the back of a truck addressing an issue, they were comforted in the realisation that that message would be transferred by me in the exact way into the Cabinet deliberations in Cabinet. And that was to me the thing that I felt the strongest; that I was sitting in Cabinet being their voice. So it was again a very special

period - four years, in my opinion, not being equalled. I don't know of any period before or after the four years of my time as Cabinet minister when there's been such incredible changes, and I think exciting advancement in support of the people's needs.

AR What would you put at the top of that?

BRIDGE I think being a very strong advocate for the people of the land; being the strongest possible advocate for the little Australians, the people who work tremendously hard, who need somebody to understand them or hear what they've got to say and reflect what they've got to say in Cabinet and in Parliament. If you go back . . . if somebody were to go back through the *Hansards* of all my speeches, there was a theme through all of them about a significance of the agricultural industries, the vital need to care for the people who operate within those industries and the importance for Governments to look after, in terms of policy and in planning, the way in which those operators are cared for. That's the bottom line. I always said, if you do those things correctly and in tandem, other things follow. Other things follow. If you get your basics right, then things evolve around them structurally, appropriately and effectively. If you haven't got your basics in place, nothing evolves correctly. So the link in between myself as an individual and the people who represent the farming industry was the closest to the perfect model that's ever been in place in my opinion. I don't think there's been a better combination than that. Of course, the people out there were rewarded. You go out now today and ask the farmers in WA what were their impressions of Ernie Bridge as the Minister for Agriculture, and they'll tell you. I think that's justifiable proof and also proof of their involvement. See that was the other thing - they came along. Anne, I'll always use this terminology - right alongside me. See that's the special thing that I associate with my days as a stockman and as a drover, because I found in my career in those areas I have always used the phrase "Let's ride together" because I always have recollections of how important that was in a successful career as a stockman and, in particular, as a drover. When those cattle stampeded at night in heavy rain, thunder and lightning, and you sought to retrieve them from the stampeding mob, you had

no chance unless your fellow drovers rode alongside you. They had to get out of their swags at night, they had to jump on a night horse and they had to go searching to retrieve the stock. All this at night, otherwise if you didn't do it during the night, you had little chance of retrieving them later on. It had a profound impact on me. And again the stockman during the day, chasing stock through the scrubs and all over the place. That very good horseman, he rode alongside you or you rode alongside him anyway. So I've always carried that into my life, I've always said to people, "We're in agriculture now, you and I are partners here; let's ride together and what we share I'll translate into debate in the Parliament and in the Cabinet." That, I think, was the unique nature of my partnership with them. I don't know of any other politician who quite had that sort of upbringing. There were plenty of farmers. But I don't know if there were so many that chased cattle through the night in the Kimberley rains. I think that was –

AR Probably not.

BRIDGE Probably; I think that was just about the only thing that I had on everybody else, you know. And that was a tremendous, wonderful thing to me because it immediately created a comfort zone with the people I talked with. This bloke understands; this minister understands us, so we'll walk with him, we'll ride with him. So there were a lot of things that came as a result of that, Anne, you know, because a lot of those people undertook a lot of the initiative themselves.

AR You mentioned earlier the underwriting of the wheat crop. Would you like to give us some background on that?

BRIDGE Yes. It was a very dangerous time that confronted us in this State when there was great uncertainty about the wheat prices. There was also a great deal of uncertainty about the seasonal circumstances that were surrounding the farmers at the time. What needed to happen was that the farmers needed to commit to a crop in advance of these uncertainties being diminished by seasonal factors or change in pricing, you see, or something

like that. Short of those phenomenons being put in place by whatever it was that created them, they were left in a very precarious position and the banks and the business operations like fuel supply agencies and other supply agents, were all in a position of local government with rates, were in a position of saying "Well, we've just got to tighten up on all of you, because it's just too risky. You don't know what's going to happen, you may not have a wheat crop next year." I went out there and they had a series of meetings in the wheatbelt area with the farmers. We were having meetings all over the place on backs of trucks and in small halls and so forth, and there was one thing that emerged out of all of those meetings. If there was a way in which an underwriting formula could be introduced as a safety zone, then all of the support services would be made available to the wheat growers so they could plant their wheat crop and then, all going well, they'd have a wheat crop next year, and they'd be back in business and their resourcefulness would be established. Now it meant - \$120 million tag, which was a sizeable amount. But that was only if everything collapsed, that the Government might be called upon to underwrite that \$120 million. But proportionately as that total collapse diminished, then proportionately that \$120 million became a lesser figure, you see, and to the point where it might never ever be called upon at all, which turned out to be the case. It was never actioned but it required me to put that argument to the Premier, Carmen Lawrence, and for Carmen Lawrence to agree on it. After negotiations and a lot of discussions and any amount of advice from Treasury and other experts - not too many of them were highly supportive of it - Carmen nevertheless went along with my advice to her. I remember her, and I leaving her office in Parliament House and heading towards a set of stairs that took us down to the ground floor and from the ground floor we were then walk out of the front of Parliament House and address these hundreds of farmers. As we went to the top of the stairs, she said to me, "Ernie, now just tell me again finally, are you sure we are doing the right thing?" I remember as clear as I sit and look at you today Anne, I said to Carmen, "Carmen, just go out there and just tell them that you're committing to the underwriting of the wheat crop." And I said, "Don't hesitate or don't even blink. Just go out there. They want to hear that. If you tell them that, they'll be very, very happy." So she went out there and I walked

alongside of her and there was one of those hand-held microphones that they had out there, which they were being addressed in by other speakers see. So Carmen and I walked out, she walked straight to that microphone and she very quickly - very quickly - got around to telling them that. As soon as she told them that, the crowd dispersed with accolades and laughter and clapping and cheers and went away contented. I said to Carmen afterwards, I said, "What did I tell you at the top of the stairs Carmen?" So that's how that happened.

AR Did it only need to happen the once, the underwriting?

BRIDGE Yeah, yeah. And it was never put into action. Seasons came. All those very people who were going to walk off the land without that decision are now, as far as I know, have all gone on to do better things. It was a good decision; it was a proper decision.

AR Were there crisis with the wool industry as well?

BRIDGE Oh yeah, there were. I think there were things that we had to deal with with the wool industry –

AR The stockpile was still there, wasn't it?

BRIDGE The stockpile was still there. I didn't have a big role to play in that stockpile debate. A lot of the big players were over in the eastern States. We had officials from the Ag department who regularly visited those meetings and that, you know. I can't say that I was strategically involved in giving a personalised strong position about that. I thought the stockpiling was a pretty shocking thing, mind you. I thought "Gee, surely we can do better than this." But anyway, that wasn't a major issue on my agenda.

AR What other issues do you remember in regards to agriculture?

BRIDGE Well, there was a series of outbreaks that were very trying and troublesome. There was the apple fly scare. The apple industry in the south west were threatened by a particular fly. Yeah, there was that. There was the locust plague; there was other things like that, you know, that suddenly confronted the farmers. These pests, suddenly discovering a new kind of species that was suddenly going to threaten the whole industry and the fruit fly was the biggest one. That was the one where I went to Cabinet and I convinced the Cabinet to provide us with \$5 million up front to create the fruit fly eradication campaign. That was really bad, you know, because it looked as if the whole industry could be destroyed. We had to move and move quick - and we did. We got it out of the way in a short space of time, you know. The plague locust was a frightening one. I mean that was just incredible, to see the destruction that followed their entry into the State. I went up to a couple of places in the wheatbelt and saw them in full action. They were just horrible. There was mass destruction of everything on site, you know. That was another bad one. We also had the footrot scare down in the south west on a couple of farms where footrot discovered; it never had previously. So yeah, there were worrying issues. But we worked through them and got them all in the end. We developed a solution that dealt with them. Not a great deal of pain as I think back. I think again, good cooperation between the Ag department and the farmers, you know. Yeah, a lot of trust there, so it made it easier for me as the minister to be able to deal with it; to straddle the areas of need. The important thing is straddling the needs of the respective interest groups rather than becoming sectionalised in your position in respect to issues. You must look broadly and straddle the genuine and bona fide interests of all players as much as you can, because at the end you have got to bring them together to be able to facilitate a solution. You can't do it singularly; it's got to be a combined effort. I think the spirit of our relationship helped in that regard, you know... Yeah.

AR Ernie I cut you off a while back when you were talking about Russia and Vladivostok. Would you like to finish what you were trying to say then?

BRIDGE Well, I'd like to say that it was a disgraceful decision to terminate that office, because it was only a small amount of money that was put up in the first instance to create it. It was going to become very much operational in its own right, so it wasn't going to continue to be a drain down on state resources. But the long-term benefits that would flow from it could be seen when we created it because of the way in which the trading capacity of that area would grow, you see. If you went in first, and there wasn't a great deal there, but you saw the potential for things to develop, it stood to reason that it was going to be a bit like the purchase into a property. You could reasonably expect that the value will increase over the years rather than decrease. Putting that sort of scenario to Vladivostok, where we were in first, we had the foundations of enormous support from the Russian administration. They liked us as a State; we were on a good footing. Anyway I've heard since - I've not had the ability to verify this myself - but I've had advice that's been passed on to me that the Singapore interest - that's a company called Intraco that came in with us - continued to stay on in Vladivostok and they're now reporting some enormous trade figures that are coming out of that operation. We're not in there anymore you know. So that to me is pretty sad.

AR I'm trying to visualise how it worked. From Western Australia came produce –

BRIDGE Yep.

AR And it was a trading thing, rather than money, so what did the Russians trade?

BRIDGE That's right. Well, the Russians would trade other things in a barter way of trading with Intraco, who then produced the financial means to pay the Western Australian suppliers.

AR So Intraco actually bought Russian produce and paid –

BRIDGE That's right. That's what barter trading is all about. Barter trading is all about your ability to trade without money necessarily but you do it in another kind of way where one party to that trading arrangement is able to produce money to the people who supplied goods into the trade.

AR Yes.

BRIDGE It was on a world market. Intraco could then use their barter system into those goods going elsewhere. That's how they realised their funds. We couldn't do it. We weren't in the barter trade. You've got to have an organisation that's involved in barter trading to be able to do that. I suppose we could do it. Now just take for example - I don't know, I'm not into barter trading - but let's take the water pipeline. If the Russians said, "We'll produce for you a lot of machinery that could build the water scheme," and we then said in turn, "We will provide a lot of produce into Russia" that's how the funding kicks in and the State Government or somebody creates the money, the currency.

AR Yes, if they had something that you needed, it could have been done without Intraco.

BRIDGE That's right, yeah.

AR As minister for north west, Ernie, what issues came up?

BRIDGE It was mainly the interest I had in fostering growth and development in those places such as the Ord, Kununurra and Broome in terms of tourism and places like Derby and Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing more as important communities that needed to be sustained. Kununurra, in my opinion, had to turn to something new to maintain the momentum and in that context I singled out sugar as an exciting industry to sort of mobilise the enthusiasm and the diversity of the Ord scheme. So I spent a lot of time on working through with the local farmers the best way to rekindle an early attempt and aborting of the sugar industry, and that we were able to do. We

got a little sugar interest going in the Ord and a small operation and so forth to reactivate what is now an industry up there, running through the normal economic ups and downs but still an established part of the Ord. I saw the need for the Ord to be looking at an export opportunity into Asia, because of the produce that they could produce as well as the niche markets that the Ord had tapped into domestically. I set up a local committee headed up by Susan Bradley and a range of other business people and Aboriginal interest to become the Ord development committee under my ministry and directly responsible and answerable to myself. That was their task to go about a range of things that they thought was appropriate. So that was a good period, I think, and that sort of created some new areas of interest. Derby and Broome - Broome was always more about the future of tourism. It was fairly much orientated towards that sort of way of thinking. Derby was running into serious problems then because of the drainage of personnel from Derby to Broome which had been going on as government policy, of all things, for a long time. Wyndham was much the same. Wyndham was being drained through government decree with the Ord expanding as it was. We tried to sort of stop that process - abort that mobilisation of the forces that encouraged it. I set up again another committee of a similar nature in Wyndham as to the one in the Ord and as to the one which was set up in Derby. They were all much the same kind of structure with pretty much identical purposes, names and objectives. So that was a period in which, I thought, stability came into those areas of the Kimberley and the other thing that I also set up during my term of agriculture, but also north west minister, was the formation of a beef team, as we described it, to look at the overall Kimberley beef industry situation and to try from a grass roots perspective, the people on the land perspective - this thing that I'd been so strong about as a minister - to come up with ideas for which we would support them in the facilitation of those ideas and plans. That was another pretty exciting dimension as well. That one lost its momentum after I left the ministry, because it went back under the umbrella of the traditional way of government managing things where it became almost locked into the agricultural way of thinking and the other government portfolios that had any role in the

Kimberley. It lost that local identity characteristic about it. I think it's been less than effective since that happened.

AR It needed to be looked at as a north west thing.

BRIDGE Absolutely and the people . . . The cattle men had to have a view. It was not for every expert to tell the cattlemen what they should and should not do. You know Australia is a funny country. Two hundred years, Anne, we've had the experts telling us how to do things. I've never seen too many of them out there doing things. If you go out and look at the actions on the land, you find the people doing it are the people who are supposed to have no competency levels. They need people to tell them what to do, what a joke! We're not good on psychology in Australia. We're good on a lot of things. I think in terms of the modern sort of medical science we're brilliant. I think Australia can be very proud of that and many other things. But when it comes to psychology and understanding people and how they think as a nation, we're still a bit short on that intelligence.

END OF TAPE SEVEN SIDE B

TAPE EIGHT SIDE A

This is Anne Rogers for the Parliamentary History project tape eight, on the 4th of May 2004.

AR Ernie, we spoke last time about your role as Minister of the North West. Can you tell me about the relationship of the Kimberley Land Council and the role of the Government?

BRIDGE I think in the early years of the Kimberley Land Council's existence and its relationship with the Government, one could describe it as being very important, and to that extent there was a large degree of cooperation and a large degree of trust that was displayed, particularly by the Government in wanting to talk through with the Kimberley Land Council a range of ways of dealing with the issues that they were very much concerned about. Then after and progressively they became a lot more political in their approach to dealing with Government, and on many occasions they were just simply too critical. People like myself who were ministers were not going to cow-tail [kowitz] to that sort of threat, so I took on the Kimberley Land Council from time to time on certain issues; quite happy to do so and to stand my ground.

AR What sort of issues?

BRIDGE They'd infer that we weren't being genuine, that there were things that were going on that we were not directly related to and I would say to them, "Look, each time I'm invited to participate in a meeting up here, whether it's on the banks of the Fitzroy, in the bed of a creek or somewhere, invariably I come and attend and I leave myself open for opportunities for us to dialogue. So, there's no point you suggesting to me that we are remote in our interest of the functions of the Kimberley Land Council." So, I think that from then on, and certainly I can say in my case, I lost a fair degree of respect for the Kimberley Land Council progressively, and that sustained itself right through and it almost remains the case today. The purposes for which they

were established at Noonkanbah were very genuine purposes. The principle of the establishment of the Kimberley Land Council was right and proper, but the way in which players become engaged in activities at the high level of the executive of the Kimberley Land Council was, in my opinion, inappropriate and as far as I'm concerned that's how it functioned and that's where they lost me as a support. I was one of its strongest and one of its original supporters, but they don't have that support from me now.

AR In 1988, there was an attack on the fact of the sale of some of your properties to the Aboriginal Development Commission. What was that about?

BRIDGE That was a very silly campaign run by *The West Australian* newspaper; nothing more than that and nothing less than that. They got it all wrong and they finished up in the end having to apologise for the way in which they went about their conduct. What had happened is that there was a family called the Gordon family, in which the late Monty Gordon was the leader of that family. He said years ago, many years prior to the sale, if ever the Bridge family choose to leave Koongie Park station as a property that he be given the first opportunity to acquire it. Because of his longstanding ties with my dad, you see, he and my dad worked together for years prior to that when we were only kids, then he was, at the time of the sale of the property, doing contract mustering on a neighbouring station called Lamboo. So, at around about that stage, because I was engaged in politics and the other members of the family were finding it less possible to be able to operate, run, the property, we decided that we would sell the station and in the course of making that decision, naturally enough, we informed the Gordon family. The Gordon family immediately responded by saying, "Well, we'd like to acquire the property, so can we negotiate for you to sell to us?" It meant, of course, that they had to acquire funding from the Aboriginal land fund commission to make the purchase. That's what they engaged themselves in doing; but because it was government money and because I was a member of Parliament, you know, the sort of cynicism of the media started to become engaged as if I was taking advantage of my position and the position of the Gordon family to

conjure up some unfair and inappropriate course of transaction, which was never intended and, as a matter of fact, I don't think ever there's been a sale that's been better for an incoming purchaser than what we provided the Gordon family. We actually had a bangtail muster conducted of the station to shore up numbers. We also agreed that the cattle proceeds of the sale of stock that year, which could easily have come to us prior to relinquishing the property, would remain in the bank account and would be a source of funding that the incoming members would have access to. So, they had the property with its numbers, they had the land as it was identified and they also had a surplus amount of money that was in the bank account, which they had available to them on signing the contract of sale, as well as getting the land fund, the Aboriginal Development Commission, to acquire the property. So, the Gordon family could never have been given a better opportunity to access a property than what they gained from us in our commitment to helping them buy into the property. Eventually this all aired itself, it all came out in the open and, of course, that was the end of the story; but it was an unfortunate area of mischievousness by the media for something that was really not warranted, was ill-considered and badly managed. That's the history of that bit of controversy that seemed to have found its way into the media prominently for no reason.

AR Are there any other issues, Ernie, from your years in Parliament that you'd like to mention?

BRIDGE I think there was a campaign by *The West Australian* for a while, again recklessly considered, foolishly conceived, to have a go at my personal position and associated with me having a preoccupation to the water supplies of the north against all the best judgment and opinions of the Water Authority back in those days and as it's now proven, I was always right in my proposition about Kimberley water supplies. I was never wrong there, as is evident now. Even though we're not building yet, it's still practical, it's still credible, to be talking about utilisation of that source. So, anybody who talked about it when I did should never have been victimised; but I was. For example, there was this very, very silly editorial by *The West Australian* that

tried to conjure up a theme of me putting preference to the Kimberley water pipeline over and above all other good considerations of south west water supplies. They even had a photo, a sketch, of me down there with other diviners in the south west, and we're all divining water, you see, lots and lots of us, and all of the divining rods are all pointing downwards by all of the others except me. Ernie Bridge's divine rod is pointing up and the little slogan was, "I don't agree with this, mine is pointing north"; you know, still a little cynical thing, "Bridgey's still on about this water from the north when, in fact, all of these other people, the experts, are all saying it's down south." Well, if you have a look at down south today, what are we doing about fixing the water problems of the metropolitan area from down south? The answer is nought; we are looking at a desalination plant as a solution to the problem, or not as a solution but a stopgap measure to the problems. So that was, to me, disappointing because I wanted everybody to understand that there was a genuineness in my desire to publicise the importance of the northern water resources for the good of the State, not to be cynically taken on by some short-sighted journalist who wanted to just have a go for the sake of having a go. I think that probably was the only other thing. There was one other occasion when I was away and I was performing on the stadium in the Grand Ole Opry in America to 80 million people, and I wasn't in the least worried what one little cynical journalist in WA might think about me; but they had to then foolishly again write that my press secretary, Mr David Berry, was in America with me at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville. He wasn't within millions of miles of being there, you know, they had it all wrong. Then there were funny little things, as I think about them last; they were too silly for words. That was the sort of criticism that I think people mustn't get too upset about; but at the time you do because you want to be genuine, you know, and you want to be decent in what you do. You're not there to try and betray the people's trust in you as a minister and all that sort of thing; but they were about it, and I suppose if you think about a long public career, then I suppose I haven't done too badly.

AR You certainly were in the news in 1990 when you went against Labor Party policy with the homosexual laws that were introduced.

BRIDGE Yes, that's right, I was. It was a stand that I felt then very strong about and I feel nowadays, as I reflect upon that decision and that course of action, if anything more stronger in my commitment to what I thought and did was right. You see, the lead-up to that legislation was debated in the Cabinet and it wasn't as if I was being unfair on my cabinet colleagues and then just threw a bombshell in and would not vote with the Government on the day; it wasn't like that. I said to the Cabinet months in advance of that legislation being debated in the Parliament that I would not be a party to supporting it. I said to them very clearly, "I don't care what you say to me about expulsion, doing the wrong thing, being indecent to the party, being disloyal to the party, I'm just telling you now months in advance you can say all those things to me but it's not going to change my position." I went on to describe the strength of my opposition to that measure, which I still hold today, from what I'd seen in my personal life and those profound impacts, similarities to what I perceived, was a homosexuality, active on the homosexuality, could be viewed. I simply said to them, "I'll describe to you the reasons why I'm dead against it, so listen to me. Be prepared to give me the recognition of listening to what I'm saying to you truthfully," and I said it. I said, "So, I'm telling you now in advance don't expect me . . . do things if you want to, to make it easier for my omission from the voting strength of the Government on the day, and I'll give you that opportunity; but don't expect me to just go along there on the day and then just toe the line because I happen to be a cabinet minister, because I'm telling you now I'm not going to do it." So, when it came the day of the vote, my position was very clear. I was very strong in my conscience, I was absolutely determined in my position and I just acted accordingly. So I had no pressures on me, I didn't feel stressed out, I didn't feel hard about it, I didn't feel under siege about it. I felt very comfortable because it was something that wasn't just a sort of a sudden knee-jerk reaction to something you had to do or not do. It was well planned in my mind and in my advice to the Government of the day as to where I was going to sit in that crucial vote, and I accordingly conducted myself.

AR Do you think that it should have been simply a conscience vote, that there shouldn't have been that sort of pressure?

BRIDGE Of course it should have been. That was the way for the Government, particularly knowing, as they would have understood by then, that one of its senior cabinet ministers was not going to vote for the Government. They were silly to pursue it without giving some way out for credibility of the others who were required to. The other thing was there were others who would look over their shoulders and whisper into my ear, "You're right, Bridgey, stick with it, but we can't do it." Now, I thought to myself, "Why can't you do it? Don't give me that sort of stuff." That, of course, gave me more resolve to stick where I was standing. So there was a way in which it could have been managed but, you see, the party system sometimes tries to control individuals without due regard to what in the end an individual might happen to do; they are so strong about it. So they made a blunder there and, of course, it's history now that I did not vote with them, but I am very proud that I stood up as I did then. I feel as if, as a politician, it probably as much as anything showed my strength of supporting the issues of decent principle that you stand for. I mean, others would have the opposing view that I was unprincipled in my stand. That's their opinion. I didn't argue with them about that. I didn't say they were wrong. I never argued with the Cabinet to say, "You're all wrong, I'm right." I just simply said, "I'm not going to vote for it and you've got to appreciate that." So that's how that all found its way into the issue and, of course, you know what the end of it was.

AR And the end was?

BRIDGE I did not vote for the Government.

AR Ernie, I'd like to have you reflect now on the different leaders of the Labor Party that you worked under, if you would mind going . . . if we go back to the beginning with Ron Davies, and how it was working for each.

BRIDGE The very first leader, I suppose, that I worked with was the late Colin Jamieson. He was there for a little while in my early days of entry into politics. The late Colin Jamieson was a decent bloke. I think he had certain qualities of being leadership material but he lacked the sort of dynamics of what I learnt in subsequent years, the sort of things you would associate with a strong leader. Ron Davies was different. He was very much a gentle type of person and relied heavily on cooperation and the strength of his colleagues to be assertive in themselves in putting forward the issues that they believed their constituents required them to exercise; so he operated at another level. Then we went into Brian Burke, and he became the Premier, of course, and I suppose, in terms of leaders, became a more definitive person. The others were Opposition leaders; he became the Premier. There's no doubting Brian Burke had outstanding ability, a very talented person and could easily have come out of his career as the Premier of Western Australia as one of the most regarded, competent and efficient Premiers in the history of Western Australia politics. He had all those qualities to be very good; but, unfortunately, there was one weakness that I think Brian Burke possessed and it, in my opinion, brought him under. He was not always prepared to take on board the opinion of other colleagues within the Cabinet. He was given very strong advice by a range of people, including myself and people like Joe Berinson for one and others, that there were things about his association with individuals that was dangerous. I happen to remember saying one day to Brian, "There is an old saying, Brian, that you watch the white ant, otherwise if you allow them to encroach upon your area, you can rue the day you did so." Those were the sorts of words of wisdom that we expressed to him from time to time to try and just click him into the realisation that we were treading down dangerous territory. We were becoming engaged in a territory outside what ought to be the genuine parameters of a Cabinet's thinking, of a Cabinet's jurisdiction and a Cabinet's decision-making responsibilities, and because he was less than prepared to listen to, I think, good wisdom, finished up losing sight of the value of that. Of course, history now tells the saga as it unfolded; but no doubting the talent, an exceedingly competent person, very, very good. I will always say that I have the highest admiration for Brian Burke as a person with talent, because that's what he possessed, and a good brain as well. It's a tragedy

really that he finished up . . . a real tragedy like he finished up because he didn't . . . I think probably he was harshly dealt with by the things that went on. I mean, that farce of him going to jail for the imprint [imprest] account, \$17 000, that's, to me, just ludicrous to think that any man should be imprisoned for that sort of thing when it could easily have been a genuine omission or just some oversight, you know, that occurred in the heat of the extreme pressure of work and all that sort of business. Peter Dowding was a different kind of person again, but had good qualities too and was more inclined to listen than Brian ever was. I think Peter, in the main, could be described as being, for that short period of time as Premier, a worthy Premier of the State. I think his genuine ability and his overall commitment to the wellbeing of Western Australian citizens was cut short. I think if he had been given a longer period as Premier, a lot of good things would have come the way of Western Australians, because he had a very big commitment to the care of people and he had a clever brain and a very skilled personality, a skilled mind, to be able to have those things happen. He had that good leadership quality in simply finding a way through the means to which good results can be achievable; but, of course, his term was cut short, you see, and we never saw the best of Peter Dowding.

AR Why was that?

BRIDGE There was that petrochemical problem and all those sort of things that also followed, and there was the decision by the Labor Party itself to have him removed from within the ranks of the Premier. Again, that was in my opinion a wrong thing that his own party did to him. Peter Dowding did not deserve the fate that followed his trip away overseas and the carryings-on that occurred back here in his absence. So he fell a victim, I think, to a lot of goings-on that were inappropriate internally and he then, of course, left the scene as the Premier. Carmen Lawrence, I reckon until today, was really a good Premier for this State. I've always felt terribly saddened when I think back about Carmen Lawrence's career as a politician. She was a very intelligent lady, had an exceedingly good brain, was very open to opinions, understood the people well and felt as if she read what they wanted. I think

Carmen Lawrence was one of the real outstanding Premiers that I've had the privilege to work with, and I'll always say that, in my opinion, she probably was about the best of them. Carmen Lawrence certainly did not deserve to end her . . . while she lost the election; but I always say to today, I think of all of the blunders that this society of Western Australia made, they made a terrible blunder in removing the Labor Government and Carmen Lawrence out of government on that election occasion. It was the wrong time to do it, it was untimely to do it and I think she deserved at least another term. I would have liked that because I was nine months away from committing the Kimberley water plan. So I've always got some disappointment that I attach to the voting public of WA for throwing us out of office on that election ground. They could have done it four years afterwards but not then, because they had a good Premier operating for them and they had a minister who was nine months away from committing, which would now be known as the greatest singular project in this State's history. So the people of WA didn't figure it out right; they made a blunder in throwing us out at that election. I think the history since then probably vindicates that. I believe that neither Government since then has been much good. I cannot talk kindly about either of the Governments that took over from Carmen Lawrence; that's Richard Court's Government in the first instance and Geoff Gallop's Government today. I think both of those Governments fall a long way short in terms of their overall management of the State's needs and their recognition of people's legitimate and proper rights and entitlements. So, yes, I suppose it's a regret really I have about politics, that the voters of WA tossed us out, not just because they tossed me out of the ministry, because I've retired, I went when I wanted to go freely, but I felt we had a good job still to do for the WA people, you see, and when you are doing a good job often it is the case you leave good people doing a good job; don't throw them out. Anyway, that's how I summarise the leaders.

AR And Carmen Lawrence was the one who gave you most support, was she, for your water?

BRIDGE Absolutely. Carmen Lawrence was the one Premier, and really the one politician in Australia, apart from myself, who publicly was on record and stated on record her endorsement of that scheme and backed it, agreed to several million dollars of expenditure through Cabinet, a decision in Cabinet, to enable a proper evaluation of that scheme to unfold, something that even now hasn't happened. We set up that board to undertake that independent evaluation and we had been about a quarter of the way through that evaluation process when we lost government; and immediately Richard Court's Government came into office, they canned that board's operations. So up until right now, whatever today's date is, there has not been a genuine commitment of the State Government to offer the community of Western Australia a clear, unbiased and a very fair evaluation and a cost analysis of that water scheme, because they just simply haven't allowed that to happen. There have been internal studies or evaluations conducted on behalf of the Water Corporation which have not been, in my opinion, the sorts of information gathering and analysis and funding options that the public are entitled to be aware of; and because of that, the Water Corporation can write up anything. They could say, "Look, it's going to cost \$100 billion to build it", and nobody's got any comeback because we don't know how they're basing it. That's the unfairness. Talk about figures if you want to, but display to the public what it is that satisfied you to quote those figures. That hasn't been done. That board that I'd set up was on the way of doing that but they were going to do it in the context of allowing me to build it, so we were going to get there anyway [laughs]. Exciting days [unclear]. Nine months away from committing that big scheme. You know, if you think about it now years afterwards, there'd have been a percentage of that scheme now that would have been in operation. If it was in the Kimberley or the Kimberley and the Pilbara, even if it wasn't down to Perth, but at least the commencement would have ultimately meant that at some given stage in the future the completion of that scheme would occur.

END OF TAPE EIGHT SIDE A

TAPE EIGHT SIDE B

AR After Carmen Lawrence lost . . . Ian Taylor . . . oh, she must have been leader for a little while afterwards.

BRIDGE Yes. I don't have dates or times, but I remember her as the Premier.

AR Then the Labor Party elected Ian Taylor.

BRIDGE Yes.

AR What was it like with him?

BRIDGE Ian wasn't a leader. Ian was just an average person, a very average political figure. You know, to be a Premier you've got to be a bit different to being an average person, or a lot different. You're supposed to be the leader of the flock, you know, and you have certain qualities that make you have the ability to perform as a leader. Ian simply didn't have that. He was a good politician for Kalgoorlie probably. He represented his constituents well, as most of the politicians in all politics around Australia you could probably say the same. In their very limited way, in terms of their ability, in terms of their leadership qualities, they lack it all . . . they are identified, should I say. In terms of helping their constituents, they probably do a good job, but when it comes to being their leader with the obligations and the judicial performing ably to assist your State or the nation, as a Prime Minister would be, then you have to look at people who are a bit special. Ian Taylor never fell into that category, in my judgment.

AR Well, he wasn't leader for long, was he?

BRIDGE No, he wasn't leader for long.

AR Then Jim McGinty.

BRIDGE Jim McGinty would be probably in the same league in terms of just pure ability or lack of leadership qualities. Jim, I don't think, would argue too strongly with me if I said to him, "You're probably an able politician, Jim, but you don't have the attributes of a leader." I don't know what Jim would say to that; he may argue with me but he may not. The thing about Jim McGinty that I've always admired, nevertheless, putting that aside, I found Jim McGinty to be very, very good when it came to dealing with disputes and matters of fairly significant disputation. He had a good ability, he had a good brain and a good capacity to be able to reason through issues. When he was part of the union movement and we had disputes that I had to work through with him, I was minister and he was a union rep, I found him to be as constantly understanding and structurally prepared as any politician I've ever dealt with. So Jim McGinty has always presented himself to me as a very, very good person in terms of understanding and working through areas of difficulty, of disagreement and of compromise and of settlement. He, to me, was probably superior to all of the people that I referred to; but, you know, that's another side of an individual. They are conciliatory sorts of courses of conduct that lots of people can possess the ability to do well, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they are leadership quality.

AR Following the Labor Party through, although you had left the party, I think, when Geoff Gallop came in -

BRIDGE Yes.

AR How do you rate him as a leader?

BRIDGE I don't rate Geoff Gallop too highly as a leader. I think Geoff Gallop is a very, very average leader. I think Geoff has always been in my eyes a very, very average politician. So if he's an average politician, he's not going to be a supremo as a leader. So I think that's the way I summarise Geoff, but I've got to say the same thing about Richard Court. I don't think Richard Court was superb as a politician; certainly he wasn't superb as the leader of the State. Now there's a vacuum that's there now. Along the way

we just need the re-emergence of a genuine, quality leader for the State; the State deserves it. The State needs to have the people aspiring to that person, to liking that person, to be clinging to that person because they are inspired by what that person is wanting to do for the State. I mean, this State would be a magnificent State with such a person at the helm. It's an inspirational group of people you've got in WA. They want to see vision, they want to see leadership, they want to see lateral thinking. They want to be able then to become part of it and we share that process, not to be always cynical and to be downright rude at times about what leaders of our Governments are doing. That doesn't get us . . . that just simply makes a process happen in a very, very sort of unimaginative, unexciting and, I think, uninvolved of the community to a large extent. It's decision making by decree then by people in power, rather than necessarily decision making with the belief and the knowledge and the consensus of the community being with that process. This State, and any State, shouldn't have that. No people, no communities, ought to always be the victims of decision making by decree that is determined at either an Executive or political level of the institution that is there to represent their interest. It is wrong, it is principley [in principle] wrong, it is morally wrong and it's indecent. So we have got to some way get back, somebody who can in my opinion exhibit the sort of leadership, the qualities and the strength of the person's individual capacity so that all of those things are all rekindled into the processes of political representation and the meaningfulness of political representation.

AR Did those sort of sentiments play a part in you leaving the Labor Party and going as an Independent?

BRIDGE Yes.

AR Could you explain that to me?

BRIDGE Well, two ways . . . two things about my departure. One was I enjoyed the period of four years as an Independent. I really enjoyed that four years after I left the Labor Party and then I went in for a term of four years in

the Kimberley. What that enabled me to do was to then just see in my own mind and my belief as to where I was positioned in the community's judgment of me; whether my individual capacity to convince people that I was doing a good job followed me beyond the Labor Party's ranks; and to my satisfaction I found that happened, as I find today. Wherever I go today, people still know me. They want to say, "Good day"; they want to shake my hand. That's a legacy that they created in their judgment about my performance as a politician. I didn't create that legacy. I made it happen for being who I was, but the judgment and the belief that they still wanted to shake my hand was their decision. That was a measure of, you know, something that was in the palm of their hands, not for me to judge or determine, but for them to determine. I saw that happening in the years that I was an Independent still. I was able to, of course, spend a lot more time freely, because I wasn't caught up with the Labor Party, or a party of any description, so I had the freedom to be more flexible, to be more freelancing, so to speak, in my interest in the people generally. So that was a good four years of my time. I enjoyed it immensely, and I figured out when I left the Labor Party and went for four years that that might happen and to my good luck, it occurred that way. Then at the end of the four years I then said to myself, "I've had a good four years as an Independent. There really isn't anything much left for me now because I'm not going to get back as a cabinet minister; that seems to be an option beyond the realms of likelihood. I've served 20 years the constituents of Kimberley and I would like to now engage myself in a more wider scale of activity for the future, where I can be looking at things across the board and not just being definitive in my responsibilities to the Kimberley electorate that I'd served for 20 years." I felt it was time I moved on. Anyway, again, you see, that judgment has worked out to date. I'm now in a position now where I have programs now that are starting to take on national sorts of possibilities. I'm still able to maintain my links with the Kimberley, with Western Australia, but have the ability to be able to move further. For example, just to give you an idea, which I think I probably would not have had the benefit of, I'm being invited to give a talk in Mexico later this year, about the diabetes problems, to an international conference that is being set up over there where mainly medical people are the ones that speak. I'm the one non-medical person in

the entire list of invitees who is given the privilege of addressing that international conference. That, to me, is important for Australia, important for the people. So you see that flexibility that's there now; it's that unfettered freedom of opportunity to be able to move, work, maximise the areas of experience that I gained as a politician, which are very profound. I mean, the things I'm doing now are heavily reliant upon the knowledge base that I gained as a political figure, and so I'm putting that into what I think is the right places for somebody who is still able to represent the interests of the people and work for the people. So it was a good decision then, as it's turning out to be proven to be a good decision today.

AR Had you become disillusioned with the Labor Party?

BRIDGE Well, I did sort of peripherally, but I can't say to you genuinely that it was the total disillusionment that led to the demise, the departure; it was a combination of things. It was the fact that I could see that I wasn't going to sort of get back, irrespective of the fortunes of the Labor Party. There was little likelihood that I would assume a cabinet ministry again. I'd served a long period of time, I was getting a bit disillusioned with I think the wrong emphasis of the party in terms of issues of importance, I mean, but you go through that. You see, for 20-odd years there were things about that that I always found I had to deal with. So when you're there and you're enthusiastically committed to doing something for the people, you live with those difficulties and you try and work them out as best you can. So it wasn't just look, I've had enough of the party, I'm sick and tired of what's going on, I'm fed up but I'm going to go. It wasn't that. It was a combination of that as being a part of . . . the other part was my capacity to be more flexible, to be more lateral in my ability to move and manoeuvre and to be able to take in across the board, non-political commitment to the needs of people. They were the major factors.

AR You had been so intimately connected with the whole Kimberley electorate for 20 years; did you continue to take an interest in the people who

stood for the Kimberley to help people that you thought were the most worthwhile? Did you throw your support behind anybody?

BRIDGE No, I did not. I was always of the view in my life that when you've been in something for a while and the time reaches itself when you need to move on, you must make that break. When I was engaged . . . for example, when I was shire president of the Halls Creek shire council, 15-odd years straight, 18 years in local government, and then the decision came about that I should move off because I was going into state politics, I cut the lines, cut the ribbon, and that was it. I did not edge [hedge] around the peripheries. The same thing I reckoned I would do in state politics. Once the decision was made, I stepped out of the scene, and I'm very happy that I've done that because I've seen these other ex-politicians who've dabbled in politics beyond having left officially a career in politics, and, you know, they look pretty second-rate in most instances. A lot of them have reached their use-by date, so why dabble? It's as simple as that. You move on, so I've moved on, and I haven't taken any great interest in . . . I mean, the Kimberley electorate and the candidates that have now got to manage as I did with them for 20 years.

AR In 1993, you were honoured with the Order of Australia medal for your work in Parliament and in Aboriginal affairs.

BRIDGE That's right.

AR What did that mean to you?

BRIDGE Those sorts of honours are always special. They're special because somebody has seen it appropriate to recognise your contribution to the wellbeing of the citizens of the land or the country or the region or the location that you represent; and if people feel that you're worthy of that, then you've got to feel very proud of that. You have to feel, you should feel, very honoured about it; so I felt very honoured that there were people other than myself that thought my work was worthwhile, was appropriate and was

justifiably worthy of being recognised in the sense of an award. So that's always been a very special memory for me, receiving that award, and I've always felt very honoured about that.

AR Ernie, we're moving to the end of your political part of your life. Would you like to reflect now on what it has meant to you over those years?

BRIDGE Well, it's meant a tremendous lot. It's difficult for me to be able, I suppose, articulate just how valuable that period of my life in politics has been, but the extent of knowledge, the extent of experience, the know-how, the relationships that you've had to forge with people, the extent to which you've gained knowledge of people's difficulties, the extent to which you shared with the downtrodden, to me, they were very powerful things. See people in crisis, see people turning genuinely to you for help and going through the motions of being able to help them, not just sharing in times of stress, in times of tears, in times of anger, in times of disappointment; doing all those things, as you would appreciate I did over the 20-odd years, but then amidst all that then you're starting to put a little tick to all those things that out of all that experience came reward for me, as the politician, because I saw things happen that were necessary for the people who were the beneficiaries of their partnership with me. So I think in the highest level that an individual could define credit, purpose and value is how I would associate my 20 years as a political figure; wonderful period of time for which it just makes you a different person. I am totally different to what I was before I went in, but it's the link and the partnership with the people that makes that transition, the link and the partnership with the people, because no matter how we perform, if your strength of working with people, supporting people and sharing with people in whatever it is that they believe is important and you are able to share that situation similarly, then you come out of it a very special person. So I consider myself today in Australia to be a uniquely special person in the Australian landscape, and it's not because of my natural qualities, my ability to be special, but it's because of the partnership and the mateship and the strength, the guidance and the education and the development that the

people helped me sustain in all those years; so they've left me very much a complete person today.

AR It's been an unusual past really. Think back to that boy on the Kimberley station. What aspirations would you have had back then?

BRIDGE None in terms of a public career path. That's why I also feel good now. I would not have had this experience had I maintained that lifestyle. I would have missed out on the most unique experience ever achieved. You see, I don't think there's too many politicians who've ever gone through the same experience as a political figure -

AR I would say none.

BRIDGE - that I've gone through. So that's why I say it's just uniquely different, special. There's been no parallels, and the people made that happen.

AR It's been a lifetime of giving to the community, because that's what you're still doing.

BRIDGE Yes, but it's a worthy one, you know. I had my son, what was it . . . two or three days ago my son came to home, see, and he said, "Dad, I was in Albany recently." He said, "I walked into a cafe and two old farmers walked up to me and said, 'You look like a Bridge; are you a Bridge?'" He said, "Yes, I'm Kim Bridge." "You wouldn't happen to be Ernie Bridge's son, would you?" He said, "Yes, I am" and they said, "Well, he was a great minister; you give him my best wishes, our best wishes." So that's the reward, see? That's the reward, Anne.

END OF TAPE EIGHT SIDE B

TAPE NINE SIDE A

This is Anne Rogers interviewing Ernie Bridge for the Parliamentary History project tape nine, on the 28th of September 2004.

AR Today I would like to look at the part that music has played in your life. When you were growing up, was it important to you?

BRIDGE It was particularly important to me in two ways. My very first introduction into the value of music came about when I became a drover driving cattle from the stations in certain parts of the Kimberley to the abattoirs. In the very initial period that was to Wyndham, because there was an abattoir that was operating in the town of Wyndham during that period of time. Later, there was a need for us to go to Broome with such similar droving trips, so it meant in each instance the same methodology was put into practice of the way in which you undertook to deliver the cattle at the destination for slaughtering purposes from the stations that were selling those cattle as livestock. One of the most important things that my father taught me . . . and I went on my initial droving trips with my dad. He was a very, very good drover. He understood how you were able to care for cattle and do all the correct things about making sure that the herd that you were driving to abattoirs were given every conceivable chance of being settled, being calm, being not restless and being generally contented. Those things were brought about by making sure they had good drinks of water on the way and they had adequate time to have a lot of eating and food intake so that they were contented with the amount of food or grass they were able to absorb and all that sort of thing. He understood all those fundamentals and that you were very careful and that you really talked about a very slow speed of mobility. So it happened that that was the daytime sort of activity. Then at night when the cattle were resting at night (bedded down for the night in other words, in the stockman's terminology) it was an absolute requirement that the stockmen who were on what we called watch . . . that meant that you were surrounding those livestock as they were resting on a stock horse at night, which you were riding around continuously circling the resting mob. The practice of that process was one where you had to sing songs to allow the stock to know it was you

that was riding around in the dark of the night, and they could hear. I guess they got some comfort from the knowledge that there was that stockman that was surrounding them. The other thing that it did, it worked towards cushioning the impact of any sudden noise that might occur out of the blue. For example, a bullock might just get to his feet from a resting position at night and go to the nearest tree and rub himself against the tree, scratching in other words. If there was a dead limb on that tree, there were sometimes occasions where that limb would snap off the side of the tree and fall on the ground, and in the course of falling and hitting the ground made quite an abrupt sound. That was capable of setting the cattle off into a stampede, so the noise tended to cushion that. That meant that I needed to learn a lot of songs, so did the other people who did the droving trip, so music became very much an ingrained part of my very early life as a cattleman. Then, in more subsequent years to that, when I was in that period of my life in the town of Halls Creek when we were going into business and starting up small business operations for the family, there were several young fellows about my age who were into music who liked just what they termed a jam session. We used to have these jam sessions and the consequence of that was we all learnt to play the guitar. We taught ourselves to play the guitar and we all attempted to sing songs and it just became that kind of practice. Occasionally you would sing at a party or at some gathering, barbecue etc. Out of the blue, one day a young fellow called Rodney Rivers, a part-Aboriginal fellow who was one of the persons that used to get together with me and who was a very good guitarist (he was a really good guitarist; he taught himself very well to play the lead guitar) he said, "Why don't we go to Perth one time in the future and let's record an album and just see how it goes?" I thought yes, that sounds a good idea. That's what we planned to do and it was probably 12 months after that that he was in Kalgoorlie and I was in Halls Creek and he rang to say, "When you are going to visit Perth some time in the future, how about I come down to Perth and we meet up and we'll go into a studio and we'll put down a number of songs and if they turn out good, you might like to release those songs." So that is what happened. We were surprised with our effort. We thought we did a very good job. It was very straight up and down bush ballads, but it was the kinds of songs that people liked then and still like today and keep asking to be

sung, I myself [included]. That initial album and its success in terms of satisfying Rodney and I that it was good was the commencement of a music career, and that led me then to become a bit serious about recording purposes.

AR You must have been having some success locally to give you the confidence to come down to Perth and do that.

BRIDGE Yes, I suppose mainly the fact that we did a lot of practising together and singing together and we reckoned we had it worked out pretty right. Between us, Rodney and I, we felt confident in our ability to be able to go right when we got to the recording studio, and that's how it was. We were pretty correct in our assessment of our ability to perform in a recording sense. So we recorded "Kimberley Favourites"; that is what I called the album. I released that. From there, I got more focused on saying, "Well, look, why don't I start to record extra numbers of albums? Why don't we go into it more?" Progressively from there, I became more involved. I then saw the value of us touring, so we did a tour from the Kimberley throughout the North West right through the Pilbara and down to Perth, and we performed at the Perth Concert Hall, and then we went from there up to Kalgoorlie and performed at the civic centre up there. That was the first time we'd publicly gone on stage to musically perform to the audiences. During that period of time, I was again interested in doing the second album, and that was being produced during that visit. Then Rodney and I started to go to Tamworth as a regular yearly event, and we went over there for several years, Rodney and I. All of the time that this was happening, my two sons Kim and Noel were growing up and were becoming interested in music as well, see. Not so long after that, both Kim and Noel became part of my music. They became the backing group in my production of songs and they have been of course with me all those years since. Once Noel and Kim became part of the Ernie Bridge sound and the band, they have always been the main backing persons as such . . . Noel on the lead guitar and Kim on the bass. We have had other musicians that have come and gone. We have had the late Barry Thornton who played with us. He was Slim Dusty's notable guitarist. We have had

sessions with other great musicians that have taken part in our concerts and we've taken part in theirs, but it's always been on the basis of the identity of the Ernie Bridge Sound, the bush ballads. There's never been any departure from them. They have been, of course, very successful. For me it's been a highly successful period that I have gone through in terms of my music career because not only has it given me the opportunity to identify myself as an Australian person being capable of producing an Australian story through my ballads, which has a big audience in itself, but also played politically very significantly for me because, like a certain member of Parliament said to me once, he said "You get up on stage for three minutes and you tell a story that everybody likes. I can get up on stage for 30 minutes and not get anywhere near convincing the people, so you have got it over us by a country mile." That's what he said.

AR Did you write your own songs?

BRIDGE Some. Mostly I relied upon other writers sending me material and then constructing the melody and the verses and recording the songs. Basically, my better songs have been written by others, and that's good because the others have been very good songwriters. They have been people who have sent Slim Dusty material over the years. They have been top-line songwriters who I have had the benefit and the luxury of being able to draw upon for material. That was profoundly important in terms of my public profile. It was very helpful in terms of my political career because it identified me as a living person, and I was always well known, see, and I have always remained well known. Of course, nowadays it's the sheer pleasure of the music that is still profoundly important, because we do the odd concerts here and there and as a family we are on stage performing, and the people like it. So it still maintains the links between myself . . . in other words, I've not sort of left the public arena so to speak. My music and its profile has always kept me there. Along with the water plan, those have been the two most fundamentally important attributes I've had going for me to support my ability to discharge the duties that I undertook to deliver on behalf of the people. That's been the combination.

AR That's always been fitted in around an already very busy life. Did you ever toy with the idea of doing this full-time?

BRIDGE I did, and I should have done. As I think about my music, I have neglected my music in a sense. I think that whilst we have been popular and successful, I often am told by people on a regular basis that our style of music is so much a part of the Australian way of living that I should not have neglected the importance of it, and I think they're right. I think because of the political responsibilities and duties that I undertook in my political career, I always gave preference to those duties in terms of allocating my time. As I think about it now, the two ways that I would describe my joint political and music career is to say to you that I fully committed myself to my life as a politician. I left no stones unturned in my endeavours to do the utmost in representing people's interest, but I didn't do that with my music. I failed two groups of people because I did not do that. I lessened my ability to be more prominent as a musician, and I didn't quite satisfy the appetite of a large group of people out there who wanted the music. So they and myself really suffered a bit as a consequence of it. I suppose, given that, time hasn't run away. There you go. As I go through my career now, and although I am heavily engaged at the moment in projects right now, I have no doubt that there's going to be a way with these projects where once they pick up their basis of platform and are structured efficiently to be sustainable in their own right, then the amount of work that's currently on my shoulders can start to lessen as I can delegate to the communities, to the people and to the range of interest groups certain tasks, and that's going to be my required time in running those projects, which in turn I can then dedicate to music. I think even though I've sort of grown a few years older than when I first started, there's nothing to stop me from picking up a lot of that lost ground over the last 20 years musically, and I'd like to do that.

AR Slim Dusty certainly kept going for a long, long time, didn't he?

BRIDGE He did, and if you look at the last 10 years of Slim's life, he was highly successful as a producer of good ballads and albums. You know, I've

got many years ahead of me if you take Slim's age as an example. A long way to go.

AR There's a lovely photograph of the two of you on the steps of Parliament House. What did that mean to you to be there with him, both with your guitars?

BRIDGE Slim was always my idol. He was the person that I saw as the ultimate. Two things about Slim that I have always felt was a very important part of my life was to know the person in the first instance was important, and then secondly to become a friend, a close friend of Slim was an ultimate to me. The third, of course, was to be able to share music with him on stage, or publicly to be identified as somebody that Slim Dusty cared about. That's what that means. Musically, that's the ultimate.

AR How did you come to perform at Old Opry?

BRIDGE That is an interesting one. That, of course, in the broader context, in the international scene, that's the other ultimate. A relationship with Slim was the ultimate in the Australian context. He was my friend, he was my idol. He was the person who in my opinion was the best of all times, and we performed together. But when it came to the international scene, which is again different, having the opportunity to be invited to perform at the Grand Old Opry cannot be surpassed. That is the ultimate in any living musician's ambition and hope.

AR Are many Australians invited?

BRIDGE Very few, very few. When I was invited, there was only one or two before me. There was the late Tex Morton who had been there prior to myself, and there might possibly have been one other. Quite a few nowadays are able to go to the Grand Old Opry in Nashville. It seems to have freed up more in the last six, eight or 10 years, but in the early days it was very special. You had to have a very special invitation to be able to perform. I got that

opportunity when I travelled as a Minister for Water Resources to the UK, to Libya and to the United States of America. It was on my trip around those nations to have a look at their water projects that brought me to America. When the authorities in America were made known of my music background, they then communicated with the committee that runs the Grand Old Opry and said, "We've got an Australian musician that's going to be visiting our shores soon. Is there any prospects of him being formally invited by the organising committee of the Grand Old Opry to maybe perform whilst he's in America?" They of course said, "Yes, by all means, we'd love to have him along." So it became an official kind of invitation. I had the red carpet laid out in other words. I was looked after by senators of that location. They spent three or four days in our group just giving us that sort of attention. I was able to arrange for my two sons to travel to America to appear on stage with me, and that's how that all came about.

AR And what song did you choose to sing for America?

BRIDGE I sang a song called, "My Country, the Flag and Me." That is an Australian ballad. I sang, "The Helicopter Ringer" because the helicopters, as a flying machine so to speak, sort of got their origins in Australia through being flown by American pilots. Because of that linkage, I was able to make it a connection between them and us, so I sang "The Helicopter Ringer", which had a lot of empathy associated with it.

AR And the flag certainly has a strong resonance -

BRIDGE Yes, very strong. That went down as well. Then we did other ballads as well. We went down to Austin in Texas where we did a concert. The two boys were with me through that period that I travelled, and we did a long, fairly lengthy concert down there, not just a few songs but almost a full-on concert. It was a grand experience for us, and remains the pinnacle of course.

AR Can you tell me the story about the video clip and Dolly Parton?

BRIDGE I can. I recorded in more recent times a song called “200 Years Ago”, and the song captures the Eddie Mabo High Court challenge. That’s what the story is about. In the production and the release of that song I thought, because of the importance of it, we should get a nice video clip done. So I went to a fair amount of cost to engage a company that was in the business of producing videos, short stories and that sort of thing. We engaged them and they did this video clip of the song. There’s no doubt that the video clip is an excellent production, and really should have won awards in Australia. I cannot for the life of me understand how it failed to pick up an award in Australia, because it wasn’t a sort of mish-mash type of production. It was very professionally done, and the lyrics were right, the story was right and historically it was an important event. Everything about the song and the video was good for Australia. Culturally very important, you know. A whole new transition in a nation. We recorded this album. I introduced the video into a series of video contests or exhibitions or whatever they are over here in Australia. Whilst it got within . . . people would say you were in the last four in these categories that it’s entered into. It never picked up any [awards], including in Tamworth. In the meantime, the producers of this video clip said to me, “If you wouldn’t mind, why don’t you allow us to enter it into a world video festival in America?” “I have always maintained,” they said to me, “that it’s really a top-line video. Whilst you haven’t got the just rewards in Australia, it’s entitled to more than what it’s received, so let us have a crack.” I said, “Fine, if you’d like to go ahead and enter the video clip in whatever categories you like, you do so.” So they did that. They put it into a country and western category in this world video festival in America. It happened to be the case that we were just beaten by Dolly Parton. She got the first prize and we ran second in an international world video festival in America. I have always felt very good about that as well. The only disappointing feature I guess is that the Australians as a nation should have picked up on it. It shouldn’t have been the Americans who saw the value of that video clip to the point that one of their supremos were the only person that beat it in the contest.

AR What was her song that beat it? Do you remember?

BRIDGE I do not recall the song but it was a good song; one of Dolly Parton's highly recognised and acclaimed songs. Of course, it's no disgrace getting beaten by Dolly Parton. We felt very honoured, the band and I, that we ran so close to somebody as good as Dolly Parton. That was an achievement, even though we didn't win the gold award.

The other part of my music career that I have fond memories about is the way in which the children at the schools have always responded to the ballads. It's only during the course of the Cathy Freeman tour in the last few weeks in the Kimberley that at the high school in Derby, for example, the teachers produced a guitar and asked me to sing a song. The wonderful part about the presentation of that song is that they'd got a group of children from a classroom to learn the words of "Helicopter Ringer". When I performed the song, I had a classroom of children who sang beautifully with me . . . absolutely in time, their rhythm was good and they were spot-on in remembering the words. Those sorts of things to me are also very valuable you see. I had all of that happening when I was a minister. In my ministerial career, I would go out and I would do these opening ceremonies formally and officially about some event, and then eventually it would come down to the schoolchildren of that local school doing an item with myself. I remember the very first time this happened is when I first became Minister for Water Resources and I went to a little place called Bindi Bindi on. . . it was to do with Anzac Day and when I was invited to be part of the Anzac Day ceremony at Bindi Bindi, a tiny little place. They had the schoolchildren there all assembled to sing with me as well, and we did that song that I referred to a little while back, "My Country, the Flag and Me". Those are also very special parts of the contribution that my music has been able to give to the people, and to be linking me in with the relationship with the people. It's all about togetherness. Togetherness is what this music of mine has always been about. I think that's the other exciting feature. It goes on today that I go to a school, I am always invited to sing a song with the kids, and I like that.

AR It's a lovely link.

BRIDGE Yes.

END OF TAPE NINE A

TAPE NINE SIDE B

AR Ernie, when you left politics or decided not to stand again, what was your priority then to do?

BRIDGE It was to continue doing things for people. I didn't quite know what those things were going to be, but I thought of myself as being this kind of person that I was still committed very deeply to work for the people and with the people. There was no way that that commitment that sort of came about early in my life was diminished or tarnished in any shape or form because of my 20 years in politics. It did not diminish that linkage between me and the people. That's still there as profound as ever, as strong as ever, and, in my opinion, it's demanding of me as ever. I feel as if I have always had a job to do. If you have that sort of feeling and you believe in that sort of way of thinking, there's a measure of demand you place upon yourself to do something to work with the people. It's just a way of life. So that was my priority. I never for once said, "Look, I've resigned from my political career. Now I am just going to wind down and take things very easy. I've done my part. Somebody else takes over now." That was never the thought. It was to look very quickly at where my next way of helping and working with the people shall emerge from, how I would find that direction. I was lucky that I was assisted in that by the fact that I'd created the Watering Australia Foundation before I left politics.

AR Would you like to explain how that came about?

BRIDGE It came about because I sensed that I was going to be leaving politics, and I was going to be leaving politics in a relatively short period of time. That was my thought when I thought about the Watering Australia Foundation. I said to myself, "What I need is an independent vehicle, a private vehicle, to provide me with the platform to be able to look at avenues of work, of goals and purposes in life." Otherwise, you're floundering. If you don't have a mechanism, an infrastructure or an entity, you flounder because you've always got to rely upon somebody else's machinery to maximise your pathway down the goals that you're pursuing, so you need to have your own

mechanism if you can. I said, "Look, I'll create the Watering Australia Foundation to provide that purpose. We'll give it a nice vision, a nice mission statement and a nice purpose so that the public of Australia will feel an ownership of it." Like it is, it's a public company, so everybody in Australia can feel an ownership of Watering Australia Foundation. I'll provide the stewardship and we'll look at projects around the country that we can talk about publicly in terms of getting a nation to shift its way of thinking from the short-term ideology that I saw surrounding me in my career as a politician and especially as a Minister for Water Resources. I saw around me a nation of short-term ideals . . . quick fix, short fix and, in the end, repeatable requirements to deal with problems. I thought, "Now, we've got to try and get this good Australian country out of that", so the Watering Australia Foundation was set up for that purpose. Very quickly, of course, after that, I sensed then that there was . . . well I didn't sense there was a problem in health . . . I'll rephrase it this way. Shortly after I retired, I was working at Noonkanbah Station when the appeal of the chairman to me about their diabetes worries caused me to reflect upon the health status of the indigenous people of Australia.

AR I'm going to stop you there Ernie because I'd like to hear a little bit more about the Watering Foundation first and then I'd like to spend more time with the whole diabetes issue. Where does the money for the Watering Australia Foundation come from?

BRIDGE It comes from sponsorship really. Local government in the main have been the regular sponsors. Each year, I write to all of the local governments around Australia, every one of them (there is a huge number of them) seeking a small contribution from them to provide ongoing funding for the small operations of the Watering Australia Foundation, so we have a flow of funding that comes in through that source. Occasionally, we have the private sector make a donation, but basically it's that. It's not been given any government assistance at all in its entire period of its existence. It simply hasn't qualified, and we've not been able to really put up an argument really that to this point of time, where we've attracted finance from any governments

of Australia. So it's been a very limited budget we have worked on, but it's been enough just to keep myself in a public profiled position where I, as the President of Watering Australia, I've had a vehicle upon which was credible and upon which the media and other information outlets have been able to and have felt comfortable in running my stories. So it's given me and the Watering Australia Foundation that profile.

AR Are there any particular projects that you're working towards with that organisation?

BRIDGE Well, the main one of course is the continuation of the promotion of the national vision. Watering Australia Foundation encompasses the national vision, and the national vision is about this nation turning its interest to looking very objectively at the capturing of the last large renewable resources or renewable waters of northern Australia and to utilise a percentage of those large resources into areas of need within the nation in a general sense. Of course, in the context of that plan, the Kimberley pipeline and its benefits to Perth and in between areas of the State have been to the forefront for obvious reasons. That is an identified project from which people around Australia understand and I have had the best knowledge base about promoting. That's been the major thrust of an international and a long-term vision for the nation, which the Watering Australia Foundation stands for. In between, we have been able to help private projects and small-scale interested groups in looking at their developmental needs by supporting them in submissions to the governments and talking about the value of such projects with them and government officials. So we are not just about one visionary project alone. We are about saying, I suppose in the sense of saying it, that if ever you're going to fix up a nation's water requirements, you've got to look at bringing on board appropriate measures of supply to deal with it. You cannot expect to deal with it in the short term or the long term if all that you can think about is constraints, regressive policies and the reduction of the availability of water, because that's the only volume of water that happens to be in the system. It's just a crazy . . . it's an idiotic notion and it's bad for Australia because Australia is a big, developing nation with these

unlimited and abundant supplies at its disposal just running out to the sea currently and effectively being wasted.

AR There was a big conference recently nationwide about water. Did the government include you in that?

BRIDGE No. One of the sad features of this present government, the Geoff Gallop Government, is that it has not at any stage considered engaging myself in any form of discussion with it about water management and looking at possible scenarios for the future. I have been totally left out of that equation. I think it's a bad thing for the State they've done it, because you'd think that people who think a lot about projects and who have a fair, basic knowledge about projects are not brought into the discussion, it's just silly planning. They've chosen to do that, and so I've not been a part of any of those conferences.

AR No. The fact that your organisation takes a national view, it seems an oversight for you not to have been invited to that national conference.

BRIDGE Absolutely. Well, it's not just seen. It's indeed an oversight of significant proportions because the Watering Australia Foundation does have at its disposal some very eminent and very qualified people who make up its membership and who are a part of its structural planning process, not just myself. So we can draw upon very good knowledge to make available to governments in their desire to look at planning, but they've chosen not to do that. Probably there are two things I'd say about that. I think one is that there are politicians (and in this country these politicians include Premiers and Prime Ministers) whose intellectual capacity to think beyond three days from today is about the limit. So when you think about lateral and vision planning, it's beyond their capacity to think. That's a sad indictment for me to make about politicians in those high places of authority, but it is factual. Secondly, they sometimes are swayed by the opinion of their advisers that the outside source of advice or knowledge that's been associated with a given

organisation is not the way forward. So instead of saying, "Well, look, let this outside organisation have its say anyway", they just dismiss out of contention the values and the validity of having them engaged in debate. I think it's a short-sighted approach by highly identified and positioned politicians, and their inability to be able to withhold or reject the measure of antagonism and negativity that flows from their advisers about outside opinion. That's the only thing I can put it down to.

AR We are sitting in the office at the Unity of First People of Australia. Can you tell me something about this organisation?

BRIDGE Unity of First People of Australia's creation is much like the Watering Australia Foundation's initial development, but I saw a need for a range of things to be highlighted in my capacity and interest in the indigenous people of Australia, that I had a job to do, that I was well qualified through my long career in the public arena to understand a lot of important aspects of the indigenous people, their culture, their lifestyle, their values, and that I ought to be engaged in assisting in the preservation of all those important fundamentals. In the preservation of them. That's how I felt about it. Again, like Watering Australia Foundation, I had to have an entity or a platform to publicly profile the views that I felt I had to express about those important aspects of the indigenous race and their importance to the nation. So the Unity of First People of Australia was set up again as a public company for the purpose of creating a base and an opportunity for me and its organisation as an operation to help people with a range of things. As it's turned out, the very first project that's emerged out of our interest in helping the indigenous race is being to become engaged quite directly in the delivery of a diabetes management and care program. Quite frankly, that has become almost a full-on, entire period of occupancy by all of us in the UFPA. We have been highly and heavily embroiled in a lot of work there because it's all about lifestyle transitions of thousands of peoples from children right through the various stages and categories of the indigenous race to the point where you have got the identified diabetics also are in need of special help and attention. This has been a very full time but it's been a very, very exciting program because

we are seeing immense changes in the lifestyle patterns of those communities that are out there now that have been the beneficiaries of our program. Take for example Looma. When we went into Looma about 12 months ago Looma was just a typical Aboriginal community where there were problems and there were difficulties in determining where they might go in the future and how they might go in the future to the point today where their excitement and enthusiasm about doing things, the people themselves in the community, that they recently entered for the tidy towns competition; the only indigenous community in the entire State that's done so. They are telling us about all of these wonderful, exciting programs that they've now got up and running. For example, only last week we had a report to say that they started their basketball competition and there was 150 people lined up on the first night wanting to play basketball. So you see the transition. It's a whole new way of living that the diabetes management and care program has generated in these communities. We are seeing from that the immense health benefits that are flowing to those people.

AR So you see that whole tidy town, basketball as a flow on?

BRIDGE Absolutely.

AR Could you explain to me how you go about setting up the program in a community?

BRIDGE The first thing that we do is to say to a community that wants us to consider setting up that we need an invitation from them to go there in the first [instance]. The reason why the invitation is so important is that if, after going there initially and explaining the program to them, they then take a decision as a community that they in fact want the program, it enables the UFPA to then engage itself officially in a certain set of agreements about joint ownership, the responsibilities of the people taking care for their own health and things like that. That's how it all starts. They send a letter off to us here in the office saying, "We'd like you to come and talk to us about your program. We've heard it's going good or it offers benefits etc. We're all worried about

diabetes and so forth.” From there we reach agreement. I go and present the program to them. They then immediately say, “Yes, we want it”, and then we enter into a series of agreements, particularly the joint ownership, because it’s a program that has to be built upon the basis of community-driven community ownership. It’s not one of these programs where you and I in an office in Perth conceptualise the plan and then we go up and we say to the people, “We’ve got a way of dealing with your worries. This is what we’ve thought through and we’re going to ask you to introduce it into your community. We’ll be here for a few weeks or a few months working on the program with you and then at the end of that time, we will leave and go back to wherever we’ve come from and the program’s yours.” That’s been the inherent failure of governments of this country for the last 200 years. Our program is totally different. It comes from a totally different position. That, of course, is why we are getting such profound results. For the first time now, people are being encouraged by the proponents of the scheme about their own ability to do things, about their own capacity to manage things and about their own responsibilities to be engaged in these practices. They are now being invited, encouraged and persuaded and motivated into those responses. Of course, those responses are the basis upon which these wonderful results are emerging.

AR So, do you have large community meetings?

BRIDGE Yes, initially you do, and then progressively during the period of the program’s life, the carers, the UFPA workers who are in these communities helping with the delivery of the program, constantly engage themselves in community meetings with the people.

AR So, trained UFPA workers actually stay on the community for an extended time.

BRIDGE That’s right. Initially, we speak in terms of six months’ duration. That’s the full-on being there every week kind of thing, but then after that period, we’ve found to date about the six-months period certainly produces

changed attitudes. We find at the end of the six months we haven't quite completed our task, and what happens then is an ongoing sort of monitoring, liaison, motivational and support mechanism that we keep going for a period beyond there. In the case of our very first community, Noonkanbah, it's about now, two years from the commencement date, that I'm comfortably in a position now to say that the frequency of our visits is no longer necessary.

AR What changes have you seen happen at Noonkanbah?

BRIDGE I've seen immense changes. We've seen a community that now have a belief in exercise, physical activities. We've had a store that's completely complied with the nutrition and dietary requirements of helping the people with diabetes, weight loss and physical activity. We've had a school that's gone from first of all having us going to the classrooms and explaining and, in a general sense, giving awareness sessions, education sessions about diabetes to the point today where they've built their own canteen, which is known as the diabetes canteen. Through this canteen they have a special person who produces specially prepared dietary and nutrition-type food for the children to consume during the period of time that they're in the school. I think it's just been a massive transition.

AR And does the funding for this come from commonwealth health funding?

BRIDGE It comes from a range of funding sources, predominantly the private sector. Rio Tinto Aboriginal Foundation, Caritas Australia and Diabetes Australia have been our major funders. We've had the Commonwealth Government, through the family and community services department and the health and ageing department, being large contributors. In more recent times, we've now got the Western Australian Government supporting us financially as well. It's a combination of governments, state and Commonwealth, and the large reliance upon the private sector for large sources of funding.

AR I imagine now that you've had huge successes in some communities that the others would have been very aware of what was going on and there'd be more lining up. Is that what's happening?

BRIDGE We've only as recent as yesterday had a very small little community say they saw such wonderful results in one of our communities in recent times. They're asking if I would consider our program going into their community. This is the school principal and his teachers saying this, and that of course is something I like because I think that the schoolchildren are the number one target group for any ability on our part to curb the increase in diabetes. I think we've got to take advantage of the non-diabetic group in our society and we've got to educate them to the extent that they themselves will keep themselves in a state of health where they don't ultimately become diabetics. A knowledge base is all that you need. It's a preventable disease; therefore, it's a disease that occurs through a range of things that happen in lifestyle habits. If you get people who are conscious of that in the early stages of their lifestyle and the patterns and their way of living, they can ensure within themselves that they don't necessarily have to face the problems of diabetes. The genetic factor is an important one, but then they can even deal with that as well you see. It's a whole new shift. The problem with the system as it applies now [is that it] has been a predominantly medically driven system. A medically-driven system focuses itself heavily upon the clinical consideration, and the clinical factors associate themselves with identified diabetics. There's nothing about a non-diabetic that is of any interest to them. That's why it's so all embracing. Our work in the community starts in the schools and with the mums and dads and the children in the homes, and then goes into the youth and progressively through the whole system to the point of the carers and the ones that are acutely unwell. We're also able to help them as well with encouragement and support.

AR I think that recently the Unity of First People of Australia have become regional finalists as Entrepreneurs of the Year.

BRIDGE That's right. Yes, we got to the last four in that particular category in 2003. That was very good.

AR That was in recognition of the initiatives that have started from this company.

BRIDGE Absolutely, yes, and it was very good when you think that it was so soon after we commenced our work. We didn't have a long track record.

AR When did you start, then?

BRIDGE We sort of got cracking during 1993. We started in 1992 but that was the very first year we went into one community, into Noonkanbah, but the results and the successes really did not become evident until 1993. So when we went into that award category, we probably had done very well considering that we were able to show such progress in that relatively short period of time.

AR The Unity of First People of Australia has been around for over 10 years, has it? Is that what you're saying, that you began in 1992 or -

BRIDGE I beg your pardon, 2002, sorry.

AR It's a very short time.

BRIDGE Yes, 2002, I'm sorry. So given that we started in 2002, and then we were finalists in 2003, it was a pretty notable achievement I believe because we had a very limited period of time to be able to highlight all of the advances that have come about. We're in a vastly advanced situation in the year 2004 to talk about our success.

AR So the diabetes program has been your major thrust, but there are other projects as well, aren't there?

BRIDGE Yes, the other one is the training of indigenous persons into the police service as fully commissioned police officers. In other words, indigenous people going into the mainstream policing not as APLOs - police liaison officers - but in fact as fully commissioned police officers. That program has also been a success for us. We've now got a fairly large or a sizeable group of indigenous people in terms of numbers that have gone through the training, the recruitment, the examination process and ultimately becoming commissioned officers.

AR To achieve this have you lobbied the police service, or how have you gone about it?

BRIDGE We did not have to lobby the police service for it to happen. He's now retired . . . when Acting Commissioner or Assistant Commissioner John Standing was an assistant commissioner, he recognised that there was a need for more indigenous people to be brought into the mainstream police service, and it was at his invitation that I spoke to him at length about such a possibility. He in fact got a group of senior police officers in to the meeting and we talked generally about how we might be able to go about doing this. He admitted freely that the police themselves had failed in attracting indigenous people into the mainstream police service, and they talked often and loud about the diverse nature of the police service they want to see out there in the field. They said that the way we do that, of course, is to have more people of other origins such as the ethnic group participant and the indigenous group participant and with the non-Aboriginals and the others. I thought I'd be happy to have a crack, so we then talked about how we might set this up. We had several discussions in the early stages about getting the modules right . . . the type of training requirements that would be given to the students as they went through a three-month bridging course so to speak with our program. We would be required to go out there and to find the people from within the community in the broadest context, and through invitation and agreement with the individuals, they'd enter into our program and they'd go through this three-month period of training; skills enhancement is what we called it. At the end of the three months, they would then sit for their entry

exams. Based on success, they'd either be invited into the police academy or they would miss out. That's how it's gone and that's been again another very good project.

AR So you prepare them so they've got a good chance of being accepted?

BRIDGE It's an interesting thing. We prepare them . . . you're absolutely correct in making that statement because it was only yesterday that I was talking to the recruiting branch senior officer and he said, "We have found, even . . .

END OF TAPE NINE SIDE B

TAPE TEN SIDE A

This is Anne Rogers interviewing Ernie Bridge for the Parliamentary History project tape 10, on the 28th of September 2004.

BRIDGE They were particularly pleased with this latest group that had gone into the recruiting branch from our last program. He said that they've all performed very well and a high percentage of the individuals have already passed their exams. That, of course, was very encouraging. The other encouraging thing that I thought was worthy of me mentioning to you is that he said, "One of the things that we discovered through working with your program and receiving the recruits that come out of your program is the preparation that they seem to have [done] in dealing with interview situations and good knowledge of the basic requirements for the entry purposes." He said, "That's something that is really standing out with your group." He said, "It's exciting because that, of course, as you would appreciate, gives them a flying start really. More often than not people seeking an entry into the Police force come in and encounter those difficulties. You've obviously got a program in place that really targets those requirements and the students reflect that by way of their conduct when they come here." So I thought that was nice to hear.

AR A high recommendation. Do most of your recruits come from the metropolitan area?

BRIDGE Mostly they do, although this year we have had two that have gone through that have been from Broome. Two of the young police officers now that are in the Police Service are Broome people.

AR And are they most likely to be sent back there to work?

BRIDGE No. I don't think that's the way the system operates. I think the system operates in the sense that a decision is made for placement, based on

where the Police Service requires people to be placed, and that's how their allocations are made.

AR So they are not seen particularly as indigenous officers when they are finished; they are police officers rather than -

BRIDGE That is it. It's a wonderful thing to see what happens with these people. We see them out there. There are fully fledged, integrated people in the mainstream police service, undertaking the task equally and sharing directly with other police officers their duties and responsibilities. It is the perfect example of the equality that we often talk about. It is that highest level of achievability that these people have gone through that has placed them in that position.

AR Do you have other areas of concern that you would like to see Unity of First People of Australia tackle?

BRIDGE I think the value of culture is something that we don't place enough importance on. I've got to say that over the years I haven't thought about it as strongly as I'm thinking about it now. A wonderful example of what this is came about in my recent experience of having Cathy Freeman visit the Kimberley as part of supporting the UFPA's diabetes program. When we went to the Warmun community, which is at Turkey Creek . . . the members of the Warmun community are the Gija tribe. My mum, her mother, my family and I are Gija by that sort of ancestral relationship with the tribes. Because of the links between myself, my mum and her mum and, now Cathy Freeman linked with myself bringing her to that community, they accorded her a welcoming ceremony in the form of a blessing in which Cathy was absolutely amazed at how they welcomed her and her manager into that community, and took them both into their company. They were blessed in the traditional way of how the tribe conducts these smoking ceremonies and these blessing ceremonies. So there you have the profound links, going back to my mum and my grandmother; not just me but them.

When we went to the other communities that were part of the tour, like Noonkanbah and Looma, Cathy and I were accorded great respect and understanding, and absolute welcoming into the communities, but there was no blessing and no smoke ceremony because we did not come from that tribe and there was no linkage with those groups. I think that we often do not realise the values that these people still associate with those aspects of their lives; it is only on occasions like that when the importance of it is highlighted and graphically illustrated for everybody to see. I think we as Australians generally (and I am very much a part of the “we Australians”) have not appreciated to the fullest extent those cultural values, those traditional values and the spirituality of the people’s lives, the indigenous races, and their lives in this country. Maybe that is another area that we have got to continue to foster in a goodwill approach to it all. I am just saying that values that people have are vitally important, are crucial; they are believable values and we must believe in them. We must believe in them. So I think getting Australia to believe in itself, believe in the important things that make up the nation, is a chartered course for me to follow, because I am in the unique position to be able to fairly authoritatively talk about those sorts of subjects. We have drifted away. We are not quite a believing Australia any more, in my opinion. The very fabric and foundations of a society are often a bit fragmented and we cannot afford to do that, yet it is only by reflection really and then contemplation that we are going to bring those things back into perspective. So I am keen about that.

AR If we could return for a moment to the diabetes program, I believe you were in Mexico recently.

BRIDGE I was.

AR Can you tell me about that?

BRIDGE Yes; that was an amazing experience. Through contacts that I have now in high places in the medical profession (and I mean international links) I was invited by the organising committee of the 24th World Congress of

Paediatrics to give a paper and to speak on diabetes in remote communities of Australia, particularly as it impacts upon the children, and in the course of doing so, to highlight to the congress the nature of the UFPA's diabetes management care program. I am told that I am the only non-paediatrician ever in the 24 periods of the congress's existence to have been invited to speak. There were 600 speakers there, there were about 10 000 delegates and it went on for over a week. I made a presentation on behalf of our program and spoke in terms of diabetes and its impact upon these remote communities. It had such an impact on the congress that what has followed the presentation has been an interest shown by, at this stage, Mexico to visit the Kimberley and to have a look first-hand at how the program is unfolding and getting such good results, and other countries that attended similarly expressed interest in visiting Australia. That, in itself, is important because that creates now an international linkage between not just the UFPA and the participants at the paediatric conference but, in fact, the international global congress linkage between those countries and Australia.

Secondly, the president of the congress requested that we have quite a decent discussion about our program and how there might be a way beyond just the participation in the congress that could emerge while we were having exchange or communication or maybe information sourcing and all that sort of thing. So there is another linkage. I suppose the third thing is that our program really set the basis upon which these other countries really need to rethink where they are heading because, unfortunately, the entire representation, apart from our submission, was absolutely focused on the clinical and medical aspects of diabetes, and that is what I have always said is the wrong side of the equation. It's at the end of a process. It's not about intervention and prevention; it's about diagnostics; it's about clinical; it's about medication; and it's about medical supervision, control and management. What I was able to say to them was just step back a bit and talk about the areas that we're now engaged in; going into the schools; talking to that group; talking to the non-diabetic people; talking to the obese but non-diabetic; talking to the borderlines who are close to becoming diabetic but are not diabetics and are retrievable. If we all do it this way, we'll get the communities

themselves to help us in pursuit of our attempts to deal with diabetes, and we'll indeed of course in the end save governments unlimited sources of funding in pursuit of these attempts. So I think it was a big awakening, because they were saying to me, "How can you do it? In our countries we cannot get the indigenous people to do it."

AR In other countries, for instance in America, are the native Americans also prone to diabetes?

BRIDGE Heavily; very, very much so.

AR So in many countries there are marginalised groups who are susceptible?

BRIDGE Very much so. You could almost say generally speaking the world over, if you've got an indigenous population, they have a high incidence of diabetes; there is no doubt about it.

AR So you could become a model.

BRIDGE I heard last night on the *Four Corners* program how a fellow said Nauru, for example, has over 50 per cent of the population with diabetes. He made the false statement that here in Australia, of course, it is running at about eight or nine per cent. In Australia in the indigenous race it is running between 45 and 50 per cent. That is how bad it is. In all those communities that we have participated in to date, the incidence of diabetes in those communities is around about the 50 per cent mark; and I think it's probably the same everywhere.

AR It's an exciting period of your life, I think, with this organisation.

BRIDGE Yes, this one's a really special one, because when you can sit back, as we are able to do now here, knowing that there are lives out there that you've either saved, given a greater degree of comfort to or you've

ensured that there's a very big chance of them never becoming diabetics, it's pretty much of a comfort zone for you to be able to sort of work and remain within the environment. It's nice going.

AR Ernie, it seems to me that we've covered most of the things that we set out to cover. Would you have some closing words for us?

BRIDGE Anne, I do, and that is that our interview has worked in a couple of ways. It's worked in the sense that we've been able to go through a historical feature of my life in which that information now has been made available to you. I've always been happy for that to happen, if that was the purpose of the series of interviews; that from these interviews you would collate a sort of knowledge base of myself, and that would be then made available and presented in the form that will be considered appropriate. The other thing I want to say is that through asking me all these various questions over the many months of our interviews, I've gone through an exciting period of recollection, of reflection and of recalling parts of my life that otherwise I would not have been thinking about, and I want to thank you for that. I think that's very special. What it does, I guess, in the end is tell us that it has been a very mixed, at times turbulent, but it has been a full-on life that I have engaged myself in, and out of that it would be right to say that there have been people who have benefited in their relationship with me and my ability and my commitment to work with them. That's very fulfilling in itself. So I want to let you know that through our interviews, you've been able to get me to feel that way through a reflection of my life and I thank you for that.

AR Ernie Bridge, thank you for your time and the information that you've given us, and it's been a privilege.

BRIDGE Thank you, Anne.

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END OF INTERVIEW