Planning News co-editor, Grant Meyer, recently caught up with former Kennett Government Planning Minister, Robert Maclellan, to reflect on his time in office.

He speaks candidly on topics including: starting in the job, his relationship with the public service, local government, the planning profession, Docklands, Jeff Kennett, the former Kew asylum site and his legacy.

For a man born on the 8th of March 1934, he is still exceptionally sharp and in good physical condition.

He confides that he has recently had surgery to remove cataracts from his eyes and has subsequently experienced much improved sight.

A review of parliamentary records reveals a 32 year career as a Liberal MP in the Victorian Parliament that included a stint as Leader of the Opposition (1982-1985), a number of ministry positions, and for the purposes of this article, the Minister for Planning in the Kennett Government between 1992 and 1999.
Of note, in 2005 he was awarded the Member of the Order of Australia (AM) "for service to the Victorian Parliament, particularly in the areas of planning and transport, and to the community."

Now living alone, he describes how his wife, Beverley, passed away in 2008 following a battle with bowel cancer. They had been married for 45 years.

He has a good network of family and friends and gets out two evenings per week to play bridge locally. He’s not overly fond of the game but enjoys the social interaction with local men and women.

When invited by Planning News to be interviewed Robert expressed surprise that the readership would be interested in him given he is “no longer important.”

Accordingly when the subject of memoirs is raised, he says he has no interest in writing any from his time in office. That said he advises that he has provided all of his ministerial correspondence to the University of Melbourne for research purposes and in the public interest.

On the subject of universities, Robert has been guest lecturing engineering students at Melbourne University and this continues in 2015. Amongst the topics he presents on are Public Private Partnerships.

He smiles when recalling that he gets the varied cultural audience to greet each other at the start of a lecture with their own culture’s greeting. He says it’s important that they connect with each other as in 20 years time a few of them will be CEO’s of major companies like BHP Billiton. He also reveals with pride that he has been voted the best guest lecturer by the students.

The interview takes place in his residence, a small white 1930’s farmhouse near Phillip Island. The décor has barely been touched in decades which gives it a period feel.

He rests back into the couch and is in a reflective mood.

(Begins)

What did you find when you took on the role of Planning Minister in 1992?

A bunch of flowers and tears. And I walked into a completely alien environment.

I had been a Minister departing on a change of government but not a Minister arriving on one.
I’m sure there will be people who dispute it but I felt I had walked into a civil war. There were groups within the Department head office in the Older Fleet (Building) who were at war with each other.

So if you asked the Director of Planning for something a significant number of people within the Department would not do it. It meant it would be slow, you’d have to ask four or five times, things like that.

They were not working together, they were working apart. And as it happens the Secretary of the whole department was there previously.

But like incoming governments wanting to put their sticky handprints on everything, every department was reshaped and re-headed so that we didn’t have to inherit the old ones. So the old ones were being parked.

I arrived and the telephone call telling the Head of the Department that he was to report at the other end of town (ie Collins Street) and more or less was never to be seen again.

Well until he could get a job with the Federal Labour Government or something. And so his loyal secretary dissolved into tears. It was quite extraordinary.

To get into the Ministers room which had this funny churchy window from the Olderfleet Building, it was a bit like the church hall. It was like an office on the church hall. Pretty bleak.
How did you come to get the Planning Portfolio?

Jeff Kennett suggested it to me in 1992. I wasn’t too keen. I asked him whether he had any policies he wanted me to follow. He was after all the leader and it was only right that I should expect direction from him. He responded with three words: “Jobs, jobs, jobs”.

Why weren’t you interested in taking on planning?

Well personal things. I mean. Well down here, planning, yuck!

Planning was always some recent graduates recruited and inadequately supervised by country shires exercising their authoritarian views. Until you could get to a councillor and try and get it reversed! Planning was not the implementation of agreed objectives. Planning was a process by which things were approved so it was overwhelmingly about process.

And I still make that criticism of planning. Planning is utterly bewitched. It makes criminal lawyers, those practicing in the area of crime, seem like high- principled people by comparison.

Because if the process allows it, they exercise absolutely no judgement about the outcome...their interest is in the process.

Aaah was the application dealt with within the number of days? Was it filled in properly? Was the signature of the right person put in the right space?!

That becomes more important than whether something really awful appears within the community or whether, more subtly, anyone noticed if something stunningly good is refused and never sees the light of day.

They are very much process people and with my law background and my previous labour and industry portfolio, which is apprenticeships and things like that, and Transport.

I can sum up my experience with transport. Strikes went down to a 15 year low because I gave the unions a list of things that I wanted to achieve as they gave me a list of things like 35 hours per week and 52 weeks holiday pay!

I gave them my list and said every time you want to go on strike something on my list will be implemented so they went straight out on strike as soon as I gave them a list and I implemented one of the things on the list. I shut the barbershop. And they didn't even have haircuts!

So why was the railways running a barbershop? I shut it! And I said: “It won’t reopen ever while I’m Minister! And you can stay out as long as you like!”
They were on strike over a barbershop. Good luck to you. So they realised that going on strike was counterproductive.

I would have the railway unions on one side of the table, the railway management on the other and I was the only radical in the room!

I have never met such deeply conservative people in all my life.

The railway unions and railway management were united in their hatred of people. The customers...the customers were always complaining. The customers were losing things. Or goods got damaged and customers were making complaints.

They loved running a model train service with nothing on it. And then it didn’t matter if it was late or if it fell off. They didn’t want anything to change.

They would have been wonderful running the Indian railways. They would have been recruited from the Indian Railways but at that stage we didn’t have an Indian component to our communities.

Those Indian attitudes of (with accent) well that is the way it is done (laughs). There should be a statue to the station assistant at the Laburnum Railway Station who sold $2 worth of tickets and spent the day supposedly sweeping the platform, onto tracks I might add!
So you started with the Planning portfolio in 1992. What was it like?

The second half of day one (in the job as Minister), you’re already being given pieces of paper to sign and somebody is coming to stand by you, not opposite you, but beside you so you don’t even get eye contact.

Whilst this happens the voice at your side tells you “From time to time Minister, it is necessary for us to have your signature for this or for that, and by doing this you’re doing that.” And that’s what happened.

And your time is meant to be filled with the excitement of signing things. And amongst those papers of course, if they can get away with it, and they tried of course, they get a renewal of the delegations.

I would think, probably within 48 hours, they realised they had someone strange in the place because I said I would not sign any delegations or renew any delegations.

And I was informed that the amount of paperwork would be catastrophic. And I said: “When I find it to be catastrophic we must change the system so that it isn’t catastrophic and find out why so much has to be signed off in the name of the Minister. So what is the purpose of the signing off in the name of the Minister?”

They also became aware, very very quickly, that I didn’t react well to pieces of paper - that I wanted to see the file. And that produced an alarming sort of fisson through the whole place because they had never allowed a Minister to see a file as far as I could see. Ministers received pieces of paper upon which there were recommendations and they all came through the Directors office. The Director gave you a bushel of papers you were rationed to sign and if you wished to, you could ask a question about them.

That wasn’t the way I went. I didn’t work that way. I wanted to know what that piece of paper was about.

So a young officer, because the Director was at war with the rest of the Department, and the Deputy Director who was the one who did all the work was having open heart surgery…at the time, it fell to a younger one, Peter Betess. I found that if I spoke to Peter Betess, then it actually happened. And so I would say to Meg (Bartel), my Chief of Staff, ask Peter Betess, because he will be able to do it.

I did speak to the man who does building control stuff there and I said: “This sort of coded thing you have to do to get into the door to the Minister’s rooms, could you get me a wedge to keep a door open?” And he said, as if it was a rather odd request: “Yes”, he thought he could find one somewhere.

And I said: “Would you mind because I want to prop the door open and disconnect that thing” (because it had a camera). And if you had the code you
could get in and if you didn’t have the code you had to push the button and the camera looked at you and then you might or might not be admitted.

Because the previous Minister, a good friend of mine, I know him well, Andrew McCutcheon. Poor Andrew, had had to run the Socialist Left secretariat out of the Minister’s office. And so there was somebody who later became the previous Lord Mayor of Melbourne, there was somebody who was about to become a senior senator working in the office.

And they had spent hours after the fall of government (Kirner Labour Government) removing about 25 filing cabinets and making it look as if it had a number of work stations approved for the Minister’s Office. But you could see the marks in the carpets.

And the man who had to do the move and fake the look of the Minister’s rooms to make it look as if it was only occupied by five people and not 15 or something, he’d been given a secondment to Paris for a year or two to brush up his French as his reward. Faithful service above and beyond the call of duty! So when he came back he expected me to react very badly to him and I didn’t at all.

Eventually, with eccentricity and teasing on my being myself, they realised that I wasn’t going to purge on the basis of some supposed political alignment. I was going to treat them as though they were teams.

I went around the office and I met people in the Olderfleet Building, not the out offices, who hadn’t met any of the three previous Ministers.
It was only a small group of people. It wasn’t a big office. I would mosey up to the desk and say: “Good afternoon” or something, “I’m the Minister, who are you?” “What are you doing?”

And they would say, “Oh I’ve never met a Minister before!” Or “The last Minister I met was so and so” and you suddenly realise there were three Ministers after that and that meant they had just skipped three.

The style of Government prior was sort of slip it in the in tray, into the slot, and it may, the priestly cast may be included to approve it and send it back. You may get the dispensation, you may get the passage to heaven, you may get the approval or you might not. And it wasn’t for you to even express curiosity as to why not. You did your work and put it in and oooh (found out).

There were about five (planning scheme) amendments per day. Most of it amending badly named sections of planning schemes which didn’t give anyone in a cast of junior priests that it applied to any particular area.

Like the Melbourne City Council amendment number blah re this street and this street, would also have a few provisions regarding about five other places that were not in any way referred to in the title of it. And that would provide for VCAT a feast of activity as they said: “Aah but it is, ha ha, unbeknowns to you, there is also this control, you didn’t understand!”

I got down to VCAT eventually because they thought I dealt with them rather nicely because I never made personal criticisms of their judgements. If I got criticisms, I always sent them down to them.

I found they had a sort of compactus of planning and because I was producing all the systems.

Producing five amendments per day, everything was a moving target. Nothing was stable. Nothing actually had a foundation on rock. Everything was in a state of movement.

So it was a very strange legal system. Quite odd for lawyers. That the law is shifting at such a rate that the case you initiated, or the prosecution you initiated now, by the time it gets heard, the law may be different. And still have this and we are meant to inform ourselves by the circumstances in which it is all occurring.

And so VCAT found themselves in an extraordinary mist of process and change.

The other thing was, I didn’t appreciate until 6 months later, maybe longer, words didn’t mean the same thing. So if you took the planning scheme applying in Victoria, those in the know, it was like biblical scholars. You could show them a piece of text, and those in the know would say within about two or three pages: “Oh that was produced by this consultancy.”
They were so sharp they were like art critics or biblical scholars, by the brush strokes, by the set out, the language, so that ‘residential’ didn’t mean the same in two neighbouring planning schemes because they were produced by different consultants.

But it meant the same in those planning schemes that those consultants had prepared. You could actually have done a map where residential means that here but it doesn’t mean that there, it doesn’t mean the same everywhere.

And I came to the conclusion following the, because I had the Perrott Report (1992), and they illustrated it beautifully.

BP, which was an oil company, decided that they wanted to have a new livery, that’s BP talk for colour scheme, for their service stations. But they had to apply to just about every Council in Victoria because they had a service station in every Council.

Photo: Current day BP Livery

So they put the applications into every Council to change to a yellow and green format. And the time it took the various municipalities to approve, and in some cases not approve!, just illustrated the sheer chaos of the planning process in Victoria.

**It was no wonder you were feeling apprehensive about taking on the portfolio.**

Well I didn’t know it in advance. You learn it on the job and I found it fascinating to learn it on the job because I had this almost infinite capacity because my wife was very supportive.
She had her own life of music, art and theatre and all sorts of things and nothing to do with politics! I mean she did what she had to do in politics and I did what I had to do with music and arts.

She didn’t mind if I used the weekend to sit up and do the paperwork. I’d bring a box of stuff home and I’d go through the paperwork and I’d read the files and I’d express myself vehemently (laughs).

**You mentioned the Perrott Review. One of the more significant reforms you oversaw was the review of the Victorian Planning Provisions. Can you reflect?**

The Perrott Review, simply described, said too many words, too many zones, too many variations, too many amendments, too much process, not enough planning (laughs). That was said by implication. I described it as being a group of people, talented people, given one of those maxi boxes of colouring pencils, zones, and you could even use two colours and make a new one. They were everywhere, all over the state. I said: “No, no,no,no,no, no.”

We reduce the number of colouring pencils and they mean the same wherever they apply. The law is the same. So residential means residential wherever it applies. Sure it applies on different pieces of land but where it applies it means the same thing.

I had this scalding experience locally, as the local member. I was invited to an employment promoting occasion at the Casey Airfield, near Berwick. They had set up a tent, the helicopter with the investor in it dropped in. It was one of five or six visits they were making that day.

And they whisked them in and the City of Berwick, with me as the local member in support, said: “And what about here?” And then the question became. And because this was a somebody who wanted to have a warehouse, office, sales thing, it didn’t fit. It didn’t fit the planning scheme. The office component was too big.

The idea was “Well don’t worry, we’ll get an amendment” I heard them say. “We can change it for you.” And I saw the look cross the face of the man with the money as he stepped back into his helicopter and took off for somewhere more congenial!

We’d lost it and I thought this is mad, what are we arguing about? On Casey Airfield, on the edge of the bloody Casey Airfield and we were worrying about how many square metres of!

So I did get a lesson locally in a context not related to rural and changing land use down here. That there were other problems in planning also so I was on the lookout for “how come these things get into the planning you know”?
So we had to get a new system built whilst we propped up the old system. I suppose one of the things, longevity in planning as Minister gave me was the time and the knowledge that allowed me to prop the old system by ‘callings in’ and doing Ministerial Amendments, and whatever it took to keep the, what I must say, was a pretty bad outcomes system going whilst we constructed the new system and met the issues about, alright, well what can you do in the rural zone.

And I can remember to this day the disdainful intake of breath from the person in the Department who didn’t like the idea that the rural zone allowed almost anything.

Well would you allow a supermarket, well no and I said: “You better say not a brothel as well if that’s what you want too.” I’m not into the listing what you can. I’m into listing what you can’t. In the Rural Zone you could do whatever the local Council wants to allow with these few prohibitions. That’s where we got the prohibitions view, the discretions wide, the Council responsive, you hoped anyway.

**What are your reflections on how Council amalgamations impacted on the planning portfolio?**

Not much. It didn’t really. It impacted on me because in the second term I became Minister for Local Government. I brought the councillors back. It was funny, there was more argument about the names of the new councils then there was whether there should be one or what shape they should be!

Obviously it was an idea that was ripe to happen. It did produce the cheerfully irreverent comment from me which I made in Queensland, well away from Victoria so it didn’t get reported here, well not much, when I stood up in front of the municipal people in Queensland. And they were ready to rip me apart, (for) daring to do things to local government.

My segment was parallel with some other segment, and mine was in the main auditorium and it was packed. And I said: “I’m the Minister for Planning from Victoria” (crowd groans, boo’s), bordering on impolite.

And I said: “We have 78 municipalities, no let me correct myself, no we don’t have 78 municipalities.” Then I said: “We have this many municipalities, one municipal theme park and the People’s Republic of Moreland.”

And the People’s Republic of Moreland of course were sitting right down in the front, ready to show what a hopeless old conservative I was and how they were the only progressive light left in Victoria under an otherwise fascist government.

The theme park was Bellarine (Queenscliff). Whenever Geelong got uppity I used to say have you heard about the Greater Bellarine proposal? And they’d say: “what?”. Some of them were actually innocent enough to fall for it and say what?
And I’d say we’re going to expand Bellarine and incorporate Geelong into it but
the headquarters is going to be at Bellarine and we’re going to get the old army
fort and the drawbridge and (laughs) put the administration there.

Can I tell you, the local paper in Geelong, the Advertiser, was having a campaign
about rude Kennett Ministers not replying to correspondence. I remembered
that I’d had a letter from Geelong (Council) to which I had not made a reply.

I thought I better reply to that! It had been a letter that had said that they were
uncomfortable being named ‘The Greater City of Geelong’ and would like to be
changing to ‘The City of Geelong’ and would I / the Government approve?

And I thought reprinting all the paper (letterhead), you can just imagine what
would get crossed out.

Then I thought, crossed out, hmmm, that would be interesting. If they just
crossed out ‘Greater’.

So I did this reply, I wanted to do a reply they could never make public, because
if they did it would embarrass them.

So I wrote back and said: “I have given deep and careful consideration to your
request and I find that I am unable to agree however I would be willing to give
further consideration to a suggestion that you be called the Not So Great City of
Geelong” (chuckles) and I sent that back.
And I have to this day never heard of the issue again – it is gone! It is gone forever!

I mean there was the Greater City of Ballarat, the Greater City of Bendigo, the Greater City of Wangaratta or whatever. I didn’t mind. And suddenly Geelong wanting to be called the City of Geelong (laughing). I thought they deserved it!

So occasionally, I was a member of Parliament for 32 years, and I always say, for 32 years and my sense of humour has survived it! I’m not sure that everybody else’s did!

Well I did and there are little things like that lobbed around every now and then. And the Department, they’re there for people to find if they wish to! (laughs). But maybe they illustrate a cheerfulness.

One of the funny things about being a Minister is the other side of the coin - of people who pray for people they’ve never met, you know, people who pray for communities who’ve been wiped out by an earthquake or something. Being a Minister is the Yin Yang of that. There are people who hate you that have never met you, have no idea what you’re like and yet they hate you with an intensity that is extraordinary.

And it’s very hard to just be yourself I suppose knowing that there’s quite a large number of people who would, if they did pray, be praying for your destruction! For your death! For you to make mistake! Trip, fall, injure, stamp, squash. And unless you’re extraordinarily insensitive, or an extravert, it does have an effect on you.
You can’t long be aware of it. You get letters, and anonymous letters. I used to have a file of anonymous letters.

There was a counter balancing one. And the counter balancing ones, when I first became Minister for Labour and Industry and Consumer Affairs, this person sent obviously what was a standard letter: “I have long admired you in public life and was wondering if I could have an autograph.”

I got this and I thought, I said to Meg (Chief of Staff), who was with me even then in those days: “Oh Meg, the vanity of giving autographs, imagine sending something back.” I said: “Just do a letter saying thank you for the letter but I don’t give autographs.” So I did and of course, typical me, I signed the letter!

Then they had a letter from me, signed by me saying I don’t give autographs. I thought if you could get one from the Pope or Queen like that.

So I heard nothing more until I became Minister for Planning when exactly the same man wrote and she said: “You’d never guess what but that same freak has written again.” I said: “I wonder if he knew that he had my real signature? I wonder if he licked his finger to see if it was ink or printed?” The Department wouldn’t let there be a printed one. That led to an interesting little change to the Act. And I sent him another letter that said: “I still don’t give autographs.”

Within the office context it wasn’t all overwhelming doom and gloom, there were fun occasions and funny things happen.

Like the day in the Olderfleet (Buildings) when I went into the little room, the annexe off the Minister’s room, a little sort of cupboard. And behind the stacked up stuff there was a button on the wall, and I always have this terrible thing, I push buttons, and I can set off fire alarms, but I thought, I’m the Minister, so irresistibly in the darkness I pressed it and a lift door opened.

I didn’t even know there was a lift there! It had been put in by Tom Roper (previous ALP Minister). It enabled Tom to get out of the office without anybody knowing because it went down to the ground floor.

At the Iguazu Falls we went down this jungle path and came to this doorway and there was this button and I pushed it. Beverley (Robert’s wife) said: “Oooh” and the whole Brazilian Army will arrive. And it was a lift and it took you up to the top of the falls. I couldn’t believe it.

In this one, I got into it and pushed the ground button because I was on the first and I suddenly came out in the bookshop below. And the poor people in the bookshop had been using the lift as a storage thing. That’s why it was full of cartons. And because the Minister had never used it, at least since Tom Roper I presume, no Minister had found it or used it (laughs).
Can you describe Living Suburbs, the publication which set out aspirations for Melbourne? This was something which you commissioned. What was the rationale for it and what are your reflections on it?

The honest answer, and I’d like to be honest with you, is filling a vacuum. All those sorts of things, those vast Alan Hunt (Minister in the Bolte, Hamer and Thompson Governments) style proclamations of intent are not really me nor urged by me.

They were usually filling vacuums or demands from the press, or the critics or the something. For example, “this Government doesn’t even have a clear statement about ...” and somebody would decide that it’s a good idea to fill the gap and I’d roll my eyes and say “Another planning statement!”

And so many of those statements, and there are enough to build a city, are a kernel of good ideas and an avalanche of padding and waffle. All beautifully expressed in ‘planningese’ and they really do give you a glorious insight into the language the planners use with each other which is roughly the sort of Latin that must have been used in medieval monasteries. It’s a language which doesn’t exist for anyone else but with them it’s reverential to speak like ‘that’. I found it all incredibly uninteresting and uninspiring I might add.

I was an outcomes person. Occasionally, utterly cynically, with the flourish of my felt pen, I approved of something and comforted myself with the thought that if it really was a wrong decision somebody would pull it down in 30 years anyway.

Because nothing that we build is worth keeping it seems. In fact somebody will put a glass dome in front of a small segment, not then outer Melbourne, and preserve it as an example of ‘Australis 1990’.

If you ask people to name six really good buildings, they named old ones, nothing new. If you said to them, name six old ones and six new ones you would see the most terrible struggle occur.

Taking the challenge myself I said: “St John Lutheran Church in South Melbourne.” There are a few. Once you got two by the same architect you’re in trouble, because the rest of them thought, ha ha, favourite architect! Who’s up who?! They must be like diva’s in the opera. Put on two performances by one of
them and you’re in trouble with the others. They don’t seem to have a nice appreciation of each other’s work.

**So you mentioned outcomes as your focus.**

I refused to give them a signature block. I had some technical reason to write to all the objectors to a McDonalds Restaurant in Glen Iris which replaced a Sizzlers I think. And I found amongst the many form letters I was telling them that the whole thing needed to be rescheduled at VCAT. Anyway, it became my job as the Responsible Authority / Minister to alert all these people.

And I found that there were people in Dublin and Ireland who had objected right. And I said, wait a minute, they were backpackers who were wondering through who gave their real addresses and I’m writing to tell that that the hearing has been rescheduled or something and I’m actually signing the bloody letter.

This is planning at work! It’s so much better when you have delegated and somebody else is doing it for you and you don’t even know about it and so it just goes on and on and on.

I said wait a minute and next amendment to the Act the objector must show how it affects them. Now that’s honoured in the breach, not in the spirit within which it was intended. The spirit within which it was intended was to get out of the objector, even the one who signed the mass form. That you wrote to number 1 on the form and that covered all of them or that they individually said how they were affected. By traffic, by outlook, by whatever but not by just by: “Oooh McDonalds” (sneering).

I used to say that if it was Abdul’s Afghan Kebabs, nobody would give a damn right! It was the menu, it wasn’t the use. And if it was the look you could understand. If you are an Italian hill village or something, McDonalds is going to look different to everything else, well you can make a good argument that McDonalds needs to be more discreet in the way it presents. It’s ideological. It’s hatred of McDonalds America and fast food and all that stuff.

And the Act and the system pandered to it and nobody thought it was peculiar.

Now when I got into the lift in the Olderfleet, they used to put their hand around the takeaway coffee because the takeaway coffee came from McDonalds! And I used to give them hell, only from the Ground to the First, and I used to say “traitor - you with a McCafe.” Because they couldn’t resist cheap McCafe coffee.

But they had spent their life trying to stop that McDonalds, but it had got through the system. So if it got through the system, inappropriate though it may be, they would patronise it. That seems to me like a very strange mindset, but that’s planners.
Can you reflect on shaping Melbourne through metropolitan planning?

We all have to be a bit conscious that every Minister who’s had the good luck or privilege, and it is a privilege being Minister for Planning, or the trust to have been Minister for Planning, has built on the foundations of the previous ones, I mean literally and metaphorically, more important metaphorically. We are all in a caring, or a trusteeship or a role in respect of Melbourne.

And I think actually that the outcomes are startlingly good by international standards. It works. I mean sewerage works, electricity works, we are fanatically critical of it but it functions. If you zoom out from it, looking at it from satellite you’ve have to say there are a few things we’re not short of and brick veneer houses in garden suburbs are by and large what we don’t need more of. We’re not short of them.

Then you could look a little more critically and say isn’t it funny that terrace housing that speculating Victorian builders built, why are terrace houses on the south of St Vincents Place South Melbourne, old medium density, wouldn’t even be allowed under the regulations today! Why is that some of the most sought after housing we’ve got? Apart from the heritage people who want to preserve things, that sort of curiosity never seemed to appear in the minds of good planning people. I used to taunt them, tease them. I used to say: “Hands up those who live in a suburb they planned”. None of them. They all loved living in St Kilda. I said: “What you love living in planning chaos? And planning lovely satellite towns for other people to live in when they want to live in chaos too! You’re planning police, you’re not planning planners!”

I remember an occasion when I went to RMIT. They probably prepared young ones by saying: “Take an inoculation because this fascist is coming! We thought we better expose you to it before you go out in the real world.”

They seemed to neatly divide into two groups. One was kids who you imagined bouncing a basketball. That group couldn’t wait to get out in the yard and do some hoops or something.

And the others were Marxists / Leninists of the most serious kind. And I did my little speech.

And then it was question time and the leading Marxists / Leninist came up with this beautiful question which was:
“Yes but isn't planning in a capitalist setting just a way of enhancing the things for the ruling class?”

And I thought ooohh, so I took a deep breath and thought well now, they're young and I should treat this question seriously.

The lecturer who was sitting on the side had a seraphic look on her face. She was absolutely so pleased that this star pupil had asked this star question. To which I replied and said: “You know that might be true but if it is true, why would you want to be a planner if you're not going to produce any different outcome? Why would you spend all of this time studying to become a planner if all that happens is it's just a way of legitimating (the ruling class)?” It doesn’t make sense. Why not go and do something useful (laughs). You can only be a planner if you believe in planning. If you don’t believe what are you there for?

And amongst your readership (ie Planning News) I wonder how many are struggling to maintain the faith? Now I know that’s a sort of like a churchy way of putting it. Within that churchy way of putting it there's a truth and that is - are they still seeking something and what is that something? And why can’t they articulate what is that something?

And why can’t they share it with the great unwashed rather than impose it on the great unwashed? They have more in common with petty police regulations, you know pilfering and urinating in the street, that sort of thing, they have more in common with that then they have with the autocratic demolition of Paris and its rebuilding into one of the world’s great cities.
The way it was achieved was outrageous I’m sure but the outcome, I have to say, was stunningly good. It’s a stunningly good example of autocracy and all the more offensive for that. But you can’t help admiring it.

And I’m the sort of person who admires St Kilda. I don’t live there but I like its vibrancy, I like its mixture, its failure to have uniformity.

I can see Bath in England having an austere elegance but having too much of it would be as bad as having too much of what we’ve got which is house and garden suburbs. Endless, mono class stretches of a house and garden brick veneers. And what we desperately needed in my years was that inner city living.

**You had a focus on Central Melbourne. Can you reflect on this?**

Now I was doing inner city living and I was getting a rattle tat tat commentary from The Age, and the progressives and all that, about vertical slums, undersized, under-insulated (lets out gasp).

I even got at a boardroom level, Liberal Party donor level if I put it that way.

I can remember getting hounded and sent off to a Liberal Party lunch and this head popped up further up the table and said: “I understand that if you flush the toilets you can hear it two apartments away.”

And I put my head forward and looked up and said: “Are worried about the ones in Noosa?” And I could have farted! The silence was shattering.

“What do you mean the ones in Noosa?”

And I said: “Well, it’s national building regulations and standards.” You rave about the apartment you bought in Noosa and you decry about the apartment that’s built in the centre of Melbourne. And you’re never going to live in one?

So why don’t you lay off and let other people live a different lifestyle. The childless, the older and kids, the people who have hitched up and are not going to be that permanent. It’s not suburban living.

And then I would read the lack of supermarket for them and the lack of childcare or the lack of affordable housing. As if we’ve got to construct the same society there as elsewhere. As if you can’t have a patch that is different. Different, physically serving a different constituency of people.

Meantime, during my second term I acquired Docklands. My put down of Docklands, for which I was partly responsible for heaven’s sake, is that Docklands has been planned to death.

People were so busy planning Docklands they didn’t have time to allow it to live.
I’m surprised people don’t get a sort of schedule of when they’re meant to be on the street. You’re meant to be on the street between 11 and 12 on Tuesday and the following Thursday and your meant to walk on this day.

I’m surprised we don’t just wind them up. What it’s all meant to be mechanical is it? No it’s not about mechanical. It’s about this extraordinary opportunity that, in strictly a planning sense, we seem to have squandered.

We haven’t squandered the land, or what’s there, but we squandered the opportunity to show that planning could produce a stunningly different or better something at a price.

Now of course, planning will say, the truest of true believers will say: “Oh if you had given us enough money we could have.” Well that never happens.

I was the Member for Berwick and I went to Wodonga. Again it was almost biblical, they took me up on the hill and waved their arms and said this is where this is going to be.

They were into inland cities like during the Whitlam years. Those gorgeous years!

And then they said: “This is the site for the hospital and we’d like your support for the hospital.”

And I said: “Oh yeah, alright, the hospital for who?” And they said: “The future people.”
And I said: “Well I have 30,000 electors in Berwick, my next door neighbour, Rob Jolly (former Labour MP), has got 30,000 in the Doveton electorate and my next colleague has got 30,000 in Cranbourne.

We’ve got 100,000 adults on the roll and unknown numbers of children not on the roll and we don’t have a hospital. We’ve got Dandenong Hospital which is overwhelmed with people and we’ve got this 100,000 people and you’re asking me to support a hospital for the people who are going to come and I’m asking for a hospital for the people who are already there.”

It is as if planning is in a world apart. Disconnected from unmet needs and urgencies.

And it’s either got to be autocratic power imposed by the dictator, the Napoleon, the Peter the Great, the whatever, the Whitlam maybe. It’s either got to be that or it’s got to be a watered down version that planning in a democracy which is a far more subtle or demanding thing.

And if I was talking to the university, I lecture to engineering students at the university (ie University of Melbourne), but I never lecture to planning students at the university. I’ve never been asked to. Never, never been asked to have a word to planning students about experiences in planning.

Which is interesting because those RMIT ones, I found they knew all about British planning, they were in the second year of their course, they had just finished (second year). And they knew about new towns, about satellites, all that stuff. And they had no idea about what we were doing in Victoria about constructing the new planning provisions in Victoria.
They had not even been introduced to planning in Victoria other than this idea that it's illogical that planning is a means of restraining, or delaying, or upsetting the onward march of the corruption of capitalism.

And I quake for the disillusionment that those people will inevitably harvest when they get a job. I mean how sad.

Speaking of jobs, you mentioned how Jeff Kennett had given you the mandate of jobs jobs jobs. What was your reflection towards the end of your time on how you'd managed to discharge that advice?

I can give a lovely story on that one. At the beginning of parliamentary sessions there's this little garden party, funny old little thing from yesteryear, we were all supposed to wear our morning suits. There were sandwiches and cups of tea, a tent in the garden at Parliament House (laughs).

Amongst it all the members gravitate to an area. And if you don't have constituents that you have to impress you inevitably fill in the time talking a bit. It's amazing how little time you get to talk to other members of parliament and other Cabinet Ministers in informal circumstances.

Two of them mentioned to me, one a Cabinet Minister and one a Backbencher, that they had just bought apartments in South Melbourne near the ABC from Central Equity so that they could stay there. The Cabinet Minister was a country one so he could stay there when he was in Melbourne. And the other one could stay there as a parliamentarian when Parliament was sitting.

And I thought: "No my heavens". This was the famous Central Equity project that I had approved within 14 days because I was Responsible Authority and it was over the limit. The application had come in and I had looked at the plans, amazingly unimpressed with what they were proposing to do but never-the-less...
I was comforted by the thought that in 35 years time it could be pulled down. It had car parking underneath, three stories of such stuff on it.

And I thought The Age, page 3, “Minister Gives Special...” and these two buy. I thought you could explain until you were blue in the face that it wasn’t like that and 90% of the community would think that this was corruption at its very worst. You’d have an ICAC hearing about it if you were in New South Wales! What do you do? I had felt so clever. No one had objected to it and I had approved it within 14 days and it had been advertised, everything.

And I was showing the Department how (claps hand), this is how it should be. Where there’s no objection and where there’s no reason why. Aaaargh, but you’ve got to put the street lamp back or different artwork or.... I mean we’re trying to get jobs.

So I stooled a question. I got a Member of Parliament to ask me a question about inner city residential. And I said a vote of confidence, one of my ministerial colleagues and a backbencher have already bought.

And this is one that I approved in 14 days. And because I announced it, got no publicity and got no criticism. Now it got no publicity because The Age was in a contrary position to the Kennett Government.

They had to be critical, they had to criticise. So they couldn’t say: “Aaah well this is an improvement, or this is a forward step”. No, no they couldn’t say that so they threw to the keeper.

They couldn’t detect that if they reversed it they could have written it up in that negative sense that I was looking at it. The answer would have been well what are you worried about, we announced it.

So we could have knocked it on the head early rather than in three weeks time. Or with a retired Magistrates Report 6 months later. It illustrates so much of what was wrong with things.
What was it like being in the Cabinet with Jeff Kennett as Premier?

Well he wasn’t anything like the Jeff Kennett that people knew in the public figure. He was businesslike and efficient, collegiate, and listened, and allowed room for discussion. It would have been wise for the government to put it on telly or something like it rather than that sort of authoritarian Henry Bolte approach.

Henry Bolte was not a dictator, by the way. I was in Parliament when Henry Bolte was Premier. I walked into the party meeting thinking he would only have to say (clicks fingers) and everybody would fall on their knees and say: “Yes Sir”. It wasn’t like that at all.

The party room was extraordinary under him. Anybody in the party room could stand up and ask about anything. If he sensed (dissent) he would adjourn the matter and have a look at it quietly behind the scenes himself.

He was shrewd as shrewd. Never got rolled in the party. Never pushed it to the point where it would have been. He worked with the party room which was a very extraordinary group of people.

There wasn’t any subject, other than heart surgery, that you couldn’t mention. There wasn’t somebody in the party that knew a hell of a lot about...

Did Jeff Kennett have an interest in planning and your portfolio?

No, I don’t think so. He did express an interest on one occasion which was misplaced.

He was raging in front of a whole room of senior bureaucrats at me about my failure to ensure that his desire to have the walkway along lower reaches of the river, where it deviated at Pier 35, and the control tower for shipping.
And I tried to deflect him and say: “You will have to ask the Treasurer about that,” because the Treasurer was in charge of the corporatisation of the Port of Melbourne. And the Port of Melbourne was exempt from planning which Jeff was unaware of.

And he thought it was a planning issue and that I should have achieved a better outcome or result.

And I’m busy saying: “Your mate there!”

And all of the senior bureaucrats were probably well aware of that and it wasn’t the moment to challenge the Premier on it.

He wanted that and he also wanted the tram to go into Docklands. And he wanted the tram at Docklands to go past Victoria Dock in a way that allowed you to know that it was ex Docklands, not full of things.

I had my little thumbprint on two little things in Docklands.

One was, I said to people that there was no reason why Collins Street couldn’t go straight on into Docklands. Indeed I felt it would be a good thing.

And that the building should simply rise, the principal floor of the buildings should rise over the railway lines so that it looked as though it was just another hill, not look as though it was an overpass over the railway lines.

That you could build it with buildings so that it looked as though it was Collins Street extended in a real sense. Not Collins Street extended to strangeville.

And that happened and it’s worked, largely, although there’s still a carpark at the front where they haven’t built the building.

Most of the buildings do that thing with the road. It was hard to explain to the departmental people and the Docklands people what I meant.

So I took them out into Collins Street and I said: “Have a look up there. And what happens? There’s a hill and the buildings, and the principal floors of the buildings...do it accordingly. Now why can’t we do it that way?”
“Oooh, Oooh” they responded. I said: “The railway line is just a hill that isn’t. You can make a hill. And with the Bourke Street one.”

And the same old thing: “What are we going to put in Docklands?”

In Adelaide it was going to be the Multi Function Polis. We’d fallen for it with the World Trade Centre – the World Trade Centre for heaven’s sake. That screwed up my role in public life! I told the then Premier if he wanted me to be the Public Works Minister I wouldn’t introduce the legislation because I thought it was a wank.

And that’s when I became Transport Minister and Transport is not a portfolio you give a friend! And that was the end of my career!

**What are your thoughts on the interplay between the transport and planning portfolios?**

Almost none. Isn’t that funny. There’s almost none. I think mainly because the Planning Department, whatever its current name, has forgotten how to dance properly. They can’t seduce properly. They lecture. They don’t woo. And transport doesn’t welcome intrusion. They don’t mind being seduced but they don’t like being pushed.

We had difficulty with the City Circle Tram. Transport (the Department) tried to play games with that like telling me it couldn’t go around the corner. And I said: “Hey, don’t monkey with me mate. I used to be Minister for Transport.”
They'd forgotten. It had been 10 years earlier. I said: “It goes around the corner” and I listed the other spots where it goes around the corner. They said: “Well you’ll have to build a new line.” And that’s exactly what we’re talking about. They’d have to build a new line and go around the corner into Flinders Street.

“And it going to be free, free?” (they asked). “Yes, it’s going to be free.”

Because it completely rewrote Melbourne’s image. You could sit on it with the other freeloaders and you would hear the visitors say: “You don’t pay”, incredulous that they were being offered the opportunity. It just made us different in an instant.

And it was a bit of Better Cities money leftover, uncommitted by the previous (Federal) government. They committed as much as they could to their Labour electorate friends but they couldn't get their hot little hands on the last bit.

And Brian Howe, I knew Brian, we’ve got a mutual friend, Andrew McCutcheon, Brian’s a lovely man, and Andrew’s a lefty lefty.

I get along well with him because I’m no threat. He probably doesn’t like pale pink ones but he doesn’t mind dark blue. Missionary opportunity.

That and the Geelong Woolstores. Having done it in Melbourne we promptly decided it might be a good idea to try and do it in Geelong and we’d try and make it the University. If we could make RMIT and Melbourne University. See we have this gap between the two. What Melbourne had was too much CBD. After Lonsdale Street, what on earth did you do with it?

They suggested jazz quarters (laughs). That’s why I was into inner city residential. Because if we can hold onto RMIT and Melbourne University and if we can have inner city residential we are going to fill streets with people.

Sure they’re going to be young people, and as it happens, overseas students it turns out more than anything else. So that for people from Endeavour Hills, a visit to Melbourne is like an overseas trip.
And Melbourne is so much better for it. It’s multicultural Melbourne on display. No wonder we get the World’s Most Liveable City. We must almost be the World’s Most Liveable City to go with it! Because that outburst of Indian murders and bashings, that subsided and went, we got over that. And we got to India and pacified India about it because it was being beaten up there and here.

**If you reflect on your 7 years in the planning portfolio, what are you most proud of?**

I’ve no idea. See you’re tempted to say, the conventional thing to say would be, Eureka Tower or something and I’m not. Ok so I assemble the site for Eureka Tower but so what! So it’s second tallest or tenth tallest residential tower. I don’t mind it. It’s fine. It’s there and I hope everybody enjoys living in it.

I think in a blighted way, because just missing is part of the democratic process of planning and certainly the democratic process of politics. Because successes have many fathers and failures are orphans.

I began the name of Federation Square. Jeff was determined that the Gas and Fuel Towers were going to come down. I was in support of that. And so was the architect that built them, to his credit. He lived long enough to see and say I think they should not be there. And Jeff had the (oomph): “They will not be there.” But having not ‘being there’d’, that’s nothing if you don’t put something there.

And of course, then the monumentalism started.

People wanting to have the world's biggest this that or the other. And I’m screaming from the sidelines saying: “If you go to Denmark, and you go to Copenhagen, what do you go to see? The Tivoli Gardens and the Mermaid.

And when you see the Mermaid, it’s a little statue on a rock in a bit of salt water in a blooming industrial zone as far as I could see. I don’t think anyone films around it, they film it.”
I said: “It (Federation Square) doesn’t have to be big. Let’s just do it well. It doesn’t even have to have anything on it. If we like, we can go and have the guards change their uniform at 12 o’clock in the day. It doesn’t matter. Look around, it doesn’t have to be very super expensive. And I said: ‘We’ve got the federation coming up, let’s call it Federation Square. Let’s be proud of it, federation’s popular and lets promote it, reclaim it.”

From that we moved to a genuine, because Jeff Kennett had Major Projects in his pocket so to speak with Mark Birrell, he wanted a genuine architectural competition.

I think that was probably Mark Birrell’s idea to Jeff but it became Jeff’s and we almost did a proper international rules architectural competition.

We did but on the change of government they stumped the one little bit. They had to change something. And like the vault being moved from the City Square we just tripped at the last hurdle. On doing it once and doing it well. And that was the sadness.

But I still think Federation Square, and doing it, I would say, with Mark Birrell and Jeff Kennett, and then the eventual outcome, I find most satisfying because people hated it and then they came around.

The satisfaction of it is not the process, not even the outcome. It’s not the colour of the bricks.
I said: “We can have the world's best Australian art because we’ve got it and no one else does. And all we've got to do is have a box for it and promote it.”

And it becomes a reason. Go to Melbourne because you'll see the world's best. And not only Australian art in the sense of Australian European art, but Australian indigenous art. Melbourne's got it. And most if it’s in store. And put on the wall it's really amazing for overseas visitors. And something which we all ought to be proud of. Like Russians like poetry, we should be all proud of it.

Even people who say I don’t really like it: “I’m proud of it” (laughs). Or I don’t understand it but I’m proud of it.

So if I had to answer your question, the specific, what are you most proud of, architecture coming back in the public domain. Architecture coming back with its hoodie off. Architecture usually sneaks in with its hoodie on and it’s head down and a feeling of being unhappy with where it has to perform.

They came to me about RMIT and Storey Hall and the addition to Storey Hall to make Storey Hall work. And these architects bustled into my office. It was a heritage issue, alterations to the classic Storey Hall.

And I said: “Tell me.” And they said: “It's the classic and then its chaos, and its feminist colours.” It was as they explained it to me.

Once they started and found they had an audience that was prepared to listen, they were about to reveal all. They were stripping off layer after layer from this thing and saying there you go. And I was about to get full frontal architecture!
“But we’re worried Minister as to whether you would be able to get Cabinet approval for it.”

I didn’t share with them that the possibility of Cabinet approving it was like a snowball in Hades.

And I would no sooner go near Cabinet with their proposal then fly to the moon.

However with my usual sort of diversionary way of getting to things I said: “I’ve observed that when people are building in the city that they often on the scaffolding have shade cloths to prevent bits falling into the street and injuring people. Would it be possible to build this shade cloth?” And they said: “Yeah yeah.”

I said: “Would it be possible to be built entirely with shade cloths obscuring it?”

I didn’t use the word ‘obscure’. You wouldn’t say that to an architect because they’re proud of their work, and the feminist colours, in honouring its previous uses of 1920’s feminist venue or something.

I thought if you can’t do architecture at universities, where can you do it?

Anyway we came to an ‘entente cordiale’ (i.e. agreement) where it was going to be scaffolded, shade clothed and built. And I would approve it. And I wouldn’t go anywhere near Cabinet - they didn’t know that part.
The Department was aghast. Even the heritage people were (gasps): “I can’t believe it. Him, approving that!”

Within 12 hours of the shade cloth coming off somebody had written something nice in the papers about the architecture saying: “dramatic new” or something.

So suddenly the word was to praise it. And I didn’t hear any contrary voices.

Now if I had tempted to get it through with ticks and consultation. Even as I explain it to you, I had attempted to explain the philosophy of order and chaos and feminism in honour of historical use and minor changes and producing a foyer for the Storey Hall so that Storey Hall would be useable.

And minimal changes to the balconies and all things that actually went into the decision process.

If I’d tried that with The Age, Herald Sun, Cabinet colleagues, a Premier, or anyone else, it would have been a disaster! Somebody would have said: “I don’t like purple and green.”

It was open to anything but once it was done, and once we looked at it, and once we showed some patience to give it a chance of appreciation.

Now I’ll tell you what I have never known to happen. And I think it’s a PHD in it for someone. Maybe even for you. Revisit the objections to some of the things that have been approved and built. Analyse them. See what weight should have been given to them, what was given to them, what disregard was made of them.

Because I don’t think anyone, I’ve never seen an analysis of the utility, in the old fashioned use of that word, the utility of objection and comment.

Has the process of objection and comment produced better outcomes or lesser outcomes?

Would the original proposal have been better if they had known it wasn’t going to be subjected to objections?

Did they self censor what they were proposing because they thought it would just attract objections and delay? etc.

I think the system is almost unconsciously producing outcomes yet it is stylishly uninterested in outcomes.

I was on the brink of saying to you earlier Docklands, there it was, in all its glory, what were we going to use it for?

And of course the first thing that came to mind was the Docklands Stadium.
Working with Graeme Samuel, he was just between engagements, and I had worked with him previously, because he had been an honorary chairman of a health group from whom I had managed to get the Villa Alba in Kew.

And I’d brought in my office him and Peter O’Callaghan on behalf of Xavier College together because of Villa Alba. And we’d got Villa Alba protected and we’d got Xavier a preschool in the garden and it worked well.

But Graeme worked wonderfully, put that brilliant commercial mind to work, on how to finance etc etc Docklands. And it was their multi sports stadium, moveable seating. It works.

And it goes back to your question about transport. And I said they fought us over the City Circle Tram and we won. And again Mark Birrell and I were more than a match for transport and Alan Brown (former Minister for Transport in the Kennett Government) didn’t push it to a point of argument. So we won on that.

On the Docklands Stadium we got it but we lost a fragment of the argument because suddenly somebody said: “You can’t have more than 50,000 people.” This was to protect the MCG.

But what did we win? We won a new sporting venue that wasn’t stuck with all the other ones, overloading. If the MCG is being used at the same time as the Tennis Centre, it’s chaos right. This was a new venue which used public transport and I got it bolted onto public transport. Wide enough that you didn’t get knocked over in the crowd coming out. Entry to every railway platform, excepting the Sandringham line - well I can’t do that!
Every carpark in the Central Business District, all those smarties that have got carparks, well they can use them and catch the tram – it makes sense. The people that provided the money, they shoot down the corporate lifts to the carparks in the building and they’re in Brighton in 20 minutes so that’s why the money came.

If you did an analysis of the Docklands Stadium, it would lead to a whole thing about transport, about a whole range of things.

In terms of my legacy, I am also very proud of the operation and independence of the Planning Panel’s Victoria operations that I oversaw the setting up of. I have a very high regard for Helen Gibson and we keep in contact.

**When you reflect on your time in public life, and you had 32 years as an MP, what do those years mean to you?**

That’s a challenging question! It’s a mixture of laudable and shabby little things.

If I want to be just a pious prick I’ll just give you the laudable ones and leave the shabby ones out with the shabby ones! They’re important too. Just to counter balance, like salt and pepper.

Making a difference. That is the big one. Amnesia must be terrible. If you just woke up one day and didn’t know who you were or where you came from, that must be (groans) terrifying. I couldn’t imagine how you’d pick up the pieces and go on. I suppose you would. Just get hungry and start eating.

But remembering too much is a burden too. And I’m one of those persons, there isn’t anything, anywhere, that doesn’t remind me of something. Melbourne reminds me of things. A drive to Melbourne is filled with, I remember when they came to me about that and I did tat tat tat.

It’s just extraordinary how you get this surround of things. I went to play bridge and I picked up a pen, because you have to have a pen to begin with. And it was City of Darebin. And I thought (slaps leg) I sacked them!

And then I thought of the circumstances of my sacking them. The report and all that. There’s almost nothing that doesn’t remind me of something. And that’s good and it’s bad. It’s a burden and a blessing.

I think I decided that I might try for public life, it was such a silly thing, it happened up at the Anderson Railway Station which is where that round about is just up there (ie locally near Phillip Island). The railway line’s gone now. Because we owed money to the bank, we had ordered a whole lot of grain. And had the grain silo built, erected, put together.
And we had the trainload of grain and we had to get the auger to empty the train trucks of loose grain and put it in the silo. Then we would be safe because we wouldn’t go broke during the drought. The bank wouldn’t foreclose. We wouldn’t ruin our reputation with a banker who had been good to us.

And the Station Master rang and said: “You’ve had the trucks too long on the sidings.” And I said: “It’s OK, we’re just getting the auger, it’s an electric one.” And we said if we put it into the power point in the station office we’ll pay for the electricity. “Oh no mate, you couldn’t have that. You couldn’t have a lead going over an active railway line.” Because two trains a week type thing.

And I thought (slaps leg) we have been idiotic enough to use the railways to cart the grain rather than trucks, when we could have used deregulated trucks because of the distance. And we’ve used the rail because we, like the rest of the rural community, think we should use the rail in order to keep the rail.

And you are not prepared to let us put a three pin plug in to turn the electric auger in to get the trucks cleared.

And I then discover the journey it is to be just a person down here, be it a law student type person, to get to the Minister, the Minister to get to the railways, to get the railways to get to the station master, to get the station master to pull his head in. And I thought, what happens to other people?

I’ve done it. I’ve got through this system but other people. That’s when I decided that I was going to try to make a difference. I was thinking of changing the rules so that other people don’t have to go through that.
There are two types of people. There are those that get angry and find a way around and they, in a sense, make it more difficult for the rest of people who get angry and don’t know what to do. And then there’s the group in the middle who say that’s the way the world is and just live with it. Unless somebody in one of those groups does something, the system won’t change.

And when I got to Planning, I mean I’d changed things in Transport and enjoyed doing it humanely, although that’s an awkward and uncomfortable word. I didn’t sack anybody, I didn’t need to. I just didn’t fill vacancies and that reduced the burgeoning numbers. I got a ticketing system in that allowed for three zones and the city and multi mode tickets.

Got that when it had been impossible. I got the Underground Loop almost completed. And the West Gate Bridge open after it had collapsed. So it was good to do things there.

But when I arrived in planning I found a new zone of dreamy, magical, fluid, rules with good and conscientious people who were administering it who must have been like middle Europeans when a train load of political prisoners arrived. And they counted to make sure the numbers were right and just filed papers in the filing cabinet.

The actual what happened seemed to not matter anything to them which was quite extraordinary. They would answer you if you said: “Why did that building get pulled down?” “Oh they managed to find an exemption to tat tat”, as if that made it all right. Didn’t cross their mind that meant there was something wrong with the system.

I remember Jeff Kennett, another one of his interventions if I can put it that way. He made several interventions which were quite unwelcome and quite inappropriate.

Like he would express views about medium density housing and tilt housing. He didn’t like tilt housing. Preferred brick layers.

I got him to back off on that one and say it’s not appropriate for commentary about that to changes in techniques of building, you’re not a builder.

But the former Methodist Church at the corner of Toorak Road and Williams Road, literally thousands of tourists going to Como (House) took photos of this extraordinary half demolished church.

Now it remained like that as a punishment for the owner, but the owner was no longer the same owner as owned it now.

But a previous owner, or a previous, previous owner had apparently attempted an illegal demolition and had succeeded in getting much of the church down before intervention stopped him.
And Alan Hunt, or somebody, took revenge by punishing him, by not letting him complete the job or redevelop the site. And that meant that we all had to look at it! It looked as if it had been hit by a bomb. People used to just treat it as if it was perfectly natural that it should be like that.

Well Jeff Kennett said: “And that... And I won’t use the words he used to describe him, they certainly weren’t very god-like. If I didn’t sort that out I was going to be sacked. He threatened loud but he didn’t really mean it. But I realised that it was going to please him immensely if I managed to sort that one out, which I did.

I remember sitting in the basement of the South Yarra Library with the South Yarra community group and this willowy figure standing up and saying in way which really would have appealed to the producer of an Oscar Wilde play, you could just imagine the back of the hand on the brow.

“We don’t want a Chinese pergola in Toorak” (laughs). And I’m sitting there because some Chinese by then had owned the site and was proposing to build a block of apartments. It didn’t matter that on the other side, on the other corner, there was an extremely ugly, equally tall, block of apartments, but that wasn’t in Toorak.
That was on the other side in South Yarra. And then they had fitted air-conditioners which dribbled down the outside of the thing. It’s since been re-done completely. Don’t ask me how anybody on the body corporate could do it. They spruced themselves up to match.

I said: “We don’t seem to mind that they invest their money and create jobs here but we don’t want (their development).” They were just so angry that somebody had attempted to make money, a developer!

By that stage the word developer had achieved a whole new meaning. It even had a pronunciation inflection to it. It had become a term of real abuse. You didn’t say job creator, a developer was like rapist.

But then my good friends in Central Equity, they quickly realised after that South Melbourne episode, that keep the Minister on side. Doesn’t matter what. Keep the Minister, silly eccentric bugger on side.

They’d become more successful and they got the Kew Asylum site. Well! And I’m the Responsible Authority for heritage. They come to me and roll out the plans because by then they knew I wouldn’t approve anything unless I saw the plans. They knew the technique now. And that was fine.

![Willsmere, site of the former Kew Asylum](image)

The old gardens were quartered with brick walls so that the patients could be in the outdoors but the more disturbed ones couldn’t mix. And what they wanted to do was to just lightly breach and put openings in. And I looked at Ray Tonkin from Heritage (Victoria) and that was alright.
Then they wanted to put apartments in and that meant the windows had to go. Ray wasn't so happy. And I said: "They've got to have doorways." Yeah, that was alright. Then the Fever Tent.

Apparently there was a tent which they put water on and which people went into when they were over excited. And that was going to be used for parties, body corporate gatherings!

Then there was the padded cell in the basement. And I said: "That would make a good wine cellar!" They wrote down 'wine cellar'. If I had said: "Stand on your head" they would have written it down, they would do anything!

Eventually I detected something which really did get up my snout, that when you went out the old front door, and looked out, there was going to be a sea of carparks, shiny cars! I said: "You're not just going to have just like a supermarket carpark out the front are you?"

With this vast view out to Melbourne over the top of the cars, it would look like a car sales yard!

I said: "Can't you bank the dirt up and put some agapanthus on it and have them inside it so they don't show, just enough greenery up?" And they said: "Oh Oh". It was as if God had suddenly spoken. Inspiration. "No trouble at all" (their response).

Meanwhile I had a ministerial colleague, a local member, Jan Wade. The local council had told her that it would be very nice if it could be a museum, where as we were building a perfectly new museum next to the Exhibition Building.

Or artists in residence. I said: "Jan, it has more floorspace then the Quirinal Palace in Rome, bigger than the Pope's Palace! For heaven's sakes. And your artists in residence! What are we on about?"

Later on it produced a very nice little moment with Victor Perton (former Liberal Member for Doncaster), who was a little 'L' liberal of gentle persuasion. He took to me on the subject: "You've got to stop it Robert, you've got to stop it" (loud animated voice). And I said: "Come on Victor, what's upsetting you?"

They've deinstitutionalised some people and put them in a house next to one of his elderly constituents. And they were misbehaving and using rude words next to a 90 year old constituent who had voted for him.

And he thought, because I actually listened to backbenchers, I might respond to his complaint. That I could roll back this whole policy of deinstitutionalisation, putting people into suburban settings and group houses and all of that. Which was nothing to do with planning, it was to do with health.

I said: "Oh Victor, every government spends for deinstitutionalisation. You can't suddenly go backwards on that."
I said: “Can I make a suggestion. If your constituent sold her house and moved into an apartment in Kew. They’re doing apartments in the old mental hospital. And you can be quite certain of one thing, there won’t be any of those people near there! They all been deinstitutionalised. And not only that. I think there’s a film in this!

It would have to be a hand held camera, black and white. She moves into the brand new apartment in the mental institution that the next door neighbours have just come out of into the group house and they’re behaving badly in the suburbs and she’s living a life of bliss where they once lived so unhappily.

I think there’s a beautiful little thing to say about our society! But I’ll let you in on a secret, it’s got nothing to do with planning (laughs).”

Victor was sophisticated to understand that I was teasing. That he’d just struck me at my worst moment obviously! I could upset my colleagues sometimes!

**Did you ever want to become Premier? Was it something you aspired to?**

No, I was fatally flawed from being Premier. I’m not that sort of person.

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I would have made a very good head of a department. I should have been the head of the Planning Department. The lawyer put in charge of planning. And I should have had a very nice photogenic minister who could go off and do all the public bits and make the speeches while I just got on with the paperwork and the administration. That would have been a brilliant outcome.

In the next life I shall certainly not come back as a minister. I shall come back as a lesser being, no perhaps a greater being, a secretary of a Department.

**Now I understand that you and Barry Humphries go way back.**

We were at school together. We keep in contact. He came in second term. Now to arrive in second term was a disaster because by then all the affiliations had formed, the friendships had formed, the groups had formed. And here he is, the strange boy comes, second term.

So he was put in the back desk in Mr Turner's class and I happened to be in the back desk in the row across the aisle. And I don’t know if I stuck my compass in him or if he stuck his compass in me. One or other of us did, and we became life-long friends. And we can pick up the conversation just where we left it. It’s as if we spoke just yesterday. And you can now know from that machine (interview recording device) there are similarities in the delivery, similarities in the care for Melbourne, in the urbanness which might be reinflected as urbane.

See, I had a moment in Paris. The French Government were trying, as they do, they hate Anglo Saxons, to woo them. And I always opted out from the Anglo Saxons. I used to say to them: “I’m nether Anglo or Saxon, I’m Celt.”

They loved the Scots and pretended not to like the English. But they were showing me ‘La De France’ and all of that. “There’s the pyramid of The Louvre and the Arc De Triomphe, and La De France.” which is another arch built on some former army land, all on the same axis. And they were showing me their urbane success. Because most of the archway of La De France was either for rent or rented to government owned things.

And the buildings around it which made it successful. It was a sort of Docklands, but not a watery one, Bank Nationale De Paris etc. And I said: “Excuse me, aren’t those all government owned?” “Oh yes” they said as if that was the most sensible and normal thing in the world. And I said: “But how does that make this successful? That’s just subsidised isn’t it?” “Oh, don’t use that dirty word! No, no, no, it’s not subsidised. We ring them up and tell them they must do it.”

And I thought, if there’s one way of making sure that Docklands is an absolute disaster it would be to ring up the SEC, if we still had one, or the water board, or the this or that and say: “You’re down there Charlie! Now do something that the Premier can snip the ribbon on!”

So much of what the world promotes as being renewal is in fact fake. Now it’s said that when Catherine the Great went down to the Crimea or something, to
Potemkin, who was her lover, well it’s rumoured in history, that he put fake villages on the royal travel. He didn’t actually. I think he had new villages, they weren’t fake. They seemed fakeish to overseas observers and foreign ambassadors. So Potemkin villages are meant to be sort of painted screens that look like a village but disguise the fact.

Well I think much of the world’s urban renewal, when you get behind the scenes, and do the analysis, or when they think they’re talking to a true believer, turns out to be fake. Subsidised, procured, directed, rather than organic. I think probably you could go and sniff the atmosphere at the street cafe and sense that it was so.

And it’s something we have largely avoided. I used to say to Melbourne City Council type people that the way they were going with Melbourne, Melbourne would end up having all of its corporates in Docklands and there would be jazz played outside the Melbourne Town Hall and the ground and first floors would be only floors occupied in the city buildings because they kept opposing everything.

And I was responsible for anything over the Tom Roper limit. I can’t remember what that was anymore, $30 million or whatever it was, and so many square metres, and this and that (groans).

And I was going to change that because frankly I thought my mild dictatorship was better than the sleazy you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours of Melbourne City Council. And I once preached it loud and clear because it was a serendipity moment.

Ministers go to Governor and Council on a schedule and I went to my scheduled meeting. And it just happened to be the meeting that approved of the crown grant for the Republic Tower to go to below the title depth.

Because it needed foundations so low and at such an awkward construct because of the underground rail loop. It had to go lower than the title did. So I got a special crown grant.
Now Melbourne City Council had wanted to stump it. It was too big. It was too big up next to Births, Deaths and Marriages and the carpark at the back of the Mint for heaven’s sake! I mean, what were they about? The shower wall went that way, it didn’t go onto anything noticeable. I said: “Damn this”. I’m there digging the first sod or cutting the first ribbon, it was sort of commencing, and I said I wasn’t going to let small minds get in the way of good architecture.

The Melbourne City Council had approved of the first 20 stories and I had approved of the rest (36 storeys in total at 299 Queen Street, Melbourne). I really rubbed it in. And anyway I said: “It’s an irony, here I am, turning the first sod for Republic Tower and it’s on a special crown grant which I had to recommend to the Governor this morning.”

Now there’s something which we all ought to take account of. The Republic (Tower), when it comes, is built on the foundations of what went before. It’s an organic emergence. It’s not a disowning of everything before. Taken that way it has one meaning. Taken as a revolution, an overthrow, it’s a completely different thing.

Some people are very confused. Some look to it as an overthrow rather than a natural progression. And I said: “Melbourne City Council are just small minded when they say yes to this but they won’t say yes to that and they won’t look at it as an architectural thing of its own.” That’s what it’s about. Look at it, then say do you approve or don’t.

**Why do you think people find Barry Humphries so amusing? What is it about his humour that attracts people?**

They always think he’s talking about someone else. They find him most amusing when they realise he’s talking about them. But the initial thing is, and this is his genius, his genius is that it is always about someone else. And then they’re laughing and later on they look in the mirror and realise it’s them as well, or part of them, or a bit of them.

But their first reaction is its aunty, or its cousin or that person down the street. Their better appreciation is when they realise it’s about them as well. And it’s this ability to look at ourselves in life that makes us better. If we look at ourselves and can’t laugh, we’re not the world’s most liveable city.

**What has your friendship been founded on over all those years with him?**

Mutual experiences, like not eating our lunch and saving the money and buying funny bits of art from funny old shops. And constructing new sentences and word things, word patterns and things. And eliminating the childish viciousness that we had when we were younger. There was a streak of viciousness in our younger days. That was when we were reacting. Once you could get rid of that then you could be creative rather than reactive.
It would be interesting if one was to be invited to speak to planners, to speak to them on reaction and creation. Where do they see themselves in that equation? Not where other people put them but where do they see themselves in the equation. Are they reacting to the application? Are they creating? Are they actually going out and trying to get an application? Or are the trapdoor spiders and sit by the hole and wait for a fly to come?

**How do you respond to the idea that a good planner is an agent for change?**

I like to think that a good planner lives in what they create. Who looks forward to living in what they create. I think if they test it that way they won’t go too far wrong. If they’re looking forward to living in what they are going to create, I’ll give them a big, big canvas and lots of coloured pencils! But if they are a petty bourgeois police force telling other people what to do, I want them to have hard black and a sheet of white paper and not much else.

*(Ends)*

All Photography – Grant Meyer unless otherwise stated.

*Photo: Federation Square, Melbourne*