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Transcript of an interview with

David Holmgren

(b.1955 -)

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TRACK 01

SH: Okay.

DH: Just check with that ...(indistinct)... in the air.

SH: What's in the air - - yes, I saw it, the little balloon flying.

DH: Yes.

SH: Okay. So today's date's the 27th of the 11th 2002, and I'm interviewing David Holmgren at his place in Hepburn Springs. It is Hepburn Springs, isn't it?

DH: Yes.

SH: In Victoria. What - - do you want to give me a few biographical details, when you were born and where you were born?

DH: I was born in 1955 in Fremantle hospital, in a heat wave in an air conditioned room. I don't know whether that sort of contributed to my aversion to the sort of West Australian heat and glare, or whether my Scandinavian blue eyes, but in a lot of ways I sort of felt you know, was quite an alien environment from quite a young age, in a lot of ways. That's why I ended up somewhere cool and - -

SH: Temperate.

DH: Yes, like here.

SH: And your mother's Beeny Holmgren?

DH: Yes. And Jack.

SH: Jack.

DH: Holmgren. Grew up in Bicton, by the Swan river. Went to Bicton primary school, which was just a few blocks away, and then went to John Curtin high school. Was probably my only experience in my life of really long term commuting, but I remember I've always avoided it since, but yes, I was into things academically at school and ended up as dux of John Curtin high school. I think I was the first dux of the school whose name wasn't put on the roll board because I refused to wear school uniform.

SH: So John Curtin had that problem even in those days?

DH: Well, really the year I went through high school, my final year was 1972. The school went through a sort of a like a major transformation. Prior to our year, the academic elite at the school were also active in sports, they were sort of part of the - - you know, they were prefects, you know, they were part of the - -

SH: Administration, bureaucracy?

DH: Yes. Of the school, whereas in my year, basically the whole of the academic elite were all ratbags and radicals, and I mean some of the other symptoms of change at that time, I was probably one of a handful who were sort of dabbling in marijuana, and I know that in the following year someone earned enough from selling dope at John Curtin high school to buy himself a Renault - - a new Renault R16.

SH: That's not too bad.

DH: You know, and that was sort of like an indication - - and yet I'm sure that in the year I went through there wouldn't have been more than half a dozen students and possibly one or two teachers who would have you know, dabbled in - - in marijuana or other sort of - -

SH: Illicit substances - -

DH: - - psycho - - yes- - active drugs of the era. So there was, yes, a huge - - huge change in that very short time.

SH: '72 was the year that Whitlam got in and pulled the troops out of Viet Nam too.

DH: Yes.

SH: You might have been on the periphery of some of that moratorium stuff.

DH: Yes. Very - - very much. It was really very central to my childhood and adolescent experience, and you know, there were sort of of a number of things both out of school and at school, it was sort of yes, it was sort of very pivotal sort of my whole childhood the Viet Nam war.

SH: Yes.

DH: Sort of figured really prominently.

SH: Well your mother was in save our sons, wasn't she, and the early protest the women had against enlistment.

DH: Yes, she was, but very quickly she felt that the approach of the save our sons organisation was very limited, because it wasn't sort of opposing the, you know the fundamental structure of the war, rather that it was focussing on the welfare of ours, rather than the welfare of the world sort of thing so that led to her helping found a Viet Nam action committee, I can't remember what year that was, but which was - - I seem to remember her saying it was actually the first organisation in Australia dedicated to complete opposition to the Viet Nam war in principle.

SH: Do you remember any of those early demonstrations like - -

DH: Yes.

SH: - - St Georges Terrace marches?

DH: Well before that I remember going in the ban the bomb walk from Fremantle to Perth, which must have been 1960 or '61.

SH: Early.

DH: A little kid sort of remember events like that. But pivotal one for me was being in - - I think it was the first anti-conscription demonstration on the steps of the GPO in Forrest Place.

SH: That's the big one.

DH: Yes.

SH: And a violent one if I remember.

DH: Where - - yes, the draft cards were burned, and I saw basically the first time in my childhood I'd seen adult violence. I'd never seen adult violence before, you know, watching these cops, you know, sort of bash their way through a crowd basically. And grabbing these people and throwing them in the paddy wagons and I - - in spite of all the stories I'd heard from the parents, especially my father, about you know, the implied and real violence of the state, that was sort of an extraordinary shock, because I, you know, hadn't seen really any adult violence, let alone violence by the authorities. And the other experience that was critical in that event was my mother and I prepared some placards which said on them Holt the murder, which was a bit controversial. And it had Holt spelt H-o-l-t.

SH: After Harold Holt.

DH: After Harold Holt, and it was very particular, you know, it was Holt the murder, not Holt the murderer, and anyway, my mother had one of these placards and I had one, and my brother, who I think was 7 years old, because I remember the picture of him in the paper with 7 in brackets after it sort of stuck in my mind. He felt a bit left out and wanted to hold the placard, and when I handed the placard over to him, I must have been 10 I suppose, the media cameras seemed to come from nowhere, and snap a photo of this - - my brother was a very angelic child.

SH: Angelic child.

DH: Yes. And that led to two interesting things in my memory. One was that the

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newspaper reported it as saying Holt the murderer. Even though you could actually read it as saying Holt the murder. And I remember being outraged by the lack of truth in - - and again it was you know, my parents had brought me up not to necessarily believe what you read and don't ...(indistinct)... but it was this shock of actually your own experience of something you know to be true or not to be true, and then - - but the newspapers said something else.

SH: I had a similar experience, yes. It's a bit of a watershed.

DH: So I sort of look back on those years in a way, you know, perhaps I had a view, a sceptical view, like my parents' encouragement, my mother especially encouragement to scepticism, meant that I was sceptical of them. I thought are my parents sort of paranoid, strange, but my experiences actually sort of yes, reinforced things that I - - you know, I sort of really already knew, but there was yes, really strong disposition to actually believe what you're told at school, what the peer reinforcement means. And it really showed me that yes, those influences are sort of remarkably strong, but the - - perhaps the parental influences come at a sort of a very early age, and then there's sort of sometimes this tension, but you know ...(indistinct)...

SH: Do you remember any political discussions with your parents, particularly your mother that you know, you might have been slightly disbelieving or a counterpoint for her ...(indistinct)...

DH: Not so much with her, you see, the other thing was for me that it took me a while to realise I was growing up in the aftermath of political faith, which was in the aftermath of both my mother's and father's religious faith.

SH: Yes.

DH: So - -

SH: They were Jewish but did they - -

DH: Well, my mother was Jewish and my father was - - came from a Protestant puritan background, and they were both atheists before they met each other and you know, sort of - - yes, I suppose describe them as sort of Utopian Communist atheists - -

SH: Visionaries.

DH: - - you know, but you know, by the time I was born, they'd both left the party.

SH: Right.

DH: My - - my father left the party in 1952, and my parents almost separated as a result of that. And my mother left in '54 when - -

SH: Hungary invasion?

DH: Yes. So though I remember all my childhood, my parents both of them talking about you know, so and so's left the party now, although they were members of the Labor party when they said the party - -

SH: You knew what party they meant?

DH: Yes. So there was the echo of this belonging, this second lost faith, but I didn't grow

up in a family that was cynical about social change, they were still really committed, but they were definitely not part of the party faithful.

SH: No.

DH: So that that scepticism was like a sort of a really deep lesson, scepticism and questioning at all levels about dogma.

SH: Yes.

DH: About any dogma.

SH: And the bureaucrats that carry out the dogma too.

DH: Yes.

SH: Personalities that seem to get attracted.

DH: Yes, so like I'm - - I can remember my parents still being you know, disappointed by how they saw some of their - - the - -

SH: Comrades?

DH: Yes, being slow to identify the war in Viet Nam as a critical issue because in their - - I remember my mother's interpretation was that the line from Moscow was that it was not a central, you know, a critical thing and that the movement against it was actually, in Australia, was grass roots and broad, and the party sort of was a little bit slow, if not everyone in the party, to - - to - - yes, to become - -

SH: Activist.

DH: Yes. So yes, there was a lot of that - - I suppose you - - yes, that lost faith and taking for granted that, especially from my mother I think, that you didn't actually have to belong.

SH: They'd still be an activist in certain areas?

DH: Yes, and but you didn't have to belong to be a person. Like it was a normal - - in a sense the way I interpreted it since is that there's a sort of like alienation is actually a normal state, so we'd better get on with it, you know, rather than rushing around trying to recreate this sense of belonging that tried, because it ends up just sort of recreating the same dysfunction, which was you know, basically her, you know, her experience of lost religious faith and then adopted party faith.

SH: Religious faith.

DH: Yes. And then losing that and then yes, well where do you go beyond any sort of bitter nihilism or whatever, and that yes, they hadn't you know and - -

SH: But you'd have to have developed somewhere along the line inner core of beliefs and I guess - -

DH: Yes.

SH: - - those beliefs about the ethics which you've espoused and gone on to develop in permaculture and do you think that - - do you think that's what's needed?

DH: Well, I sort of felt the ethical foundations of, you know, my upbringing, you know, were really strong, although to some extent in my mother I felt there was sort of a bitterness about past idealism and like one of the stories she used to tell about the block of land they had in Leederville, and that, you know, ended up moving to closer to Fremantle and sold the block of land for the same price they bought it for, because they believed ...(indistinct)...

SH: No profit there.

DH: - - speculation - - yes, was immoral.

SH: Immoral, yes.

DH: They sold it for a quarter of its market value.

SH: True value.

DH: You know - -

SH: For the next person - -

DH: - - weren't actually that well off. I don't know what actually the next person did with the block of land, but you know, my mother sort of used to say as a story of you know, with some bitterness and sort of you know, don't be as stupid as we were, sort of thing, so there was some element of that against the past idealism which you know, I gathered, to some extent through talking to my father, in - - who died when I was 21, that then he had been much more sort of a passionate believer - -

SH: A committed person.

DH: Yes. Absolutely, you know, that - - that total commitment so in some ways it almost feels to me like the passion and drive are sort of, you know, about belief I learned from my mother and almost the scepticism and that there's always another way to look at things from my father. But definitely the sort of - - the passion, you know, from my mother.

SH: The commitment?

DH: Yes.

SH: Did you ever feel that her passion and commitment, she was an activist, even after she left the party, ever in your mind's eye as a child interfere with your needs as a child, that you were swept up along with it and was there ever any tensions there around that?

DH: No. I don't remember things like that. I can remember sort of helping with you know, folding up leaflets and you know, stapling and printing and sort of going out and putting up posters and - - and you know, quite sort of heavy involvement with things, in a lot of ways is an exciting thing, you know, of being involved in the adult world rather than work which still seemed to like exclude you, you know, that - -

SH: Do you remember any of the other activities, May Day parades, or any of the more social activities?

DH: A bit of that. I can remember you know, some of the things, like I think it was waterside workers - -

SH: Picnic?

DH: - - annual picnic ...(indistinct)... at Peppermint Grove of all places.

SH: Yes, I remember that well.

DH: And you know, that was sort of - - some sort of sense of oh, yes, that was the community that my parents were part of, but in a way, that was sort of almost like they sort of existed on the periphery of this community, but we as children didn't really, because - - because they weren't 100% involved in it anymore.

SH: Okay.

DH: And of course you know, our main - - my sort of gathering sort of community like was the thing that related to school and neighbourhood and friends.

SH: Did that neighbourhood and friends identify your mother as slightly oddball or radical or activist or - -

DH: Yes, you know, like we had a sign up, you know, ordinary suburban street, a big placard in the front lawn, you know, against the war in Viet Nam in 1965, you know - -

SH: That's not something every day - - everyone would have along with the garden gnomes is it?

DH: Yes. So - -

SH: This in suburban Bicton?

DH: Yes. But you know, my mother was also, you know, she was on the committee that did the fundraising for a local library, and a whole lot of things, you know, involved, so all of the usual sort of social community connections, because you know, both my parents were very much the grassroots activists, that passionate belief that you actually talk to ordinary people, you start with ordinary people, in what ordinary people are doing, you know, that that sort of bottom up subversive agents have changed. My father would always talk to people in the pub and my mother would always take the opportunity to you know, talking to someone on - - sharing on a white elephant stall or whatever, to talk about social and political issues. Not - - not in a sort of you know - -

SH: Proselytising way.

DH: Yes. But always take the opportunity to engage rather than - - rather than disconnect, but it was just like - - yes, didn't have a sense that they were - - like that we were - -

SH: Isolated at all?

DH: Yes. Yes.

SH: So you didn't get any of her kind of, that's the commie kid type reaction at school?

DH: Oh, yes. Yes. Yes.

SH: Marginalisation with teachers - -

DH: Well, being the only kid in the school of 400 for primary school, only one of two that didn't go to religious instructions, and you know, it seemed to me the only one who sort of had wholemeal sandwiches and - - and dried fruit and sort of weird things like that for lunch - -

SH: Yes.

DH: - - but you know I mean I was also just by my nature the sort of the big mouth and prepared to sort of do my own thing anyway, like, you know, just on my own volition, you know, refuse to stand up, you know, on Anzac Day for the national anthem, you know - -

SH: It was very nationalistic, wasn't it, Anzac day?

DH: Yes.

SH: British ...(indistinct)... nationalism.

DH: Yes. I mean it was in a way like - - in a way it has been partly transformed these days by the effects of all that, in spite of you know, the resurgence of it, it's really a bit different to what it - -

SH: What it was.

DH: Yes. Then. Yes. So you know, it felt like this was basically a propaganda day for the engagement in Viet Nam, you know, that that's what it really was about and it and that it was meant to link what was happening in Viet Nam to this glorious history, but you know, yes, I can remember being chastised by teachers for you

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know - - and arguing you know political arguments which came from really just the constant political discussion at the dinner table, that there was always a debate about ideas, and a debate about political events was going.

SH: Was there ever non-mainstream literature like magazines or the Tribune or any of that coming into the house?

DH: Yes. And there was - - ...(indistinct)... you know, lower work, middle class I suppose house but with carpets with sort of wear holes in the floor, and you know, the third bedroom had one wall of books, you know, my parents were passionate about books and in a way, about education that they didn't have, so it was you know, huge number of left book club books and in terms of - - yes, occasionally, they used to get the Tribune, but in a lot of ways it was more my father especially was a media person, obsessive radio listener and my mother found at times his political interests in political affairs a bit obsessive and he was a bit almost like the armchair academic who wasn't an academic in that he was you know, the observer and the commentator, whereas she was more about well, what do we want to do.

SH: Get out and do it?

DH: Yes. So a little bit of that discontent about the endless analysis and finding out more, which my father was, you know, always, you know, obsessed with, you know, and he was like really sort of brilliant at that in sort of political science and you know, having left school at 14, you know just from ordinary sources he actually read between the lines and I can remember him talking about all of the events that were exposed in the release of the Pentagon papers. He already knew about all of those, and his only sources were things really like the New Statesman newspaper. He used to subscribe to the Australian when no one did in West Australia, and Newsweek and

you know, and a few other really essentially mainstream but a bit more erudite sources than the average West Australian was - - yes, and ABC radio became Radio National, but my mother was not so interested in all of the great detail of arguments and analysis. It was more about what's worth doing.

SH: Yes.

DH: What needs to be - - what should we fight for and - - and you know, the - -

SH: Do you think your dad brought an internationalist perspective that may have influenced you at some point?

DH: Both my parents were really very much that internationalist view. I mean I grew up with a view that I didn't regard myself as an Australian at all. And I thought Australians as a nation I had fairly simplistic idea that are basically racist, bigoted people who had an underlying element of fascism that would come out if it wasn't for the good times you know, the affluence that Australians lived under, and I didn't see myself as an Australian at all. I just saw myself as a citizen of the world. Now I've later come to sort of see that Australians probably aren't that much worse ... (indistinct)...

SH: ...(indistinct)... lot of others.

DH: It was just that I'd had the first hand experience.

SH: We're very isolated here though weren't we?

DH: Yes.

SH: Particularly in Perth.

DH: Yes. Yes, well that sense of incredible isolation in Perth, you know, they'd had the rest of Australia was over east.

SH: Did you see international visitors at all through your parents' activism?

DH: Yes.

SH: Find yourself more exposed to those thing?

DH: A lot of that was just the sort of - - the people did meet was the not so much accidental, but just the serendipitous interactions that my parents had, more so my father because he was out working in the outside world and meet people, but you know, go down to the wharves, we made a friendship with a Scandinavian sailor who came back and forth to Fremantle on the ships, and then there was this very influential relationship with these Filipino musicians, who were musicians on a cruise ship who got stuck in Western Australia and weren't able to get work, because of the musicians' union ban on them getting work.

SH: A good fate ...(indistinct)...

DH: Yes. And my parents, yes, they became very, very good friends of my parents. My father was a musician himself, and yes, I had coming to our house, you know, when the ship was in, take over the kitchen and cook Filipino food and yes, and I can remember university students, African university students, I don't know how my parents met them - -

SH: Did you regard the family as a fairly open family that allowed a lot of these influences through, you know, people coming in an open door?

DH: Yes. Yes, well very much like - - my sister actually went to Sunday school, because she was sort of interested in what it was. I was never interested in such things. She was quite a few years older than me, but my mother was especially, yes, open to, yes, whatever you know, and it was interesting that in relation to influences I was thinking of what comes through the front door with the religious proselytisers whereas like my mother would tend to talk to politely and say goodbye, and get on with her work, whereas my father took it as the great opportunity to actually try and convert them. So that - - I mean that was reflecting that sort of, might have been much - - in some ways yes, passionate and idealistic, but more focused on what - -

SH: More grounded.

DH: Yes, doing and whereas my father was a bit more head in the clouds about - -

SH: Sounds like a good balance.

DH: Yes.

SH: Did you ever get in contact through the family, or through your own later activism into Aboriginal awareness, awareness in a situation of indigenous people?

DH: Yes. There was quite a few - - there was an Aboriginal family who were part of the Allowa Grove community who came to either stay with us or visited quite frequently and I think that was when I was quite young though, I don't have that many memories of it. It's funny, the main thing I remember about Aboriginal activism was something that happened when I was in late primary school and there was going to

be some Aboriginal community house set up in Applecross so ...(indistinct)... middle class suburb, and the outrage at the time. And because it was so near, I remember it felt like my parents were talking about something that was not happening on the other side of the world or even you know, in Perth or Canberra, it was like our community sort of thing, and you know, their views about the sort of underlying racism in you know, Australian middle class society, and discussed it, people sort of talking about you know their real estate values being lowered and all of those sort of indirect, less direct racist - -

SH: Well, do you remember the white Australia policy, if there's any of those - - I think you might have been a bit young for that, but I do remember making a recollection walking down St Georges Terrace as to why aren't there any black people here, like black Americans I think I was trying to say. I think I got a thorough discussion on the white Australia policy at the time.

DH: Yes, well, it was interesting that a lot of the people who came into our house from overseas were in fact not white and not Anglo, you know, that - - and so really had that very internationalist view that there's always other people in the world and always sort of interesting experiences and yes, so there were several say African university students and different people. And then of course when my sister went to Canberra to study Chinese and Asian civilisation, I think all her boy friends were Asians, and she ended up marrying a Singaporean Chinese man - - well, she's not married, they're not married, but they've been together for a long, long time. So there was - - there was a whole sort of Asian influence that you know, extended back through my sister as well, but - -

SH: Do you remember the music? Is there an international flavour came through in the music, as well as the food?

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DH: Yes.

SH: Folk music or words of the struggle, music of the struggle?

DH: Yes, there was - - there was some of that. Music was definitely a big part of our house, and my parents were both into jazz music and classical music, but yes, there was - - there was you know, a lot of the classic songs as well as political action, and - -

SH: Pete Seeger and - -

DH: Yes. And I remember particularly the music of Paul Robeson was - - was sort of a passion of my mother's. But yes, so it was yes, all around in - - in different ways and yet it didn't seem to me like a sort of a coherent community upbringing, like it could have been for some other people who were more you know, identified you know, that their families more identified as you know, that community. See there was another aspect to my parents' involvement in the left was really through their membership of the Fabian society, and that - - that they were some of the few members who were regular attendees at the meetings who hadn't been to university, who hadn't completed school, and you know, the fact that my mother sort of took - - I remember hearing the stories of my mother taking John Wheeldon - -

SH: Labor ...(indistinct)...

DH: Labor - - no, he was senator at the time, taking him to task over some ...(indistinct)... he basically tearing him to shreds on a, you know, a point of logic, you know, at a Fabian society meeting, and there was a sort of - - a sense that they didn't really

belong, because they weren't educated people, you know that yes, you know, and as I said about my father's abilities as a political scientist, totally self-educated, you know, just brilliant and his ability to you know - -

SH: It was an intellectual snobbery of a sort, even amongst elite - -

DH: Well, whether there was I don't know. I mean I was a child and I never went to those meetings.

SH: Never went to the meetings? No?

DH: No. I don't remember going to - -

SH: The meetings?

DH: - - much in the way of - -

SH: Not got dragged along to the ubiquitous meetings?

DH: No, I remember a few, but not really. Maybe because - - I don't know whether my sister did.

SH: Where are you in the family, by the way?

DH: In the middle.

SH: You're in the middle?

DH: Yes.

SH: Maybe your sister was looking after you.

DH: Sister's quite a bit older, and it's quite possible that she went to meetings, you know, when she - - I mean of course she was before - - born before they left the party, so that - -

SH: Maybe I should speak to your sister next.

DH: Yes. But yes, I was just - - certainly I had a sense through my mother of whether it was intellectual snobbery or whether it was the - - her lack of self confidence and - -

SH: Sensitivity?

DH: Yes, sensitivity about not being an educated person, you know, bitterness about you know, being taken out of school at 14, yes, because she certainly was one of those women that, of her generation who, yes, very sharp mind, who could have done all sorts of things if she'd had the opportunities.

SH: Do you think you would have learned, you know, maybe some of your mother's, and possibly your father's, though it sounds like it was your mother more the activist, ability to get connected in the community and organise and any of those things ever come through, do you think, into your own personal life history or values?

DH: Well, I think so. I mean I suppose I see you know, just in the varying community environmental and other activism that I've been involved in, which has not been sort of like a central part of my life, in a lot of ways, it's more been the development of a

fundamental ideas in permaculture work and the practice of how we live as a - - as an expression of our - - and then - - and also then what tools you have available to give people as a way you earn your livelihood, you know, and the way I earn my livelihood is as a consultant, you know, I sort of helping people in that way, so in a way social and political activism hasn't sort of filled my life the way my - - it did for my parents, and partly that was a sort of like a huge shift in some ways away from that, away from trying to change society by changing the systems to changing society by changing yourself.

SH: Yes.

DH: So in a way - - yes, in a way it's back, in some ways back to an almost religious idea about, you know, like change the world through changing yourself.

SH: ...(indistinct)...

DH: Yes, but on the other hand, when I look at the way my parents, and especially my mother went about her political activism, it was all very much this bottom up approach, so the degree to which I've been involved in campaigns and activities, I just take that way of working as absolutely natural and obvious and efficient, rather than what I see a lot of people who are involved in such work who take for granted that the task is to develop press releases, get the connections, to the top structures of mass media and decision makers and create change that way. And yet a lot of people involved in that, because they're working in NGO's without being on a salary, believe they are grass roots, in what they are doing. You know, whereas yes, what I say just to the extent that you know, being involved in such things, I take the sort of - -

SH: Grass roots activism.

DH: Yes, as just given, and of course that's more in keeping with the permaculture ideas which are - - I suppose that there is that difference that I saw the degree which I took a different path is that still saw a lot of what that political activism was about, was about saying what we don't want in the world.

SH: I see.

DH: Oppositional.

SH: Oppositional.

DH: Yes. And that - - that there was another element that my parents, I believe I actually can see now that I gained something from them even though I saw it almost as a different path, in that I was interested in the positive solutions, permaculture is absolutely about creating the world we want, not being naive about the monster of what is going on.

H: The way they focussed about - -

DH: Yes.

SH: ...(indistinct)... paranoid.

DH: But - - but to actually just be pushing ahead with - - with the resources that are possible to actively create the world we want because in any - - any struggle of possibilities unless people can see that some other way actually has reality, has life,

then they will always choose dependence. They will always choose submission to this - - to the system because what else is there, other than some ideas, some - - you know, and some oppositional passion.

SH: Well there was ...(indistinct)... happing that concretely they've been living with their children and ...(indistinct)...

DH: Yes. So that - - that that in a way I sort of like I've stepped aside from a lot of really worthwhile oppositional community and environmental social campaigns because might think it's about creating the positive, but what that is is sort of like of a developmental sort of agenda. It's actually a constructivist sort of - - almost like an enterprise agenda, and values often I find alien to the culture of a lot of - - a lot of people who are involved in activism, but because I think my parents were small business people, or became small business people, you know, after they left the party, became small capitalists - -

SH: Yes.

DH: - - you know, and actually developed what was arguably the - - one of the best technical bookshops in Australia, in Perth, Rellim technical book sellers, and you know, ended up employing five or six people and the bookshop's still going, that you know, that experience of them being small business people whose you know, they occasionally said that politically, you know, it was against their self-interest to actually support the left at times, you know, but they were still you know passionately committed to that, but what they were actually doing was constructing something, saying this is actually, yes, it's a way to earn a living but they actually sort of believed, because it was - - they believed they were delivering high quality information, you know, and was independent small business rather than the

juggernaut of amalgamated big business.

SH: Bit like Schumacher, small is beautiful.

DH: Yes. And also - - yes, of actually producing something that's of value, something that empowers people to do things which was connected to their passionate commitment about information and education.

SH: So have you seen this with your role now, permaculture, because you seem to be involved in very similar things? ...(indistinct)...

DH: Well, yes, that sort of small business independent constructivist positive approach is absolutely natural to me, you know, that whereas I do see for a lot of people involved in social activism is that it's too close to the - - you know, the - - the tale of capitalism in the peasantry that had to be stamped out, as the Maoist said about, you know, in the lead up to the cultural revolution. Yes, whereas I see it as you know, in a way I feel I've integrated that totally with the - - with political social beliefs whereas I think in my parents, especially my mother, were sort of an uncertain sort of like they weren't quite sure how those sides of themselves fitted together.

SH: Well ...(indistinct)... happened to have a fairly big break with their belief systems didn't they, when they left the religious faiths for a start.

DH: Yes.

SH: And ...(indistinct)... belief system of centralised party control?

DH: Yes. Yes.

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SH: You know, in the communist party, would have been quite a big break then to look at autonomous learning and - -

DH: Yes.

SH: - - education.

DH: But yes, so you know I see those, you know, the more I - - I mean I've said in this new book, Permaculture principles and pathways beyond sustainability, that there's no need to sort of denigrate what our parents and our grandparents and our ancestors did as sort of ignorant, short-sighted or anti-nature, you know, in fact we you know, the ground's been prepared for us that it is actually a sort of an evolutionary process, and I sort of feel that sort of really, really strongly that what I'm passionate about in articulating permaculture you know, very much see myself as standing on the shoulders of - -

SH: ...(indistinct)...

DH: - - what my mother and father did.

SH: And how do you hand those values on to your own children? You've had two step-children you've had contact with through Sue, and you've got your own son, Oliver.

DH: Yes. Well I suppose being a step-father of a relatively young age you know, in a family that had been through a difficult separation with both personal and cultural conflict you know, between Australia - -

SH: Italian father.

DH: Yes, who it was you know, nouveau riche Neopolitan businessman that the conflict of values and worlds that they came from and where I was and to a fair extent where Sue was, were sort of enormous so that the - - I found that sort of quite - - yes, quite a lesson in understanding and tolerance of you know - - and not having the expectation that - -

SH: It imposes ...(indistinct)...

DH: Yes, and also because they weren't my biological children I suppose I was less likely to get into that thing of trying to imprint on them what you know, as all parents you know, are sort of prone to do, but also that was one of the passions that my mother taught me about, about she wanted to let her children be themselves because she felt that that hadn't been allowed to her, so that was like this sort of huge lesson that you you know, you don't try and impose - - you provide an example - -

SH: Yes.

DH: - - and you let them do whatever they will.

SH: You done this with Oliver do you think?

DH: Well, by the time Oliver was born, you know, I'd sort of had you know, the experience of yes, accepting that my step-kids are unlikely to have my values, you know, the seduction of the sort of endless consumption and whatever of - - you know, partly the realities created by a distant father who's out to impress, which can happen in any society, but especially overlaid with the sort of nouveau riche values that were - -

SH: ...(indistinct)... presenting well and - -

DH: Yes, all of that, you know, as lots of my friends say well, what would you have chosen when you were a teenager, you know, the promise of the Ferrari and all of that, I said I don't know.

SH: Killing ...(indistinct)... in the backyard for lunch.

DH: Yes. So I sort of felt with - - with Oliver I really wanted to not in any way have expectations about what he might do, but at the same time totally resistant to that idea that you would just therefore immerse them in the mainstream influences and then some day they'll decide what their values are.

SH: Yes.

DH: I think that is like toxic poison, and I see lots of people who are very radical in their own ideas, putting their children back into all this poison, I say to people would you put heroin on the coffee table and say to toddlers, yes, you might - -

SH: Just drop a line in or something.

DH: Yes. You know, because that is my attitude to television and a lot of the peer pressure and so yes, Oliver in a lot of ways was protected from those things for as long as is practicable while accepting - -

SH: So you didn't have TV?

DH: Yes, we didn't have TV any he was actually home schooled until the point where he

got curious about I want to go to school, I want to see what - -

SH: How old was he then?

DH: He was nine. And he is more independent, more self-assured than I was. He is - - he's amazing at how resistant he is to the peer pressure of fashion and whatever, and yet he's not disconnected, he's not a weirdo, and so many kids at school see him, they would love him to be a role model that they could look up to. They would love him to be a bit more conservative, to have the right clothes, to do the right things because he's got this natural self-confidence that just you know, that kids are really impressed with, but they freak out by how different he is, but they don't regard him as just like this - -

SH: Queer ...(indistinct)...

DH: Yes.

SH: ...(indistinct)...

DH: Whereas he did have quite a bit of that when he was sort of in primary school.

SH: When he first went to school.

DH: Yes. Yes.

SH: So he's not interested in putting on the Nike brand label and Gameboys ...(indistinct)... - -

DH: No. Well, it's like a story he said he's just done a work experience earlier this year, down in the city, at Cecil Walker's, one of the oldest and most established bike - - bicycle businesses in Australia, and they actually said he was the best work experience student they'd ever had and he came back with so much knowledge about bikes, but you know, his work mates said, you know, aren't you going off to you know, down in the city, aren't you going to Macdonalds for lunch, you know, and he said I like food, I wouldn't eat that shit. You know, so he's - - and he doesn't sort of need to do those things to impress - -

SH: Prove himself.

DH: Yes, or impress us, because I sort of you know, accept, you know, I had the expectation, oh, yes, my son will probably go to Macdonalds and eat that sort of crap when he's got the opportunity, but I'm not going to - - yes, I'm never going to - -

SH: How old is he now?

DH: He's 16.

SH: 16. Well he's obviously old enough to make a lot of his own decisions.

DH: Oh, yes, well he makes you know, heaps of his own decisions and you know, I accept his advice on lots of things.

SH: Did you ever find that because you were born a bit later, your mother had left the CP, but was there - - this is going back - -

DH: Yes.

SH: - - to an early conversation, was there any concern that you couldn't speak freely to the outside world about your parents' belief systems, or any kind of censorship, internal censorship that it wouldn't be wise to let that be known? Do you remember anything like that? I'm thinking more now - -

DH: I'm sure I must have been circumspect at times because of that, but my main memories are of speaking out.

SH: ...(indistinct)... slight reverse, yes.

DH: Stuff you, you know. But I'm sure yes, there was a sense as a young child of you know, maybe my parents are sort of really strange, and - - but I see most kids actually have a lack of self-confidence about their own families, and have a distorted view about normal families being elsewhere.

SH: Yes.

DH: Which is often guided by the default reality of media, and I think that's even you know, even more so now, but - - so I think you know, the fact that I had those feelings, I - - I wouldn't place too much emphasis on that - - that gulf between the society, the mainstream society and - -

SH: Your own family?

DH: Yes, and either their sense of pulling away and being outside of mainstream society or the repression, you know, the - - the forced to conform because - -

SH: The worst of the '50s was over by the time you were old enough - -

DH: Yes. Yes.

SH: - - ...(indistinct)... weren't you? McCarthy idea anyway.

DH: Yes. But I can sort of you know, remember being bashed up at school for being you know, commie rat, a traitor, you know, but I suppose I sort of felt, you know, relatively immune from that, not - - I mean it was pretty sort of full-on at the time - -

SH: Yes.

DH: - - but I don't think it sort of psychologically scarred me for life.

SH: No. You have a pretty good bunch of friends, I've met some of them.

DH: Right.

SH: When I worked for the Post down in Fremantle.

DH: Yes. Yes.

SH: He remembers you.

DH: Good grief. Yes.

SH: Quite a character.

DH: Yes. Well, the thing is in primary school I sort of felt my experience was tougher in that I felt myself more immersed in the mainstream society and that there were few

people who - -

SH: Like you - -

DH: Yes. Whereas by the time I got to high school and especially my later years in high school, you know, I'd met quite a few people who, if they didn't come from the same exact social background, you know, as I did, they - - yes, had some similarity of values, so by the time I left school I felt this enormous strength of peer identity - -

SH: Yes.

DH: - - that was really strong.

SH: Right. I think that the early '70s which you left school '72 - -

DH: Yes.

SH: - - there was enough of a group and enough of a ground swell to really feel that.

DH: Yes.

SH: Yes.

DH: So I can remember starting high school and feeling you know, my outspoken opposition to the war in Viet Nam maybe just what a weirdo, what a weirdo, you know, by 1970 my third year of high school I saw the masses of people - -

SH: Mass rallies, the moratorium marches - -

DH: And kids starting to express opposition to the war when they didn't actually know anything about it just because it was a cool thing.

SH: Yes ...(indistinct)... a degree of cynicism.

DH: I was disgusted, you know, I sort of felt people had the obligation to find out, like how do people - -

SH: ...(indistinct)... be informed - -

DH: Yes, how do people change their ideas without even bothering to find out, you know.

SH: The latest fashion item.

DH: Yes. And but by 1972 it just felt to some extent - - I mean always felt like we were natural leaders, we were the prefects of the school, even though we were not part of that structure, we were the natural student leaders, you know, that - - and to the extent that I actually didn't realise at the time that I found out, because I left Western Australia virtually after I left school, it was only on visits back there talking to younger students who were at that school who said this small group of us were enormously influential. You know, whereas we were sort of in a way a bit of a snobbish clique of - -

SH: Like the Sydney push, the rat pack?

DH: Yes. You know, and it was very much the sort of - - the small degree of passion and idealistic faith that I had that a tiny little dose was actually the belief that if - - if people took psychoactive drugs, the hallucinogenics in the right environment, with

the right tutoring, this would actually lead to the social revolution.

SH: Timothy O Leary?

DH: Yes. Timothy Leary. So to the extent that we developed, you know, that I developed you know a sort of independent ideology, you know, sort of rejecting my parents, it was for a small number of years, you know, from 16, 17, you know, by 18 that the evidence was pretty much showing that that was not going to be the case. But yes, so you know - - and in a way, there was a sort of an elitism amongst those in the know, you know, that those who had the insight, who could understand what the art forms were at the time, and what the songs meant, and you know, in a way - -

SH: White rabbit.

DH: Yes.

SH: Jefferson Airplane.

DH: And saw it as - - but I can remember at that age being shocked at meeting people who would go to a party and take LSD and you know, there would be people drunk there and people even violent you know, and I thought this was - -

SH: ...(indistinct)...

DH: - - sacrilegious almost, you know, that because if you're actually going to use these substances then you actually have to use them in the appropriate environment and get some sort of change value - -

SH: Carlso Castaneda.

DH: Yes, that idea that there was some depletion of internal psychic energy in that process, and you had to use it properly.

SH: Wisely.

DH: Yes. And you know, after a year travelling around Australia, when I was 18 and coming back to Western Australia and seeing a lot of my friends who'd stayed there who'd taken too much LSD and I just was - -

SH: Too much dope over too long a time?

DH: - - completely disillusioned, I thought where are they at, you know, and in a way when I went off to Tasmania to study environmental design and occasionally came back, I found myself in a position that the people who'd been very influential on me, my peers, who you know, really influenced me, that had reversed quite a lot, and they were sort of drifting and lost, and me with my sort of permaculture passion, by then this is 1975, I was sort of like someone who they you know, looked up to as - -

SH: A hope?

DH: Yes. Yes.

SH: Well, Bill Mollison was still a great permaculture programs in Perth in '78 or something like that was the first ...(indistinct)...

DH: Yes.

SH: I think my mother was one of the first.

DH: Yes.

SH: Were you involved in any of those? Teaching?

DH: In a way, but you see permaculture came out of my working relationship as sort of a student-mentor relationship with Bill Mollison, from 1974 to 1976, and by 1978, when permaculture one was published, I was already a bit cautious about the - - the whole publicity thing, because I sort of felt - -

SH: ...(indistinct)...

DH: - - a little bit of a fraud. It was alright for Bill Mollison, he was in his 40s and had all this experience, but I sort of felt that you know, I was just a - - you know - -

SH: A raw student?

DH: Yes. And that my passion was about going out and getting more of the skills to - - to provide an underpinning to what I was on about, so in a way I was escaping from the - - the media - -

SH: ...(indistinct)...

DH: The media publicity. Well, my relationship with Bill Mollison had sort of really - - there was a very passionate working and living-in relationship in his house in 1970 - - late '74, '75, '76, and that's really what permaculture came out of that working relationship, but by that stage I'd already you know, Bill was a very difficult person

to work with and some people said you know, they were amazed at how - - how long I managed to - -

SH: Maintain it?

DH: - - work with him, but you know, I learned a huge amount through that, but - - and our ideas have been developed to a remarkably parallel extent, despite the fact that we had very, very little to do with each other since - - since then. Though we did - - you know, we've shared platforms at conferences and different things.

SH: Been a remarkable export like you made note of in your notes on the web. One of Australia's most successful intellectual exports.

DH: Yes. I mean it's obviously very hard for me to sort of judge and even, you know, it's only time will sort of tell what the significance of that is, but yes, I mean just in what's happened in the last 20 years. And a lot of - - as I've said in the book, a lot of people would attribute that to the charisma and dynamism of Bill Mollison, but - - and that's obviously been a huge factor, but I think there is something more substantial in what we did, although in 1978, I sort of couldn't see that anything that I'd written - - I mean if it had been left to me, permaculture one would not have been published, because I would have left it in the drawer.

SH: Right.

DH: You know - -

SH: Well, did need that core set of beliefs written down, people could follow it to some extent would have been manageable - -

DH: No, no, it wouldn't have happened without - - without Bill Mollison's sort of passion - -

SH: Without the book.

DH: Yes. And so I mean the other element of that I suppose was that you know, my father dying when I was 21, you know, there's no doubt that sort of relationship with Bill was sort of partly student-mentor and you know, an element of father-son sort of - -

SH: Replaced the father.

DH: Yes. You know, and that Bill had a whole lot of things that my father didn't have, which was a connection back to the pre-modern world, because I saw my parents as essentially part of the modern world, in a lot of ways, you know. They didn't know anything about rural self-reliance or you know, they'd - - they sort of lived in the social and economic and cultural reality that we really call modernity.

SH: True, yes.

DH: You know, whereas Bill Mollison in his earlier years was part of an older world, even though he was younger.

SH: ...(indistinct)... and all the rest of it, yes.

DH: Yes. Yes, part of - - you know like a pioneering culture, a self-reliance that, you know, going to town was getting on the shark boat, going to Melbourne, you know, it wasn't getting in the car, going down the dirt road to Burnie from Stanley.

SH: Yes.

DH: And that is part of a yes, a completely different world, but I mean Bill had spanned back right through to the you know, the modern world, you know, sort of working in CSIRO and stuff, so there was - - there was something in, you know, what I learned from him that was sort of I felt missing in my - - in Tassie, because I didn't know my grandparents to any extent, it was like yes - -

SH: You were able to adopt those ...(indistinct)...

DH: Connection back yes, to where did things come from you know, and you know, permaculture is very much partly about reconfiguring with, you know, post-modern sort of ecological understandings, bits and pieces from actual traditions past which are really low energy societies adapted to a low energy future, and that a lot of what's in modernity is actually dysfunctional for that - - for that transition.

SH: So you've still got this eclectic mind of some of those inquiring left- wingers, where you're gathering from all over.

DH: Yes. Yes. Gathering. And I - - yes, I sort of feel that was sort of one of the sort of strongest heritages that you know, came from the family experience, and that there's all these different bits of value that you can pick up and that there - - it's sort of like that cultural appropriation is a normal state of existence, this looks like a useful bit. And it really doesn't matter whose it is, yes, we respect where it came from, but you're actually sort of constructing a new culture - -

SH: ...(indistinct)... another jigsaw.

DH: Yes, you know, and it's not taking on that because that's actually part of something broken, but this bit looks useful, you know, and that - - yes that - -

SH: Bring that forward into the present life.

DH: Yes, that's I felt that my parents were actually doing unconsciously.

SH: Is there anything you want to add David, that in closing? I think that's kind of nice rounding off there. Anything extra?

DH: Can't think of it, you know. I mean I suppose the other thing about reflecting on my mother is I suppose I saw the - - being embittered and loss of faith, you know, from leaving the party and - - and yet continuing on with political activism, I sort of felt that as she grew older she became more cynical but in reality I kept getting surprised that she would - - you know, it was a great joke in the family, but yet another cause.

SH: She was adopting ...(indistinct)...

DH: Yes.

SH: ...(indistinct)... activist isn't she?

DH: Yes.

SH: Even through her poetry?

DH: Absolutely. You know, her poetry - -

SH: For older women, she's a tremendous role model.

DH: Yes. And that that poetry is really like a whole phase of political activism which is after the environmental forest activism - -

SH: That's right.

DH: - - that she was part of the core of the whole grass roots local movement on the south coast in New South Wales against the destruction of the forests, you know, to the extent that she got herself arrested you know, and you know- - and she brought like a wisdom and knowledge to that to the extent that it was sort of recognised. Look, there's a lot of lessons to learn about activism, that a lot of the semi-professionals from Sydney were, you know, younger professional activists.

SH: Paid party functionaries of activism?

DH: Yes.

SH: The ACF or whatever?

DH: Yes. Who were like abysmally ignorant of and I can remember some of her sort of frustrations in that, but the fact that she sort of kept having another go, it's a family joke, you know, because she was always saying I've no more causes, I'm sick of causes. So yes, it's that scepticism so that cranky anger in a way, about - - well, it's got to be - - still have a - -

SH: Have another go.

DH: Another go. And you're still evolving, it's still a new situation, a new approach, a sort of a new issue - -

SH: Do you think you'll ever want to stop changing the world and making it a better place, David?

DH: Well, what I sort of take for granted is that if the sustainable low energy society that I envisage were to come about I would be a cranky old man who would be discontent with it, because it actually would naturally settle into a pattern, and that I don't actually believe it's sort of likely for another few generations actually, so that that's a lot of what this new book about is actually about permaculture as coping with continuous change but change in a completely different direction to where it's been going in the last 300 years, and it's an energy descent change, but the thing that we bring from our heritage is radical continuous change is normal state of existence. But our task is to actually create a world where that ends up becoming a peculiar state that was in the past, because actually human societies can't go through continuous change, and we're going to go through a change of decreasing consumption, but eventually it will settle out into some sort of stable sustainable society, but most of us would find it so alien - -

SH: Right.

DH: So weird, and yet that's our task is to actually contribute to creating that.

SH: You also seem to still have a commitment there to seeing that it's done in a more equal way, that there isn't just an enormous group of people that suddenly miss out on the basic needs of life.

DH: Well, I think that's one of the huge sort of tensions and issues between the heritage of social justice and the new vision of what I'd called ecological rationality, that there are rules in nature that are actually going to drive systems, and that we can, if we don't recognise those, then we'll end up with a far nastier, more inhumane version - -

SH: Version of ...(indistinct)...

DH: Version of ecological realism.

SH: Yes.

DH: But that if we take on board the energetic laws, the energetic rules that drive systems, then we've got a better chance of creating an ethical and just version.

SH: You're pointing to earlier forms of cooperative behaviour that's still there in nature too, in ...(indistinct)...

DH: Exactly. Exactly. You know, so there's a lot of sort of positive things about that change to a lower energy state, less resources that actually make possible what were only idealistic dream in the past, like cooperative structures that have struggled against logic through the phases of affluence and growth.

SH: Growth in ...(indistinct)...

DH: Yes, they just become obvious essential, natural, cooperation just becomes natural way to do things, but there's also a lot of the things that we've taken for granted out of - - out of affluence, you know, that are part of what the social democratic tradition takes as absolutely natural and normal and inevitable, and they are not. You know,

and that is the sort of huge challenge to social democratic politics is actually facing the implications of energy descent, ecological reality.

SH: And you think in that situation more likely arise again as Fascism? Because that was always the catchcry I remember hearing at home. Fascism will rise again when things get extreme and there's shortages.

DH: Well, it is the default thing, unless - - unless you actually sort of work to - - against it, and deal with the realities of energy descent, and deal with the social alternatives to Fascism that - - yes, and that we've - - we've got that world emerging around us as our parents said, but I sort of see it as sort of like this mirror sort of creative and destructive - -

SH: Forces.

DH: - - forces that are sort of like mirrors of each other, you know, that their - - that one way or another sort of ecological realities are actually sort of coming in to the core of society, and they're doing so in both positive and very negative ways.

SH: Well, I mean just to put a comment in there, is in the tape later, we're sitting right in the midst of the kind of beginning of the petro- - petroleum wars really aren't we with - -

DH: Exactly, yes.

SH: - - you know, the Iraq conflict looming on the horizon.

DH: This is sort of like the environmental limits to growth scenario that people never sort

of really quite imagined, because they thought that economic - - that we believed in market forces to the extent that as things got more constrained, markets would respond, but what we actually have is Fascism as the response.

SH: ...(indistinct)... really.

DH: You know, and that it's some group over there that are preventing you from living a good comfortable life so we've got to get them so you can live comfortably, which is classic, you know, the classic sort of the elite's basically, yes, resorting to the Fascist explanation which - - I mean and there's - - there's a lot of elements in - - in my latest book about permaculture, which actually really synthesise the sort of bringing back sort of political perspective into - -

SH: ...(indistinct)...

DH: Yes, you know it's always been there for me as an underpinning, but I feel more confident about being able to bring it in without - -

SH: Being a proselytiser?

DH: And without falling into that thing the task is to fight against something because I still believe the task is to create you know, but we should never be naive about what the - -

SH: ...(indistinct)...

DH: Yes. And what the realities are. But the more you focus on that, the more you actually sort of like feed it.

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SH: Yes. Yes.

DH: And that's the - -

SH: Applying it, you know. Well thanks a lot Dave. It's been fascinating.

DH: Okay.

DH: Been getting up on my soapbox.

SH: Yes, that's good. Make sure it's all there.

DH: Yes.