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From Ratbags to Heroes: Creating Social Movements and Making the World a Better Place

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**2007 Communities in Control Conference
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I think it's a bit dangerous to allow an old bloke in his mid-seventies to wander down memory lane.

And I don't know whether ratbags to heroes is OK, but I suppose vilification to vindication would be one of the ways I'd describe the green bans movement, because it's clearly the most exciting thing that I've got caught up in in my life, the bringing together of diverse people around ecological issues.

Paul Ehrlich described the green bans as the birth of urban environmentalism. Before that there was a tendency to look upon the environment as the preserve of the more educated middle to upper classes who appreciated the whole ecology movement. The green ban movement brought together ordinary people. It was a linking up, as I've described it, of the enlightened working class and the middle class, both coming together to fight for the built environment.

It was only in the '60s that the first international environmental movement took place. And, in fact, when the first conference took place in 1972 in Stockholm, the audience really couldn't agree on what was the environment. The nature conservation people said it was the green environment, it was the lakes and rivers and oceans and forests. Others argued the world was becoming more urbanised, with huge cities of 10, 15, 20 million people coming along and bringing about huge problems, and that was what it was about.

Of course now with global warming – the most political issue of the 21st century, there is no doubt about that – the environment is very much on the front burner.

My background in the trade union movement was that you fight for wages and conditions. That's true even now as unions fight for their lives, with a very conservative government out to limit their power and to restrict them in many ways.

And I think it's true to say that, essentially, the trade unions in Australia have been responsible for the living conditions that we've enjoyed over the last 100 years.

When you look back, it was the union movement that formed one of the main political parties, the Labor Party, in 1891. And I'd like to talk about some of the other positive things that have been achieved by the unions before I get onto the green bans.

The union movement is a very broad church, and it moves from left to right, taking on different political themes and approaches that differ greatly from period to period. For example, in the 1914-1918 war the progressive unions led the campaign against conscription. In the Great Depression of the late '20s and early '30s, when evictions were taking place in Melbourne and Sydney and other major cities, it was the trade unions that fought against that. With the rise of fascism in the '30s it's well to remember that it was the brave waterside workers in Port Kembla that refused to load pig iron for Japan because of the military build-up taking place in that country. Ted Roach, the leader of the waterside workers, was jailed by the Attorney-General Robert Gordon Menzies in 1937 because he took that action, refusing to load that pig iron that came back as weapons against us a few years later.

Of course, in some cases, the union movement was very backward. They supported the White Australia Policy, for example. But then the progressive unions broke away from that in support of the Aborigines. They brought the striking stockmen down from Wave Hill 40 years ago in 1967, and took them around to building sites and the waterside and through the factories, and educated the workers in the cities about the real plight of the Aboriginal people, about the land rights struggles that took place and the Wave Hill strike that went for nine months. And of course, when the Whitlam Government came in, that was the birth of land rights. Those striking stockmen who were out for nine months, that was the turning point that brought that around.

On the Apartheid question, when Nelson Mandela came here over a decade ago, he honoured the trade unions and the progressive sections of the political parties who had come together and played such a powerful part in the end of Apartheid in South Africa.

Let's look at the gay movement. When Jeremy Fisher was kicked out of the Robert Menzies College at Macquarie University in 1972 because he was homosexual, the building workers on the site at the time went on strike in support of his reinstatement, and compelled the authorities to reinstate him. This was unheard of before that but it was an indication that the progressive section of the union movement was taking a stand.

About the same time, Elizabeth Jacka and Jean Curthoys started a course at Sydney University on women's social liberation, but the university authorities stopped the course. Again, workers on that site, because there were a lot of extensions taking place at Sydney University at that time, went on strike and compelled the authorities to have that course reinstated.

These are some of the examples of the very positive contribution made by the union movement, coming together around gay rights and women's rights issues. These actions showed a growing maturity within the trade union movement. These days, when unions are fighting for their very life, it's well to remember that when unions reach out like this, they strengthen the whole position. It's that extra-parliamentary action, the residents' action groups and those sorts of things, that have changed society.

There have always been attempts to keep politics out of unions, and while I believe that unions should not be just controlled by one political party, it's true that political action should be a part and parcel of the union movement. Really, a union movement will wither unless it's got that broad outlook of moving beyond wages and conditions. Of course, wages and conditions are important, but increasingly there are other political issues that play their part.

The green ban movement really started when progressive women in a fashionable part of Sydney, Hunters Hill, went down in front of the bulldozers when the first big development was taking place to destroy a whole open bushland. This was the last bushland on the Parramatta River, and these women went down in front of the bulldozers and stopped it.

As a last resort, they came to the Builders' Labourers' Union. The reason they came to us was because I had said that in a modern society it's not much good just fighting for wages and conditions if we live in polluted cities, devoid of parks, denuded of trees. The quality of life issue was equally as important as the wages packet. Those women more or less said to us, "Well, here's a chance to put your theory into practice." And so that started the first of the green bans.

We went to the site, held a meeting and went back to our members and said, "Those people want us to put a ban on."

We said that if they could show that it was a feeling of the community and not just the handful of people that would benefit if we kept the open bushland, that we would put a ban on it. And a ban was put in place.

The company that was going to do the work was AV Jennings, a Melbourne-based company at the time. They came up there and they said, "Oh well, if you put a ban on, we will use non-union labour."

Now, we had fought to improve the union, to civilise the union, because the union when we took over was run by people who colluded with the employers, who were very right wing and didn't look after the workers at all. We civilised the industry, we gave the workers dignity, improved the wages and conditions and safety on the building sites, and because of that we won the respect of the workers.

When we went to the workers and put it to them that they should support these middle class people, some of them said, "Look, we haven't got a member in Hunters Hill. They couldn't afford to live there." Others said, "Well if you're fair dinkum, whether it's Redfern or Hunters Hill, if we believe that there should be open space within a great urban area, well then we should support them."

And so a ban was imposed. At the time it was called a black ban, but we changed it to a green ban because black bans had connotations of workers taking action to jack up their wages and conditions. A black

ban was about going to the hip pocket, whereas we said that this was more of a moral question – it was a wider issue; it was an environmental issue. It wasn't as though the workers were immediately benefiting themselves, it was for society as a whole.

So we changed it to green bans, and this movement really caught alight. We were inundated with similar requests.

Although AV Jennings had said they would use non-union labour, we had a lot of bargaining power. Because of the work that the union had done, 95% of the workers working in the building industry as labourers were in the Builders' Labourers' Union. When Jennings said he would use non-union labour to smash the green ban, on one of AV Jennings' jobs in North Sydney the workers decided, over 130 workers, that if one blade of grass or one tree was destroyed at Hunters Hill, Kelly's Bush, this half-completed building would stand half completed as a monument to Kelly's Bush.

Well, that really set the cat amongst the pigeons. The very conservative Premier of NSW at the time, Sir Robert Askin, was very pro-development and viciously anti-union, and he sort of sneered and said, "Who do they think they are? They're mere labourers. They think they're urban town planners," and other such guff. But it certainly had the effect because Jennings immediately pulled back from that position.

At that time things were changing in our big cities, in Melbourne and Sydney in particular. When I started 50 years ago in the building industry, the tallest building in Sydney was 12 storeys and the height limit was 150 feet. But then they lifted the height limit and the sky became the limit, and with that came many accidents. Building workers were not experienced in going up to heights like that, and so many accidents occurred because of that and because of the poor conditions that had been in operation before we took over.

So of course it happened that many other organisations came to us and said they wanted bans as well. We always followed the same pattern. Of course we wanted to build buildings, but we argued we

wanted to build socially useful buildings; we wanted to have concern for people as well as building buildings.

So there was Kelly's Bush – it still remains there I might add, 35 years later – but then the other green bans came along and at the end of five years there were 43 green bans holding up over 5000 million dollars worth of development.

The second green ban was very different to Kelly's Bush. Whereas Kelly's Bush was in a fashionable area of Sydney, the second one related to the ordinary people down on The Rocks, who were going to be kicked out – the idea was to develop The Rocks into high rise development right down to the water's edge. Those of you that know that part of The Rocks would know you've got the Harbour Bridge, then you've got The Rocks, Circular Quay and around to the Opera House. It is really a vital area of Sydney.

The wonderful leader of the green ban movement down on The Rocks was Nita McCrea. Unlike the people at Kelly's Bush and Hunters Hill, Nita worked in a bar, and the rest of the people who lived in The Rocks mainly serviced the city – worked in factories, worked in the waterfront and so on – so the socio-economic position was completely different to the one at Hunters Hill.

The Government said to the developers, "Go right ahead – kick the people out." They introduced legislation that took away the rights of the people to property in the area. So those people took action.

The green bans at The Rocks were to save those people from being kicked out, but it was more than that too. The movement there linked up with the National Trust, which also did not want that place destroyed because The Rocks really was the birthplace of European Australia and was also the place to which the first Australian Asians came in great numbers after the gold rush – The Rocks were very important from an historical point of view.

Today, 3 million people a year go to see the birthplace of European Australia. They wouldn't go there if there were highrise buildings right down to the water's edge.

Then came Centennial Park. In 1972 there was a proposal to get the 1988 Olympic Games to celebrate 200 years of white Australia. The idea was to destroy the lungs of the eastern part of Sydney, Centennial Park, and build a giant sports stadium. The wonderful Patrick White, Kylie Tennant and many other literary people came together and argued that it should be kept, that there shouldn't be any destruction of Centennial Park.

Again, the union was approached and after a meeting of 7000 people, they marched to the Sydney Town Hall. The Builders' Labourers' imposed a green ban and Centennial Park was saved. Centennial Park is still there. 1988 came and went and we didn't win the Olympic Games, but Centennial Park is still there.

A similar thing happened in Woolloomooloo, the oldest suburb in Sydney, the oldest suburb in Australia, you could say. We had two more green bans in Victoria Street. Who would have thought when the Opera House was being built that they would have clean forgot about building a place for the car? They were going to tear down big trees in the Domain. In that year, 1972, the chief of staff of the *Sydney Morning Herald* told me that there was more opposition to the destruction of those fig trees and more support for those green bans than any other subject that year.

Again, there was a wide cross-section of people involved, and the people who would normally be anti-union, that were crooked on unions, particularly left-wing unions, many of these people were saying, "Look, normally we're not for unions. But we find ourselves on side with the Builders' Labourers' Union." And so there was this dichotomy that went right beyond the idea of just the working class being concerned.

One hundred and twenty heritage buildings stand in Sydney today because we imposed a ban on any building that the National Trust considered worthy of preservation.

When the Askin Government went and the Wran Government came in, they introduced the first Land Environment Court and the first heritage legislation. And it was, I think (which is convenient to this sort of conference) this extra-parliamentary action of residents' action groups, progressive architects and town planners, together with the trade union movement, that was instrumental in bringing about that change.

Another thing that I think it shows is that a socio-economic coming together of the middle class and the working class is so important in bringing about those changes.

Before 1972, as I said before, there was no international meeting of environmentalists. In 1976, because of the argument about the built and natural environment, the Vancouver Conference took place on the built environment, the human settlement on the built environment. And because of the Builders' Labourers' green bans activities, I was invited to that conference in Vancouver. And so the whole question of the green ban movement was then shot into international prominence.

And it spread to Europe. Spike Milligan invited me over to England and we put a ban on a building in London that still stands today because of the ban that was imposed by those building workers. So there was an international feeling.

Of course, the green bans didn't last. Finally, when the developers couldn't bribe or coerce the union leaders (and the leaders were offered millions of dollars to lift their bans), they used a corrupt element of the union movement to come in and break up the union and destroy the union in NSW.

But the spirit lives on. All of those places I mentioned are still there. In fact, the CFMEU, which is the current construction union, has continued the policy, not in the same sensational way of the green bans of the '70s, but they have continued to have a social conscience

about the question of heritage buildings and they also work with the National Trust. There has been a qualitative change in the attitude towards historical buildings and towards corporations.

And that ties in with the question of where do we go from now, because as I said earlier, it's obvious that climate change, global warming, is going to be the most important political issue of the early 21st Century. The whole life of the planet and for humans and other species rests with how we behave in the next 20 or 30 years. I think it's not an exaggeration to say that it's in those years that change has to occur.

It would seem to me that the history of the green bans links up with the asking of other questions. Can we move from a consumer society to a consumer society? Can we move to a greater degree of egalitarianism? Because if ecologically sustainable development is going to become a reality, it would appear to me that it's vital that a level of egalitarianism be established. Poverty in the third world must be tackled by the rich countries.

Community involvement is absolutely essential if we're going to have a sustainable future. And that's why at a conference like this it's great to see 1500 people coming together, a very diverse group of people, to say that community, which is really extra-parliamentary action, is important.

Democracy is always at its height when there are a lot of organisations outside of just the government decision. Of course, governments have got a big responsibility around social and community issues, but increasingly we want to see that there's community out there.

The strength of that period of the '60s and '70s around women's social liberation, around the rights of gays, around the rights of the environment, really set us on the path. Unfortunately, following that great decade of the '70s and early '80s things changed very much into the '80s and '90s, with the rise of Thatcherism and Reaganism. The whole atmosphere internationally changed very much in that period, and I think we all agree that unless there's people involvement, unless

there are grassroots organisations involved, well then governments alone will not change it.

It seems to me that it's terrific that people like Joe and Rhonda and your organisations and the Pratt Foundation and the others who are sponsoring this conference, it's good to see that there is a broad section of the community out there working to ensure that the future is ours. It's this way that we can involve the Aboriginal people. It's this way that we can involve the lower echelon of the people. It's this way that we can break down the division between the middle class and the working class, because bringing together the middle class and the working class in common action, that is the way for the future.

I think it's good to remember that it actually happened, that the green bans actually happened. We brought that diverse grouping of people together and really did bring about change. Sydney would be a very different city if it hadn't been for the green ban movement. And of course not only Sydney – here in Melbourne in the earlier times around the Queen Victoria Markets and the Regent Theatre, green bans were imposed here as well.

And so I'll end by congratulating the organisers of this conference, thanking them very much for allowing an old bloke to walk down memory lane, to talk about the glory days of the '70s and the green bans, which of course are a big part of my life.

So thank you very much for allowing time for an old bloke at 75 to go back over the years and to say, "We can do it again."

Thank you.

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