

## **CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

### **CoS Staff and Councillors**

### **TRANSCRIPT**

**Name:** Craig Johnston

**Date:** 21 November 2017

**Place:** Town Hall House, 456 Kent Street, Sydney

**Interviewer:** Laila Ellmoos

**Recorder:** Marantz PMD 620

01/00:05 **LE:** So this is an interview with Craig Johnston at Town Hall House in Sydney. The date is Tuesday, the 21st of November, 2017. Craig Johnston was a former alderman of the City Of Sydney Council from 1984 to 1987, is that right, or a bit longer?

**CJ:** When was the council dismissed? I thought it was '87.

**LE:** It was 1987.

**CJ:** To the dismissal.

**LE:** Yeah. So first of all, Craig, I was wondering if you could tell me just to sort of get the ball rolling about where and when you were born and where you grew up. For example, are you a Sydneysider?

CJ: Yes, I'm a Sydneysider, I was born in 1951 in a hospital in Sydney. I think for the first year of my life my parents still might have been out at a place called Herne Bay after the second World War there was a lot of changes to housing, an inadequacy of housing, obviously new housing estates were being built by the government, what we call public housing by the then Housing Commission. So I actually grew up in south eastern Sydney in a suburb called Matraville in the public housing estate, which was there and is still there. So I went to local schools in the area, Matraville High School, primary school Matraville, high school. And I joined the Labor Party in my last year of high school.

01/01:39 LE: **So what made you join the Labor Party?**

CJ: It was all a bit quirky actually. I think I might say John Maynard Keynes. I was studying economics in high school, in those days we're talking about the late 1960s. While there was a lot of going on in the world in the 1960s, there wasn't that much going on in suburban Sydney. But I did do history at school, so I was exposed to the world in that way, but I also studied economics and I know that I looked at, tried to read John Maynard Keynes *General Theory of Money*, I think it's called. So it's his major exposition of Keynesianism and in a funny way for somebody who's his experiences with the Depression and, of course, post-war reconstruction, Keynes was very important. I think he described in an appendix of that book what he proposed as democratic socialism. And I don't think he was a socialist but I think that's how he described himself and it was that and obviously that attracted me to the Social Democratic Party and my parents were apolitical, didn't talk politics but given the area that I lived in, being in a public housing estate, the Labor Party was the expression of social democracy party in Australia. Also at that time, it must have been the last year of my high school was probably the first election where Whitlam led the Labor Party to election; that wasn't the '72 election, I think it was the one before, '69, and I think that his re-workings of social democracy to make it more modern, progressive, if you like, or less old school than Arthur Calwell who he replaced, that had some attraction to me. So there are just a number of different sorts of things that somehow gelled together. But yes, I went to university and very quickly moved further to the left.

01/04:09 **LE: So further left from the Labor Party?**

CJ: Yes, yes.

**LE: Were you involved in student politics? Was that something that you were interested in when you were at university?**

CJ: Yes, heavily so, too much so, to the detriment of my academic studies, which I gave very little time to. Yes, I moved quickly to the left and became a Marxist. It was a time of large anti-war demonstrations, of course, around Australia and the birth of a whole lot of other protests or solidarity movements, we might say, including Zimbabwe. I hope we're forgiven for the sins of Robert Mugabe, which was then of course a British colony, apartheid in South Africa, various wars of national liberation overseas including Palestine, which continues, and, of course, issues around redistribution in Australian society, a lot of concern about foreign investment and multinationals. The beginning of what we would call identity politics, feminism in particular, had immediate resonance with me and originally of course first I wasn't gay or didn't identify as such, but there were lots of stirrings around issues, land rights movements. So these things sort of caught up.

01/05:58 I might throw in here just a bit of personal note because I don't give it the recognition that I think it deserves - just in me as a person. My brother, well strictly half brother, had Down syndrome, so when I grew up and there was a very early post-war movement in Australia by parents, including my own, not to institutionalise their kids, so the kids grew up at home, went to special schools but they weren't farmed out to institutions. My brother was - let's say - a bit different in appearance, of course he talked strangely, he had lots of personality and communication issues. He was clearly somebody who was a bit different or potentially embarrassing. I think the fact that I lived with what we now call diversity and difference, had a very subtle and intangible influence on me in terms of commitment to social inclusion and social justice. So there's a funny little thing that my mind says how much I am indebted or privileged to having had a brother who was a person with a disability. But anyway, the disability, what the NDIS, the big battles around disability initially in terms of my more public political activism but there was obviously issues around getting rid of

oppression, exploitation and opening up opportunities beyond the western liberal traditions of liberty, equality, fraternity to much more deeper issues around distribution of wealth and getting rid of class inequalities. So those were the sort of things that got me moving.

**01/07:53 LE: Yeah and I think that's a really interesting observation about your brother and his role in your life, because I think people don't often see that as an advantage but I think in your situation I think a lot of other people as it is and it was a real time in that post-war period, I agree with you, that people sort of stopped institutionalising people with a disability and there were more services in some ways, I think parents kind of...**

**CJ:** They were setting up services. My parents and others set up what we now call welfare services.

**01/08:19 LE: Yeah that's right.**

**CJ:** Now the model of care or whatever approach was different from what is now politically acceptable, but they were actually setting up special places to accommodate that, so now we'd call that a civil society type sort of activities. So yeah, so living with people with disabilities, it was difficult, not so much with him perhaps. But, yeah, there were changing attitudes. My orientation was a bit, I guess, intellectual, obviously read but also what we would call activist, which meant going to lots and lots of meetings, developing strong views and holding very strongly to those strong, strong views in a fairly dogmatic sort of way, that paradoxically was part of a sort of intellectual reaching out for better explanations for the world and how to change it.

**01/09:24 LE: So I just wanted to go back to your membership of the Labor Party and the fact that you said you were moving politically yourself towards Marxism, but you stayed a member of the Labor Party, is that right? Or did you kind of move between the political parties?**

CJ: No I left it, yes. I did join the Labor Party when I was in my last year in school. I stayed a member of it for a couple of years, but most of my political activism then was in part of what I'd call it extra parliamentary, was the word used at the time and my Labor Party membership eventually just lapsed and so I left the Labor Party.

**LE: Do you mind me just asking, because I mean you're fairly well regarded from what I can gather in the gay community because of your role as an activist on that front. Is that something you're happy to discuss as part of that broader political...?**

CJ: That's fine, because it actually leads directly into the aldermanic thing.

01/10:38 **LE: I had a feeling it might have, yes.**

CJ: Clearly I was a Marxist in the core period of my student activism, I was at Sydney University, well, I use the term Marxist-Leninist, so I stopped being a member of the Labor Party, but at the same time – so I'm now talking, I think I'm talking early '70s, I had come out as gay -- I had already known about the early gay groups, CAMP, whatever, I had read that stuff, you couldn't not know, and being of that part of the left that I was, which was not, it wasn't Stalinist, I was never a Stalinist, being on that part of the far left, the gay liberation groupings were something that you supported as a matter of bourgeois rights, we would say. Of course you support that. But as soon as I actually started expressing myself sexually I joined gay liberation groups, so I was in my first year at Sydney University, I think it was 1973, I joined the gay liberation group on campus and the gay liberation group off campus, and I was actually doing that as a gay Marxist, if you like, so none of the things I was writing at the time, were very strange -- were issues around how to understand the oppressed position of homosexuality in terms of exploitation and oppression in a the capitalist society.

01/12:35 Feminists were doing the same thing, of course, at the time, and it was not only just Marxism but also Freud, and later on, a bit after, the so-called French thinkers, who I think are still influential. So there was a lot of intellectual stuff going on that actually brought together nonheteronormative sexualities with feminists' critiques of patriarchy, with Marxist critiques, class critiques of our sort of society and how

liberation could move forward and, a split between more traditionalist emphasis on class and historical working class institutions like the Labor Party and the trade unions, amongst which there was a lot of conservatism, but in style, social attitudes, and the so-called new social movements. So these tensions still play out today of course, many decades later, but in my activism was in the middle of that [period].

01/13:50 At some point in time -- okay, after I finished my degree I worked for a year full time in Melbourne for the national student organisation, it was called the Australian Union of Students, it's the forerunner of today's NUS, National Union of Students, so I moved to Melbourne for a year. So again, as a left-wing activist working around student issues, still a Marxist and a gay activist. But I moved to Sydney after a year and took up a teaching job at Sydney University, again still a Marxist, still a gay activist, and I've lost the point of this particular story. Ah yes, I was there when China invaded Vietnam. Now, I forget the exact year when China invaded Vietnam, but after the victory of the Vietnamese people and reunification of Vietnam, its relationship to the Vietnamese Government with the Chinese Government, which supported it during the struggle against the Americans, the Chinese wanted Vietnam to be a client state. The Vietnamese weren't that way inclined. Anyway, there was a war over the border, I think the Vietnamese didn't win it, the skirmish, a bit of a stalemate. My sympathies were with the Vietnamese and for some reason at the time I decided I was going to reengage a bit more in an institutional sense, if you like, it seems strange but I know that was the trigger and I re-joined the Labor Party.

01/15:50 I was living at North Bondi at the time, so I re-joined the Labor Party. I then became - when I was still living at Bondi - there was in the early 1980s, I think that war must have been about '79, there was a big growth of the development of the growth of the gay scene in Sydney, especially focusing on Oxford Street, obviously it began before those dates. I spent a lot of my time around gay bars in and around Oxford Street, Surry Hills and was getting drunk a lot, commuting from Bondi and I was still working at Sydney University and I decided to move into Darlinghurst, East Sydney, for lifestyle reasons, to deepen my engagement with what was a very exciting time in terms of new forms of economic and cultural expression. That was when Oxford Street became Oxford Street, rather than just its shadow its been for the last couple of decades, still obviously symbolically important given that's where people assembled after the same sex marriage result. So I moved into Darlinghurst and I moved into obviously a different Labor Party branch, I was still a member of the Labor Party. A couple of

things then that were important background in terms of going onto the council.

01/17:30 One, I was in the Labor Party, I was obviously in the Labor Party and a branch where there were lots of other gay people, just because of the demographics of the area, it wasn't a gay identified branch or anything. It was a left-wing branch in terms of Labor Party factions, which was of course my own faction just because of my own background. There was a bit of interest in gay electoralism, particularly from San Francisco and Harvey Milk, big movie been made on Harvey Milk, and the book, which I'd read, Randy Shilts, I think, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, and I was actually purportedly doing a PhD while I was teaching there [at Sydney University], on the development of the gay community in Sydney and I went to the USA, my first overseas trip, I think that was 1980, and visited a whole lot of gay and lesbian activists in the USA and including people in San Francisco. So that whole thing about open gay elected politicians was a thing in my mind that I could be it, so to speak. So I think that was one thing that was actually going on, I guess, in my head, at the time.

01/19:09 The other thing that was going on at the time was that I and Lex Watson founded the Gay Rights Lobby, it must have been at the end of 1980, though I had come from the more radical left gay liberation faction within the gay movement that the idea was to -- and Lex Watson was seen as a bit more conservative -- was to actually try and build a broader coalition, particularly for decriminalisation of male homosexual acts. At that time in New South Wales, there were specific laws prohibiting, in effect, sexual acts between males, not between females but between males. They were worded in terms of the activity, so it wasn't being homosexual wasn't illegal, it was their sexual activity, so it was in the Crimes Act, yeah, it was about a particular reading of law. That campaign was quite a complicated campaign and it involved a number of phases. One of the phases was there was a failed attempt to get this through, there was Labor Party Governments at the time. We had Neville Wran, a progressive premier, but the Labor Party was still caught between the old school and the new school. The Labor Government had been bringing in anti-discrimination legislation and we managed, mainly through that group but other groups in the gay community, to get the government to amend the Anti-Discrimination Act to prohibit discrimination -- the word used in New South Wales and Wran did this -- on the ground of homosexuality. That was the term, not sexual preference, it was not sexual orientation, and it still is in New South Wales.

01/21:00        So the Anti-Discrimination Law was passed, so we were able to get through because that wasn't a conscience vote, that was the government's position on anti-discrimination. We ended up in the situation in New South Wales where it was illegal to discriminate against people in terms of goods and services on the ground of homosexuality, but it wasn't actually legal for two men to have a homosexual act. Those laws of course about how the state anti discrimination laws are worded is, again, a topic of theme in Australian politics today about how same sex marriage might be drafted and how those laws brought about that might actually be undermined if the Christian Lobby gets its way. So we had this situation where you couldn't discriminate against homosexuals but there were jail terms ranging from seven to fourteen years if two men were caught in certain acts, where there was so-called indecent behaviour or in sodomy, which is anal intercourse. So that became an anomaly in the law that we used then to actually say you have to change the law, so I was a key figure in the campaign for homosexual law reform through having been a co-convenor of the Gay Rights Lobby.

01/22:31        Those two things, which I just mentioned, actually happened - and I was a Labor Party member - those things happened in the years before I was elected to the council, so in the same period immediately after, so I was immersed very much in a gay and lesbian subculture; development of Mardi Gras, which I wasn't a key figure in, I went to the early meetings that moved the event from winter to summer and all these things that are a part of Mardi Gras' history, but I wasn't a key organiser, but I was in that milieu. I had re-joined the Labor Party, I was still very much what I would call the far left but I was interested in gay electoralism and very much involved in gay political campaigns and a member of the Labor Party. So somehow or other those were all background which were seeking to get elected to the council, the Sydney City Council, as an openly gay person. That's the Harvey Milk Rainbow electoralism, I wasn't the only gay person thinking of that obviously at the time. And doing so from an area that the geographic area that actually had Oxford Street in it, because where I lived and Macquarie ward, I think it was called, and had Oxford Street right in the middle of it. So that commercial strip was in my ward and there was a relatively gay population in there, it was certainly seen as the gay part of Sydney. So that was it, I was just sort of there.

**LE:**    Did you have to seek support from your local area? Obviously, there are people not in the Labor Party who are probably going to



**vote, but was there some sort of support from a business lobby or anything like that?**

01/24:39 CJ: No it was a bit messy in my case because there was a ward system back in those days, and certainly there were other movements amongst it, what you would call the Community Independents sort of movement, where there were gay candidates running from there as well. I was constrained in a way in that I was part of a party machine. The Labor Party lost its majority in the elections that I was elected in, because there was a big vote for Community Independents, especially in the older South Sydney area of the LGA. But in my particular case, that ward had three councillors in the ward, the Labor Party was expected to win two and the Liberals - or Civic Reform they were called, the Liberal Party, one and that's what happened. So I just had to, given my base was in one of the branches and I was a secretary of the East Sydney branch of the Labor Party, just to wrangle or negotiate my way to be preselected onto a winnable spot on the ticket, which was number two, we were expected to win two: Labor Party, out of the three. There was an incumbent alderman, councillor, Jack Calpis, he was of the right-wing of the party, Greek heritage, sort of jovial sort of guy, we'd get on well with him but we weren't ideologically the same and he had the top spot, because he was the incumbent and I managed to internally in the left of the party to be preselected, as it's called, for the second position. So having been preselected I knew I was going to be elected because unless the Labor Party did very badly in my ward, which they didn't, there was no Community Independent vote, the Liberal had got the other spot, which we expected.

01/26:42 I did start my work at that stage though to -- start working with the resident action groups in that area, which in the other wards were part of the social and economic base for the Community Independents. So I started doing the work with them that the community dependent councillors were doing in other parts of the city, so I couldn't be outflanked if that's the word. Yeah and that's it, I was elected as the Labor Party person.

**LE: Because there was another man who was serving with you on the council at that time, is that Brian McGahen?**

01/27:21 CJ: Yes. He was from the next ward, which is Flinders, and in that particular ward it had been two Labor and one Liberal and he was elected there with the rise of the community independents, he ran as a community independent. He got that position so that ward elected one Labor, one Liberal and one community independent. So he knocked off a Labor Party person in that ward in effect, yes.

**LE: Just reading about that period in council, it seemed like it was for various reasons quite tumultuous, but also there were a lot of aldermen and I'm interested that sometimes you slip into the term alder people.**

01/28:18 CJ: Well the official term at the time then was 'alderman' and I wasn't the only one but some of the more - let's call them younger, I think I was only in my early 30s, we weren't happy with the title 'alderman' and some of us got on our business cards that the council produced for us at the time, we got them to put in 'councillor' but that was not the official term at the time, that came in with the Local Government Act about 1993 or something like that. But at the time, we're talking a decade before that, we weren't happy with the word 'alderman' so yes, I fall between that. I seem to use the word 'councillor' is an anachronism, because that's not what they were officially called and not what officially people had to call each other, it was 'alderman'. And so that's why I occasionally use 'alder people' as just a non gender thing. Actually it was an extraordinary thing, because the Local Government Act said that people were 'aldermen' at the time, if anyone on the council chamber, if a councillor on the council chamber referred to somebody as 'Councillor Moore, Councillor Sartor' the Liberal alderman would raise a point of order saying that that was not acceptable, they had to be called 'alderman', male or female. That's how ridiculous it was, that's how polarising, sharp and hostile the atmosphere was. But there was a political battle about that naming, that's all I'm reflecting in my ambivalent and inconsistent use of 'alderperson' or 'councillor.'

**LE: It also strikes me as that period and indeed much of the period of council up until that period, had been quite a masculine environment. The council's first female alderman or alderperson was Joan Pilone in 1967, I think, which is actually quite late compared to the other councils. So did you find it was sort of a**

**macho masculine environment or were the tensions were running on different lines?**

01/30:45 CJ: It was a time of transition. Clearly there had been some women - and the other thing about the Sydney City Council is the council that I was on was a forced amalgamation between a previous City of Sydney and the previous South Sydney Council, they were split again later on and they were brought together with the existing wards, I think we had five wards in the City of Sydney but it was four in the old South Sydney and it wasn't one person, one vote, one value. There was an imbalance and it was done by Labor Party state government, it was designed to help build up to ensue that there would be a Labor Party majority on the expanded City of Sydney Council and it was just one of those rude, crude, opportunistic acts the Labor Party does. So you had this imbalance, but it was a bit of a cultural thing because the City of Sydney we had a sort of fairly spivvy bunch of Liberals or Civic Reform, who were all dressed in their sort of suits and lawyers and whatever, and you had had on the council immediately proceeding to me a Labor Council that has been elected after some years in the wilderness that had been heavily influenced by its left-wing, there are a number of left-wing aldermen; Robert Tickner, Steve Reeves (sic: Tony Reeves), Steve McGoldrick and the guy who became deputy mayor whose name I forget.

01/32:26 So you actually had that particular council trying to be progressive in whole lots of ways. But it was amalgamated with the then South Sydney Council, which were -- which was actually an old style, inner city, right-wing, kerbs and gutters type sort of council that was not interested. So you had a Labor Party caucus post the amalgamation where there were two different sort of cultures and the councillors had two different cultures but so did the councillors. But into that mix you had this new stream, which was the left-wing councillors inside the Labor Party and the Community Independents, who had existed on the previous council. You'd had Michael Matthews on the City of Sydney, you'd had Clover Moore on the South Sydney and then with the election which I was a part of in '84, you had more Community Independents, there were three blocks but none of which had the majority and the Community Independents were based on the gentry, (apart from Jack Munday, the old style communist), this was based on the new gentry of the inner city and they brought them with the political agendas of the gentry, one of which was feminism.

01/34:00      There was a very strong - what I'd call - Claire Vernon who was elected from the Newtown ward on that South Sydney community independent ticket, along with unofficial leader was Frank Sartor who was a very strong feminist. So Claire I think was at the forefront of a lot of that. But so, it wasn't just me, there was a milieu. So that council was still clearly male dominated but if you had people like Claire and of course Clover Moore, they were strong and good women who weren't lacking in any ability to put themselves forward. So I think those changes were happening as well, and some of the issues were there for our council took up, there had been some precedence in the previous council where the left Labor alderpersons were the driving force. But there were issues around childcare and things like that, childcare in the city for city workers, so that there should be trying to get, as community benefits, childcare component in new developments. Every time I walk past World Square and I see that childcare centre there on level one I think of that, but I don't know whether we approve that or the history of that, but that was very much Claire, Claire was pushing that all the time she was on the community services committee.

01/35:48      So there were just new things that were actually being promoted across the agenda, from Frank Sartor's managerialism, business managerialism in terms of program budgeting, and to some of the more symbolic stuff on the other hand. There was environmental concern, struggles against the monorail of course, was a critical thing in terms of the fight with the state government, and there were issues around developmentalism and even some of the smaller things like the fights over public access to Sydney Square, which was then jointly managed by the Anglican church and the council and to some sort of MOU, but it wasn't possible, it wasn't easy for gay groups to get bookings. There was a whole lot of stuff that just sort of happened in that period as a result of the arrival of new political forces, but in a political juncture where neither the old two political forces were able to stop that and they were supposedly enemies of each other, as well, I'm talking of the Labor/Liberal divide here. So there was just a lot that happened.

**LE:**      Because I grew up in Sydney in that period as well and it was a time of change in the environment as well, so Darling Harbour I think was evolving from a wharf area to become what we know today. Were those sorts of issues around - I think you used the term 'growthism' was that something that was an issue that was being played out in the council chamber?

- 01/37:41 CJ: Yes, they're perennial issues for Sydney today. We were a post Green Bans council. We actually had a key green bans advocate as a councillor, in terms of Jack Munday, and Jack Munday was elected to be the chairperson of the Planning and Building Committee at the first meeting of the council. The politics of the council after the election of 1984, the Labor Party lost its majority because of this surge of vote for Committee Independents, largely in the South Sydney area. Obviously I survived, I was number two on the Labor ticket, so I survived and I forget the exact numbers, even the number of councillors, but of course the numbers were swelled because of the two councils coming together. But the Labor Party did not have a majority. The Liberals were the smallest group and then you had this bunch of independents, they were all labelled Community Independents, but they weren't like a strong party in the way that parties now exist in the local government. And what the Labor Party did -- there are two things at work in terms of the Labor Party and on council, inside the Labor Party caucus, the majority of the aldermen were either from the left or from the old City of Sydney right, and the minority whose titular head was Doug Sutherland, Lord Mayor. And the minority faction in the Labor Party caucus was the old South Sydney right.
- 01/39:47 So the majority of the caucus was this opportunistic alliance who were largely against the Bill Hartup right, but that meant that a number of left-wingers who were able to actually have a bit more influence than they might otherwise. And I don't know why I forget the name of the deputy lord mayor at the time, but he was a councillor from the Kings Cross, but he became the deputy lord mayor, so I was just left, I became chair of a council committee, the Property and Works Committee I thought. That was significant for me in lots of ways because it actually had management of housing the council at that time had - what they call - a social housing portfolio, some 800 dwellings.
- 01/40:46 So that was my first entree into being a housing activist, which I had been until my recent retirement, obviously, until my recent resignation from work four months ago. So in terms of social housing the Sydney City Council was very important. So that was one of the dynamics that was happening and it was inside the Labor Party caucus and that revolved this alliance between the left-wing aldermen and the sub faction of the right. On the floor of the council chamber, the Labor Party didn't have a majority, but two of the community independents were actually members of or ex-members of the communist party. So for the first line up of committee positions, they were approached and agreed to in fact support the Labor Party winning all the other committee chairs, which was the power of the council, in return for getting one each. So

we had two communists and that's a traditional left-wing alliance in other countries, obviously the social democrats and communists, it wasn't that strange. So Brian McGahen became chairperson of the Community Service Committee, his background was as a social welfare worker and Jack Munday became chairperson of the Planning Committee and that was the Green Bans thing. It was only on the question of the division of committees who was the chair people of the committees and really didn't have a lot of power, frankly, over agendas or votes or whatever. The committee chairpeople didn't get extra money or nothing, just extra work, but the chairperson of the committee showed what the political alliance of the council was and so when the council was elected its committee chairperson, I think the council date was out of sync with the normal September dates of the local government elections and there was, in effect, a Labor-communist alliance, if you like, for the first period, up 'til the September, four to six months or so.

01/43:06 That was sort of a bit of a break amongst the community independents, that two were poached, if you like, that didn't seem to cause a lot of rupture because I think they probably accepted just because of this historical left-wing thing, that the two formerly far left-wing councillors were aligned with the Labor Party, there was no particular problem, and of course they didn't have to give any big concessions in return either, there was not much in terms of the trade off. When the next round of elections, annual round of elections by the council of its chairpersons of committees took shape, or happened, I think that must have been September of '84, the Labor Party left-wing people took review and Sutherland himself, who was the lord mayor at the time, had the view that this consolidating, in fact the Labor Party power on the council through alliance with community independents was working okay and it should actually be continued.

01/44:16 And as a way of ridding the coalition, if you like. And the critical thing then which happened, which is important for the future, was that council set up a new committee, which I think went under the name of something like the Budget Management Committee, it was separate from the traditional Finance Committee, and the person who was appointed to the chairperson of the Budget Management Committee was Frank Sartor. Frank Sartor's background was interesting because he was a community independent. As you know later on he joined the Labor Party and became a minister in the state government and aspired to be Labor Premier of New South Wales. But Frank's background was from the private sector. He was a managerialist and got that committee and instituted program budgeting. So he had his

ideas, it was the real introduction of the corporate model into local government, it's probably still there, ruthlessly so. They were still called town clerks, they weren't called CEOs back in those days, but it was the beginning, really, of the introduction of that sort of model through Frank. So that expanded alliance, if you like, and that was the model that we were hoping to continue. However what happened is that Frank and, the majority on the floor on the council was clearly Labor and community independent, was that my understanding was that Lord Mayor Sutherland didn't like some of the scrutiny, the greater scrutiny that was happening under this new regime.

01/46:12      Anyway, a year later when the council elections were up again – sorry, the chairperson elections were up, he went cold, he did two deals. One, he did a deal inside the Labor Party caucus and moved his numbers with the South Sydney right, and that meant the left was in a very small minority, that included me of course. And secondly, he did a deal outside the caucus with the Liberal Party aldermen, which was on the basis that since the Labor Party didn't have the numbers, the majority on the floor of council, is that they would actually support all Labor Party people being elected to committee chairperson, no community independents at all were being chair people and they would -- I don't know if this mattered, it was more symbolic than material -- would have their status as the opposition, leader of the opposition, leader of the opposition, Bingham, who later became a lord mayor, confirmed. And those on the floor of the council, those two parties together, would generally seem to start voting against the Community Independents, so the council became more conservative. So two switches happened. The consequences of that for me and for Phil Rhoades -- the Labor Party left walked out of the caucus meeting when this was announced by Sutherland and two of us -- Phil Rhoades and myself, decided we would actually break with the caucus decision and I think we probably voted for community independent candidates against Labor Party candidates for this council meeting and we were considered to put ourselves 'outside the party': we were expelled, in effect.

01/48:08      The position we took, we were both of the left, was based on my Marxism, that this is class politics, that the Liberals represent the capitalist class and the pro growth forces in Sydney -- so much that local government deals with is actually class issues, it's about property and if you come from a left or socialist tradition, you just don't make deals with those people. I know that seems very, very strange now in local government, in Australia, where you see all sorts of alliances taking place, but if you think back to - I don't know - that movie *Rats in the Ranks* and all that was happening in the city councils in Sydney in

the early 1980s, these were very strongly felt views in the Labor Party. Anyway, I was expelled from the Labor Party and became an independent. The issue around development, which is where this big rave started in terms of (\*unclear 49:23) for you, was always in my mind the perennial issue of the council, things I learnt whilst that observation, that environmental issues weren't just some sort of insipid type of bleeding heart issues, but were fundamental issues around the use and allocation of resources in a society, they were not just natural resources but...

**End of file 1**

**File 2**

**LE: So this is the second part of an interview with Craig Johnston, on the - what date are we on again? 21st of November, 2017. If I could get you to start where you just left off when we were so rudely interrupted by technology.**

02/00:27 CJ: Sure. I was a bit of a rave. The issue is fundamentally about growthism and what I learnt on the council and it was clear that issues, environmental issues, about appropriate development, are very strongly class issues, or at least you often get interests that have a short-term agenda and a monetary based agenda wanting certain solutions and fast, and the environmental and social impacts often get considered inadequately, issues around the precautionary principle are not looked at, at all, and that it was actually important to consider those in issues around development of a city and the council was the consent authority then for a lot of stuff. And it just emerged very strongly in my mind. I know at times I was accused by people as being anti-development, it was sort of you didn't want to have that tag and perhaps now I care so much but these were times before there were terms like smart growth, or new urbanism, these terms, concepts, weren't around at that particular time. But you knew that you need to, I thought there had to be constraints on growth or at least questions, and in my mind my view that that was the key role of the Environmental Planning Assessment Act, that was brought in by the Wran Government in '79 and is still there battling on, if it hasn't just been



destroyed by the parliament under the current Berejiklian government in the last couple of weeks.

02/02:34 But I saw - and this is a very Keynesian way of looking at things - that something like the Environmental Protection Act is a regulatory intervention by the state to put some constraints against the operation of the market to try and make sure that the other factors are considered properly and even given priority, if necessary, apart from the short-term interests of a particular bunch of capitalists, that is property developers. That goes straight back to John Maynard Keynes in terms of the role of the state in the market in the capitalist economy, not that particularly left-wing. But that's what we would call green, with a small 'g', green, I guess, these days. At that particular time the Greens Party was just forming at the time of my expulsion from the Labor Party, for reasons I'm not quite sure of, I chose not to get involved in the formation of the Greens in New South Wales or Australia. I think it had something to do with not really liking some of the style of key Greens who were operating in Leichhardt local government area and Sydney Federal Electorate. But it might have been a bit personal. Anyway, I did not join the Greens and haven't sort of since. But that is a green argument. The other thing at the time in terms of the council deliberations on any development, I don't think my colleagues on the council, that is Liberal and Labor were corrupt, I don't think they were bribed, I don't think they got any material concessions from actually being lackeys of the developers in Sydney, it was just a part of the culture that you were pro-growth and if you could accommodate people with their extra storeys, well of course you would.

02/04:32 It was just a way of thinking rather than being more cautious and a key thing I learnt was that decisions are never set in stone, everything was contested, so everything was negotiated, so one might make a decision like Lendlease, you might make a decision to say, "No you can't have this" and you think it's settled, but they'll come back later on and ask for something else. All of the major developments in Sydney like Barangaroo, they never accepted the rules of the game, they just keep on demanding and upping their demands and getting what they want. Everything was contested. So the whole decision making process was actually also a bit fraught, which leads a lot of insecurity, if you a councillor because nothing is safe, you have to be on the ball all the time in that political environment.

02/05:33 I'm especially thinking of the period in the end of my term, when I was in fact an independent, I started, as did Phil Rhoades, Labor, and myself, Labor Reform, and I had the option, as did he, of applying to join the Labor Party after a year after we were expelled for our position

on the coalition between the Liberals and Labor. I decided I wasn't going to, I knew from the beginning I would not reapply, I took the view of, "If they don't want me, they don't want me." I said, "Good riddance" and I'll just see how it goes. Well we know how it went, the whole of the council was dismissed. Again, there were lots of issues, it wasn't that that particular council - including I'd say with the support of the Liberals, I think as far as I am aware it was unanimous -- it was hostile to the monorail and gave a lot of resources to the extra parliamentary campaign against the monorail, but there were lots of other sites in which there was concerns about overdevelopment. I don't think the councillors ever took a position, that was to the left of the council staff, so it wasn't as if we were trying to force the city planners to take positions more anti-development, that planners would have otherwise done, and planners aren't a left-wing profession.

02/07:07 But there were a number of battles around where developing, Big End of town developers wanted certain developments that the council staff and the council didn't like and there were fights about these often took place in the media. The one that actually comes to mind, which struck me as being a key one, is one on the old Tooheys Brewery site, which is in Elizabeth Street, Elizabeth and...

**LE: Is it Devonshire Street?**

02/07:39 CJ: No it must be Albion. Foveaux. It's a hideous development. It's just got no relation to the street, the streetscape, it's just three towers in this plot, but I remember that in particular because it was state ministers who were lambasting the council, on two fronts. One was its attitude towards development was insufficiently pro-development, but the other thing is politically unacceptable from a Labor point of view, which is such an authoritarian party, that you didn't have a two party system, a clear two party system there, despite the deal that the Sutherland [recorded as Sator] Laborites had made with Bingham and the Liberals on committees, the Labor Party wasn't guaranteed a majority all the time on particular votes. So it was very unstable, and you never knew how a vote would go and the Labor Party machine didn't like that.

02/09:02 And so you had what's called - let's call it uncertainty, and the business community and formal political sciences, we don't like uncertainty because it's not good for business, and that's still a mantra that's used these days and you have to have policy consistency, which means

everyone kowtows to the Business Council of Australia or whoever, Property Council and Master Builders Association. There was a body back then called Building Owners and Managers Association, which I think has now been passed to the Property Council, it might still be there but it's certainly not the force it was at the time. But you had a number of these interests and lobby groups that represented the big end of town and they were hostile to the Labor Party, to the community independents and to anything that was seen to be against the activity of business itself. So the strong push towards growthism. So there were a number of sites around the city, then as now, where these conflicts and the view that I guess I supported, which was one that took the Environmental Planning Assessment Act seriously, section 79, that you had to have proper social consideration of impacts and there was such a thing as a beautiful city and there was such a thing as an ugly city and there was such a thing as overdevelopment and there was such a thing as appropriate development. I now call that smart growth 'new urbanism', I didn't use those terms back then but it was clearly an influence of environmentalism.

02/10:51      Also I guess this tug that the City of Sydney has got of a CBD dominated by the finance industry and the casinos and all that global city nonsense, surrounded by a residential base, which was a mixture of historically working class areas, including lots of public housing and gentrifying and affluent areas as well. But which actually had a certain political culture, one that Clover Moore successfully tapped into, in trying to unify those strands to produce something that's both progressive but operates within a particular paradigm. It seems a bit more settled these days, a few decades later, but clearly there were lots of political battles at the time and the upshot was – but I can't underestimate the authoritarianism of the Labor Party and some of the right-wing alder people, councillors, from the South Sydney area wanted the council dismissed as soon as they were elected they were saying, "This councillor should go" simply on the basis the Labor Party didn't have the majority.

02/12:16      Dismissals for councils because of who controlled and who didn't is obviously a key thing in Sydney history and New South Wales history and that's not confined to the Labor Party state governments as well. We've had Liberal Party state governments, the boundaries of Parramatta local government area were just rorted last year with a view by a Liberal state government with a view to try and make sure that they're a Liberal Party majority on Parramatta Council. These things aren't sort of strange or ancient history.

**LE: I mean there is that sort of a long tradition, I guess, of the intervention of state government into local government politics, but also in particular the City of Sydney is sort of I guess the shining light in some ways, or just the most dominant council.**

02/13:15 CJ: Yes only in the city councils. After the elected council was restored Frank Sartor led a group of community independents, I don't think he got the majority, but he was able to establish, I think he managed to work with one of the Liberals, but he managed to actually form a fairly stable administration. It was very managerialist but it was clearly progressive or modern in the way that it had been pre-shadowed by the early years of the council I was on, or indeed the previous first regime of Doug Sutherland. So his council operated in a certain style and that's been continued in her own style by Clover Moore ever since. And there's been a concern -- I don't think Frank was an environmentalist -- but there's been a concern about the social life of the city and concern for the environment and appropriate development, and also a juggle with what concessions might make to the growthism that the business lobby still obviously wants.

**LE: Going back to 1987, how did you find out that the council was actually dismissed? Was it a surprise? Was it something that had been in the foreground or was some announcement made and you knew that was...?**

02/15:05 CJ: We sort of knew that it was coming, it was earlier in the year and I'm not quite sure about what the build up had been of over particular development. Now there was a lot of stuff in the paper and I think it was Premier Unsworth talking about the councillors knocking back DAs on the other sites and that one on Elizabeth Street is the one I remember in my head, so there very well could have been others. Actually I think in the book that the city historian wrote, is it Shirley Walters?

**LE: Shirley Fitzgerald has written a book and then also Hillary Golder wrote a book as well.**

02/15:44 CJ: Yes. In one of them the number of sites was actually mentioned, I don't remember those particular sites but I knew that it was coming and I think there was a lot of speculation in the media and I know on the day itself, Doug Sutherland, the lord mayor at the time, heard some inkling of rumours through his Labor Party caucus. I think that he rang around, either he rang me or one of his assistant officers rang me and I know I went down to the council chamber and we were in the room, I don't know what it was called, the reception room in the old town hall that used to be outside the lord mayor's office and I think I was there we heard the actual announcement on the radio. So it was, yes, he would have heard it through his connections. But in the couple of days preceding that, there was a lot of media speculation, so it seemed to be a question of when it was going to happen, not if it was going to happen. 'If it was going to happen' had been happening ever since our council was elected in the first place, so there'd always been an 'if'. At some point that 'if' had become a 'when' and what the particular triggers were for that particular time, I really don't know, because we knew what the broad contours were, they were unacceptable to the state Labor government: one was an insufficient kowtowing to big developer interest over DAs, and the other was the fact that the Labor Party itself didn't have full total control of the council, it had to do it in a juggling environment. So those hadn't changed, whether they had become more intense, I don't know what brought it on then. But we knew, we expected it.

**LE: I guess I was reading Hillary Golders' book and she does say that the council elections were going to be later that year anyway, I think at the end of 1987, but of course the following year was the bicentennial of - I guess - invasion of Australia. So I'm sure there would have been a lot of interaction with the state government and the council in that period perhaps.**

02/18:25 CJ: Back then, as now, the local government elections usually were held in September and inside a council which has been elected for a four year term or whatever, each September is then either the election of the mayor, if the mayor is not directly elected, and of the chair people of the various committees, so that happens. So yes, there could have been, you know, but it was well before the September of '87. The thing that the Labor Party had not actually done - and by the Labor Party I mean the state government - it actually had not abolished or done a reorder of the wards. So we were still operating on a council that had

five old wards from the old City of Sydney and four from the old South Sydney: nine wards, were just chunked together but they weren't one person, one vote, one value. So that was really an unacceptable situation, so the state government, the minister for local government would have had to have gone through before the next council election a proper integration of the councils, through getting rid of wards altogether, which the current situation, or if they kept a ward system, to redraw the wards. They hadn't actually done that so they needed to do that, would have needed to do that before going into an election. They could have continued the situation, but the reason they used for the election that I was elected back in 1984, was that they hadn't had enough time to bring them together. But they'd had time, they would have had a free period and they hadn't. And perhaps it was just a bit too hard and they liked the fact that the votes from the old South Sydney Council area was still a lot of captured Labor Party votes and that actually helped them with their numbers overall and they would have had to make some other decisions about the area.

02/20:43 Well, subsequent governments decided to get rid of the ward system and just have an electorate at large, but that wasn't the culture at the time and it wasn't the view of people like me which was that we supported a ward system. So yeah, they would have decided something, with a bicentennial the following year, I mean in that situation if you had redraw the wards to have a new system, what was the guarantee that the Labor Party would actually win? I would say it was on the nose, [Lord Mayor], he'd been dismissed by a government of his own party, they'd have to find another candidate, it wasn't going to be amongst the existing crop of councillors and so they would have had to bring in some outsider, whereas they had from the opposition point of view, Bingham, as the leader of the Liberals, was a very presentable and eloquent sort of smart looking guy, a lawyer who knew his stuff.

02/21:52 You had people from the community independents like Sartor and Moore, who were both sort of attractive and smart people. The Labor Party just didn't have that. So I don't know whether they wanted to go into the bicentennial year with a mayor of their own. They didn't, if I remember correctly, they would have kept the commissioners there for some time but the elections were held and Sartor was a mayor at the time of the Olympics, or at least the Olympic bid, and that was bad enough for them. They had to tolerate that. The Liberal Government had to tolerate him as mayor of Sydney at that particular point in time. So I don't know what the particular factors were that came together in

that, whatever it was, summer or autumn of '87 to bring about the dismissal at that particular point in time.

**LE: I was also interested because earlier you were talking about your role as a housing advocate and I guess you mentioned where you grew up and sort of that cohort of people that you've moved through your life with. How did that play out when you were on the council in terms of housing? What were the issues with the social housing mix?**

02/23:28 CJ: There were two things that I, I guess, was engaged with, really from the beginning because, as I said, I was the chairperson of the Property Committee and there were other Labor Party people I knew around I got into introduced, in fact early in my period there, had a meeting with the NGO housing sector in the inner city. So this was NGO workers working for providers of community housing, housing information centres or whatever, it was held at the Inner City Regional Council for Social Development, the meeting offices were then in Goulburn Street. They came up with - and I was happy to rubber stamp them or run along with a whole number of initiatives that tried to expand the role of the council as a player in providing and facilitating affordable housing. I know that we commissioned, for example, I got through the council with the support of the independents, commission to engage a consultant, Greg Vickas, to do a survey of council surplus commercial properties to do an assessment of any of those that could actually be used for affordable housing. There were a number of initiatives; minor or major, that sought to make the council as being a key initiator of affordable housing type activities. The other strand was the fact that council had - and this is municipal socialism -- had a stock of social housing dwellings, which controlled and managed itself.

02/25:31 There were a couple of problems with that. There was stories - and there were about 800 or so - there were stories that they weren't kept in good condition, that it was aging stock and maintenance wasn't terrific. There were lots of anecdotal stories that the way you got allocated into these properties was through people you knew, so if the Labor Party employees on the council, so we'd call that corruption but that was old type networking if you call it, in a laborist sense and there's always just anecdotal, so we don't know. But it was when I grew up, you asked people who you knew if you could get a job somewhere. I'm sure that still happens in the world out there but it was a particular way into many

-- within working class communities when they became institutionalised, being involved in unions or the Labor Party was a means for economic advancement for poor families. I don't think it's more than that. But it was a great assault to the managerialist, modern idea that everything should be merit based and things should be based on need and if you don't want to kick people out if they've done better for themselves. And I took the view, well, I was a bit in conflict because there are two conflicting objectives. One, is allocate limited social housing to those most in need, and if they're not in need anymore, kick them out, that's the view of the current Liberal Party in New South Wales.

02/27:19      The other view is that it's actually important to give people more stable life and if people improve themselves, get jobs or whatever, that security of tenure is also important and just charge them rent at the market rate rather than discount rate and you'll help subsidise some of your other housing, that's the view I have now. But these were played out at the time and there was certainly a big push by some of the council planners at the time to change the rules so that if people no longer met the original eligibility criteria, they should be, in fact, evicted. I supported that for a while, I think I was wrong in doing that. And I know we did have some disputes with the Labor Party people in the state government in the Minister for Housing's office, and Labor Party New South Wales Government, because they - at the time - were defending security of tenure, rightly so I think. Though Labor Party governments in the last few years have not supported such a policy at state level in New South Wales. So we actually had the issue of the stock.

02/28:33      So there are two big -- and the issue of whether it should be reformed and it was a bit of a mantra on the Labor Party left that the housing stock was controlled by council officers aligned with the Labor Party. Right then you only got housing if you were in a right-wing branch or connected somehow. Look, how do people get jobs as a garbage person in the council? All of that, there's a lot of that stuff about how do you become a council employee in the 1950s and 1960s? I don't know whether these allegations were true or not, but nevertheless, council employees were eligible to get allocation into social housing and council housing and I knew those council employees as well, and part of this was actually to do with the historic settlement under the Whitlam Government and Tom Uren for the rehabilitation of public housing in Sydney, specifically Woolloomooloo and Glebe. And there were threats to redevelop Woolloomooloo to make it all high-rise, commercial area, big struggles, Green Ban type struggles, to protect Woolloomooloo and part of the upshot of that was federal intervention in terms of finances



for the Woolloomooloo settlement to upgrade the area in its more or less a traditional way, or in an area architecturally that was sympathetic in terms of built form to the traditional area. And that actually meant keeping the original residents however they had been applied.

02:30:23 So that meant working class, working age, in the workforce people, that's a big shock horror now to New South Wales ministers for housing of the Liberal Party in New South Wales today. But to me, that's also part of the social mix and it's something I do support. But the council stock we had inherited as a result of those changes, council housing, which included employees of council, that was anathema to certain reformers. So a big bunch of issues and that got resolved obviously by the commissioners, I think just one a day or two before they stopped being commissioners, after we were sacked and the three commissioners were brought in, just one or a few days before the commissioner served out their term of office, they handed the council stock over to New South Wales Department of Housing and it became Public Housing! So the biggest local government housing stock in the country just got lost and it became part of the state government and, as we know, a subsequent state government -- at least with Millers Point -- decided to privatise that, the big bunch of social housing that they had inherited and that also had been a part of the City of Sydney council's social housing. So big story. So two big runs of issues.

02:32:06 I had been chairperson of the Housing Committee, we were also trying to do our own stuff, there was some derelict housing in Pyrmont Point that had been owned by the council, but again this historic legacies that needed up doing, I had to try and negotiate with squatters to get them out and of course they thought we'd sold out and how could they trust me? And they couldn't, but we wanted those sites to be redeveloped properly into decent housing that would accommodate people that might not necessarily be those squatters on a needs basis if they applied actually, but we'd ensure that that housing is decent housing and is social housing for the future, rather than just derelict squatters -- and that is still the case at Pyrmont Point.

02:33:00 So we were just trying to - I say 'we', because I had the support of the Labor Party left, but it was actually an agenda shared by NGO housing activists operating in the city. There was a lot of concern about -- as there still is -- about the need for affordable housing and so there was a milieu and it was part of the community activist type of milieu, and a big concentration of housing NGOs in this area, an area which sort of obviously, by the way, as it is still now, a high focus point for street based homeless people as well. That's like an inner city phenomenon, that's my ward as well, Woolloomooloo, Matthew Talbot, that was my

ward, as well as gay Oxford Street. And the gentry don't like the homeless people, and that's my ward and my city as well. So you had to sort of try and engage with creating opportunities if you were from the left, for poor people and people who were living it tough in terms of new housing that was decent and suitable and affordable to them, even though --within whatever resources you had -- even though affordable housing was a state government responsibility, it's not primarily a local government responsibility, it's state government under Australia's constitution and they've got the resources and local government has got limited resources. So that was an issue about how far does council go beyond roads and rates and garbage to actually a broad agenda within its means to actually promote the welfare of people in the city. Nothing new about those issues still happen now.

**LE: No it's interesting because I guess, in some ways, you're not necessarily representing ratepayers either, particularly with homeless people because they can't afford, they don't have to pay rates, do they, if they've got nowhere to live.**

02/35:31 CJ: No, well I've got a view on that, but I don't know that I would have expressed it so articulately then is that rates are a tax, it's a property tax, and the key thing about a tax is it's a redistributive mechanism and it's not a user pays regime, and you don't and should not expect to get back value directly from the money that you put in. You might get nothing back from the tax you pay, that tax goes to pay for something that is in the public interest more generally. So a rate is not a user charge, whereas a lot of property owners think it's a user charge and it's something they're paying for specific purposes, especially in the local government. I think that's wrong, yes it's based on property but the money is there to pay for things in the general good.

**LE: You're thinking of it like a shared asset for everyone?**

02/36:30 CJ: Yes and that's the debate that we have around land tax and the inadequate land tax system we have in New South Wales, it's just the basis, it's not a hypothecated levy like Medicare is. Taxes are redistributive, you take from people who can pay more to give to people who need more. Tough.

**LE: Yeah. Can I just personally ask you what happened? I mean it sounds like you had a lot of issues that you were dealing with on the council itself, the council gets sacked and then did you continue on in public life after that period with your local government service?**

02/37:16 CJ: No. There was a period in which the independent aldermen kept on meeting after the dismissal and put up the idea that we were like the 'council in exile'. It was a bit phony in a way, in as much as I don't remember trying to involve the Liberal or Labor aldermen in that sort of exercise, but we kept on sort of meeting for a while and tried to articulate criticism of the commissioners, in effect, the new government of the city. But there was a while, as you noted before, the next local government election and trying to keep up the momentum when you did, after all, have day jobs and there wasn't the same sort of structural pressures to keep on being engaged or resources or access to information. So there was a bit of frittering away, and I think the other thing that was probably relevant at that stage - and I don't know if I want to over emphasise this -- was that we always had a bit of -- yes we probably always -- since our council act in '84 had a bit of an issue inside the Community Independents' rank, which was the personality contest, if you like, between Sartor and Moore. And so the issue was, I guess, well if there was to be a new council election and perhaps even a direct election of lord mayor, who would be running for lord mayor? Would it be Frank or would it be Clover?

02/39:15 So what that did, it just made things very sort of difficult. Certainly in the closing days of the council, some of us wanted to try and introduce a more formalised decision making, if you like, amongst the independents, that's a bit closer to the idea of the community independent parties that now operate, because the Local Government Act requires people to run -- pseudo parties get established for electoral purposes. And there was some of those who didn't and Frank and I support that formal approach, Clover Moore was very strongly opposed to that, that she'd have meetings with people but in no way would she caucus, if that's the word. Clearly that's not what she does now on the City of Sydney Council but two decades ago that was very strong, very hostile to that idea. And this happened in the last few months of the council before it got dismissed, an attempt to try and - I wouldn't call it like a City of Sydney Green party, but it wasn't going to be a party but more formalised forum, if you like. I'll call it a caucus,

which people would still be free to vote how they liked but they would try and take the view that they would have a common view first off. This is a different sort of independent than just a whatever. So there was just that bit of an ideological organisational difference. They both had their own machine, she had her own machine and of course very sort of Clover focused, so did Frank. I was more aligned with Frank back then and that might have been an issue, too.

02/41:11 It resolved itself as history shows us, that Frank actually stood for lord mayor and Clover went and stood for state seat, I think it was called Bligh at the time and she was lucky enough with the help of Australian Democrat preferences to get over the Labor Party's vote and take the seat from the Liberals and has had an illustrious and terrific career ever since. But it just meant that because of some of that internal - I'll call it 'tension' with a small 't' - contradiction operating, just because the logistics of it that people became less and less involved, to a greater lesser extent. Frank clearly had built up a bit of a machine and had his eyes on going back. My own point of view, I had a full time job and I really had felt burnt out, not bruised, but burnt out. I was so tired. That period on the council was very energetic. Initially for part of it I was actually unemployed and I was able to give it some time, but once I started working it wasn't just turning up to council meetings and voting, there was a whole lot of other stuff. For us, or for people with a more community engagement orientation, it was often two meetings a night. You'd go to a resident action group meetings or welfare agencies or there'd be something on, or some sort of a council committee, most of the weeknights I seemed to have two meetings on, an early evening thing. You'd have sort of sessions in the local community hall being available for people to come and complain about some nonsense that you had to then follow up with them.

02/43:18 Also we were putting out, the Frank Sartor group had initiated a publication in his area called the *South Sydney Post* in the lead up to the '84 election. I had initiated an equivalent publication in my area called *The East Sydneysider*, it was just an A4 -- out thing we had printed, you had to have laid out. As well as that I had a single sheet which was branded with me on it after I was expelled from the Labor Party, I forget what that was called but it had my photo on it. It was local news. They had to be printed and letterboxed, I was letterboxing my area all the time. Partly I needed to do that because I was an independent and would have been intending to re-stand for the election, but part of it was just general commitment to community engagement. You needed to give people information about what's going on in that area as a necessary precondition for people to actually be able to have

some information to respond to consultation, and to actually participate themselves. We were trying to encourage people to be involved so when council committees were considering particular DAs in an area, which was every fortnight, I used to produce bits of paper and actually put them in people's letterboxes saying, "If you wanted to talk about this issue, the council committee meeting is on such and such a time."

02/44:54 Now, of course council staff would put things in the box, they do that these days, perhaps they did that then. But it was just a general, "Your right to object" or whatever, but what I did was go beyond that, it was actually at the council meeting. I think they actually do that now, I don't remember whether they did that then, but actually tell people when it's coming up. So a lot of the council meetings or certainly the committee meetings would have lots and lots of residents at them, and they'd be sitting there all night waiting for their time or the agenda to come up and they'd have their five minutes or whatever and it was actually part of the process that of course in terms of policy concession and the big developers, they actually hate, but I certainly saw it as part of my role to actually inform and to promote. Anyway, that all added to the workload and so it took over your life, really, being a councillor. Yeah, so it was quite full on. Now that's not the way that everyone did it and I've seen councillors since who don't do it that way. You can spend the minimal amount of time, you just turn up and read your papers or don't read your papers and vote and that's it. And being a councillor is just another ladder on the way to somewhere else and wherever you think your career is heading. But yeah, I think I was trying to see myself as doing something different and this was activism.

**LE: It sounds very grassroots.**

02/46:51 CJ: It was, yes. It was activism, it wasn't parliamentarism, if I can use those sort of left-wing type terms -- it was a parliament of sorts, I guess, and it was a parliamentarian in a small pond. But I was fundamentally an activist and it was about being in that institution to try and effect, to make things better, but that involved trying to get other people. So that was going back to some of those -- not just the Harvey Milk that I referred to in San Francisco, but taking into account also Ken Livingstone in London, Red Ken, and also other cities that had traditions of radical municipal politics, like Bologna in Italy was the famous one, Red Bologna. It was about what local government could be doing. The Loony Left, it was called at the time. There was a big

swathe at the time we were there of so-called Loony Left councils, they were Labour Party in London and other parts of England and they were called Loony Left and the local government is different there, but local government was taking on every agenda, progressive agenda you could imagine.

02/48:32 That's probably still a bit of tendency amongst some local councillors in New South Wales today, and that would not be my position, my position would be stretch the boundaries, but accept limitations of local government that's quite distinct from the other three spheres of government and don't try to be a substitute for failed Commonwealth Government on refugees or a state government on whatever the issue is. You're not those governments, but anyway, there was at the time this thing happening in England that its enemies called the Loony Left period and that was part of the background of the sort of council I wanted to be. But it actually had implications for my workload and certainly my job was very difficult at the end, just in terms of you couldn't have people calling you, or you weren't there to have people call you during the day about some of the local council stuff. You had to try and create those boundaries which people didn't think you had the right to and yeah. So I think I was a bit burnt out, so I was kind of happy to take a bit of a reprieve and by the time the local government elections did come around, over a year or so, whatever it was later, it was a new ball game of course, and by then I moved onto other things, decided, no I wouldn't try and go back.

**LE: Because you said earlier in the interview that you moved to Darlinghurst in the '80s and I understand you moved away from there quite recently and so I guess how did you find that period on the council affected where you lived and your relationship to your local area?**

02/50:32 CJ: Okay, the critical thing in the first period leading up to my election was actually the ALP branch boundaries, that was a key thing. When I moved from Bondi to Darlinghurst I joined a particular branch and having established some context in that branch, which had some boundary overlap with the central part of East Sydney and Darlinghurst, which was the core part of Macquarie ward, not all of it but a core part of it, I sort of felt I had to stay there, I just became branch secretary. So I was renting, I could only move around to houses in a certain area or I'd lose my position, I'd have to join another branch. So that was a bit of

a problem, but the rental market obviously must have been a bit different then because I didn't remember having too difficult a problem with that. It was also an area that was the heart of the gay area in terms of close enough to the entertainment facilities, if I could call it that, Oxford Street, and it wasn't really a problem for me in that brief period, given I wasn't on the council for very long, it was only between two to three years, it wasn't a problem for me then at all where I live. And I stayed in the area, even though I stopped being a councillor, and even though as I aged I didn't have the same fascination with the Oxford Street scene, it wasn't the same. But it actually - given my workforces were in the CBD and various jobs I had, it just stayed eminently convenient because it was just a walk into the CBD. So I stayed in the area for those sorts of reasons, really, yeah.

**LE: And so you would have seen Sydney has changed, so did you see that locality changing over those years?**

02/53:03 CJ: Yes, I think it was very slowly. Oxford Street has always had a problem, Oxford Street in the early '80s became the opportunity for a lot of gay businesses while there was a lot of gay money around of a certain sort because of the derelict state of the property market. There are less of the gay type businesses now than there used to be but my observation is the property market around Oxford Street is still very problematic and the council's tried to recreate it as an arts area or whatever. But it's a whole number of reasons that strip type shopping doesn't compete well against the super malls. There were still some things that haven't changed, street people, and the visibility of homeless people from The Cross right through to the CBD here is also really visible. Those areas have gentrified significantly.

02/54:17 There's been a lot more apartment buildings of course, belted in the nooks and crannies, in any vacant space that one could possibly find and that has been apartment buildings of a certain sort, the shoebox sort of type style for young singles or professionals. The demographics have changed, even though Darlinghurst Public School has got, as I understand, a vibrant school age population, primary school age population again. There is overwhelmingly, because of the high price, which is not related to the -- of the housing stock in my view, but because of proximity to the CBD, that young couples can afford with high incomes, because they work as lawyers in the CBD, to co-rent apartments in the city, but really when they have their kids they'll want to move into the suburbs somewhere because apartments aren't constructed for families. You have quite an interesting change of

demographic, which is basically eradication of older people who die out or move on and eradication of poorer people, who die out or move on. So that is much more obvious. Some parts of the inner city where I lived had been pretty derelict and part of that was because of traffic. Before the Eastern Distributor, the great bulk of the heap of traffic just went through those areas, a lot of those streets now have had street closures and have been quietened in various ways, still very important in terms of coming off the Harbour Bridge to go through the inner east I'm talking about.

02/56:26 Perennial questions around the Cross in terms of how daggy that is an area, but the areas around that are very affluent areas and it's primarily location and I think that's quite different. Now that is, of course, political for the Labor Party, but that actually helps to consolidate the Community Independent vote through Clover Moore and her team for the City of Sydney Council and for her successor, Alex Greenwich, in the seat. But in the state seat of Bligh or is it called Sydney? Bligh/Sydney, his main enemy is actually the Liberal Party. The Labor Party vote has sort of collapsed into the community independent vote. So I'd say it's quite an affluent area. Parts of Darlinghurst still aren't that attractive say compared with Surry Hills, but just from an aesthetic point of view. I think that's a legacy of the past, from the derelict state because of the heavy traffic. In places like Bourke Street they were just awful streets to be on, trucks and stuff. So I think that's changing but it's a bit of a slow change. I think people coming from outside the area might look at it and still think it's awful, but if you look at the quality inside people's houses, it's a very affluent area now. The social agenda or the political agenda is that small 'g' green type, you know. Yeah, agenda, it's not a hard left agenda, those days sort of aren't there, yeah.

02/58:29 **LE:** Yeah, it's a different, I guess, political climate, isn't it?

CJ: Yes.

**LE:** Compared to 20, 30 years ago. So do you miss living in the city? You don't have to answer that if it's too personal. Is it different? I guess because where you live now is so rural.



02/58:44 CJ: I've only been away for a short period of time and the short answer is 'no.' I know what I value about living in Darlinghurst and the city. It was the access to public transport; both bus and train systems, so you could travel around greater Sydney easily. It was, because my jobs were in the CBD, it was the proximity, being able to walk to work, so walkability is a terrific thing.

**End of file 2**

**File 3**

**LE: So this is the third section of an interview with Craig Johnston at Sydney Town Hall on the 21st of November, 2017. We've just been talking about the liveability of living in Darlinghurst and the walkability and I think we're nearing the end of the interview, but was there any more that you wanted to add?**

03/00:30 CJ: No. I think that's fine. I mean I was only a member of the council for really a couple of years. It was at a particular point in time in its history. The council is notable for the fact it was dismissed by the state government, so it's part of the history of the dismissals of local councils by state government, for state government purposes. There was always a mystery in my mind around the particular factors that triggered the blade being pushed in at the end, though it wasn't a surprise, and that council was one of the earliest of the City of Sydney councils where the political alignment of forces wasn't a clear-cut, two party type system, and involved a lot more horse trading. Some of the things that seemed to be new or shocking or strange at the time, or difficult, looked to raise questions about in hindsight why we might actually have considered that to be the case. And as I said earlier in the interview, I think our council - like many other councils probably today - still had to confront issues around growthism and how do you draw the line against bad development and promote the quality of life, especially for residents who lived close to CBDs, which undergo their own specific and very strident paths of overdevelopment. These are perennial type issues I think for people in local government and community activists. We, I think, try to do our best and there were people of goodwill from all parties involved and we're not there now, there's other people.

03/02:47 **LE:** **Taking up. Thank you very much.**

CJ: Thanks for the opportunity.

03/02:52 **LE:** **It's been lovely to talk to you. Thanks.**

**Interview ends**