



 TV HOME

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Transcripts

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Peter Thompson talks to Jack Munday whose 'green bans' campaign of the seventies has had a huge impact on how our major cities have developed.

SERIES PRODUCER Daniel Cooper

PRODUCER Sophie Emtage

RESEARCHER Jacquie Harvey

COORDINATOR Lauren Hillman

FIELD CAMERA Dennis Brennan, Geoff Lye, David Marshall ACS, Daniel Shaw

FIELD SOUND Guenter Ericoli, Anthony Frisina, Lauren Howard, Grant Roberts

STUDIO CAMERA Chris Lockyer, Ben Pettitt

STUDIO SOUND Tony Hill

EDITING Jake Peterson

AUDIO POST Martin Davies

MAKE-UP Jane Surrich

SET Kathryn Sproul

TITLES MUSIC Steve Matters

TITLES GRAPHIC DESIGN Steve Hammat

PUBLICITY Amanda Werner

PRODUCTION SECRETARY Carolyn Flowers

UNIT COORDINATOR Leanne Bryden-Brown

PRODUCTION MANAGER Andrew Mills

PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR Sacha Gregson

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER Margot Phillipson

PETER THOMPSON: This week on Talking Heads we journey back to the pointy end of the green revolution. How did Jack Munday, a Queensland country boy who wanted to box and play rugby league, become one of our leading environmental crusaders? Jack helped save Sydney's Centennial Park from being turned into a sports stadium, this area from becoming a car park. And he's perhaps best known for saving the historic Rocks from a massive high-rise development. Jack, it's great to have you on Talking Heads.

JACK MUNDEY: Pleasure to be here.

PETER THOMPSON: Here's a man who has a place or a street named after you, plaques, heritage displays. It's a long way from being the president of the Communist Party of Australia.

JACK MUNDEY: To become almost respectable.

PETER THOMPSON: Almost respectable. (LAUGHS)

JACK MUNDEY: Almost. Once you get respectable, that's beyond the palm.

PETER THOMPSON: (LAUGHS) So we'll test out that. We'll see how respectable you really are. If you think of it as a moment in time, your views about green bans met sort of a tide of public opinion that was hostile to a lot of development that was going on. The idea of turning Centennial Park into a sports stadium, for example, perfect example.

JACK MUNDEY: I think the interesting thing about it was that the Builders Labourers green bans brought about a change in the thinking of the middle class.

PETER THOMPSON: It can't be exaggerated how odd this was. You're getting together with particularly middle-class women who lived in a very comfortable part of Sydney.

JACK MUNDEY: At the time we said, "What's the good of getting higher wages and better conditions if we live in cities devoid of parks and denuded of trees?" So of course the quality-of-life issue was not just for the enlightened middle class but for the working class as well.

PETER THOMPSON: How were you personally threatened?

JACK MUNDEY: The Painters and Dockers were looked upon then, the union, as pretty rough and ready.

PETER THOMPSON: Well, they were murdering people.

JACK MUNDEY: Workers in that union came to me and told me that we were lined up. And it was in Victoria Street, Kings Cross, where the real struggle was taking place at the time.

PETER THOMPSON: Did you take measures to protect yourself and family?

JACK MUNDEY: Well, not really. For example, the police, when we were threatened - we were threatened over the phone many times - and they advised me to take a secret number, a silent number. I refused to, saying I was the elected secretary of the union, the membership have got the right to contact me. And because we were straightforward about it, I think that that's the reason that we survived. Of course, Juanita Nielsen didn't - one of the women that took action up in the Victoria Street vanished and the crime is still unresolved.

JACK MUNDEY: I didn't start off as some great environmentalist forward thinker. I became a part of an urban movement. It's a learning process. I was convinced of it by the actions of the people, so we grew into it together.

I think growing up in the beautiful north Queensland you had an innate feeling about the environment. I was just a normal country kid, I think. I was born in 1929, in a little town on the Atherton Tableland that's called Malanda, and it's a beautiful little place.

My mother died when I was six, and that was a great shock to my system, and my eldest sister Josie really became the mother figure, so it was a very trying time. Even though, of course, we always had sufficient food and clothing, the family were really tied up with the work that needs to be done on a the farm. Even as a child you fit into it by helping to feed the cows and the pigs and do those sort of mundane work of the

farmer.

I grew up in the Catholic Church. The Holy Days of Obligation during Lent, et cetera, you'd go. It was only when I went to the Marist Brothers at boarding school in Cairns for a period, and it was there that we went more regularly to mass. The discipline was there every day and I found that hard, as a kid from a dairy farm, to adjust to that and so I left very suddenly and returned to Malanda and commenced an apprenticeship as a plumber.

Like a lot of young kids in the bush, I was sport mad. I trained every day. I was very fit and I was a reasonably good footballer by country standards. I came down in 1950 to Parramatta to play rugby league.

PETER THOMPSON: Jack, you came to Sydney and worked as a Builders' Labourer, then a unionist, but initially, when you came, you really saw your future as in sport, didn't you?

JACK MUNDEY: Yes. I wasn't always an intellectual! I came down to play football and I looked a pretty good footballer in the bush, but down here I was pretty ordinary. Rugby league, after a couple of seasons, I went coaching in the near Sydney area - Riverstone, Wentworthville - and became more involved, then, in the trade union movement.

PETER THOMPSON: The Builders' Labourers, on the pecking order, are generally unskilled. It's hard work.

JACK MUNDEY: The work didn't worry me at all, but the dangerous nature of the work and the pressure that was applied to Builders' Labourers worried me. One year there was over 100 deaths in a year, and even when I started to civilise the building industry, in one year 14 dogmen got killed. They used to ride the load up. We banned it. It was too dangerous. And the wind tunnels used to catch the dogmen and throw them against the building, and you could be sacked on an hour's notice and had no recall to it. Unionism changed all that and we brought about changes where the workers were given real consideration, and so when that happened, of course, people like myself were elected organisers and union leaders.

PETER THOMPSON: What persuaded you to join the Communist Party?

JACK MUNDEY: I thought that of all the fighters looking for improvement in conditions and dignity as workers, they were either left-wing Labor or members of the Communist Party, and that attracted me to it. It wasn't that I was a thorough student of Marx and Engels and Lenin. It was the fact that the actual seeing the workers in action, and that won me over to join the Communist Party.

JACK MUNDEY: We would never have got the Builders' Labourers to come on-side on ecological and environmental issues had we not civilised the industry. We fought for the right of decent wages and conditions.

JACK MUNDEY – file vision: It's up to us to say which buildings we want to build. It's not good enough for workers to say, "Thank you, boss, I've got a job. I'll do anything you want me to do."

JACK MUNDEY: I said, "And what's the use of winning higher wages and better conditions, if we live in cities devoid of parks and denuded of trees?" And then the most unlikely alliance of middle-class women linking up with the rough-hewn Builders' Labourers saved Kelly's Bush. And the first green ban was imposed at a fashionable suburb called Hunter's Hill, where there weren't many Builders' Labourers, I might add.

After the Kelly's Bush was a success, we were then inundated with other requests for green bans. Centennial Park was gonna be turned into a giant sport stadium. People across the whole social spectrum came to the Builders Labourers asking for the green ban. The green ban was imposed. And I remember the chief of staff of the Sydney Morning Herald telling me that on the issue of the fig trees being destroyed in the Botanical Garden, there were more letters in support of the green ban than any other issue that year.

PETER THOMPSON: Jack, they were pretty exciting times to be in the middle of.

JACK MUNDEY: They were. You can say that again, yes.

PETER THOMPSON: Did you have a sense of euphoria about many of those actions that were going on and the fact that you had many significant wins over green bans?

JACK MUNDEY: No. Looking back, considering the gravity of the situation, I think, in the main, my feet were pretty much on the ground.

PETER THOMPSON: The Premier of New South Wales, Bob Carr, said years later that no union in the world had ever done something like this - put a ban on work that had something to do with other than wages and conditions. Is that right?

JACK MUNDEY: Well, to the best of my knowledge, I think that's true.

PETER THOMPSON: Among the things you did was impose limits on union officials, on yourself, and also you stopped being paid during strikes.

JACK MUNDEY: The very fact that all the officials got the same wages as the workers on the job, and after six years in office people relinquished their position and went back to the job. We had a big strike - it went for five and a half weeks - and the officials didn't get paid either. It also gave confidence to the ordinary workers that the leadership were not just job seekers, but they were fair dinkum.

PETER THOMPSON: What was happening in in your personal life? You found time to get married.

JACK MUNDEY: Yes. Very sad. First wife died at 22 with a cerebral haemorrhage and I had a little child, Michael, to that marriage. And five years later I married Judy, my present wife, and, of course, we had Michael, and then how tragic it was that when he was 22, the same age as his maternal mother, he got killed in a car accident. Like me, he was an environmentalist and against motor vehicles. Well, against motor vehicles dominating our life. And ironically, dies as a passenger in a car, so that was a very sad part of my life.

JACK MUNDEY: At one stage it was estimated that the 42 green bans were holding up a combined value of \$3,000 million worth of so-called development. And Victoria Street had the criminal element, it had people being pressurised. You had people occupying parts of Victoria Street to stop buildings being knocked down. So in one way it was one of the most exciting of all the green bans.

This captures the spirit of the time, in October 1973. I think it typified that whole green-ban period when Askin used the police force against the protesters, and that was the turning point in the battle for The Rocks.

After I stood down as secretary, I went back and worked on building at St Vincent's Hospital.

When the federal body took over the union, they banned the elected leadership, so we were driven out of work. I never went back and worked as a Builders' Labourer again.

PETER THOMPSON: You say perhaps the most exciting of the green bans was over Victoria Street, Kings Cross. Why was that so?

JACK MUNDEY: Because of the sharper struggle there because it highlighted the corrupt elements that are coming in.

PETER THOMPSON: Of course, a local resident, Juanita Nielsen, who was publishing a newspaper, disappeared during that dispute.

JACK MUNDEY: That's right, and she's never been found. And it's obvious that she was murdered.

PETER THOMPSON: You had a short affair with her.

JACK MUNDEY: Oh, well, I knew her well, yes. She was a supporter of the Builders Labourers, of course, and we knew all of the rank and file.

PETER THOMPSON: What do you think happened to her?

JACK MUNDEY: Rumour has it that she was murdered. Her clothes were found outside of Penrith, in the Blue Mountains. In that time there was enormous development taking place at Kingsford Smith Aerodrome, and that the body could be disposed there.

PETER THOMPSON: Let's go back to that interview you gave Paul Murphy about that bribe. Is that how business was done all the time?

JACK MUNDEY: Well, that's certainly how it was put to me.

PETER THOMPSON: This wasn't an isolated case, I presume.

JACK MUNDEY: No, no. The Askin period - the level of corruption never really came out. Now it's generally considered the most corrupt area of probably Australia's history, but certainly New South Wales' history.

PETER THOMPSON: You got expelled from the union, there was a takeover of the union - federal takeover. You got expelled, along with your colleagues, and the green bans came to an end.

JACK MUNDEY: When you consider that heritage legislation in many of the states now mean that buildings that would have been knocked down, there are buildings standing in every capital city of this country that owe their existence to the Builders Labourers, and so there's no doubt there's been an indelible decision made along those lines of heritage values that have changed.

PETER THOMPSON: So it created a great breathing space, there's no doubt.

JACK MUNDEY: There's no doubt about that. It does. Before that, there was a notion that the environment was nature conservation. I think that the very fact that in England, for example, when Spike Milligan asked me over, when I was over in England on a lecture tour to talk to building workers. We put a ban on a building up in Birmingham, you know.

PETER THOMPSON: Post office or the town hall.

JACK MUNDEY: The post office. Exactly. The post office.

PETER THOMPSON: He's no doubt been your funniest supporter.

JACK MUNDEY: (LAUGHS) So Spike Milligan and ourselves and the building workers there are responsible for that.

PETER THOMPSON: Well, when you think about it, what sort of personal price did you pay, in terms of having the life you wanted, by instigating the green bans? You know, you never really picked up a shovel on a building site again.

JACK MUNDEY: No, that's right. I suppose I could have fought to get back into the union movement, but by that stage my involvement in environmental issues had broadened.

JACK MUNDEY: Well, I became very involved with the environment movement. I was invited to give a

lecture tour in Britain, and later on, at the first ever environment conference under the auspice of the United Nations, I was elected on the national leadership of the Australian Conservation Foundation. I was invited to give talks and involved in the Franklin River dispute and in anti-nuclear activities and in support of the rainforests as well. The environment will always have to be fought for and we shouldn't just take it for granted.

In the 1980s, I became an alderman on the Sydney City Council. I was asked by Nina McRoby, wonderful leader of the Rocks Action Group, to stand, and so I was elected as a community independent. Community independents were people fighting for the rights of the gays, the rights of improving life in the inner city.

JACK MUNDEY – file vision: I think that in the long term we've got to think about not only phasing cars out of the city centre, but bringing back light rail, bringing back trams and trolley buses.

JACK MUNDEY: Well, I became chair of the planning committee for a period. The community independents were opposed by groups who wanted to change the whole development ethos and allow developers open slather once again. The Labor Government moved against and sacked the council.

PETER THOMPSON: Would you have been a good full-time politician?

JACK MUNDEY: Well, I think I AM a good full-time politician. Do you mean a paid one?

PETER THOMPSON: Yeah. Well, you've half-answered the question.

JACK MUNDEY: It would have been helpful to be paid, yeah.

PETER THOMPSON: To align your life with your values you've done some quite interesting things. For example, you don't drive.

JACK MUNDEY: No. When I was secretary of the union I did have a car, but, in principle, since the '70s I haven't. The cars have almost strangled urban areas and so it's just a principle I took. I refuse to drive a car. My wife Judy would say it's a bit hypocritical because I travel in hers.

PETER THOMPSON: (LAUGHS) It's a compromise, is it?

JACK MUNDEY: But a principled compromise. But I believe very strongly in public transport, and, of course, with the ecological crises that we now have, it's obvious that one of the biggest things that has gotta take place is a change in the mode of travel in our large cities.

PETER THOMPSON: These days you're Dr Munday.

JACK MUNDEY: Double, twice.

PETER THOMPSON: Two doctorates.

JACK MUNDEY: Yeah, two doctorates.

PETER THOMPSON: One's not enough. You've been given two. That's a long way from the kid who left school at 13, isn't it? Regarded as a dangerous radical, but ultimately accepted.

JACK MUNDEY: Haven't you changed too? I think we've all changed in that period.

PETER THOMPSON: Let's go back to you being Catholic, being brought up Catholic, and struggling about letting go of that Catholicism. Joining the Communist Party, becoming the president of the Communist Party, and the whole party collapses. What about the transformation in you?

JACK MUNDEY: Well, I think that those things you mentioned have been passing stages of life, and had

those organisations been different, maybe my life would be different. So I couldn't change the Catholic Church much. And I couldn't change the Communist Party that much internationally, but I'm very happy with being part of the environment movement. My years on the Australian Conservation Foundation, some wonderful people, and then the many, many urban environment organisations I've been in and I've been part of is the richest part of my life.

JACK MUNDEY: Judy and I got married in 1965. We're still very ordinary. We're just in the same place all the time, so I haven't taken many bribes that I've been offered. I would say the rich experience for me has been having Judy, but also in being able to play a role in the green-ban movement have been surely the highlight of my life.

It's almost 40 years since the first green bans were imposed. It is very gratifying, despite the tremendous struggles we had, that even though we were attacked and vilified, we've certainly been vindicated. I think in any mass movement there'll always be individuals that will be looked upon as the leaders, and I was one of those.

The great strength was, it was really a people's movement. People like Kath Lehany were the heart and soul of the struggle in Kelly's Bush. Because there's no doubt that the laws that now exist on heritage and of the built environment wouldn't be there had it not been for those ordinary citizens, that extra parliamentary action that came together. And, of course, when you look at Sydney now, and you look at The Rocks, Victoria Street, Centennial Park, those fig trees, who would now suggest that that be destroyed? Of course, eternal vigilance is required. But I think that it shows that when people do come together, that ordinary people can make a difference.

When I was arrested in one of the demonstrations to save The Rocks in 1973, one of the young constables later became an avowed environmentalist, and so Steven Lane was the instigator of Jack Munday Place. I've never aspired to have my name up in lights. I would have preferred it to be called Green Ban Place. Nevertheless, because it is identified with the green bans, it's nice to know it's there anyway.

PETER THOMPSON: Jack, you've never been just a hardliner. You've always been...

JACK MUNDEY: Intelligent. My interest has always been organisation for the cause that I'm fighting, and I've just stuck to that.

PETER THOMPSON: Australia is pretty much a paradise, though it's far from being the sort of workers' paradise you had in mind.

JACK MUNDEY: I don't know about paradise, but I hope that the future for humanity is all the things that I expect it to be.

PETER THOMPSON: Jack, it's been great talking to you. Thanks for coming on Talking Heads.

