

JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: SIR WILLIAM DARGIE

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JAMES GLEESON: Sir William, we're anxious to have as complete a background for the National Gallery, its history and development, as possible, and undoubtedly you're the right person to come to for information of this kind. I wonder if you could cast your mind back to your earliest recollections of the Gallery and the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board and tell us what you remember of those days.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: I'd have to go back a fair way, and I'm not the only person who should be consulted. There are at least two other people still alive who should be able to give information. In addition, there's a Commonwealth Public Servant who was associated with the old Art Advisory Board for many years and she, Mrs Valda Leehy, should be able to help you and possibly correct any errors of fact which may have crept into my memory.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, Valda is still working with the Gallery and she is getting together her recollections and information to help us. I've already had a brief talk—not a very extensive one—with Tas Drysdale, and he's given us some information. But since you were associated with it longer than anyone, you're the prime source really.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Well, I think I should say in the first instance that the idea of a National Gallery was first mooted to our first Prime Minister, Barton, by two artists, Tom Roberts and John Ford Patterson.

JAMES GLEESON: John Ford or Ambrose?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: No, I think it was John Ford Patterson.

JAMES GLEESON: John Ford.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: The father of Betty and Esther Patterson. This resulted in agreement in principle by that first cabinet, that eventually there should be a National Gallery in Canberra. It was first defined as a National Portrait Gallery, because in those days portraits were regarded—this is a matter of a change, historical change in taste—as possibly one of the most important forms of art. Historically one can see that people who are creating the first government, the first national government of Australia, were concerned to have some record of the personalities who had brought this about and would continue with the government in the future.

JAMES GLEESON: Quite so.

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SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Well, nothing in fact was done because it wasn't until 1927 that Parliament House was built in Canberra, or let us say the first buildings went up in Canberra because with Parliament House went the places for people to live, and of course the first shopping centre, Civic Centre. It was about that time, before the war, that I first became acquainted with Canberra, because my father-in-law at that time was in Canberra with the Government Printing Office. Now, I think it's best for me to get straight on to my recollections of the Art Advisory Board which date from 1952.

JAMES GLEESON: Bill, before that, at one stage there was an institution called the Historic Memorials Committee or Commission—Committee I think. Now, was that an ancestor of the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: No. But I'm rather surprised that you should speak of that in the past tense.

JAMES GLEESON: It's still—

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes. Let me put it quite plainly. The Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, throughout its history, was an advisory board only—in theory. The fact that in practice it exercised something very close to executive functions is really beside the point. In theory it remained, from its inception until it was dissolved, advisory only. It was advisory to the government of the time. Not to any particular minister, although it was incorporated into the Prime Minister's Department. A parallel with the Art Advisory Board was the Historic Memorials Committee, which was composed of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the President of the Senate, the Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives. Normally, the Art Advisory Board reported and recommended to the Historic Memorials Committee.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, I see.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: That Committee of course had the final say. I can remember some very interesting situations that arose because of this. I've forgotten the exact year but I discovered in Sydney, in talking to Dame Mary Gilmore, that the large portrait Bill Dobell painted of her was not really what Dame Mary felt she could handle in her own home. She felt she would like to make a presentation of this to the Commonwealth, if they thought it of sufficient importance. Well naturally I was delighted at this, and I arranged for this to be brought up, up to Canberra, to be seen by the Art Advisory Board, and in due course for it to be shown to the Historic Memorials Committee. Well, the Art Advisory Board at that time, that was Daryl Lindsay, Bob Campbell, myself and Doug Pratt. I think Will Ashton had left us by then. Anyway, we had a good look at this and I was covered with a certain amount of praise for having winkled this out. It was going to cost the Commonwealth nothing, and we hadn't a good Dobell at all in the collection at the time.

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We met in a big room, the conference room at one end of East Block, and the picture was taken from there over to the then Prime Minister's suite in the Houses of Parliament. Whilst we were walking across something entered my head, and I said to Bob Campbell, 'You know, there's one thing we've forgotten but surely it couldn't come about. You know that Bob Menzies doesn't really like Dobell's work, but surely he wouldn't turn this down'. Bob Campbell said, 'Oh no no no no no, couldn't possibly happen and you know he'd be delighted'. Well we walked into the Prime Minister's suite where those people that I've mentioned to you were gathered, and at that time the Leader of the Opposition was Dr Evatt. Well, the picture was there for display and the first thing Evatt said, without greeting us in any way, he turned to Bob Menzies and said, 'Who are these men. I've never heard of them before'. He said then, as far as I can remember, 'Are they responsible for bringing this picture here?'. Well Daryl was Chairman, and he said—you know what Daryl was like, he didn't mess about—he said, 'Yes, yes, yes, very good, very good'. At that Evatt blew up and he said, 'That painting, that portrait's a disgrace to a great Australian. That's the worse piece of painting Bill Dobell ever did'. I looked across at Bob Menzies, who could look incredibly like an oversized pussy-cat at times—just eaten a whole bowl of cream—and I could see that all his problems had been solved. Because without any more ado, after Evatt had gone on at some length in his own inimitable way, Bob said, 'Well gentleman'—I mean, completely ignoring everybody else—'I feel that as the Leader of the Opposition has spoken his mind very plainly, it would be futile for us to discuss it very much more', and back it went. It's now in the Sydney Art Gallery.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Ironically, the Art Advisory Board got blamed for this rejection, according to the gossip I heard around Sydney. The gossip was all over the place that the Art Advisory Board had rejected this.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: It wasn't, it was the Historic Memorials Committee and I'm telling this story to make it quite plain that in those days the Historic Memorials Committee was pretty well the court of last appeal. A lot of things were accepted for various reasons by the Commonwealth, without the pictures or pieces of statuary going to them. But if it were considered something of genuine national importance, especially as in this case a portrait of a famous Australian, almost certainly it went through the Art Advisory Board to the Historic Memorials Committee.

JAMES GLEESON: When did that change, that situation?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Well it never really changed. I think that before we get too deeply into the later stages of the Art Advisory Board, it would be better to go back to the earlier years, as I knew it.

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JAMES GLEESON: Good.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: I think I was appointed on the death of Arthur Louis McCubbin or J S McDonald. I'm not quite sure after this length of time.

JAMES GLEESON: Nineteen fifty-two?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Fifty-two. I was at that time on the Art Committee of the National War Memorial, which I've had a far longer association than I have had with the Art Advisory Board. I think I'd been drawn to the attention of, in those days, Ben Chifley. This was before I was on the Art Advisory Board, but it must have been something to do with the Memorial, because we met him. He was a very interesting and a very good man, very intelligent. I know that I spoke up out of turn, because naturally I was interested in this idea of the building of a National Gallery in Canberra. He turned to me and said, 'That's all very well'. He had a grating voice, I can't possibly imitate it, but it was a friendly grating voice. 'That's all very well, but this is just after a great war and there are many people in Australia without their homes, and they must have their homes built before we think of these galleries and museums'. I thought that was fair enough. He was not at all unsympathetic; he was just indicating an order of priority. How I was selected for the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, I don't know. I simply received a ring from one of the greatest secretaries the Board ever had, Frank McKenna. Frank McKenna belonged to that older order of public servants, whose praises have never been sufficiently sung.

JAMES GLEESON: Is he still alive?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: No, he's dead now. I received this ring on the phone, would I accept this appointment, and I said I would. So it started. Frank was at pains to impress on me that it wouldn't take much time because the business of the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board was chiefly concerned with the commissioning of portraits of Governors-General, Prime Ministers, Speakers of the House, Presidents of the Senate. These are the people whose portraits are required to be painted by some act—whenever enacted, I don't know. As these things were a fairly infrequent occurrence, Frank said, 'Don't be bothered very much'. He said, 'Perhaps once or twice a year at the outside'. Well now that really was what the Art Advisory Board was about in 1952. Prior to my appointment Bob Campbell and Daryl Lindsay had come on to the Board and the only other member, as far as I can remember, was Will Ashton who was Chairman. He was a wonderful fellow, you know, very kind but very determined. One thing that he was determined about was that Bob Menzies, who was a personal friend of his—and Bob Menzies was then Prime Minister, starting his long run—Will Ashton was determined that Bob was going to give the green light for the building of a National Gallery in Canberra. We were right behind this. This was the start. Bob, in his own way of course, had an interest in art, a rather conservative interest, but a genuine interest. He didn't discourage this early

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planning. I remember one of the things we used to do was to go about Canberra and say this would be a good site for a gallery.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: You know, all unaware that these things were subject to all sorts of planning restrictions and so on. But we were saying to Bob, through Will Ashton, that we didn't want a big gallery, we just wanted something because we were pretty sure that if it were started it would grow. Australia in those days of course was a poorer place than it is now. Not that it's very rich at the moment. We continued to get reports from Will that he'd spoken to Bob Menzies and that consideration would be given to this but, you know, there would have to be a cabinet decision and so on. Well meanwhile, for some reason which it's rather hard to define, the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board under Bob Menzies was asked to do more and more things. It started with Bob saying, in this day of air travel we have more important visitors, political visitors from overseas, and he, Bob, would like to make presents to them, and if they indicated they wanted a painting, he wanted us to get a painting. His favourite painter, by the way, was Bob Johnson, and fortunately Bob was fairly prolific. But we had the idea that other artists should be represented. Here of course we ran up against certain practical difficulties that the particular picture we had selected didn't really appeal to Bob or he didn't feel that the artist was important enough, or—and this is more important—the recipient, having had a look at it, obviously wasn't terribly pleased. So gradually we got around to getting a group of pictures, and as some of the artists were not particularly keen on sending pictures up for selection—and as an artist I can't blame them for that. I wouldn't do it for a moment.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Somehow or other we got permission to acquire these things, never for very great amounts of money. But these pictures were obviously useful, because some of the people going to overseas posts cast their eye on this little store of pictures, and said, you know, 'I'd like that in Kuala Lumpur' or wherever they were going. In an odd sort of way I think this was the start of the Art Advisory Board getting together a collection. Now, in Bob Menzies' days this was never a great thing. He kept it small. Bob was thrifty. I remember on one occasion I found a picture which I thought was most important. It was by Lambert and it was Weighing the fleece at Haddon Rig.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Now, I don't say this was the greatest work of art ever painted. As a matter of fact it was slightly pedestrian. But technically highly skilled and of course of the greatest historical importance to Australia.

JAMES GLEESON: Of course.

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SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: When you consider our dependence on wool. At that time whoever owned this picture wanted a thousand pounds or guineas for it. It was a picture about 20 inches by 24.

JAMES GLEESON: I know it well.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: You know it well, do you?

JAMES GLEESON: It's now in the collection.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes, well it did come into the collection eventually, but at this time, when we got it up to Bob Menzies, and he had a look at it—because he insisted on inspecting every picture which we bought—we got a brief note back, 'No painting by Lambert is worth a thousand guineas'. Flat. Well, as a matter of fact, this annoyed us very much. But I can tell you there was no going against Bob. At least he did have some statement of his point of view in that thing because mostly, if he were going to refuse something, we got on our submission, we simply got back 'No. RGM'. Yes, that picture eventually finished up in the collection because after he had retired—resigned—and Harold Holt was Prime Minister, one of the very first things we did was get in touch with the owner of the picture and put it up to Harold, who with no delay at all just gave us the okay. I have to correct a small detail there. In the first instance it was put up to us for 600 guineas, and Bob said 'No painting by Lambert is worth 600 guineas'. When we did buy it the price had risen to a thousand guineas, and that's what we actually paid. I'm sure my memory is correct on that. Well this was getting toward the end of Bob Menzies period. Before I move on from there I'd like to say a few things about the relationship of the old Art Advisory Board and the Prime Minister. You see, we were in the Prime Minister's Department and Bob, with his interests in literature, first of all, education and visual arts, treated us all as friends. Well friends as much as anybody could be said to be a close friend of Bob Menzies. I mean, he was a man who kept a certain reserve. But he made no bones about entertaining us, talking to us, listening to our arguments, and as often as not we knew when he was not going to agree to our arguments because he would say, giving one or the other of us a pat on the shoulder, 'I think there is much merit in what you have to say.' We knew jolly well we weren't going to get it.

JAMES GLEESON: You weren't going to get it.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Fair enough. But he was intensely loyal to his members and he expected loyalty in return. He once said to me, 'I expect my advisers to keep me out of trouble'. That is exactly what he wanted. I remember that I thought he was going to really take to me on one occasion because after the fiasco of the Dame Mary Gilmore portrait, and in my absence in England, the then Secretary, a chap named McCusker—Valda Leehy can correct you on this if I'm wrong—McCusker and I think Doug Pratt, I think on their own went to an auction, that highly publicised first auction of Bill Dobell's works in Sydney, when the money was raised for some Jewish charity.

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JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes. Schureck sale.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes, Schureck sale. A sketch for the portrait of Mary Gilmore came up and Doug Pratt and McCusker bid—I think it was three thousand two hundred pounds—for this and got it. Now, when Bob found out about this he nearly went through the roof. We were bidden in a body to his suite. I was back. He really, you know, went to work on us. I was foolish enough to say that he had at various times upbraided us for not getting a representative work of Dobell's in the collection and that, in fact, one had been offered to us for nothing, a most important one. I was still feeling sore about the Dame Mary Gilmore because for some reason or other people started to spread the story I was the one that was chiefly responsible for its rejection, whereas in fact I was the one that tried to get it accepted. I mean, that sort of thing gets under your skin.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Anyway, I brought this up. Bob was furious with me. He didn't say very much, but he closed the little meeting very quickly and my memory is that it was the only time he didn't offer us a drink. But he gave me a glare that really withered me. I think somebody said to me, 'He won't forget that'. Anyway, he did. But, you know, now I'm older and wiser, the last thing I would do is remind a Prime Minister that, you know, he was making a mistake, and do it in front of somebody else. After all that's simply not done. You may be able to do it in private later on but you don't do it in front of other people. Now, yes, I was talking about his loyalty. Many people were surprised that the appointments to the old Art Advisory Board had no termination.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Once you were appointed, you either had to resign or die, but Bob would never dismiss you. This is the main reason why someone like Will Ashton, I think he was 83 when he finally had to retire because he was ill. But Bob once, or afterwards, said to me when I questioned him about this, he said, 'Well all my experience tells me that length of experience is very important when it comes to sound judgement'. He said, 'You people, you got to know me and I got to know you'. He said, 'It meant that when you sent recommendations, or propositions to me, I could read them and say, "That's Bill Dargie brought that up, that's Daryl Lindsay, that's Will Ashton"'. He said, 'I could make a judgement not only on the facts but also ad hominem', which I thought was very wise. I think it was one of the great strengths that Bob had in other fields. He said, 'You got to know me. You knew when you came to your deliberations that there were certain things it would be quite useless to put forward, and other things which should be drawn to my attention, even if I didn't act on them at once'. He said, 'I wanted a Board and a body of advisers that I could trust and I could trust their experience'. So that was why no one was ever dismissed from that Board, no one's appointment was ever terminated. In the case of Will Ashton who, as you know was a very dear old man, but he did get to a stage where, well, I won't say his

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judgement was impaired, but he couldn't stand the strain of meetings, and he couldn't remember us. All of us do, I suppose, as we get older. He couldn't remember quite from one meeting to another what we were on about. But nothing in this world would get Bob to terminate his appointment as Chairman. Another very great friend of mine of course, who was to be the successor, was Daryl Lindsay. Daryl, who was a very lively and vital and creative person in this area, as he getting on a bit in years he was starting to champ at the bit. You know, he wanted to become Chairman, and not entirely for selfish reasons. He could see certain contributions he could make. Daryl was very friendly with Bob too but, no, Bob, not on your life was he going to hurt old Will. When Will finally did retire, because he collapsed in Adelaide and we had quite a bit of trouble—had to get him into hospital and so on—when he did recover a bit and retire, Bob gave us one of the most slap up dinners I ever remember in Sydney.

JAMES GLEESON: Is that so?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: In honour of Will. I remember there were tears in both their eyes. Will was very sentimental, and Bob was sentimental too. A lot of people don't think Bob was sentimental, but he was. Then Bob proceeded to use his political nous—I always remember this. He left Daryl as Acting Chairman for 12 months. This nearly broke Daryl's nerve, because Bob was friendly the whole way through, he never was anything but friendly. He treated Daryl as the Chairman, he took notice of him, had him over to The Lodge, filled him up with those explosive cocktails of his so that the usual articulate Daryl, when he came back to us, his tongue couldn't get around the words. But he wouldn't make him Chairman for about 12 months. I was greatly amused at this because I thought, 'That's a fine example of Bob's ability to handle somebody without antagonising them, but just keeping them on their toes'. Well, I mentioned Will became ill in Adelaide. He really tore himself to pieces with anxiety about the creation of this National Gallery. Because the years had gone by and Will was 83 and he kept saying at every meeting, 'I just want to live long enough to see the foundation stone of that gallery laid'. A phrase in fact that Daryl was to repeat later on. I found out later that before Will Ashton, Frederick Mann, who had been Chairman I think before Will, a long way back, Frederick Mann had said the same thing. So you can see this idea of a National Gallery runs like a thread, you know, through the whole of the history of the Art Advisory Board. Well, I've got more to say about illnesses on the Board later. Well then Bob resigned and Harold Holt became Prime Minister. Now, this is when the Art Advisory Board really started to find itself loaded with responsibilities.

JAMES GLEESON: What year was that?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Now that would be 1967. Yes, I think 1967. I must say, the initiative rarely came from Harold himself. But of course the Board was prepared for somebody who'd take an initiative. We could hardly believe it. But the fact that we'd made so many recommendations. We had things in the minutes. We were immediately taken under the wing of Harold who, as you

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know, was a very friendly man. We had some very surprising results. Harold had the attitude that, as we seemed to have proved ourselves, we were a responsible body, when we said, 'Do we have to show you every picture?', he said, 'After all this time why should you?'. He said, 'If you're the experts, if you think something should be purchased for the Commonwealth, you go ahead and do it'. Of course he had the usual warning, which every Prime Minister or every Minister must have, if you make a terrific boo boo, you're going to pay for it. Well that's only human nature. I mean, there it is. Well one of the great surprises of my life, as you know, I've always had a great interest in primitive art.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: For quite a while I had been trying to get the Board interested in this, but it was always felt—under Daryl, anyway—that we weren't there to deal with anything except Australian art. I think he was interpreting in his own mind the feeling that he had about Bob Menzies and probably what he thought about Harold Holt too. But anyway, as I've always been fairly impulsive and I get around, and one day I happened to be talking to Harold Holt. I can't quite remember in what situation. But all my ideas about a collection of Melanesian art, particularly Melanesian art, came spilling out, and I had all the figures. I said, you know, 'For about thirty five thousand pounds we could get a collection of art for the Commonwealth that would be in a world class. You can still get it', because I knew my New Guinea. He said, 'Well, why don't you get it?'. I said 'Well, what about the money?'. He said, 'Oh, that's all right'. Bill Cumming a week or so later got in touch with me and he said, 'Do you know you've got thirty five thousand pounds to buy a collection of Melanesian art?', or words to this effect.

JAMES GLEESON: This was really the first time that you'd stepped outside the just Australian field?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So it was a very important event, I think.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Well, it was all very well for me to talk about this, but suddenly being given thirty five thousand pounds, Bill Cumming and I were a little bit stunned. He said, 'What do you think?'. I said, 'I don't know what I'm going to do with it'. But I had sold Harold on the idea that it should be collected in Melanesia itself.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: This was the start of that Melanesian collection. You remember, we worked on this a lot.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

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SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: But I'm telling you that story because it was an indication of the sudden change that took place under Harold Holt, because Harold was keen that we should get together a collection of Australian art. I have missed out one small thing here, and it's very important. One of the last things Bob did, and it was in 1965 under pressure from Daryl Lindsay, he set up a public committee of inquiry into the establishment of an art gallery in Canberra. He appointed a number of people—you'd have to look up the records—but there was Daryl and myself, Tas Drysdale, Joe Burke, Tristan Buesst, Henry Basten. Well, there may have been somebody else.

JAMES GLEESON: Was James Fairfax on it?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: And James Fairfax.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: That's right. We prepared a report, which is known as the Lindsay Report, which was in due course accepted by Harold Holt in the first couple of months of his Prime Ministership. I had a little personal fight over that too. Because although I gave a lot of evidence and worked on the inquiry, and I thought I'd got primitive art into the idea of the National Gallery, I had to go off to England, and I was over there for about six or seven months whilst the final stages of the report were going through. I came back and I was going up to Canberra on a plane and I found myself along side Joe Burke, who said, 'I'm sorry to say, Bill, that they've cut the primitive art out'. I was furious and I got up and I stirred a bit, and it was put back—pretty reluctantly—because I'm sorry to say Daryl had no understanding or sympathy with it whatever.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: This is where the role of Chairman is terribly important in any of these things. Daryl, with all his width of sympathy for all forms of art, I'm afraid had no interest whatever in this.

JAMES GLEESON: In the primitive forms.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: No. Well, that's fair enough. Anyway, I got that back and, as I said, Harold Holt and his Cabinet accepted the Lindsay Report for the establishment of a National Gallery. Of course this put a stress on the formation of a collection. Harold Holt proceeded to make money available for the Australian collection on an historical basis. It was still strictly Australian and this again is where Cabinet and the Prime Minister came into it. This was a decision we had to respect. Even though at that time the Lindsay Report, it did say, you know, the art of no period or time is necessarily excluded. But I think this was right. We had no real Australian collection and at this time, well, we started to get it together. First of all we had to find out what pictures the Commonwealth did own. It owned quite a few but they were scattered all over the place. In the pre-Menzies era

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pictures had been acquired by one means or the other by various departments and it was only by accident you found out that the library had a splendid Tom Roberts. That Fred McCubbin's *The broken fence* was on loan, on permanent loan, in Melbourne. Dozens of things like this. So the first thing we had to do, on our own initiative, was to find out what the Commonwealth really owned, where it was and what condition it was, and some of them were in shocking condition.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I can imagine.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Now, the Art Advisory Board was suddenly loaded with this increase in duties and responsibilities. We had what you might call one quarter of a secretary and one-sixth of a typist to help us. So the members of the Board in fact did the work. We got into the habit of doing it. We got into the habit of hearing that there was such and such a picture at such and such a place. We went there and we wrote letters to the Chairman to say we'd seen this. I saw *The broken fence* and somebody else found the Tom Roberts, and so it went on. In other departments some of the ministerial offices had pictures. It was rather hard to find out how they got there.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: We began to list these and of course we wanted someone to help us. This was the inception of our pressure to get James Mollison as an Exhibitions Officer.

JAMES GLEESON: Ah, I see.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: That was to be the job of the Exhibitions Officer, to find out and to help us. Well things went on and we got a lot of money that first year under Harold Holt, and a lot more the second. It seems that whatever we asked for we got. We got the right to buy things under what were called special arrangements— a necessity. We got the right to bid at auction, which we'd never had before. In fact the Board was really acting as a government department. It had its own budget, it was responsible only to the minister, and we could buy whatever we liked. There was never a—

JAMES GLEESON: It was all brought in under Harold Holt.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: This was started under Harold Holt. Yes. Of course we bought things that what would be today considered a very cheap price. I remember I got a John Perceval for seven hundred and fifty dollars which was not a bad buy, and it was one of those, you know, the cat clawing the boy's face.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: You've got it in the collection.

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JAMES GLEESON: It's one of the major ones.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes. Well, believe it not that was seven hundred and fifty dollars—three hundred and twenty five pounds. I saw that in a dealer's rooms and I said, 'How much?'. This showed you how things had changed since Bob's day. When the dealer said, 'Three hundred ad twenty five pounds', I said, 'Right, that's for the Commonwealth and we'll send you a cheque'. I didn't have to do anything. I didn't even have to refer to the Board.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Because I was only a Board member then. Oh, I was Deputy Chairman.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: All I had to do was report to them at the next meeting and this was ratified and the Government paid the cheque. Not always as promptly as they should have, I must admit. But they did eventually pay. We got together, by the time poor old Harold died, quite a respectable start to the Australian collection. Now, it's somewhere around about here I think that you come into it, James. A bit later, because I think it was under Gorton or a bit later.

JAMES GLEESON: It was when Howson was Minister.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Oh, well that's much later, we'll come to that later, yes. But anyway it started earlier than that, where I was Acting Director and I must say I was very active. Daryl, with whom I was on pretty close terms, used to leave a lot to me. I think it's only fair to say that Daryl in this area was a great salesman, which I am not. But Daryl was, and Daryl I think was right to concentrate on this when he found that he had what could be called a willing—and I hope he considered loyal—assistant in me. So I set about trying to change the policy of the Board, which you must remember by now was acting pretty well as an autonomous department.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: I wanted its buying policy broadened beyond the Australian scene, and of course by this time the Melanesian scene, that was in it too. But I wanted it ever broader than that. We only had 4 people on the Board at that time. I wanted it enlarged. Well, with a bit of a struggle I got approval—and this had to go to the Prime Minister—for a sculptor to be appointed. Now, this I thought was very important because so much sculpture was being commissioned and seen around Canberra. By this time the Commonwealth Gazette came out and there was a simple one-line statement: the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board is charged with the responsibility for all matters pertaining to art in the Commonwealth. Now, you know, you're not a civil servant, but that was a very

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pregnant statement. That meant we were the authorities. Everything that was done had to be referred to us. Again this increased our workload. It meant that the National Capital Development Commission had to refer its suggestions about sculpture to us. The people who were building the airports had to refer to us about what—

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Now, where was I at? Can you remember? No. I think I can go on. Well I was talking about, you know, the enormously increased range of responsibilities we had. We were responsible for everything pertaining to art. This to me meant that we had to have a Board with more breadth. Not only did we need a sculptor, but there was not doubt in my mind that we were rightly seen by most Australians as being fairly conservative. I don't quite know why because both Daryl and Bob were very much in sympathy with, you know, newly emerging ideas. The thing is they weren't seen to be in sympathy, and there's a big difference. Now I felt that the important thing was to get someone on the Board who would be known as in sympathy with these things. Eventually of course we got Tas Drysdale. Which to me is rather ironic, because I think that Tas, a great friend, I hope he's a great friend of mine still, Tas is really an intensely conservative artist.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Very. How anybody could have called him a modern in a strict sense of the term is beyond me, any more than Bill Dobell could have been considered modern. But, anyway, this I felt was a step forward. Of course, Cliff Last when he came on—and Cliff, you notice I've got one of his spirit things over there—he was very good technically. Unfortunately he and Daryl didn't get on together.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Daryl was Chairman and that, so. But, still, Cliff really pulled his weight. But I wanted to get you on and I wanted to get Bert Tucker on, and I really worked at both of these, as you'd probably know.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: But although it seemed possible to get your nomination through, there was some reason why everybody, including some members of the Board, wouldn't have Bert. Now, I've never been able to work this out, but I do remember a Board meeting before you came in when I brought this matter of Bert up, and I suddenly found—this was when I was Chairman, by the way—I suddenly found I had a bit of a revolt on my hands. I won't mention any names, but a couple of them said they just wouldn't work with him. Now I've never been able to understand this because I found Bert a highly intelligent man.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, I always have too.

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SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes, highly intelligent and he represents a certain theme which has run through modern Australian art which is very important. Anyway, I always regretted that. But we did, as you know, manage to get the enlarged Board, and Daryl eventually resigned, and under Gorton there was a certain amount of thunder and lightning. Well by that time I think it was getting pretty close to when you came on the Board. You'll remember we had a big collection. We didn't have it properly stored. We had our problems under McMahon. Not because of McMahon himself, but because the administrative change which sent the Board, still retaining its autonomy, down to the most junior of ministries instead of being with the most senior, had a certain effect which didn't help us. Yes, I remember you came on under Peter Howson.

JAMES GLEESON: That's right, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Well, this was of course getting toward the end of the Art Advisory Board's existence. But in the meantime, of course, the Gallery itself had been designed, and we were starting to build it. I would be inclined to sum it all up by saying that it was this thread which had run right through the whole history of the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, the building of a gallery, this was the thing which brought about in the end the Gallery itself. And more or less as the more optimistic members of the old Art Advisory Board earlier on had envisaged it. They'd never seen it as a rather parochial place.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: They'd seen it as a gallery which had to reflect in some way Australia both internally and externally. I know very little about what's going on now.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, much the same policies are being pursued here in Australia. Its own art is the core of the collection, but Australia in its geographical situation as a Pacific nation is again a central theme.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Oh I'm glad to hear that.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Oceanic art, Asian art, South-East Asian art, and extending across the Pacific to pre-Columbian and west to African Negro art, so that your work on the primitive field has really borne great fruit in that new order.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Oh, I'm pleased to hear that. Of course, toward the end, and before you came on board James, the fact that the Board was still carrying on more or less with its old style, and yet we would have, I mentioned earlier, two or three meetings a year Frank McKenna said. One or two, he said. It had grown until we were having monthly meetings of two and three days, and we had agendas which I've still got, which are up to three inches thick with their supporting documents. We had to make decisions about the sculpture, murals, paintings for airports, for official overseas residences. Well, there was so much.

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Exhibitions which were sent overseas, we had to find some way of getting them together, getting them out, we had to deal with the matters of insurance. We were getting exhibitions in from overseas. We had to arrange for these to go around the circuit of the State National Galleries as we had none in Canberra. This was putting an enormous workload on the members of the Board.

JAMES GLEESON: When did you get a permanent secretary? Can you remember?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: We never had a permanent secretary to the very end of the old Art Advisory Board. He was also the Secretary for the Music Board, the Literature Board, and he had Prime Ministerial duties too.

JAMES GLEESON: Goodness me.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: So that's why I said we had a quarter of a secretary, a quarter in Valda Leehy, a quarter of a stenographer/typist and probably a little bit of typing assistance. We were spending in the end over a million dollars a year on art. Now, any organisation with that expenditure, it should have a staff.

JAMES GLEESON: Of course, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Well we didn't. In consequence, really the first one to crack up was poor old Doug Campbell. Now I shouldn't say poor old Doug Campbell, those are nasty adjectives, because I was terribly fond of Bob. If I can interpolate a little personal experience here. I've always regarded Bob as one of the most lyrical painters we've ever had in Australia. Something that Australia sadly lacks, because a lot of Australian artists, as you know James, are a bit ponderous.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Bob wasn't that, he had an intimate lyrical response to landscape in both watercolour and oils. I felt that he had wasted his life giving conscientious service to a state art gallery and the Board. I remember one day I said, 'Bob I wish you'd get out of all this because I think you're a beautiful painter and I just wish you hadn't become a director and you just painted your pictures, which I love'. I always remember I'd said the wrong thing because Bob nearly broke down.

JAMES GLEESON: Really?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: You know, a waste of talent in these things.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

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SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Anyway, I had an insight into what I consider the cruel side of government over this because we had a meeting in Melbourne. We knew that Bob wasn't all that well, but he was, you know, still doing a great job. He collapsed at this meeting, and I'll never forget it. In the Melbourne Government offices—but yes I have to say this—there seemed to be little regard for what was happening. It was only when I got my own personal physician, who dropped something else in Collins Street, to come up, we managed to get Bob into the Freemasons Hospital and get in touch with his wife, because actually I thought he'd had a terminal stroke.

JAMES GLEESON: Good lord!

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: I wanted the government to do something about this. You know in the way of, you know in those days, pay his hospital bills.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Get him back to Adelaide, you know, perhaps by an ambulance. As I was Chairman at the time I was told quite plainly that we were expected to, in these circumstances, if we became ill or anything happened, we were supposed to have our own insurance or whatever it was, but that was no concern of the government's. I've never forgotten that. But Bob was the first one to crack up. Then Doug Pratt started to go downhill. Now, I suppose a lot of people have got an image in their mind of Doug Pratt, who is the arch conservative. In fact, he was the most persistent supporter of everything that he felt was worthwhile, even though it were experimental, and he made some purchases for the collections. I think a lot of people would be surprised to see his name. If you put the names of those who purchased various things on them, you may be surprised to see some of things that Doug bought. He was a very good man in every way.

JAMES GLEESON: He was indeed. I was very fond of him.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes. Well Doug started to crack up, and then eventually died. By this time Daryl was out of it. There's no doubt Daryl wasn't in very good shape. We had been overworked.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Now I was by that time Chairman. Well by the time the Board came to the end of its existence, I had honestly had quite enough. You may remember James I used to say, and Tas used to say, we were handing over, we wanted to get out. In fact, I'd got to the stage where I was plainly irritable and I felt that a lot of things we were doing, I was wondering whether they were worthwhile. Of course I wear this other hat, you know, which is more scientific discipline. I was getting increasingly impatient with areas of judgement

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where the only scale was a scale of value judgements, and there were no objective judgements whatever.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Where nothing could be tested, everything depended on whim and fashion. I was quite clear in my own mind though, I was approaching it in a purely ethnographic way. You know, if anything came up, well it was different, let's have it as a record. It can go into the anthropological record eventually. I remembered what Benedetto Croce had said about aesthetic judgements, that they were—what was it?—purely intuitional perceptions entirely devoid of any cognitive knowledge. That disgusted me, and I thought this is the area where I find myself after all this time. It was a wrong judgement in my mind. But that was how I felt and I was turning with increasing relief to the area, or the ethnographic side of Melanesian art where I not only had an emotional attachment, because I get that intuitional sort of response. But where I could bring in standards, objective standards of judgement, where I could compare with my peers in this area, this thing and that, and we could agree or disagree but on an accepted standard.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: So this was how I would regard the end of the Art Advisory Board as far as I was concerned. My part in it, I think, really came to an end before it was wound up. Because I was out of sympathy, I was annoyed with the administrative procedures, I felt it had to be taken over or should have been taken over long ago and made a part of government, where in fact the Board would have retreated back to being an advisory body, and there would have been a staff to carry out under ministerial direction the recommendations of the Boards. The original role of the Board was correct. The latter one was, in my opinion, quite wrong. It was in plain fact an executive body of government. I hope I've made that clear.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, you have.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes. So that when it was terminated by Whitlam, I think sometimes the right thing is done for the wrong reasons. This was perhaps the best thing that could have happened, although I think the one thing that was lost, and I think it was a very important thing, Whitlam lost the unity of judgement which the Board had brought to the arts in Australia. Not only the art being acquired for the Gallery, but the control of decoration in public places, overseas posts, the exhibitions going in and out of Australia. I feel that unified advisory policy was a very good thing and it was a retrograde step to destroy it. Now, I'm quite well aware there is the Gallery, there's the Visual Arts Board, there's Foreign Affairs, I think even the Department of Works, they've all gone back to their own—

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JAMES GLEESON: Separate departments.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes, with their unofficial advisers, some of them of no competence whatever I'm afraid, none whatever. That was bad. So the Board played a certain part, but it must be remembered that it got to a situation that was never envisaged in the early days. In Bob Menzies days it was an advisory board. From Harold Holt's time onward, increasingly it undertook executive functions. Mind you, in theory the Secretary was always there to say, 'Well I don't think you should do that, I don't think you should do this'. But this was very rarely done and as the thing steam-rolled on, and especially after I became Chairman, and Bill Cumming the Secretary, well it was only on the rarest occasions we were going to the Minister. I mean the sort of thing we went to the Minister about was the purchase of the Mann collection. Anything less than that, the expenditure of hundreds of thousands of dollars, which was going into our Melanesian collection, you know, when we had the people sitting down for six months or more, trained anthropologists in the New Hebrides and the Parare Delta, and up on Green River off the Sepik, the money was just pouring out. Nobody questioned this. Nobody questioned it, except the Treasury wanted properly audited accounts.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, exactly.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Nothing more than that. Provided you could show where you spent six cents, that was fair enough.

JAMES GLEESON: Bill, at what stage was the actual building of a National Gallery contemplated? Was this the result of the Lindsay Report?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: No. No. No. The Lindsay Report was the result of pressure for a building. It started in Will Ashton's time. This was when we used to go up to Canberra, we'd have a day meeting and we'd probably stay till next morning. At that time—and Will was fairly active—we used to wander around Canberra a bit. We all used to stay at the Hotel Canberra, Canberra Hotel. Hotel Canberra, that's right. In those days Capital Hill caught our eye because it was a common thing for Bob and myself—we were the two most active to walk up there in the morning. Will knew about it, and Daryl knew about it. A sort of idea coalesced in our collective head, that you could have two or three small buildings around this, the top of it. This would make an admirable gallery, and you could probably have something else, a little museum. Nothing very large. As Will used to say, 'For three quarters of a million pounds we could have a beautiful little gallery up there'. We could see it, and we used to talk about it, and we used write little letters and talk to Bob Menzies about it. Bob, who had pretty good ideas on this, he said, 'Oh well, I've set up the National Capital Development Commission, and they're the ones who have to give you a site'. At this time Daryl was appointed a member of the National Capital Advisory Planning Committee, to which I succeeded him. Consequently he was able to push it there, so it got on the agenda there.

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JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Every now and then he'd say, 'Well they've got around to thinking about it. They say they'll think about it for the next meeting'. That would be in another six weeks. He'd report back to us you know, no, you couldn't have it on the hill, we may have it on that part, on the other side of Civic Centre, perhaps along Northbourne Avenue. No, that would be no good. Now down by the lake. No. Then there was always something. It was shifted about all over the place, or in one of the newer suburbs. Nothing was settled. But by the time I got on the National Capital Planning Committee the Lindsay report was through. Harold Holt was pressing for something to be done. In other words, he was pressing the National Capital—

JAMES GLEESON: Development Commission.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Was he pressing them for a new site for the Houses of Parliament, new houses of Parliament?

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Of course where the Houses of Parliament went, to some extent, was going to dictate where the gallery went. This was the big argument, you know, once Parliament was going to be down where the Gallery and the High Court is now. But that was thrown out by Parliament itself. This put all the plans back because the National Capital Development Commission had in fact given us Capital Hill, you know, to build around it.

JAMES GLEESON: I see, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: That had to be scrapped because some members of Parliament, after throwing out the lakeside area, were talking about the Hill as they are now.

JAMES GLEESON: As Parliament House?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes. So then—and actually I think by the skin of our teeth—when I was on that Planning Committee, it got through and the Cabinet accepted it, the Gallery would go down on that site. From that moment we started to plan.

JAMES GLEESON: Do you remember the year?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: That would be under Gorton.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes. Gorton appointed an Interim Council and I was the sort of executive person on that, and also liaison between the National Capital

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Development Commission and the Interim Council. The Interim Council, well we proceeded to get designs going and we were a bit irritated that the National Capital Development Commission had picked an architect and we'd had no say in it. But these are the sort of things. Anyway, I met Madigan and I formed a very favourable impression of him.

JAMES GLEESON: Was it the result of a competition?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: No.

JAMES GLEESON: It wasn't?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Oh, there was a sort of competition and Madigan and his associates prepared—like most architects will do, given half a chance when they don't know the site and something—you know a pretty sort of thing that would have been absolutely hopeless as an art gallery. But it was pretty and apparently it satisfied the current ideas of architecture of the National Capital Development people at the time, although some members of the Interim Council were pretty restive over this, Daryl especially. I had a talk with Madigan and I realised, you know, he really knew what he was about and there was no worries there as far as I was concerned. At this time we managed to get—well there was some trouble over the Directorship, which for some reason I've never been able to work out. Gorton, who was Prime Minister, was pretty reluctant to appoint a chap that only a majority of the Interim Council wanted.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: It was one of those things. Anyway, I wasn't greatly worried about this, although some of the members of the Interim Council were. I suppose I wasn't greatly worried because the gallery was sort of going. We needed a Director, certainly. But Madigan was on his preliminary designs, we were writing the brief, or rather we were writing the brief and we were getting up to where he could start his preliminary designs and the finance was being organised, and all that sort of thing. So I wasn't greatly concerned except that I thought if things got a bit too noisy, Gorton might say well, you know, 'We'll just stop this for a while'. I was a bit afraid of that. However, in the end Jim Mollison of course had been working pretty hard on this, and I think more or less by accident he became sort of Acting Director—that's the best way to put it—simply because he was there. I mean, if you bear in mind what I was saying that all the old Commonwealth Art Advisory Board were doing these things for nothing. My own man of affairs, he used to get livid with me. I remember one of those years, he said, 'I'd like you to know that your little hobby'—that's what he used to call it—he said, 'Your little hobby is costing you about twenty five thousand dollars a year'. Well I found out it was afterwards. So with Jim around, and Jim was a very hard worker, even though he had his attacks of nerves at the time. I always remember one of my most vivid memories of James is him sitting down to write out his resignation. I'd come on him about something or rather, and I'd say,

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'James what are you doing?' or 'Can I see you about this?'. 'I'm writing my resignation'.

JAMES GLEESON: Who brought James Johnson Sweeney to advise?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: National Capital.

JAMES GLEESON: NCDC.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes, the NCDC.

JAMES GLEESON: At what stage had the design reached then? It hadn't really begun?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: It hadn't really begun. Sweeney was really just giving general large concepts. In fact Sweeney, I was a little bit disturbed when there was a move to make him the Director.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: That disturbed me a bit. I didn't like to speak out because I got on well with Sweeney. Well I got on largely because we had a common interest in primitive art. I've still got somewhere or other a letter that I received from him when he said, 'This gallery will stand or fall on its collection and display of Melanesian art'. He said, 'Any gallery in the world can have a collection of modern art, any gallery in the world if it has enough money can have a collection of European Renaissance art. But you are in a unique position and you should build on this strength'. So naturally I liked that, I liked it. But I don't think he had very much influence on any detail of the design.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Sweeney was very good at the big beautiful generalisation. You must build for yourselves a flexible space container. You know, that sounds wonderful until you run into the practical problems, you know. Still it's not a bad measuring stick when you're putting something in, you know: how flexible is it? It brings you back, you know, we're getting around to designing a new museum here in Melbourne.

JAMES GLEESON: No, I didn't know.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Oh we are, yes. I couldn't help thinking that when I was up there the other day and going around the dungeons, as we call them, all the unopened boxes and all the problems we've got. In the talking to the herpetologist who's now in his forties and still in the same small room he came into as a lad of 19 with his collection. You know the flexible space container is a wonderful idea, but—

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JAMES GLEESON: Difficult to make work.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Difficult to make it work. Anyway, I think that was Sweeney's role. He came out every now and then and, well, the thing just went ahead and the last real problem I had—I have to talk about myself, you know.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, of course.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Because the Chairman was the one who was expected under these successive Prime Ministers to work almost like a head of a department.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: It was taken for granted. As a matter of fact, when Peter Howson became Minister he started to treat me like a head of department. Once or twice he tried to bounce me. As if I were, you know, a permanent public servant. I don't blame him for that because how was he to know. I was there all the time, I was spending, you know, I'd be up there up to about seven months of the year.

JAMES GLEESON: Good lord!

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: You know, not only for meetings, but you know to run things. Now, what was I going to say there? It must have been about the development of the Gallery. Oh yes, the last and most difficult thing was trying to find a store. Now, you'll remember this.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Well, I thought of all the things I've ever been engaged in in Canberra, that was when I came closest to driving me really mad. We had an enormous collection by that time.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. No, I know.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: As James Mollison said, 'It was an all but complete collection of Australian art', and we had a lot of other things as well. We had some beautiful South East Asian work, and Indian, and it was shoved in the oddest places.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, rooms here and there all over the place.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes. I found this place in Fyshwick and, well, I'm a practical man. Well, in my time I was the Executive Director of a very big public company which handled a lot of money. I simply couldn't understand this, because when I was Director of TV Victoria, the Executive Director, if we wanted

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a building, if we wanted one down in South Melbourne, I had look around one day and I said, 'Right, we'll have it, fix it up'. We moved in there next week.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Well, I found this place at Fyshwick. Bill Cumming, I remember, was the Secretary at the time. I said, 'It will do, we need a few things done but we can at least get the things in there even if they're wrapped'. I thought we'd be in there in a month. It was 18 months. God knows what the delays were about. It had to go through this, that and the other thing. There were priorities, I was told, about other buildings. Other people had claims on space. That sticks in my mind as the most infuriating, frustrating thing I've ever had to deal with in Canberra. All the other things were fairly human. But this was purely administrative and I was at one remove, because the Secretary, Bill Cumming, was gathering the information. I was really fighting other departments for some space that had become available. I'd never thought of this before.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, now that's expanded. There's five bays now in use, as well as the rotunda which has the library and the office staff and so on. So it's really expanded, as it needs to do.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes, oh yes. But that was that last year. Tas and I had worked it out, we were going to retire in June that following year. I don't know why we'd fixed on June. I think it may have had something to do with the full financial year. We felt we had a certain responsibility for having drawn up the budget or something like that. I can't remember at this time. But Tas and I were agreed, and we had you then, and we had Freddy Williams, Cliff Last.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: You know, we felt we'd got the new generation in and it was certainly time that we went. I think when you know that you're coming to the end of a thing, you do start to get pretty impatient.

JAMES GLEESON: Well Tas told me the same thing, that he had made up his mind to retire before, you know, that happened.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes, yes.

JAMES GLEESON: So that it was simply a carrying out of his intention anyway.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes, yes. Well it was the same with me too. The only thing of course—and I suppose it should be for the record—was the way Whitlam did it, which was incredibly dirty.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes. I remember you saying when you came back, 'It's a very cold wind that blows down through the corridors of power'.

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SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Oh yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I remember that day very distinctly.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes, yes. But, oddly enough, when I got back to Melbourne it was with enormous relief that I realised, you know, that I was free and free with honour. If I'd hesitated for a moment, you know, I would have had regrets. But of course then it was just in time, you know, with a new Labour government. I got back our business affairs. Well, my man said to me, the manager, he said, 'What do you think of the new government, what's going to happen?'. It suddenly dawned on me that of course I had to—after the beautiful coasting along we'd had, you know, when there was practically no inflation, you could plan ahead—I had to look objectively at what might happen, and look to our own affairs. This was where I was very pleased that with all the Canberra experience—perhaps it was luck—I made the three right decisions up to the end of 1975. So we had no trouble at all.

JAMES GLEESON: (inaudible)

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Oh no, we did awfully well, doing awfully well.

JAMES GLEESON: Good.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: But it did depend on making the right decisions.

JAMES GLEESON: By that time you were free to concentrate on—

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: I was free, yes. It was only a matter of thinking and, unlike the things in Canberra, if I said, 'Look, we've got to get into real estate, we've got to get this much, we've got to get it quickly, because there'll be an enormous boom with the Labour people', because I'd read the policy very carefully. I said, 'It must happen'. I said, 'Then there'll be a squeeze'. I said, 'We've got to be into real estate and out in a certain time'. So they did this and we got out just before the credit squeeze in cash. So things went pretty well. I couldn't have done it if I'd still been in Canberra.

JAMES GLEESON: No, no. Looking back over it all it seems to me that by the time you did leave the institution of which you were the Chairman had grown to such an extent that it really did have to sub-divide into other groups.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Oh yes.

JAMES GLEESON: I don't think, certainly not with the kind of staff that it had, it could cope with all the workload that it had to cope with.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: No, no.

JAMES GLEESON: How it managed for so long, I don't know.

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SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes. Oh yes, I absolutely agree. The only thing I think that was wrong about this was that what I mentioned earlier.

JAMES GLEESON: It was lost, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes. They lost an over-riding watchdog, if you like to call it, on policy.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: An advisory body, not an executive body. That was the trouble with the Art Advisory Board in the end. It was—I said it several times—it was in effect behaving like a government department, or part of a government department with the Members of the Board working. Not making decisions, working. I remember drawing up—I did it on my big drawing board here, sitting up until about three o'clock in the morning for about five nights—the flow chart that we'd have to consider, the basic flow chart for the construction of the gallery, to take this to the Interim Council. The simple reason being that the NCDC had other things, they couldn't do it. I've had a fair bit of administrative experience and I was able to do it. You know, when we need this, when we need that, when staff should come on. Well, this shouldn't have been what I was doing.

JAMES GLEESON: No, of course not, no.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Or any member of the Board, or any member of the Interim Committee. So, as you say, yes, they had to have the staff, they had to be sub-divided. I think that today you're really going through some teething troubles.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, we are. Again, one of the big problems is lack of staff to do all the things that need to be done in order to reach opening day at the Gallery.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: I don't know whether this should go on the record or not—you can wipe it off. But when I was up there having a look around I felt, James, that you have just as great a problem in storage and conservation as we had in our worst days.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: If you're going to open a gallery at the end of 1980, I don't see how in the world you're going to get those pictures up to display standard.

JAMES GLEESON: An enormous problem. We really are aware of it. We've fought Public Service Board for the lifting of the ceilings. We are in a desperate situation because of the lack of staff. We've got one conservator.

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SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: You're lucky to have him.

JAMES GLEESON: It's a her.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: And she's not terribly good.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, I think she's all right.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Is she?

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Only with a certain kind of work, and she'll only tackle work before, say, about 1900. She doesn't like to work with modern things, but older works she is familiar with and her results are good. But one person to deal with that collection, which is now, the Australian collection, is probably as big as Melbourne's or Sydney's.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Oh, it must be. Well, it was worth five million when I reported to Gorton. He got me to value it.

JAMES GLEESON: Yes. Well, it's grown considerably since then.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes. Oh yes, I think you've got your problems.

JAMES GLEESON: Oh, there's no doubt about that. But then I suppose every institution always has.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Yes. I'm sorry to say James that's one of the things I'm grateful I'm no longer connected with it. But I can see some other people having—I feel like the man looking over the fence, you know, at somebody working in the road.

JAMES GLEESON: Well, Bill, thanks very much for your thoughts.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: I think that more or less covers my recollections. Of course detailed recollections, I've got this mass of papers. I think that when the Gallery is built, when it's going, somebody at some time in the future—because there's a proliferation of these PHD's—is going to write the history of this, and all of my detailed papers will then be available to them. At the moment we've got a lot of stuff stored in a bank vault.

JAMES GLEESON: I see.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: They're there.

JAMES GLEESON: Well look perhaps I'll tell you something that is on the way at the moment. Oxford University Press have approached us to bring out a book to coincide with the opening of the Gallery. Now, it's not going to be simply a history of the Gallery from 1900 to the present day. But it's going to have, say, the first

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two chapters dealing with that. Then it will cover the building and the various collections. It will be a general book, but it will have two chapters devoted to the history. Now, we've been looking. It's impossible to find one person to write such a book because it has so many departments it needs specialists in different areas. I was wondering if you knew anybody, a historian, a social historian, who would be interested in doing that, those two chapters or that area of the history of the National Gallery?

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: No one comes to my mind at the moment particularly.

JAMES GLEESON: Well if you do think of someone—

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: But I tell you, in view of what I've been talking about, about the old Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, I hope that when it's opened, somebody has the common humanity to put the names of Will Ashton, Daryl Lindsay, Bob Campbell, Doug Pratt, and I suppose to a great extent myself, but I don't care about that. These should be recorded as the initiators—

JAMES GLEESON: Of the scheme.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Of the whole scheme. It should be a plaque or something like that.

JAMES GLEESON: I think that's a marvellous idea.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: Well I think it should be done because, although I did a lot of work, I didn't do the basic hard work. It was Will Ashton, and it was Daryl Lindsay who really got successive Prime Ministers just up and over that hump, this thing which had been talked about since our first Prime Minister. Another thing, this is just a little post script to what I was saying about the Art Advisory Board. Bob Menzies, John Gorton, Harold Holt, and McMahon, all came around to the policy that there should never be an appointment to the Art Advisory Board unless the person appointed was a full time practicing artist. There were to be no other people but artists.

JAMES GLEESON: That's a pretty revolutionary rule.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: There were to be no others. There were to be no directors. You may laugh at this, James, but I went even further in a way. I said I didn't want anybody on the Board who didn't have private means. I think it was Peter Howson asked me why, because it seemed a really extreme statement, I said, 'I think there are going to be great problems of principle that will have to be decided, or resolved. I'd like to feel that somebody who objected to this or that or the other thing, instead of going along, would just resign because they'd know it didn't mean twopence to them'. I think I was a bit extreme but at the time I could see certain things coming up.

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JAMES GLEESON: Yes, yes.

SIR WILLIAM DARGIE: In fact they didn't eventuate so I won't go into them. But I thought they would come up. Especially at the time when the Interim Council wasn't performing perhaps as well as it should have been. I felt that it was the first time I'd really come in contact with people who weren't artists but who valued the social position. Now this is the disaster that overtakes every institution, it becomes social. Now at present, with our museum here where I'm on the Board, we only have representatives of various disciplines. We're of course the new museum we're talking about getting a friend of the museum, as we get friends society.