Transcript of excerpts from *Interview with Vai Stanton* video

Excerpt 1

**Stanton:** Well I started working at Bagot in 1964.

... A lot of things that I had concerns about were just sort of basic human rights things.

1972 when the Whitlam government was in power and I was asked to be on that advisory – Bill Hayden’s advisory for Social Security – I really liked that, I really enjoyed that. It was a whole lot of things that helped me too, to understand how to go about highlighting issues and I also learnt myself how to get to the point. Like, there was lots of things happening at Bagot. I’d work out exactly what was the things I could take to the Social Security Council meeting. Anything that, you know, hinged on them. I even asked about the way people are classified to get the pension. It was terrible! There was old people that were working on the place, on training allowances. And I thought quite a few of them were entitled – I felt – to be on a pension.

There was one old man, for example from Blue Mud Bay. I’ve got a story about him and I want you to read it. And they’d call him Old Bob. He’s got a big long name and I’ll show it to you. But he used to – actually Marty, he had a broken spine or something, he could only drag himself around on his haunches. But he used to work on Bagot. He used to sit on a piece of old bag and he used to weed the gardens. And he did weeding and he pulled the grass and he used to get a training allowance. A very dear old man, with grey hair and a grey beard – I can tell you! Now for the life of me, I wondered why that man had to be in that position, to drag himself around, to get a few miserly pounds.

**Kamener:** A training allowance is less than a pension. Yeah? Is it?

**Stanton:** It was less than the basic award [wage]. There was no award for Aboriginal people.

They were the things I brought up to Social Security. Now, we got some people qualifying for pensions or for benefits because they could qualify. They were eligible, but nobody did anything about it or whatever, you know.

Excerpt 2

**Stanton:** They knew it as children that their mother’s mail had been opened. And others would pipe up and say, ‘Yes, my grandmother’s used to’. So it went back generations. So, there you go. I mean, I wouldn't know. One of the things that … I mean I couldn’t date that. So they just knew that, it was just part of it. Me telling them something different was strange and we had to check it. ‘Is that right? Is that true Olgo? Is that a fact Olgo? Olgo I didn't know that.’ And then I’d say, ’Believe me, that is true. I wouldn’t tell you anything if I didn’t think that it was right. It is true. You cannot … Nobody can open your mail.’ ‘Well if that’s the case, I'll just go up there and tell so-and-so.’ And I said, ‘No, how we’ll do it: everyone of youse here, you must be committed to this. If I go up there and make a complaint that I don’t want so-and-so from the office opening Betty’s mail, and Joanies’s mail, or Judy’s or Kathy’s or whatever, you know what they’re going to do? They're going to tell me to go and have a funny run! … As much as I’d like that position to be right, you’ve got to want it as much as I do.’ Then one woman said, ‘I’m going.’ … ‘Now if it’s true, and what you're telling us is right Olgo, well then I'm going too.’ I was telling you Marty, there were nine women.

So those women said ‘right’. We made a plan for when that mail, which was coming on – whether it was a Wednesday or a Thursday, I suppose we worked strategies [chuckles]. We decided on that big mail day with the social security mail, or whatever it was, that would come in on a Thursday or whatever.

‘Well I’m, for one, going to do it.’ This is one of them. ‘Me too, me too.’ So, well individually, they all made a decision and decided they would. And then – you see when the mail used to come in they used to – the woman used to take it out, extract the rent, or whatever it was, and document it in the book. It was all supposed to be done very – well I suppose it was done properly. Cheque number, who it was to, and all that, it was all recorded in the register. From there the people would go down to the shop to do their shopping, while they had their money, cheque.

But while they were up at the office and they’d check for their mail or whatever, the women would say – one started off – ‘When the mail comes today, I don’t want my mail opened please.’ And the woman said, ‘Look, you know it’s got nothing to do with me. It’s my job, and I've got to do that.’ Well it went on like this, and as one and another one stepped up and said, ‘Well never mind. I don't want you to open it. Just don’t open it. I'm telling you.’ And then when she realised, one, two, three and they were all coming up, she realised that there was something afoot. She races and gets the manager. The manager comes out. ‘What’s all this about? What’s all this bullshit?’ – or whatever. ‘This is her job. You don’t tell her how to do her job. She’s got to do this. If you want to have a complaint or whatever—’ Then he realised something's afoot … he go to the superintendent. Ok. Right, then the other fella that comes out from the superintendent’s office, he comes out. ‘Now what’s all this? Now come on, she’s only doing her job. If you’ve got some complaint, or grievance, you go and see the old fella. Don’t harass her here, she’s got a job to do.’ ‘Okay, that’s fine, that’s alright, I don’t mind. But I’m just telling you now, you’re the manager, I don’t want her to open my mail.’ ‘It’s got nothing to do with me. You see the boss, see the boss.’

Well it all come up of course … they put two and two together. But one of the men that we’d told about, he came up and when the girl – he used to come by and we’d offer him morning tea and he’d come in. We were all having [tea] and one of the women said to him, ‘Do you know …’ and started to tell him, ‘Did you know that people are not allowed to open your mail? Did you know that? Olgo told us.’ ‘Is that right?’ Well he didn’t know.

So anyway he said, ‘Well I’m in it. I’m going to say the same.’ First time we thought men came in on it.

He decided – he was the courier and had to go pick up the mail and everything like that, and go into town for odds and ends. Anyway he walked in, waltzed in, got the mail bag and the keys off the place where they kept it, going to do his courier run. And as he walked past, he said to the woman, on the counter, ‘I’m going now. I’m going to pick up the mail and all that,’ he said. ‘But I’m telling you before I come back, I don't want my mail opened.’ [Laughs] Well, it was all part of the [same] thing and it just had happened with all the women. The manager came out and said, ‘Now look here, look here!’ Called him by name and said, ‘Look you can’t!’ And he kept walking out. He said, ‘If you can't give me any assurance about this,’ he said and he's walking away with the mail bag and the key, ‘if you can't give me any assurances about that,’ he said, ‘I’ll go out, I’ll pick up the mail, I’ll pull up halfway down the street there and I'll open every bastard’s mail that’s in this bag.’ And with that he went off in a flurry of dust and took off. ‘Oh, c-c-call him back!’ Too late, he’s gone. Well that was it. That was, just those few women, and that one man, and that was the start of all that …That was the very beginning where the people took a stand against that administrative office. That mail thing. And I had actually taken that to that Social Security in Canberra. And they said – and I told the people – ‘Yeah, there is a big fine if they open your mail.’ What the outcome of that was, well those people’s mail weren’t opened – none of them.

Then not terribly long after that, she came over, quite breathless. ‘They’re refusing to negotiate my cheque now. They won’t change it at the shop.’ ‘What?!’ That was the normal practice. They used to change it down the shop, you see. I said, ‘What did they say?’ ‘They just told us they’re not going to change our cheques.’ I said, ‘Oh well, I'll come over with you because I’m very interested in this.’ So I walked over and the other women were standing there because only one had came back to tell me. And they’re all waiting there – a little knot of them to just see.

As soon as the woman working at the counter saw me, she just looked at me and said, ‘Look I don’t want any trouble here, this is …’ And I said, ‘Look there’s so problem.’ I said, ‘I don’t know why you’re getting agitated.’ She identified me straight away as coming in where there was a problem. And I said to her, ‘Well there’s no problem. Not from our end of it. I really want to know, I mean, somebody just told me that this is the first time they’ve been knocked back for cashing their cheques here.’ And she said, ‘Look I don’t know. Look, really, don’t involve me, but we been told—’ ‘Who told you?’ ‘Well we just got a direction from the office. And it’s got nothing to do with me. I mean, if they want to say anything, then they’ve got to go and see Mr Wilson.’ ‘But please, you explain to me why because previously you used to. Now why can’t you?’ ‘Oh, well you see it’s because the superintendent always stamped … there was always a stamp on the back of a cheque where he endorses it and that is why we can do it then.’ ‘Oh is that right? Oh well, I didn’t know that. I’m sorry, but I didn’t know that,’ I’m saying to her. And so she felt a little bit mollified about that, quite good. ‘Oh yes, you see, and because this hasn’t been opened, so therefore it can’t have the superintendent’s stamp on it.’ ‘Oh, I see. Please explain to me why the superintendent’s stamp has to be on the back of, say Joy’s cheque for example.’ ‘Ah … oh well! You see it’s because a lot of the people can’t sign their names, or... or…’ ‘Well what do you do in the case where people can’t sign?’ ‘Well we take their thumbprint and things like that.’

‘Well explain to me now. This woman here now and that woman there and that one, that one, that one, they’ve been to school, they know how to sign. They can sign their cheques. They can do it.’ ‘Oh Vai, look please, I don’t know but—’, and she was completely harassed about it. She was so upset, uptight about it. I said, ‘Well look I fail to see why these women cannot endorse their own cheque.’ ‘Alright.’ And then she started getting tearful, and crying, saying ‘Please understand, I don't know.’ And she went to pieces on us. So we said, ‘Leave it. That’s it. We made our point.’ I said, ‘You going to negotiate the cheque?’ ‘No, no, no.’ She couldn’t. She couldn't operate. So, we went to find out about that. I said, ‘For the life of me I don't know why those people couldn’t endorse their own cheque.’ And that's one of the things that I took up to Social Security.

Now I think that practice ceased after that.