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## A new approach to industrial relations

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**T**his column recently foreshadowed major changes to Australian industrial law and labour relations as likely to flow from election of a federal coalition government. Since then, the trend has gathered speed with tabling in the federal parliament of the new government's *Workplace relations bill*. It broadly confirms our previous forecasts.

There is no doubt that a shake-up of employment policy sits at the top of prime minister Howard's reform agenda. But of course it cannot be assumed from this that either the institutions or the characteristics of Australia's labour market have remained unchanged over recent years. In fact, the nation's workforce and its workplaces are already fundamentally different. Huge changes have occurred and the government's new approach will need to address them if it is to succeed.

For example, changes in the pattern of labour supply have seen a rise from 35 to 55 per cent of married women in the workforce. Simultaneously, employment of men has fallen from 83 to 73 per cent.

A second obvious change concerns the collapse of full-time youth employment. Less than a quarter of 15- to 19-year-olds are now working full-time, compared with around half at the beginning of the 1980s. In the same period, the percentage of teenagers in part-time work has increased from 12 to 32 per cent.

A third marked labour supply shift is in the proportion of workers with post-school qualifications, rising from around a third in 1980 to more than half by the 1990s. The fourth major supply side change concerns the number of employees working longer hours. More than one in five now report working more than forty-nine hours per week compared with one in seven a decade ago. Overwhelmingly, the additional hours are unpaid. Thus we see the paradox of more and more unemployed and under-employed people struggling to find the work they require, while those who do have jobs are working longer in them.

Adjustments in the nature of demand for labour can be seen more generally in the huge increase in the use of part-time and

casual work. In 1970, one in ten workers was employed part-time. Today the proportion is one in four. As well, the past decade has seen a rise in casual work as a proportion of all work from 15 to 23 per cent. In short, the vast majority of new jobs created in the past twenty years have been part time or casual positions. This is a trend that has had a particularly strong effect on ALIA members and librarians generally.

But it is not just on the supply side that the labour market is different. Outcomes have changed, too. In 1975, the lowest-earning ten per cent of workers were paid 76 per cent of median national earnings. Today they receive only 65 per cent. The highest-earning ten per cent of employees received 141 per cent of median earnings in 1975. Today they receive 168 per cent. Moreover, in the same period the highest income tax rate has also fallen from more than 60 cents in the dollar to 48 cents in the dollar, while average and below-average earners have been pushed into higher tax brackets.

In short, the widening of income dispersion in Australia has been substantial, especially by our own historical standards. Yet, while wage differences certainly are growing, they remain more compressed than in most similar countries. Similarly, relative overall average hourly wages of Australian women (89 per cent of men's rates) compare favourably with those in Germany (73 per cent), Britain (78 per cent) and France (81 per cent). Bearing this in mind then, it seems certain that the new government's policy for more flexible wage-fixing policies of the kind used overseas will have implications for existing income relativities, both between high and low wage earners and between men and women.

The other significant difference in recent labour outcomes concerns industrial dispute. Working days lost to industrial disputes in Australia are now less than 20 per cent of the corresponding figure in the mid-1980s and represent only a tiny proportion of the time lost in the 1970s. The government's intention to reduce the rights and the role of trade unions must presumably risk a rise in industrial disputes in the immediate future. Indeed, it is fair to say that even minimal industrial action to oppose the govern-

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ment's new policies will create a severe upturn in the time-lost trend line, given its low starting point. And policies for heavy staff reductions in government employment can be expected to produce more industrial action too.

In the past few weeks I have taken part in various ALIA functions, especially in Queensland and New South Wales. At almost all of them, the dominant questions concerned the impact of the *Workplace relations bill*. It is clear from this and from their telephone enquiries that members everywhere are concerned. The new approach to industrial relations will clearly affect ALIA members along with all other Australian workers. It may be, of course, that the dire forecasts made by some will prove to have been exaggerated. But proposals for a sharply reduced role for trade unions and the Industrial Relations Commission are bound to worry many employees, since they do represent an enormous change to fundamental

Australian traditions. Many would argue that the public interest powers of the Industrial Relations Commission have over the past 90 years played the major role in maintaining the egalitarian society for which Australia is celebrated. It certainly cannot be seriously denied that, in their present form, these policies have the potential to generate real social change in Australia, going far beyond simply the technicalities of industrial relations.

Exactly what library sector employees will face remains unclear, however, because the government's Bill must first clear the Senate before it can become law. That remains some way off, not least because the opposition parties seem determined to amend more controversial sections, especially those affecting the Industrial Relations Commission. Only when the final shape of a new *Workplace relations act* is known will we be able confidently to begin planning strategies to cope with what may be a very different workplace.

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