

What's a job?

Ken Phillips

REMARKETING POLITICS

Quite recently, many of Australia's major daily newspapers extended their battle for readership by beefing up their business sections. Most newspapers have added or expanded small business and business opinion sections and have repositioned business issues within the papers, thus giving business a fresh focus and importance.

Media outlets don't initiate this sort of activity without having undertaken detailed market surveys and profiling of their readers or potential readers. The newspapers must believe that more people want to know what is happening in business and what it means to run a business. The newspapers seek to capture these readers.

This newspaper marketing shift is, in part, more evidence of some significant changes under way in society. The newspapers have identified changes that the Howard Government has also detected.

Put simply, there is a developing social environment in which people no longer see themselves as combatants in a class war when they are at work. The idea of being either a worker or a boss is receding. More and more, people now see themselves as all manner of things: a worker, the boss of themselves, an entrepreneur and an investor, all at the same time. They manage themselves, their own careers and their own work choices. Other people or systems don't do this for them. And this shift in people's approaches to work is happening at every income and demographic level.

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Consequently, people have heightened interest in business issues. And it's not just gossip about big business that they want to know, but rather issues about running a business of all levels, sizes and types. This is what the newspapers are reacting to and hoping to capture. For newspapers, business issues are ceasing to have exclusive appeal to 'elite' managers and investors, and are developing a wider appeal approaching that of the sports pages.

John Howard's political take on this was explained in a speech he gave on 11 July 2005 to the Sydney Institute. The speech received only marginal media coverage but in fact explains a great deal about the repositioning of the Howard Government. In his speech, Howard claimed that there is 'no more important economic development in Australia in the last two decades than the rise of the enterprising worker'.

Significantly, he did not restrict his comment to claims that this is occurring simply with professionals or with the emerging independent contractor community. Rather, he said that the change is a state of mind which is also prevalent within the blue-collar sector and with traditional employees. This is the same, broad cultural shift to which the newspapers are reacting.

If the newspapers and John Howard are correct, this cultural change blasts holes in the ideas and structures of labour law, labour regulation, management philosophy and the prevailing political ethos developed and seemingly set in stone over the last 150 years or so.

The change flips on end the ideas of human resource management developed since the Second World War. It challenges industry associations which thought they were representing 'em-

ployers' against 'workers' but which now find that 'workers' and 'bosses' can be one and the same.

The change makes life difficult for the trade union movement, whose life blood is the maintenance of class consciousness and class warfare in the workplace. It also presents a conundrum for the Australian Labor Party, whose policies have historically targeted 'protection' of 'exploited employees'. Now these easy symbols of 'exploited classes' are being deconstructed by social change.

The most important question, however, is how does this change affect public policy which has long operated on the assumption that there is a controlling class of managers and a controlled class of employees?

What it suggests is that public policy cannot be constructed on the assumption that people neatly fit into classes of employers and employees or any other neat class idea. Regulation cannot assume that the legal and/or academic placing of people into classes reflects how people behave. Consequently, such classification should not determine how people should be regulated.

What it says is that, for regulation to be relevant, it must be class conscious neutral.

This is the big challenge for the Howard Government in its new workplace relations laws, because labour law is the remaining key point at which class-based regulation confronts the cultural shift away from class.

Like newspapers, politics is undergoing a marketing shift underpinned by policy repositioning.

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REVIEW