



## FRAMING THE DEBATE: THE UNIONS' CAMPAIGN

Neale Towart

The union campaign, 'Rights at Work – Worth Fighting For' has struck a chord. The emphasis on rights as workers has connected to people's rights to be a person, not a cog in the productivity machine. The 'Rights at Work' campaign has focused on the right to spend time with family, friends and community and the right to fairness at work. The government has clearly put these rights under threat with its proposed industrial relations legislation. As John Robertson, secretary of Unions NSW, in a speech to a state-wide Sky Channel meeting put it, "what the government is proposing is scary" (Robertson, 2005). Members of the government seem to agree: Glenn Milne in *The Australian* (31-10-05) quotes unnamed MPs saying, "IR is really just off the rails. The public is frightened."

### Frames and Values

George Lakoff's book *Don't Think of an Elephant* (2004) emphasises the importance of how debates are framed. The title of Lakoff's book asks the reader to engage in a thought experiment - not to think of an elephant. Invariably, the reader does, and in doing so, demonstrates the operation and power of frames. This has a political corollary in the example of Richard Nixon proclaiming 'I am not a crook': people forever after assumed that he was. Frames are interpretive structures that influence how we see an issue. Once a frame has been invoked ('an elephant'), attempting to negate or argue against it merely reinforces it. Lakoff's central argument and advice to progressives engaging in contemporary

political debate is therefore not to deal in the language and frames that have already been established. Rather, they should seek to reframe the issue and articulate an alternative, positive, and culturally resonant moral vision.

Similarly, US pollster Vic Fingerhut has observed that in political debate it is important for opposition parties and movements to argue on their own turf, not that of the government's. The goal is to shift the terms of the debate, not by engaging in strike action, not by arguing about the meanings of current account deficits or theories of globalization, but by forcing the government to answer in terms of arguments framed by the values of 'ordinary people' ('the Howard battlers'). The debate can then shift a long way. A US example of the shift in public responses when a question is reframed is that, by merely adding the words 'for working people' to the question 'who is better at managing the economy?', support for the Democrats picked up by 30 percentage points (*Workers Online*, 15 July 2005).

The union movement has, to an extent, already succeeded in framing the debate and the government has been caught off guard and forced to engage on the issue of workplace changes and industrial relations within a hostile framework. As a result the government's responses have been unfocused and contradictory, ranging from assertions that the era of the five day working week society is past, mantras about the declining global competitiveness of the Australian economy, and assertions that the bill will give workers more 'choice' and that ultimately workers will not notice the difference. The government has explicitly stated that we need to lower wages to compete globally. This has undermined the 'relaxed and comfortable' feeling of security that the government has tried to foster and Howard's 'aspirational' voters have been trying to build in their working lives. If all we can aspire to is the wages of workers overseas, and with no right to bargain as a group with workmates, then this is indeed scary to families and working people, to their capacity to repay their mortgage, and to our sense of self in society.

An important part of framing a debate is to build a favorable structure of values into the debate. Former Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke, whilst delivering the Lionel Murphy lecture and attacking the Coalition government's big business agenda in industrial relations, identified some

of the values of the Australian industrial relations system that support worker's rights at work. He describes John Howard's IR plans as:

...an assault on the very core of what generations of our citizens have been proud to boast of at home and abroad as the essence of the Australian character: the fair go; the belief that might is not right; that it is not those already with privilege who should be protected by government but the most vulnerable in our society; the encouragement of enterprise, not exploitation (Bob Hawke, Lionel Murphy Lecture (Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> October 2005).

In contrast, the Business Council of Australia (BCA) has been advocating 'reform' of the industrial relations system ever since its formation. The BCA, composed of CEO's of many of Australia's largest 500 companies, influenced the Hawke-Keating governments, and has used its leverage constantly since the 1980s to push its business agenda. This agenda has been focused on the individual – the 'me' generation. The BCA has been promoting its own frame of values too (BCA 2004). Although the BCA has identified similar shared values as Hawke, its outlook sees Australia moving in a different direction away from these 'bedrock' values. The BCA documented their perspective in a scenario project entitled 'Aspire Australia' released in 2004:

In this scenario we see a dramatic rise in individualism. Australians become increasingly self-interested and see themselves as individuals in a globalised world rather than participants in an Australian community. They pursue individual goals, particularly economic goals, which results in a more competitive society.... As a result of this emphasis on the individual, many Australians could become increasingly disinterested in participation in civic life, particularly at a local level. A political leader who emphasises individualism over social policy, and lowers public spending in favour of tax cuts, will appeal to the great majority. Egalitarianism in the Me World becomes an increasingly irrelevant concept - inequality is more accepted and Australians are reluctant to support programmes to provide equal outcomes for all Australians. Given continued economic prosperity, we feel that this is the most likely scenario for Australia in 2025 (BCA, 2004).

## The Campaign

The union movement has been mounting a successful campaign in the public domain against the changes to industrial relations legislation because it has had a major influence on framing the debate. The notion of the 'fair go', emphasized in the speech by Bob Hawke quoted above, is illustrative of the core values that are fundamental to beliefs about the good society. It contrasts with the explicit attack on fairness by the powerful business lobbyists, and by the government itself. Employment and Workplace Relations Minister Andrews has parroted remarks made by Access Economics in a paper prepared for the Business Council of Australia, ruling out the workplace as a place for fairness: on this reasoning, only the social security and tax systems are appropriate avenues through which to pursue fairness.

Unions have not, as the government seems to have expected, reacted to the IR 'reform' proposals by using 'traditional' industrial action. Certainly there have been calls for this at almost every public meeting held, but the response from union leadership and from the clear majority of attendees has been to avoid such action. It has not been ruled out but, as John Robertson said on a NSW Sky Channel broadcast (2005), 'This battle is about workers, union and non-union, their families, their workplaces, their communities and the shape of Australia for generations to come. It will be won not by a general strike but by earning confidence and support in all those places, and more'.

The obvious concern is that industrial action, usually called for in terms of 'lets have a general strike', would be easily used by the government as part of its campaigning on the need for changed laws. With less than 25% union membership (below 20% in the private sector), with begrudging State government support across Australia, and with the initial lack of popular awareness of unions and of the impact of changes in workplace laws, unions have had to use different tactics. Robertson, however, has ruled nothing out, and industrial action may play a role in the right circumstances as communities mobilise against companies that use Howard's blank cheque to 'screw our mates'.

The different tactics unions have been using include campaigning against the government's proposals and the media propaganda through their own large scale media advertising. Concurrently, and equally importantly, grass roots campaigning, such as talking to people, bombarding members of parliament with workers' concerns, having stalls at community events, and holding regular forums in lots of towns and cities around Australia, has mobilized supporters. Workers, John Robertson has said, are taking their messages to schools and churches, organising barbecues, and turning commuter carriages into discussion groups.

The union campaign in NSW has included using a big orange bus painted with the campaign slogan 'Rights at Work on the Road'. It spent three weeks in August and September taking unionists to venues small and large around NSW, informing and campaigning. This bus will continue to be used for this type of activity. When it went to Bathurst there was a well attended meeting, organized by local people, and building on a lot of community activity that had already taken place. The usual call for strike action was made, referring to the Clarrie O'Shea case, the refusal to pay fines and the large public rallies that linked this to broader work issues. An 'old fashioned' unionist then spoke, pointing out that grass roots campaigning and education had been going on for at least three years before those large public civil disobediences.

Another example from the 1960s is opposition to the Vietnam War. Noam Chomsky has written and spoken often of the development of opposition to foreign invasion of Vietnam in the study circles and small groups that were the beginnings of the movement that gradually turned opinion around. Women's movement activists from the 1960s and 1970s will be aware that consciousness-raising groups were not marching in the streets from day one. The unions are aiming for something similar now. This will involve creating links with other organizations, and identifying groups and communities that will be affected by these changes and talking to them directly about what the proposed changes will mean. Hence the re-invocation of the old union theme: *Educate, Agitate, Organize.*

A conference organized by Working NSW (the fledging research centre established by Unions NSW) in the week following the PM's announcement of his intention to 'reform' industrial relations drew

together church groups and volunteer organizations. It heard from leading researchers Don Edgar, Leslie Cannold and Juliet Bourke on many concerns from families, children, churches and volunteers who depend on community participation. Marian Baird, a leading researcher in the field has since developed an issues paper around the concerns raised (Baird 2005). This approach has formed the background for much of the campaigning.

Egalitarianism and social justice are off the agenda for our future, according to the BCA. By contrast, the union campaign has focused squarely on these very issues. An initial and sustained campaign around work and family has plugged the labour movement into an issue that has been the focus of much research in Australia and around the world for some years (eg. Pocock 2003). This is an area that labour movement politics has been slow to take on board, seeing family issues and values as the preserve of conservative politics, but 'work-life balance' has become an important theme in the current campaign. A particular concern has been that the increase in working hours since the 1970s, combined with the growth of earnings inequality, has seen social stresses increase (for examples of research see Thornthwaite, 2002, Edgar 2005, Cannold 2004).

Opinion Polls commissioned by Unions NSW since the late 1990s have shown a strong level of support for unions amongst those who know of them. The question "Would Australia be better off without unions?" has always shown well over 60% disagreeing with the statement (Bearfield, 2003). Even those who feel they do not need them support unions. Focus group research regularly shows that unions are seen as 'heroes of fairness' (Riley Research 1996).

Bringing the ALP along is part of the strategy. This is not a matter of asking the party respectfully to take up the issue, but campaigning in the community on the importance of work, family, community, quality of life and why these things are worth fighting for. The campaign has been organized around the fact that the Coalition is in a position to pass any legislation it likes. This central reality means that campaigns aimed at minor parties in the Senate are now a thing of the past. It requires a focus on what unions are about, and what we should stand and fight for, to ensure that any future government that replaced the current one would be

in no doubt about the importance of values relating to fairness at work, social justice and quality of family and community.

### **Good Policy**

Framing the debate on the industrial relations 'reforms' in terms of progressive social values is what is needed. This is also a means for opening up a political space in which to propose and consider public policies to encourage a fairer and more equitable society. We need to build the values we see as essential to social justice into real policy choices. In an example of the concerns coming from churches, The Brotherhood of St Laurence has produced a paper that focuses squarely on what values we hold dear and how they need to be addressed in policy (Perkins and Angley 2003). The authors contend that 'The broader labour market policy being pursued in Australia [by the government] is also likely to result in significant social cost and reduce the long-term competitiveness of the Australian economy'. They highlight issues of increasing inequality because industries growing in the 'low road' spectrum emphasize cost-cutting as the means of enhancing competitiveness, and draw on a range of labour market research that reach similar conclusions. The values of the 'Me Generation' espoused by the BCA and stated as their preferred outlook for 2025, lead directly to the grim social landscape of which the Brotherhood of St. Laurence warns.

George Argyrous has set out the alternatives bluntly in a previous issue of *JAPE*, arguing that 'the high road is most likely to build economic prosperity through industrial cooperation and strong worker rewards.... The 'low road' relies on conflict and insecurity, control and harsh worker punishments' (Argyrous, 2000:47).

Taking the 'high road' is not confined to developing industry policies, but requires sustained input and action from progressive social forces to drive public opinion, public policy and society towards an ecologically sustainable future. We need to ensure a society that maintains a focus on the creation of decent work, good health, equality and environment as economic essentials. An economy is as nothing without these. Framing

the public policy debate in these terms, while campaigning vigorously against the current industrial relations 'reforms', is the means, not merely to influence the outcome of the next federal election but to achieve a fairer society.

*Neale Towart works for Unions NSW*

*n.towart@unionsnsw.org.au*

### References

- Argyrous, George (2000) The High Road and the Low Road to International Trade: Emerging Exporters Revisited, *Journal of Australian Political Economy* No. 45, June, pp. 46-67.
- Baird, Marian (2005) Things Fall Apart... Issues Paper prepared for Working NSW, October.
- Bearfield, Sue (2003) Australian employees' attitudes towards Unions. ACIRRT Working Paper no 82, March <http://www.acirrt.com/pubs/WP82.pdf>
- Business Council of Australia (BCA) (2004) *Aspire Australia 2025*. <http://www.bca.com.au/content.asp?newsid=94443>
- Cannold, Leslie (2004) *What No Baby? Why women are losing the freedom to mother and how they can get it back*. Freemantle: Freemantle Arts Centre Press and Curtin University Publishing.
- Edgar, Don (2005) *The War Over Work: the future of work and family*. Melbourne University Press.
- Lakoff, George (2004) *Don't Think of an Elephant: Progressive Values and the Framing Wars: a Progressive Guide to Action*. Melbourne: Scribe Publications.
- Milne, Glenn (2005) Ads Scare Off Workers, *The Australian*, 31<sup>st</sup> October.
- Perkins, Daniel and Angley, Philippa (2003) Values, unemployment and public policy: The need for a new direction. Brotherhood of St Laurence Discussion paper 2003 [http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/values\\_unemployment.pdf](http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/values_unemployment.pdf)
- Pocock, Barbara (2003) *The Work/Life Collision* Annandale: Federation Press
- Riley Research (1996) Survey Commissioned by Labor Council of NSW, Union Summit, Blacktown RSL, April.
- Robertson, John (2005) Speech to Sky Channel Broadcast: Australia's Largest Ever Workers Meeting, 1st July.



Thomthwaite, Louise (2002) Work-family balance: international research on employee preferences, ACIRRT Working Paper no 79, September. <http://www.acirrt.com/pubs/WP79.pdf>

Workers Online (2005) Home Ground Advantage 15<sup>th</sup> July. [http://workers.labor.net.au/272/editorial\\_editorial.html](http://workers.labor.net.au/272/editorial_editorial.html)

