

# PRODUCTIVITY: A WORKER PROBLEM?

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According to Mr Keating, Australia has made the necessary macro-economic corrections and the time is now right to enter the era of microeconomic reforms: "success in the overall adjustment process will come increasingly to depend on the extent to which individuals and enterprises effectively compete in the international market place." (Budget Statement No 2, 1987/8, p.44) As the newspapers constantly inform us, the essential reform is to the labour market. For far too long the labour market has not behaved in accordance with the principles of the auction-market model, and it is time that the necessary 'reforms' were implemented to ensure that it did. At the cornerstone of such reforms are the issues of trade union power, restrictive work practices and the prerogatives of management to manage. The reforms will make Australian industry more productive and more competitive, and generate additional jobs and investment. This at least is the favoured scenario.

Behind the public pronouncements on microeconomic reforms in the labour market are hidden judgements concerning the nature of work and employment, and the process of productivity generation. The obvious judgement is the ideological one - that is, the fault for poor economic performance is attributed to labour, or its trade union representatives. This view is reproduced regularly by the media, especially in the "guest com-

1 Comments and suggestions from Frank Stilwell, Gavan Butler and Stuart Rosewarne are acknowledged.

mentator" and "expert" columns of *The Australian* (see Keegan 1988, Stone 1988). An editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* lamented Australia's poor productivity performance and then proceeded to list an itemised "cure" to the problem which included more market de-regulation, the elimination of restrictive work practices, and reduced trade protection (*Australian Financial Review*, May 17th, 1988).

The other judgments involve assumptions about productivity generation - namely that changes in work practices, combined with a diminution of trade union power, will generate a productivity surge. Such views encompass a clear path of causation from the system of industrial relations and industrial awards to productivity performance. Additionally such views suggest that work effort and work attitudes can be improved through the same reforms.

The current productivity debate in Australia, apart from having strong ideological implications, is misrepresentative of the processes and forces generating productivity growth. Moreover the debate ignores the macro and long term forces impinging on productivity growth. Nearly all the discussion is confined to microeconomic and supply-side (cost) issues, the industry coverage is confined to manufacturing, and there is broad acceptance of the proposition that Australian productivity performance is poor by world standards. Notably absent from the debate is the key issue of income distribution - that is, how should the gains of productivity growth be distributed across the community?

The purpose of this article is to provide a broader perspective on the process of productivity generation, specifically assessing the contribution of restrictive work practices, and reviewing Australia's productivity performance. It is shown that the "evidence" on productivity is problematic and that there are a multitude of potential sources of productivity generation. The two dominant beliefs about productivity - that the Australian productivity performance is "poor", especially in the manufacturing sector, and that the key to improving productivity performance rests with the elimination of restrictive work practices - are thereby assessed.

## Understanding Productivity

Productivity is an elusive concept which is difficult to quantify with any certainty. Simply stated, productivity is the relationship between outputs and productive inputs. Unfortunately it is difficult to reduce inputs and outputs to the same base for comparative purposes. If monetary valuations are used there is the problem that not all outputs are quantifiable (eg public services), that production is frequently multi-product, and that there are a multitude of potential inputs contributing to production. Traditionally, following the lead of conventional microeconomic theory, two productivity concepts are assessed - that of labour productivity which is the relationship between output and labour input (often quoted in Australian wage determination cases), and total factor productivity which is the relationship between output and the combined inputs of labour and capital.

Apart from difficulties associated with measuring the input of capital per period of production, there are doubts over the completeness of total factor productivity. There are other factors which contribute to productivity generation including changes in the skills of the workforce, the introduction of new technology, the realisation of economies of scale, the achievement of full capacity utilisation in production, and increasing concentration in the product market. Productivity levels and growth rates can be quite independent of the volumes and quality of the inputs of labour and capital.

Economists such as Kendrick and Grossman (1980) and Maddison (1979) have sought to identify and explain the process of productivity generation through time. Since increasing productivity levels are essential to increasing material living standards there are strong normative reasons for better understanding the determinants of productivity generation. However, even if such forces were identified, the issue of distributing the productivity gains within the community requires resolution. Moreover, at the empirical level productivity growth is interpreted as the residual remaining after you have subtracted input indices from the output index. It is that part of output growth which is not explained by the growth in inputs.

For this reason productivity growth has been regarded as a measure of ignorance - that is, that component of output growth which could not be explained by input growth.

What generates the productivity residual is open to debate. Indeed, whether productivity can be legitimately measured is open to doubt, given the problems associated with the measurement of capital and the plethora of qualitative variables which form part of the growth accounting framework. Countless cross-sectional, inter-temporal and international studies have attempted to explain the productivity residual (eg. for an overview see Maddison, 1987). What these studies imply is that the number of potential influences on productivity is endless, and that the contribution of identified factors is not consistent across time, industry, or nations.

It is thus significant that worker attitudes, trade unions, and industrial relations have been singled out in Australia as the prime productivity determinants under the label of "restrictive work practices." Even more significant is that a Labor Party Government should be at the vanguard in promulgating such views. There are, however, precedents for such a narrow and ideologically-loaded approach elsewhere, notably Britain.

## **The British Worker Question**

An important and instructive contribution to the productivity debate in the UK is provided by Theo Nichols in a book entitled *The British Worker Question* (1986). Essentially the British Worker question is whether the long term decline in British industry is due to the laziness, indolence and non co-operation of British workers. As Nichols states, there have been endless "variations on the theme that British workers work less hard than those of other nations, and that they work less than they used to." (Nichols, 1986, p.8) According to Nichols, such a view of the British worker has dominated British public opinion for most of this century. By implication, if workers had worked harder then the decline of British industry could have been avoided. Nichols quotes examples of the popularisation

of the British Worker mythology, such as letters to *The Times* in 1901 lamenting the drunkenness and laziness of British labourers, especially compared to their overseas counterparts. (Nichols, 1986, ch.1)

Respectability and legitimisation of the British Worker view has been provided by numerous academic studies, the majority undertaken by economists, which attribute the relative poor performance of British industry to poor industrial relations or worker attitudes. The task undertaken by Nichols is to assess the evidence and to ascertain to what extent the findings accord with the facts.

The evaluation of productivity and its determinants is, according to Nichols, too important an issue to be left to the domain of economists. He suggests that "it is important to appreciate that the productivity studies which economists have produced are not simply part of the subject matter of economics as a specialised academic discipline. They have a wider social significance in that they contribute to the way in which British society is interpreted and explained more generally." (Nichols, 1986, p.243)

Nichols set himself the task of reviewing productivity studies which purport to reveal that the key to the relatively poor performance of British manufacturing industry is to be found with the attitudes of British workers. What Nichols found was that the proof of the case was far from persuasive. The evidence was either biased, circumstantial, erroneous or purely ideological. Typical of the deficiencies in the evidence are the following examples.

- a. Studies which did attempt to directly measure and account for the attitudes and performance of British workers were often based upon the perceptions of management as to how efficient their workforce was. British management had a much lower opinion of the workforce than their Continental counterparts. Whether based on fact or prejudice, this perception explains why worker attitudes have been considered as central to the determination of productivity differences.

b. Studies which directly compared the productivity of plants in the same industry in different countries typically compared dissimilar operations, then assigned the observed productivity differences to worker attitudes. In fact there were significant differences in the age and size of plant, extent of capacity utilisation and degree of replacement investment.

c. Studies persistently omitted consideration of managerial competence and expertise, and neglected the opinions of workers as to how productivity could be improved. Implicit in many of the findings was the assumption of management homogeneity (eg managerial competence or effectiveness was not an explanatory variable). Alternatively the assumption was that good management generated good productivity results and that poor workers generated bad productivity results. Nichols emphasises that the qualitative aspects of both the labour force and management were often neglected or assumed homogeneous.

Another issue investigated by Nichols was the extent to which the measured increase in manufacturing productivity in the 1980's can be attributed to the employment and trade union reforms instigated by the Thatcher Government. In general the 1980's has seen a significant improvement in the productivity performance of the manufacturing sector in Britain, especially compared to the 1970's. Such an appraisal is important given that the Thatcher "reforms" are quoted as a model for labour market and industrial relations reforms in Australia. Undoubtedly there has been a significant increase in manufacturing productivity in Britain during the 1980's. The problem is to identify the sources of the increase.

Firstly, the forces of Economic Darwinism have been present as the shake-out of the manufacturing sector has resulted in the closure of plants with below average productivity levels, especially in the labour-intensive sectors such as textiles and clothing. Secondly, the relocation of many plants to green-field sites in new enterprise zones in the depressed regions of Britain has reduced overheads and allowed companies to re-employ non-union and contract labour. Thirdly, the large pool of unemployed has enabled a greater use of part-time, casual and sub-contracted labour across the manufacturing sector. High unemployment and a high bankruptcy rate have made a contribution towards increased productivity. Research

chers such as Batstone (1986) report that fundamentally, however, work practices and industrial relations have not altered in the remaining core of British manufacturing industry. Muellbauer (1986) found that there were a range of plausible explanations for the dramatic improvement in manufacturing productivity, the most important appearing to be greater rates of capacity utilisation and higher rates of investment. Ironically, the evidence is very inconclusive since the cut-backs in the UK statistical services have left researchers such as Muellbauer with an incomplete data base.

Thus, there are a range of potential explanations for the improved productivity record in British manufacturing. Trade union "reforms", industrial re-location, capacity utilisation rates, scale effects and employment changes are all plausible reasons. Unfortunately many of the productivity studies diagnose single "quick fix" productivity determinants which display strong ideological content. Invariably the search for an explanation for the productivity residual leads to qualitative and institutional explanatory factors such as worker attitudes, systems of industrial relations, or the presence of trade unions. Though these factors are non-quantifiable they quickly become part of the folklore in explaining productivity differences, especially between economies. Since the degree of trade union coverage and the systems of industrial relations invariably differ between economies, then these factors must be responsible for observed productivity differences. Nowhere has the case been more publically demonstrated that with the Australian discussions of restrictive work practices.

## **Restrictive Work Practices**

The assault of the New Right on the Australian industrial relations system has centred upon the elimination of restrictive work practices as an essential pre-requisite for productivity improvement (see Copeman, 1987, p.543). In essence the debate over restrictive work practices has simplified and polarised the productivity issue. It is an example of ideological subterfuge in the tradition outlined by Nichols. It is not only the New Right who are addressing the issue — prominent ministers in the

Federal Government such as Senator Button have been publically attacking such practices, even where they were non-existent (See Maquire, 1988).

The problem with restrictive work practices is that they are sufficiently vague and all-encompassing to include any award condition. The implication is that the elimination of such practices clearly increases productivity. Moreover, productivity generation is represented purely in the context of industrial relations and cost-reduction. MacDonald (1988, p.2) notes that "there is a wide range of worker behaviour that is included under the heading of restrictive work practice and it quickly becomes apparent that the concept as such is of rather limited usefulness". All award conditions embody restrictive work practices in that they limit the weekly hours of work, they prescribe holidays, establish set job descriptions, set safety standards and set sickness benefits. By limiting working hours or increasing the costs of production awards impede productivity and by definition, constitute a restrictive work practice. Short of slavery there are very few civilised condition of employment which do not constitute a restrictive work practice. In their commentary on the Robe River case, the well-publicised attack on restrictive work practices by Charles Copeman, Smith and Thompson (1988, p.299) note that all of the offending restrictive work practices constituted agreements collectively agreed by unions and management prior to the takeover of Robe River by Peko Wallsend.

The attack on restrictive work practices implies that they are undesirable, imposed and sinister. In fact, many are part of legal awards endorsed by employers. As MacDonald states "rather than being seen as either good or bad, work practices have, first and foremost, to be recognised as rules formulated in the industrial relations process". (MacDonald, 1988, p.6) Many such practices could be seen as enhancing productivity through reducing absenteeism, maintaining worker morale and commitment, reducing labour turnover, and preventing disruption to production through dispute or industrial accidents. Work practices per se are not productivity impeding. The case against restrictive work practices has largely been conducted on the basis of selective and anecdotal evidence for the purpose of discrediting the entire system of industrial awards.



The emphasis upon the elimination of restrictive work practices, apart from fulfilling an ideological function, is peripheral to the process of productivity generation for four reasons. Firstly, there is no conclusive evidence linking superior productivity performance to particular systems of industrial relations. Secondly, even if the elimination of such practices did boost productivity, it would be a once-off boost. Of more importance are policies which have a long lasting impact upon rates of productivity growth. Thirdly, the emphasis upon cost-cutting measures completely ignores the technological and demand considerations which are important in generating productivity growth. Fourthly, there is a strong body of opinion which suggests that cost-cutting measures are at best marginal in their productivity impact, while investment and plant utilisation are far more important and effective (see Skinner, 1986)

### **Emulating Others: Japanisation and Swedenisation**

Nichols suggests that if the experience of other economies in the manufacturing sector is to be emulated there are two alternative paths to follow. The first path would reduce the role of trade unionism, implement contracting-out to the secondary workforce, employ more casual labour, and eliminate industry regulations such as those related to minimum working hours and health and safety provisions. This is the cost-cutting and worker alienation approach which requires either large pools of unemployed and non-unionised labour, or access to migrant labour. The experience of Europe with "guest" workers, of Britain with enterprise zones or Japan with extensive sub-contracting offer examples of this first approach. The second path would move towards more stability in the employment contract, more effective training of the workforce and management, and greater participation of employees in the running of enterprises.

The above alternatives will be familiar, given the public discussion of productivity and work organisation generated by the ACTU's *Australia Reconstructed* (1987). The path towards productivity generation outlined by the ACTU favoured such reforms as increased skilling and training for the workforce, greater employee participation in the management of enterprises and improved redundancy/retraining arrangements. The

report gave a strong endorsement to the model of flexibility and consensus found in the Swedish enterprises studied. Participation and industrial democracy were the key reforms envisaged to industrial relations: "the conditions and imperatives of production now asserting themselves in Western industrial economies are qualitatively different. Maximum productivity cannot be achieved through the old methods" (1987, p.135).

Thompson (1988, p.90) is very skeptical of the validity of the *Australia Reconstructed* linkages between workplace organisation and productivity. Additionally, he views the processes and relations of production as fundamentally unaltered. Power and control remains vested with management, regardless of cosmetic changes to the procedures and framework of decision-making.

There are fundamental doubts over the validity of the emulation thesis - that is, that the successful should be copied. Part of the emulation process is mythology and ideology. The imperative of "foreign competition" is introduced as an argument for the necessity of organizational and workplace changes. Critics such as Holloway (1987) and Graham (1988) see the comparative competitive imperative as "part of a wider movement towards a pseudo consensus political system in the West" (Graham, 1988, p.74). Such a view is appropriate to the thesis expressed in *Australia Reconstructed* for greater corporatism at the enterprise level and at the level of macroeconomic policy. Indeed, if emulation were to be seriously considered within a growth context, then the appropriate models would be the high productivity and high growth rate economies of South Korea and Taiwan. Their systems of production and industrial relations within the context of extensive trade barriers and government regulations have not been mentioned for purposes of emulation.

Even at a pragmatic level there are strong reasons for doubting the validity of the Japanese and Swedish models. Discussion and evaluation has been confined to large-scale, export-oriented manufacturing enterprises. About 15 percent of the Australian workforce is employed in manufacturing, and the proportion is falling. Additionally, Australian enterprises are typically small-scale and service the domestic market. Whether changes to work organisation, industrial relations, and product management

will generate large-scale international enterprises has to be doubted. By far the bulk of the workforce is employed in the service sector which in general enjoys a high degree of natural protection.

Finally, the emulation models have little to say about the issues of distribution and control which are at the heart of the productivity issue. Worker-participation, profit-sharing and more secure job tenure are one thing, but managerial prerogatives, a supporting secondary labour force and regulated wage shares are another.

### **Australia's Productivity Record**

Granted the methodological and measurement problems associated with productivity discussions, resort to conventional productivity estimates reveals some surprises, given the popularised perceptions of Australian productivity. The productivity record is not dismal, contrary to popular belief. Productivity levels are comparable to most other Western economies. Manufacturing productivity offers a particular surprise. Firstly, compared with other Western economies the growth rate in manufacturing productivity in the 1980's has been above average (see Haig 1986, Bureau of Industry Economics 1985). Secondly, the growth in manufacturing productivity rates has been much higher in the 1980's than for other sectors (see OECD, 1987, p.27).

However, recent aggregate productivity growth rates have been low, even negative for 1987 (See Indecs Economics, 1988, p.75). The problem is that productivity growth rates are volatile and cyclical, and in the short term such factors as labour-hoarding, under-utilised plant and inventory variations all exert a significant impact on observed productivity growth. However, beyond this there are three factors which have tended to reduce the growth rate in aggregate productivity.

Firstly, there is the compositional or structural change effect. Most of the recent employment growth in Australia has been in the lower productivity service sectors. It is a reflection of conventional productivity measurement procedures that services perform poorly relative to primary and

secondary sectors. Output is difficult to identify and measure, and tends to be understated, especially in the public and banking sectors. Statistically, the contemporary process of "structural adjustment" will usually reduce aggregate productivity levels.

Secondly, the significant employment growth under the Accord (nearly one million additional jobs since June 1983) has not been matched by similar output growth or investment growth. Despite the increasing share of part-time employment (now nearly a quarter of all those employed), on an hours-adjusted input basis the recent productivity performance has been only moderate (see *Indices Economics*, 1988, p.75).

Thirdly, since the "resources boom" of the early 1980's investment levels have been stagnant, continuing a longer term trend. For example, business investment as a ratio of GDP has fallen from 14 percent in the early 1970's to 8 percent in the mid 1980's (see EPAC, 1986, p.5). This, combined with employment growth, has meant that capital per person employed has fallen. Since in general it is through investment that new productivity-enhancing processes and technology are introduced, the investment slowdown has contributed to a slowdown in productivity growth. Conventional theory would suggest that there is a strong case for concern over the historically low levels of investment.

Without a significant increase in the rate of investment and a significant increase in employment in the high productivity sectors, average productivity growth rates can be expected to remain low. Workplace industrial relations reforms and the elimination of restrictive work practices are peripheral to these forces. The debate had focussed upon cost-cutting reforms in the enterprise, rather than productivity-enhancing reforms. An obvious example was the second tier of the Accord Mark III wage determination system. The "restructuring and efficiency" pre-requisites for second tier wage increases were in effect cost-cutting offsets in return for the wage increase. Whether the 1988 National Wage decision will make an effective change remains to be seen. It certainly does address the productivity issue in a more long-run framework. However, the longer

term aggregate and demand aspects of productivity generation have been neglected in the recent emphasis upon short term, supply side, microeconomic reforms.

### Why the Long Run is Important

Australia does have a productivity problem because of the broader dynamic forces which have been present within the economy over the last decade. These structural developments include the following:

a. There has been a pronounced slow-down in the rate of economic growth in the Australian economy. Compared to the 1950's and 1960's the economy has moved into a phase of relative stagnation. Whereas real output grew by rates consistently above 5 percent for the 1960's, they have rarely reached 3 percent in the 1980's. This means less investment, a decline in the expansion of the capital stock and fewer possibilities for scale economies. In general, productivity is procyclical (a proposition which is known as Verdoorn's Law), reflecting the fact that in good times output increases faster than employment and firms operate close to their capacity limits. With growth or increases in demand the corollary is improved productivity performance.

b. The structural shift in the composition of output and employment in the economy has meant that resources have been reallocated away from the relatively highly productive to the relatively low productivity sectors (in terms of output per person employed). The long term shift from agriculture and manufacturing to services has resulted in a shift towards a lower average productivity growth rate. Market-oriented policies designed to increase the efficiency of resource allocation have not resulted in a shift away from low productivity to high productivity sectors. Rather, there has been a shift away from trade-exposed sectors to naturally protected and sheltered non-trade sectors, with a subsequent reduction in average productivity levels. This trend has been a persistent feature of the last two decades.

c. A combination of the output slowdown, high real interest rates, a fall in the relative price of labour and other conditions increasing the cost of capital (eg. currency depreciation) has led to a slowdown in investment and in the growth of the capital stock. Consequently, the capital-intensity of production — or capital employed per worker — has declined. In turn this has contributed to the productivity slowdown. Moreover, the success of the Accord in reducing real unit labour costs of production has combined to further increase the labour intensity of production and to generate lower productivity growth; in relative terms labour has become much cheaper to employ than capital (see *Index Economics*, 1988, ch.4).

d. There has been a general slowdown in the growth rates for all economies during the 1970's and 1980's has affected the international trade conditions. Trade is important as a source for generating productivity growth through such factors as realising scale economies and greater capacity utilisation. When the major trading economies slow down as they did in the 1970's, the consequences are invariably felt by Australia.

## Conclusions

When economies are in crisis and fundamental shifts are occurring in the balance of global economic power, as has occurred over the last decade, then the search for scapegoats and quick fix solutions becomes imperative. The selection of employees and trade unions as the source of all types of economic ills is nothing new, nor is it surprising. Critical analysis of the forces determining productivity growth is warranted since it is an important variable in the determination of living standards and income shares. However, there is also a need to step back from the momentary productivity crisis and look towards the longer view. Economists steeped in the orthodoxy, such as Maddison (1987) and Baumol (1986) are in agreement with Marxists such as Naples (1987) that the behaviour of productivity is intimately related to the evolution and dynamics of the development of Western economies. Long cycles in growth and productivity are present. In turn there are fundamental shifts occurring between nations in the distribution of global economic power. Australia as a peripheral economy in a more interdependent international economy can-

not isolate itself from these forces - to this extent Mr. Keating is correct. However, "reforming" trade unions or restrictive work practices, apart from the doubtful assumptions behind such changes, are not going to reverse the longer run forces at work.

Also at issue should be an examination of the distribution of the gains and benefits of productivity growth. Under the Accord productivity benefits have been deliberately not allocated to labour (except to the extent that improved superannuation provisions were achieved under the Accord Mark II; declining real unit labour costs of production and a falling wages share of GDP at factor cost attest to this. Likewise, it is also doubtful if consumers have greatly benefited from productivity growth through lower prices. The absence of the distributional issue has been as notable as has the presence of restrictive work practices in the recent public discussions of productivity in Australia.

Microeconomic and workplace reforms are neither unwarranted nor irrelevant in the process of productivity generation. However, supply-side and microeconomic measures are by no means the exclusive or most powerful determinants of productivity growth. Over the longer term, demand side and international factors have been very influential; rates of economic growth and investment growth in Australia, together with growth in the leading Western economies, notably the USA, are extremely important determinants to the productivity outcome in Australia. As Maddison (1979, p.40) states, "past experience demonstrates clearly enough that the possibilities of growth offered by technical backlogs can be squandered by inadequate demand policy."

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