

‘MAKING IT TOGETHER’: 35 YEARS ON

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Some official reports, such as the AFCA report reviewed in this issue of *JAPE*, are white-wash jobs. Other reports offer blinkered views, as the two preceding reviews of the Productivity Commission report argue. However, some others offer balanced judgments and innovative ideas, even maturing and looking better as they age. A good example, published 35 years ago, is a report of the Senate Standing Committee on Industry Science and Development, chaired by Senator Bruce Childs, called *Making it Together: Manufacturing Industry Revitalization*.

This report was prepared during the 1980s when interest in industry policy was more prominent than at any time since. Trade union pressure for an interventionist approach had laid the groundwork, included distribution among workers of booklets such as *Australia Uprooted* and *Australia on the Rack*, compiled by Ted Wilshire, research officer for the then AMWSU. The Metal Trades Union published *Policy for Industry Development and More Jobs* (a bigger, more technical report, including applications of post-Keynesian political economy, that I summarised for this journal in 1984). More memorably, the *Australia Reconstructed* report appeared in 1987, making a further strong case for a change of policy direction. Based on the findings of a delegation that visited various European nations, including Sweden, Norway and Germany, *Australia Reconstructed* was seen within the labour movement as an exemplar of political economic advocacy, even though its direct impact turned out to be disappointing (as discussed in a special issue of *JAPE* on the report's tenth anniversary in 1997).

The Federal government led by Bob Hawke was by then into its sixth year in office and had built political capital through its Accord with the unions. However, rather than embracing the comprehensive alternative economic strategy that *Australia Reconstructed* envisaged, the government chose to emphasise industry plans with the more modest goal of managing and slowing the downward trend in manufacturing industry jobs.

Appearing in the year immediately following *Australia Reconstructed*, *Making it Together* may be regarded as an attempt to add more momentum to the push for reforms across a wider range of industry sectors, not only those facing job losses. Individual chapters in the report focus on industrial relations, work and factory organisation, education and training, research and development; and a central theme throughout is the need for attitudinal change. The attitudes impeding a progressive approach are listed in the report as: insularity, complacency, indifference to economic realities, confrontational industrial relations, apathy, media bias, lack of confidence, dependence, hesitancy about technology, and resistance to change. This is quite a list! What could bring about a transformational shift to overcome such an array of impediments?

Bruce Childs and his Senate colleagues did not shirk the task of trying to find out. Interviews were conducted with 100 expert witnesses from industry, unions, research organisations and academia. They included industrial organisation expert Bill Ford from UNSW (whose schematic illustrations of connections between skill formation, work organisation, skill formation, industrial relations and new technology are in the report) and political economist Ted Wheelwright from the University of Sydney (who had been on the Jackson committee set up by the Whitlam government to advise on industry policy). The *Making it Together* report is punctilious in taking account of – and frequently quoting – the witnesses who helped with the committee’s deliberations, making the whole thing seem like a consensus-seeking process. However, the recommendations fell mainly on deaf ears and the report has rarely been mentioned since.

So, why revisit *Making it Together* now? For this reviewer, the trigger was the recent passing of Bruce Childs, chair of the Senate committee that produced the report. A printer by trade, Bruce had worked his way up through the ranks of trade union and ALP politics, which was a more difficult road then for someone from the party’s minority left faction than it is today. Bruce was elected as Assistant Secretary for the NSW branch at its Sussex Street headquarters, where he was the sole left-faction person in an office dominated by the party’s right-wing. Snubbed and harassed, he learned the value of resilience, as did his successors in the same role including John Faulkner and Anthony Albanese. For Bruce, escape came through getting onto the NSW party’s Senate ticket and then, after being elected, through serving the party, state and nation for 17 years as Senator. Throughout that time, he was a key spokesperson and driver of the ALP left within the Hawke and Keating governments. Beyond the parliament,

he was just as active in numerous social struggles, particularly as a key organiser for the peace movement and, subsequent to his retirement, as President of the Evatt Foundation.

Within parliament, Bruce Childs was renowned for his hard work in Senate committees. He was especially highly regarded for his efforts to get agreements across factional and party lines, becoming atypically well trusted and respected by all for his efforts. The *Making it Together* report is typical of the assiduous committee work for which he was renowned and his unswerving commitment to creating conditions conducive to better jobs and social justice in Australia.

Is this review an eulogy for Bruce Childs? Well, yes, it is. Former Senator John Faulkner and Prime Minister Albanese spoke in similarly glowing terms at his funeral, as did Tanya Plibersek whose first job in the ALP was on Bruce's staff and who had enduring respect and affection for him. Simultaneously though, this review is also a reminder of the tremendous energy over many decades that has gone into trying to create better policies for attaining positive industrial outcomes in Australia.

Making it Together never had the impact it deserved. Rather, it stands as an example of the road not taken. Neoliberalism's emergence as the dominant orthodoxy overwhelmed the report's proposals. Concern with competition trumped the concerns with cooperation, as evident in the way that 'microeconomic reform' was implemented. Rather than higher productivity and more equitable distribution of its fruits, Australia got pro-market ideology, deregulation, privatisation and market-driven structural change. The hollowing out of the manufacturing sector that followed from this neoliberal turn led to the very problems that the first two articles in this issue of *JAPE* address.

So, the question that remains is fundamentally the same that Bruce Childs and his Senate committee explored – what will it take now to get progressive and effective industry policy 'out of the too-hard basket'?

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