

**Who's a worker now?**  
**And what does it mean for Australian politics?**

Barbara Pocock<sup>1</sup>

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Recent months have seen some discussion about the changing nature of the Australian workforce and especially the shifting 'blue collar' vote, and its implications for parliamentary politics. Are 'working battlers' increasingly a conservative constituency, and a stronghold lost to the Labor Party? Are political views increasingly framed around non-economic issues, where work matters less, and cultural and international issues matter more? What does this mean for the future of parliamentary politics<sup>2</sup>? In this paper I want to review the changing nature of the labour market over the past decade, asking the question 'who is a worker now?' and, secondly, what do they care about?

How this affects voting patterns and parliamentary politics is a larger question that depends for its answer, at least in part, on analysis of voting patterns and demographic factors. While I don't attempt that here, I speculate a little on how I see the intersections of changing worker identities and concerns with parliamentary politics.

It seems a useful time to consider these questions: we sit at a very particular moment of change in industrial relations in Australia. We are witnessing the unraveling of the federation labour market settlement. We are quite likely to see over the next conservative federal government term – and perhaps beyond it, to the one after that<sup>3</sup> – accelerated movement towards a national industrial relations regime that is minimalist in character, with fewer rights like protection from unfair dismissal amongst others; where rights to collective union organisation are increasingly restricted; where strike action is very impractical and hemmed in by highly regulatory voting mechanisms; where workplaces are essentially non-union and certainly non-collectivist beyond some masculine and public sector peaks; where enforcement of any regulations (except those restricting strikes or union activity) are weakly or not enforced; where a widening gap separates the top of the labour market from the bottom; and where the experience of work is increasingly individualist, casualised and unregulated in relation to key issues like actual hours of work, as flexibility in the interests of employers becomes ever more dominant. In this future, beyond some large or exemplary workplaces and the public sector, combining earning with caring is likely to be harder for most, and especially women, with significant implications for those they care for and the larger quality of community life. In this situation it seems useful to consider the linkages between work and politics, especially parliamentary politics.

There are some elements in my argument that are debatable. However, the first step is the least controversial. It is unarguable that a series of sea changes are underway in the Australian labour

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<sup>1</sup> School of Social Science, University of Adelaide. This is a draft paper, not for quotation. I'd like to thank John Wishart, Margaret Hallock, Richard Denniss and John Buchanan for offering comments on a draft, some of which I am still considering. Responsibility remains mine of course. In the interests of easy electronic mailing, this version excludes figures.

<sup>2</sup> By parliamentary politics I mean how people vote and how they identify with political parties in particular, but also the pathways into parliamentary representation, and the legislative and policy platforms that the parties pursue. I am concentrating on the main parties: that is, the Coalition and the ALP.

<sup>3</sup> This acceleration and continued influence is likely in view of the Coalition domination of both federal houses of parliament, and their likelihood of controlling the Senate for two terms, given six year senate terms.

market. The changes of the past decade that I focus upon, are especially significant in the context of the longer-term trends that they continue – all in the general direction of a shift towards the feminisation of work, the service sector, white collar work, part-time hours, and away from unionized, full-time jobs.

The identity of the worker has changed, along with their household and social location. This shift is accompanied by a new relation to indebtedness. The changing Australian worker exhibits a new inclination to go into debt – both to meet the long term Australian aspiration of a home of one's own, and to meet a rising plain of material aspiration, as well as the rising private costs of health, education, retirement and care of one's dependents, as the public provision of these things is cut back. Some of this shift is about acquisitiveness, 'luxury fever' and status anxiety expressed through consumption and pursuit of material wealth (Hamilton 2003). But not all of it. Some of it is a result of rising asset prices, declining real pension entitlements and increasing costs of items like health and education.

### ➤ **The Link Between Labour Market Status and Political Preference**

The link between labour market status and politics preference is increasingly mysterious. The connection between work and workers' identity, and voting patterns and political perceptions was once quite uncontroversial: farmers and big and small business voted conservative, and the Australian Labor Party (ALP) was the party – indeed, the creation - of the waged worker: at its birth, a particular kind of waged worker. He sweated. He worked on wharves, ships, in shearing sheds and as a rural labourer, making boots, or down a mine, and he was in the union (McMullin, 1991, p. 1-14). His labour fits the neoclassical economic conception of work as a necessary, negative choice between labour and leisure. An essential road to livelihood, his work offered few pleasures and many hazards – to health, safety, security and the welfare of his loved ones.

These days there is a spectrum of views about the links between status at work and politics. At the traditional end, some see a fairly close continuity of correspondence between employee status and voting patterns: for example, some in the Labor Party advocate a return to traditional advocacy for workers as a means to electoral success.

Others see significant changes in the old mapping labour status onto 'Labor' support. For example, a school of political analysis since the October 2004 election attributes Howard's wrong-footing of Labor and his electoral longevity, to a shift in the blue-collar vote. This builds on analysis by some of the actors themselves: Mark Latham, for example, argued that Keating's loss of the blue-collar vote in 1996 was critical to Labor's loss of political office. He was keen to recover this ground (McGregor 2004; Manne 2004). According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, following his 2004 electoral victory Prime Minister Howard revealed 'in his newfound status as a working-class hero', saying that Labor's forestry policy (which cost the party two of Tasmania's five lower house seats) 'had treated blue-collar workers with "contempt" <sup>4</sup>.

In this view of the economic/political nexus, the ground is shifting and old relations are unreliable - but the economic, and labour status, still *matters*: Howard simply offered the blue-collar workers and self-employed of Tasmania's forestry industry, along with the indebted working people of urban and suburban Australia, better economic prospects.

On the scholarly front, many writers see a continuing defining role for work and labour in the definition of self and, by implication, political affiliation. For example, Alain de Botton and Ulrich Beck, argue that work continues to powerfully construct identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Beck mocks the centrality of work to the modernist sense of self, but recognises its foundational role in constructing identity:

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<sup>4</sup> SMH, 11 October, 2004, [smh.com.au/news/Election-2004/Economy-and-terror-top-PMs-agenda/2004/10/11/1097406462739.html](http://smh.com.au/news/Election-2004/Economy-and-terror-top-PMs-agenda/2004/10/11/1097406462739.html)

Everything is work, or else it is nothing... a chasm of irresponsibility seems to open up with the end of paid work... having lost their faith in God, they believe instead in the godlike powers of work to provide everything sacred to them: prosperity, social position, personality, meaning in life, democracy, political cohesion. Just name any value of modernity, and I will show that it assumes the very thing about which it is silent: participation in paid work'. (Beck, 2002, p. 63).

In similar vein, describing the corroding effects of 'status anxiety', De Botton observes that work remains 'the chief determinant of the amount of respect and care we will be granted. It is according to how we can answer the question of what we do – normally the first enquiry we will field in a new encounter – that the quality of our reception is likely to be decided'. In Australia, Clive Hamilton has lamented the centrality of waged labour to identity at a time when he sees liberation from it as possible in a 'post-scarcity' environment<sup>5</sup>.

These writers regret the centrality of wage earning labour – a narrowly defined form of commodified toil - to identity but they admit a tight and continuing relationship<sup>6</sup>. While critical of how the focus on labour, and especially waged labour, has driven a focus upon the economic and upon money income as the source of happiness, self and a good future, they describe a continuity of work in constructing identity and by implication politics – even as they advocate for change in this relationship and in the definition of work itself.

At the other end of the spectrum, analysts like Charles Handy see workers as liberated from identity through work and from employment relations entirely, entrepreneurs of their own lives and incomes, running their own small businesses or working as portfolio workers who construct their own career trajectories and are the architects of their own destiny and politics (Handy 1989). Presumably the portfolio worker, whose employee status is simply dissolved, is also a portfolio voter, with their vote as unstable as their job<sup>7</sup>.

This view suggests that political preferences are now significantly unhinged from economic realities like labour market status. This separation of the economic from other bases of identity and preference has been recently noted in relation to US politics by Thomas Frank, who suggests that the triumph of George W. Bush is marked by a separation of the economic from the cultural, as a consequence of successful social movement mobilisation by conservative groups like the pro-life and pro-gun movements which have unhinged the political from the economic and reattached it to the social.

Frank argues that the poor and low paid in the US now do not build their political preferences around economics, but instead respond to calls to their cultural and 'values' identities. Some of the poorest counties in the US are its most Republican he points out, drawn to it because of opposition to abortion, criticism of government and political 'elites' and to a politics that speaks to 'the common man',

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<sup>5</sup> Hamilton argues that the arrival of the age of abundance means that work 'can be liberated from the bonds of wage and salary payment, so that it can be considered a creative self-realising activity' (2003: 153). For Hamilton work is best defined broadly to include non-commodified endeavour which is the 'the means to human fulfillment and the expression of creativity', giving meaning to life (2003: 151). This is reminiscent of Guy Standing's critique of the reduction of labour to 'raw effort and toil' crowding out creative, caring and contemplative work (Standing (2002). *Beyond Paternalism: Basic Security as Equality*. New York, Verso).

<sup>6</sup> They critique the narrow focus on labour and employment, which has led us away from understanding 'work' more broadly, the ways in which care work underpins and makes possible employment, its over-developed role in constructing identity, as well as its function as the basis of citizenship and economic fortunes - or 'making a living' as we quaintly express it.

<sup>7</sup> This optimistic, ahistorical construction has a long pedigree in labour market life: as Sennett has pointed out the archetypal 'portfolio worker' is the transient immigrant (quoted in Standing 2002).

archetypically a blue collar worker<sup>8</sup>. Frank argues that this kind of political backlash movement ‘mobilizes voters with explosive social issues...which it then marries to pro-business economic policies’ (2004: 5). This cultural pull shifts the voting preferences of working people against their material interests – the US working man identifies with the down-home authenticity of Republicans ‘the true representatives of the common man’. Frank argues that this shift would not be possible without a ‘critical rhetorical move: *the systematic erasure of the economic*’ (2004: p. 119, 127, my emphasis).

The signs of a cultural politics, and the unhinging of the economic from the political, are much weaker in Australia.

For example, although anti-abortion crusaders like Tony Abbott have worked to fan the fires of an anti-abortion movement in the past year, most Australians remain firmly supportive of women’s easy access to abortion if they need it<sup>9</sup> and the Prime Minister –with an eye to electoral fortunes - has rejected moves to restrict access to abortion – so far. However, while there are few signs of this cultural backlash and its remaking of political map in Australia in relation to abortion, the same cannot be said of immigration, racial politics and a consistently heteronormative social policy<sup>10</sup>.

John Howard’s political advisers have been reading at least parts of the US Republican’s mail, as Howard has confidently and deliberately reached across the old political divide to achieve ‘cut through and connect’ - in the front bar, at the shopping centre and the barbecue, and on talk back radio, successfully reaching middle and battling ‘working Australia’ and strategically activating fears around immigration and international instability. This reach is made discursively and in policy terms. He reaches past traditional ‘labour/Labor’ relationships<sup>11</sup> to appeal to ‘ordinary decent, hard working Australians’ – who he frequently purports to ‘*know*’ – to encourage their identity with his international, social and political objectives, obscuring their labour market fortunes and his own relations with the employing class<sup>12</sup>. But far from ignoring the economic it is integral to the appeal he makes.

### ➤ **What Might Explain a Weaker Labour/Labor Connection?**

Several things might be driving a shift in traditional patterns of labour market status and political preferences. Firstly, it seems clear that traditional work-politics connections have generally *weakened* in Australia with much interference in the relationship arising from non-economic and non-work factors like fears about international stability and some shifts in cultural values in some quarters.

Secondly, many blue-collar workers are no longer reliably identified with the ALP. This might be explained by several factors: by fading historical memory about a labour-ALP connection with successive generations; by rising prosperity which weakens the appeal of a Labor Party ‘protector’ for wealthier working people; by confusion arising from the ALP’s ready adoption of the dominant neo-

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<sup>8</sup> Frank argues that this shift would not have been possible without the ‘simultaneous suicide’ of the traditional voice for working people, the Democrats, who accepted economic liberalism and gave up on the defense of blue collar US man and a fairer labour market (2004: 175).

<sup>9</sup> Bramble reports the results of the Australian Social Attitudes Survey of 2003 when 81.1 per cent of Australians agreed ‘women should be able to obtain an abortion easily when they want one’. This is much higher than in earlier years. (Bramble 2004: 24).

<sup>10</sup> See for example Carol Johnson (2003) ‘ Heteronormative Citizenship: The Howard Government’s Views on Gay and Lesbian Issues’ *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 38, 1, (March).

<sup>11</sup> By Labor I mean the Australian Labor Party, and by ‘labour’ I mean working people very broadly defined: ie employees, those doing unpaid labour to support them and a growing number of so-called owner-managers and self-employed who are, at essence, in some kind of arrangement (formally contracted or otherwise) that essential rewards them for their work.

<sup>12</sup> Including in relation to the ‘real politic’ of immigration, where on the one hand Howard has encouraged fear of refugees while significantly increasing the size of the skilled immigrant program, with strong support from business allies concerned about skill shortages and labour supply (van Leeuwen, *The Australian*, 13 January 2005, p. 13).

liberal economic and labour market approaches (different in degree but not direction from the conservatives) since 1983; by the conservative's audacious reach into labour terrain and the jettisoning of some ideological scruples<sup>13</sup>; by the growth in share owning that weakens worker identification as 'worker' and strengthens interest in share holder value and its labour-intensification underpinnings. Many workers who entered the labour market in 1983 are now in their mid-thirties with twenty years of experience in an increasingly deregulated labour market under their belt, much of it courtesy of the ALP. They are entirely enculturated with the notion of self-funded retirement and finding private social solutions. They might be excused for failing to see the Labor Party as a more reliable means to job security, wage increases, paid leave, and social services, given their practical experience. They are open to other offers.

Current labour market changes make the traditional blue-collar working ALP stalwart less significant, so that there are fewer archetypes to sustain the traditional labour-ALP rapport. The meaning of 'labour' has changed, and the identity of the labourer is now different. In addition, the experience of labour is not all bad: it is less sweat and more talk. The old work/leisure trade off is weaker, and work holds more pleasures and fewer hazards. Indeed, for some work is now 'better than sex' (Trinca and Fox 2004).

In the next section I outline some of these key labour market changes, and consider how the social and household location of the worker has changed, how their views about work are in many cases reasonably positive, and finally how debt is increasingly at work in shaping these relations. Finally, I speculate upon the political import of these changes, and what Labor in particular might make of them.

#### ➤ **More Work, Therefore More Work-based Identity – But A Changing Identity**

There is no doubt that in Australia, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was – to adopt Guy Standing's terminology – 'the century of labouring man'. Working men and their employment relationships are appropriately characterized as the dominant social and economic relationship of that century. Standing argues that the 'ethic of labouring man' made labour, and high labour demand, a primary objective of the last century – indeed a fetish<sup>14</sup>.

Australian men's labour market participation as employees was considerably higher in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in the nineteenth century – by about 10-18 percentage points (figure 1). It hovered around 75-80 per cent for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, it has shown a steady decline since the 1970s – a decline that is persisting into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the ABS predicting a steady ongoing downward trend to around 66 per cent participation in 2016<sup>15</sup>. This downward trajectory suggests that the 1970s saw the zenith of labouring man in Australia: by dint of retrenchment and redundancy, amongst other factors, men's attachment to the labour market has been steadily lessening for the past 30 years.

In general, however, Australia bears out Standing's characterisation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as one in which labour issues dominated many aspects of personal, political and household life for men. Labouring men and their workplace relations cleaved Australian politics and mapped directly onto parliamentary allegiances – at the personal and regional levels.

In addition the fortunes of many Australian women were a direct consequence of the workplace fortunes of their male partners, so that the political imprint of male labour had a reach well beyond the

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<sup>13</sup> Beautifully illustrated by both the CFMEU debacle in the 2004 federal election and the pre-election wages deal made by the Coalition in Western Australia with the WA Australian Nurses Union, in the wake of the Labor Governments attempt at non-union agreement with nurses (*The Australian*, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2005, p. 1).

<sup>14</sup> 2002: 8. Standing remarks the 'strange transformation' of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which began exulting 'rights to labour', transmogrified into the 'right to labour', and then descended into the 'duty to labour' (2002: 8). Thanks to John Buchanan for drawing my attention to Standing's ideas.

<sup>15</sup> ABS (1999) *Labour Force Projections Australia*, 1999-2016, Cat. No. 6260.0

men who directly laboured, to their wives, children, and extended families and communities. In many times and places – certainly not all - the women’s auxiliary barracked for or against men’s champions or enemies. The breadwinner household vote was a family affair, and for much of the 20th century this was both a labouring household and a blue-collar household. Blue-collar workers (defined as unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled manual work) dominated labour for many decades of the century (at least until the 1960s) (Williams, 1988: 2). Even in the late 1970s blue-collar work accounted for well over half of all male employment.

The decline in male participation over the past three decades has not seen a general detachment from the world of work amongst Australians overall, however. Women have more than made up for men’s decline so that overall participation rates continue to trend steadily upwards (hovering at 63.5 per cent at present).

As Standing readily acknowledges, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century fetishisation of labour was always more a male affair. All the established national and international definitions of employment exclude the primary spheres of most women’s work – informal work, care and reproduction. The sidelining of the breadwinner’s partner, working and caring woman, has long been remarked, along with the preoccupation with measuring and valourising only the forms of labour that enter the market and are commodified<sup>16</sup>.

### ➤ **The Feminisation of Labour**

Across Australia and the industrialised world since the 1970s, women have joined labouring men in their labour fetish in unprecedented numbers. During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century women’s participation rates hovering around 20-40 per cent. The astounding lift from the 1970s continues through the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (though it is predicted by the ABS to flatten out in the coming decade)<sup>17</sup>. Figure 1 shows the dramatic arise in women’s participation in paid work in Australia after the 1960s.

If we focus on just the past decade, the greater part of the absolute growth in employment in Australia was amongst women: the number of women employed (that is, as employees or owner managers) rose by 982,000 between 1992 and 2003, compared to 822,000 men<sup>18</sup>. Amongst women employees (that is, excluding owner managers), almost half of the change was accounted for by women employed full-time<sup>19</sup>. Women’s share of total employment rose from 42.5 per cent, to 44.7 per cent by the end of 2003<sup>20</sup>.

Given this historic lift, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is plausibly labeled the century of labouring man *and woman* - as women have increasingly joined men in employment relationships, taking paid jobs alongside the steady unpaid work and care that they continue, in the main, to undertake.

Figure 2 shows the steady convergence of male and female labour participation rates over the past quarter century. It is possible to imagine a time when they meet – in around 2025 if we continue the trajectory of the past quarter century.

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<sup>16</sup> Standing, (2002).

<sup>17</sup> (ABS (1999) *Labour Force Projections Australia*, 1999-2016, Cat. No. 6260.0). This is an arguable projection, applying existing age cohort participation rates to successive generations of Australian women. However I think it likely that future generations of women will have a greater labour market attachment than their foremothers, and we are likely to see a more sustained increase in female participation than the ABS predict, in my view.

<sup>18</sup> (ABS, 2003, Australian Labour Market Statistics, Cat. No. 6105.0 Spreadsheets).

<sup>19</sup> (ABS, 2004, Labour Force, Australia Cat. No. 6202.0.55.001, Spreadsheets, table 01, Labour force status by Sex – Trend).

<sup>20</sup> (ABS, 2003, Australian Labour Market Statistics, Cat. No. 6105.0 Spreadsheets).

This gendered convergence of participation is very similar to that in other countries like the US (figure 3), that experienced a similar 1970s jumping off point for women, and a similar trajectory for both sexes over the period since the mid-nineteenth century<sup>21</sup>.

This picture of rising overall participation does not suggest that work is diminishing as a source of identity in Australian life.

It does suggest, however, a significant shift in the gendered nature of that identity. Men are less, and women more, the source of it. If politics is made in significant part by identity as a worker, then that identity is increasingly female.

Further, more and more women enter work independently of men and prior to relationship and household formation – as young women with an occupational and industry identity of their own, increasingly backed by qualifications and some attachment to career<sup>22</sup>. Their political preferences cannot be easily read off their mens' or households'. They are much more attached to their identity at work than their mothers. And that attachment increasingly collides with their later identification as mothers and carers (Pocock 2003, Probert 2002, Reed et al. 2003). These tensions create powerful new political terrain amongst the growing number of women voters with strong labour attachment, for whom the work and home squeeze is most acute.

Thus it seems reasonable to suggest that the fetishisation of labour, and its role in the construction of identity, which strengthened for men over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has significantly strengthened for women in the past 30 years. These trends suggest that work and paid labour remains robust in shaping social, political and economic relations today. However, a significant shift has occurred, in the gendered character of that identity. For women, personal identity is increasingly connected to the labouring identity. Overall, identity related to 'labour' is of growing significance in shaping the self and the citizen.

Within the overall increase in participation what other markers are shifting the nature of the identity of the worker? Several have been much discussed in the Australian literature: the shift to part-time work, the increase in casual work, and the growth in service and white-collar employment, which I briefly review in turn.

### ➤ **Most Workers Are Full-time – but the Growth is Part-time**

Figure 4 shows the overall composition of all those employed in Australia in 1992 and 2003, including those who were employees (full-time and part-time and with paid sick and holiday leave entitlements and without them) as well as owner-managers.

The greater part of employment in Australia in the post war years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was full-time work, and this form of employment remains dominant. Most jobs are full-time with paid entitlements. However, both part-time and full-time employment without entitlements has grown strongly in the past decade, as has part-time work with and without entitlements. These forms of employment account for a growing proportion of total employment, while full-time work with entitlements – the 20<sup>th</sup> century standard – accounts for less.

The number of owner-managers has also increased although its overall share of employment remains steady at around a fifth of total employment. However, as we shall see, there have been significant

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<sup>21</sup> Australian experience is, however, a little different from that of the US in that Australian women had a higher rate of participation than American women in the last half of the nineteenth century.

<sup>22</sup> Preston and Burgess recently summarized the extraordinary growth in the qualifications of women in Australia (2003). Reed, Allen, Castleman and Coultard (2003) have recently examined the attachment that many professional women in Australia have to their career and professional identity prior to having children or forming households. Qualitative research amongst young Australians (10-18 years) suggests that this trend is likely to continue upward (Pocock 2004).

shifts within this employment category by industry and occupation. The relative shares of these forms of employment are shown in figure 5.

### ➤ **The Growth in Jobs without Entitlements**

A growing proportion of Australian employment is in jobs without paid sick or holiday entitlements (most of these employees are self-identified casual employees). Forty-two percent of the change in full-time and part-time employment in Australia between 1992 and 2003 occurred in jobs without these entitlements. This has been much remarked in the literature, and its implications debated (Campbell 2000; Wooden and Warren 2003). Casual density (that is the proportion of employees without paid leave entitlements as a proportion of all employees) grew from 21.5 per cent to 25.5 per cent of employees between 1992 and 2003.

The greatest growth in casual density occurred amongst the young: it rose from 36 percent to 49 per cent amongst 15-24 year olds between 1992 and 2003 (figure 6), while it remained fairly steady for 25-54 year olds and those over 54.

While both young men and women experienced the steepest increases in casual density over the past decade, density rose more strongly amongst older men than older women, where slight declines in density occurred. Iain Campbell has also noted the relative growth amongst older and prime aged men, and amongst non-students (Campbell 2000). Nonetheless women remain over-represented amongst workers without paid sick and holiday leave, with over 1.1 million women employees (30.6 per cent of all female employees) lacking these entitlements in 2003 compared to just over 800,000 men (or 20.7 per cent of male employees). Figure 7 shows the changes in casual density by sex and age group between 1992 and 2003.

Casual employment is especially concentrated in particular occupations and industries (as appendix 1 shows). Casual terms are most common in accommodation, cafes and restaurants employment and amongst lesser skilled workers. Many casuals are in fact in long-term employment relationships, with average job tenure at 2.6 years according to HILDA data (Wooden and Warren 2003).

Qualitative research tells us that some casuals are positive about their jobs overall: around a quarter of a group of 55 I was involved in interviewing in 2004 had overall positive views about their casual terms (Pocock, Prosser and Bridge 2004). However, these positive views were underpinned by two quite specific circumstances in almost all cases: the first was back up income (a pension, a partner or a parent) and the second was a reciprocal negotiating relationship with the employer or supervisor – one that gave the worker effective say over hours of work. When *either* of these conditions did not hold, casual workers held negative views overall about their casual terms. This negative evaluation had many aspects: insecurity and unpredictability of hours, a lack of respect, the absence of holidays (even unpaid), the necessity to work when sick, a lack of voice at work, susceptibility to bullying and unreported workplace injuries. Contrary to myth, many casual workers – the majority in our qualitative study – lacked flexibility in their working hours and found it very difficult to refuse work.

Casual work is growing rapidly and generates both positive and negative consequences for workers: for the labour market ‘dabbler’ – who has another main means of support and can pick and choose their employer, there are positives. For others, whose degrees of freedom are much less, experience is much less positive.

The rise in casual employment shifts the risks of daily, weekly, monthly and annually fluctuations in production to the employee who shoulders the risk in their pay packet and loss of time sovereignty, liberating their employer from these burdens. The growth in limited term contract and some forms of self-employment similarly shift these income and temporal risks to workers (ACIRRT 2003: 66). The new level of riskiness, accompanied by a low level of union protection (now less than a quarter of all

employees), seems likely to stimulate a higher level of worker interest in economic factors like employment growth and economic settings.

➤ **The Rise of the Service Sector**

In terms of industry, much of the employment growth in the past decade has been in service sectors. Agriculture, forestry, fishing, construction, mining and manufacturing accounted for only 20.7 per cent of all employees in 2003, down from 23.6 in 1994 and continuing the downward trend from 31.9 per cent in 1984<sup>23</sup> (see figure 8). The overwhelming majority of Australian workers are now employed outside manufacturing and primary industries, as employees in the rapidly growing retail industry (which grew by 300,000 between 1994 and 2003), in property and business services (303,000), in health, community services (207,800) and education (207,800).

➤ **Occupational Shifts: The Disappearing Blue Collar**

In terms of occupations, a fifth of all employees in 2003 were intermediate clerical and service workers, and a similar proportion were professionals. Figure 9 shows that these are the largest and most rapidly growing groups of employees.

So-called 'knowledge workers' (defined to include managers and administrators, professional and associate professionals) grew from 35.5 per cent of employed persons in 1997 to 39.4 per cent in 2004<sup>24</sup>.

Coming to the category of blue and white-collar employees<sup>25</sup>, there has been very rapid growth in white collar employment fuelled by the growth of women's employment (or pink-collar employment) as clerical and service workers, associate professionals and professionals. In 2003, white-collar employees made up 70.5 per cent of total employees, up from 66.5 per cent since 1996. This represents absolute growth of 865,000 employees.

➤ **Not All Petite-Bourgeois now: The Employment of Owner Managers**

One of the few specific new industrial relations policies that the Howard Government took to the 2004 election concerned facilitation of contracting arrangements in employment. International literature suggests that some industrialised countries are seeing a rapid growth in the transformation of employment arrangements, with owner-manager and self-employed arrangements replacing traditional employment arrangements. There are some signs of this in Australia through a change in the composition of owner-managers by industry. However, their overall share of total employment remains fairly steady (while growing in absolute terms).

A fifth of employed Australians are owner-managers. Most of these are owner-managers of unincorporated enterprises, though their share has declined from three-quarters to two-thirds of all owner managers between 1992 and 2003, as the proportion employed in incorporated enterprises has increased.

A quarter of all employed men were owner-managers in 2003, compared to 14 per cent of employed women. Men account for around two-thirds of all owner managers.

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<sup>23</sup> ABS (1996) *Labour Force Australia 1978-1995*, Cat No. 6204.0; ABS (2004) *Australian Labour Market Statistics*, Cat. No. 6105.0 Spreadsheets.

<sup>24</sup> ABS (2003) 'Measures of a knowledge-based economy and society, Australia, Human Capital Indicators', ([austats/abs@.nsf/0/IDD513B22B4785D3CA256D97002C8638?Open](http://austats.abs.gov.au/abs@.nsf/0/IDD513B22B4785D3CA256D97002C8638?Open)). These are drawn from ABS *Labour Force Australia*, Cat. No. 6202.0.

<sup>25</sup> These are crude categories in themselves as Williams (1988) and Howe (1977) have observed. They introduce the category of pink collar work to describe feminised jobs.

While there has been considerable interest in the prospect of more women turning to self-employment to gain more family friendly flexibility and autonomy, this trend is not evident at the aggregate level in Australia, over the past decade<sup>26</sup>. Employment growth was stronger amongst women working as traditional employees (both part-time and full-time) than amongst owner-manager women between 1992 and 2003.

**Table 1: Percent Change in Employed Women, 1992-2003**

<b>Per cent Change in Employed Women, 1992-2003</b>	
Per cent change in part-time employees	43.6
Per cent change in full-time employees	23.3
Per cent change in owner-managers	25.0

Source: ABS (2004) Australian Labour Market Statistics, Cat. No. 6105.0 Spreadsheets.

However, there have been significant shifts in the industries and occupations in which owner-manager employment is concentrated, amongst both women and men. Owner-managers in property and business services and construction are replacing farmers and small shopkeepers at a rapid rate.

The number of owner-managers in agriculture, forestry and fishing fell by 40,100 between 1994 and 2003<sup>27</sup>, and those in retail enterprises fell by 36,400. On the other hand, there was strong growth in property and business services (115,400) and construction (80,100) (see figure 11). In other words, industries long characterized by self-employment, like farming, are giving away to much greater shares of owner managers in those sectors more traditionally characterized by employer/employee relations. These shifts also have potentially significant political implications, with a decline in the number of owner-manager farmers and small business retail traders (who might be assumed to traditionally vote for the Coalition), and growth in owner-manager voters in occupations and industries where employees might traditionally have voted Labor.

➤ **The Decline of the Breadwinner, the Rise of the Time Poor Dual Earner**

A further element in the transformation of the Australian worker is the shape of the household in which they live. Over the past 30 years Australia has seen the decline of the ‘worker-citizen/female carer’ household type and a rise in dual earner, and single mother/earner households. These trends are likely to continue. Dual earner and single parent households are time poor and consumption dependent (i.e.

<sup>26</sup> Contrast this with the growth that is underway in countries like Canada, where the number of women with unincorporated businesses more than doubled in the last decade, compared to 33 per cent growth amongst men ([www.rbcroyalbank.com/sme/women/statistics.html](http://www.rbcroyalbank.com/sme/women/statistics.html), accessed 12 January 2005). Karen Hughes has been studying the growth in women in small business and self-employment in Canada and concludes that growth amongst women has been strong: ‘Overall, women comprise over one-third of the self-employed, compared to just one-quarter in the mid-1970s. They make up nearly 40% of all solo self-employed, and just over one-quarter of employers, compared to 11% of employers in the mid-1970s’ (Hughes, 2003: p. 3). In Australia, women’s share of owner-managers has remained fairly steady: it increased only slightly from 31 percent of all owner managers in 1992 to 32 per cent in 2003. This form of employment accounts for 14 per cent of all women’s employment in both 1992 and 2003 in Australia. If we consider a broader definition of small business (including proprietors of small businesses, partners in partnerships, and working directors), then women’s share of small business operators was 33.9 per cent in 1995, and fell slightly to 33.0 per cent in 2003 (ABS Cat. No. 8127.0, 1997 and 2003) (these figures exclude agricultural businesses, and define small business as those with 20 employees or less).

<sup>27</sup> This data is only available in published form from the ABS by industry from 1994.

they need to replace domestic labour with purchased services like childcare, elder care, prepared food, clothing, cleaning, gardening and other services).

The increasing allocation of household time to paid work (through women's increasing participation, and growth in the hours of work of full-time workers especially those working very long hours), has contributed to both a *squeeze on time* (at the individual and household level) and a *struggle for control* of time (ACIRRT 2003; Pocock 2003). More and more households feel this squeeze and it affects their political responsiveness. Politicians who speak to, act for, look like or proselytize in the image of the traditional breadwinner family turn away a sizeable household constituency.

This shift in household forms and the very significant reduction in the proportion of women at home providing unpaid care, drives spending on commodified care, and labour substitutes for her labour like food, cleaning, laundry and other services. It also drives a new level of need for workplace flexibility to assist the growing proportion of working carers who populate the paid workplace – now up to 40 per cent of all employees on any day of the week in Australia (Pocock 2003).

### ➤ **What Do Australians Think of Their Work? Is Work 'a good' or 'a bad'?**

We have seen in the above discussion a remaking of the structure of employment in Australia over recent years, which we might expect to have significant implications for political perspectives. These might also be affected by two further factors (probably amongst many others): firstly, how Australians view their jobs: whether their overall views about work are positive or negative. Secondly, how their level of indebtedness is changing, affecting their sensitivity to economic factors. I'll consider these briefly in turn.

In qualitative discussions about work, many employees talk about the pleasures of their working lives and the positive associations they make from their work. In interviews and focus groups, many talk of their jobs in positive terms, their work relationships as friendships, and – in rare cases - their employment as 'a holiday from home', as one casual worker (and mother) put it to me in 2004. These positive views on some issues are often countered by negative comments about aspects of work. Children can often also see positive outcomes for parents from their jobs – benefits that flow well beyond those of the pay packet to positive social connection, and a sense of contribution from the positive use of skills (Pocock and Clarke 2004; children also perceive many negative effects).

This raises issues about the perspective that employed Australians have about their jobs. A political party that assumes work as a 'bad' may fail to connect with a significant slice of citizens who view their work as at least good in parts.

The 2001 HILDA survey asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement (on a scale of 1-7, with 7 indicating strong agreement) with the statement 'I would enjoy having a job even if I didn't need the money'. This is an interesting indicator about how central work is to people's feelings of self-satisfaction, as well as an indicator of views about the non-monetary aspects of work. Tables 2 and 3 set out the results. They show that almost 60 per cent of men and women agreed that they would enjoy having a job even if they didn't need the money. Only a quarter disagreed, and 17 per cent were indifferent to the proposition (i.e. neither agreed nor disagreed). There is little difference between the sexes.

**Table 2: I would enjoy having a job even if I didn't need the money (per cent of total)**

	Male	Female	Persons
Disagree	25.5	25.2	25.4
Indifferent	16.3	17.3	16.8
Agree	58.2	57.4	57.8
	100	100	100

Source: HILDA Wave 1, 2001. The data, which are weighted, excludes those who did not have a useable answer. In the table 'disagreed' includes those who marked 1-3, indifferent includes those who marked the midpoint (4) and 'agree' includes those who marked 5-7.

Almost twice as many were in *strong agreement* that they would enjoy having a job than those who were in *strong disagreement* with the statement: 18.7 per cent strongly agreed, while 10.1 per cent strongly disagreed with the statement.

Casual workers had a lower average level of agreement with the statement than permanent employees (i.e. they were more negative about having a job even if they didn't need the money), and workers in their middle years (35-64) were more likely to be positive than either younger or older people<sup>28</sup>.

More professional and managerial workers hold positive views about work (over two-thirds agreeing that they would enjoy having a job even if they didn't need the money). However, the pleasures of work are not confined to white collar workers in more senior positions, with over half of cleaners and labourers, and elementary clerical, sales and service workers agreeing that they would enjoy having a job even if they didn't need the money. Just over a quarter definitely would not. Paid work has positive outcomes that are significant sources of enjoyment beyond their pay packet, even in jobs that are relatively low paid, lower skilled and probably have less personal autonomy on the job.

Many Australian have a positive identification with their jobs. They take pleasure in them beyond the pay packet and draw a sense of identity from their work. They may not like all elements of their job, but overall see the business of work as a positive aspect of life. These flow-ons are not confined to white-collar, professional or so-called 'knowledge workers'. However they are stronger for these kinds of workers. While we lack longitudinal data to allow analysis of change over time, it seems plausible that such positive evaluations have increased with the shift in employment to less hazardous, service sector, white-collar and professional employment over the past century. This shift suggests that a workplace political agenda might usefully recognise these positive elements of work, and encourage their enlargement, rather than speak from a perspective that work is always a disability, and always a negative trade off of leisure. This is not the usual starting point either for union discourse, or for the Labor Party's industrial stance. This is not to suggest that workplaces are without hazard and in no need of renovation: however, political discourse might more regularly reflect and build upon positive elements that are there for many. Work is clearly far from all bad for all, with nearly 60 per cent of Australians enjoying their jobs even if they didn't need the money.

<sup>28</sup> This analysis is discussed in Pocock and Liu (2005) forthcoming. Regression analysis suggests that factors like control over when you work, lower stress, and learning new skills – amongst other factors - are associated with more positive levels of agreement with the statement.

**Table 3: I would enjoy having a job even if I didn't need the money (Per cent of all in occupation)**

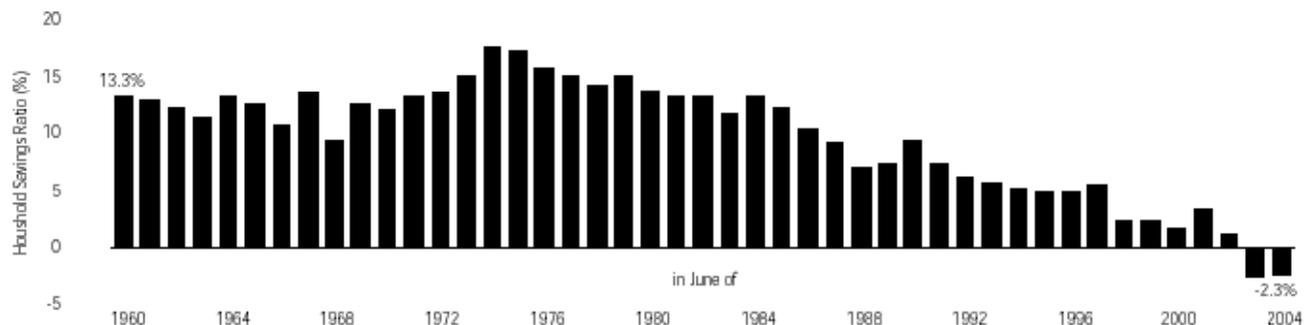
Occupation	Managers and Administrators	Professionals	Elementary Clerical Sales and Service Workers	Labourers and related workers
Disagree	17	17.4	26.3	27
Indifferent	15.4	16	18.3	15.4
Agree	67.6	66.5	55.3	57.6
	100	99.9	100	100

Source: HILDA Wave 1, 2001. The data, which are weighted, excludes those who did not have a useable answer. Negatives are those who did not agree (from 1-3), those who indicated the mid-point of 4 are considered indifferent, and positives are those who indicated a level of agreement (from 5-7).

➤ **Debt, Home Ownership and Consumption**

The recent election saw much attention to the issues of indebtedness and the sensitivity of Australian voters, including many workers, to interest rate changes. It is not hard to substantiate the rationale for this new level of political sensitivity. NATSEM recently summarized the changing levels of household debt in Australia, with the average household setting aside an old-style ‘saving to spend’ approach in favour of ‘borrowing to spend’. Average households now spend 2.3 per cent more than they earn each week, making them ‘acutely’ sensitive to higher interest rates (NATSEM, 2004: i). The long-term savings ratio tells the historical story:

**Figure 12: Household Savings Ratio, 1960 to 2004**



Note: The graph shows household saving as a percentage of household disposable (after-income-tax) income.

Source: ABS 5204.0 Australian System of national Accounts, table 1, NATSEM, 2004: 2.

Average levels of debt were around \$60,000 per household in 2002, generating national total household debt of \$432 billion. Just less than two-thirds of this is home mortgage debt, with 20 percent other property debt, 12 percent other debt, 2 percent credit card and 2 percent HECS debt (NATSEM 2004: 3). This debt is not evenly spread, with lower income households and young people having lower levels<sup>29</sup>. For households with income of \$20-40k, average debt was \$26,500 in 2002, and for those with income of \$40-60k it was over \$50,000.

<sup>29</sup> Indeed, it is obvious that rising housing prices are hitting young people hard with the proportion of 25-39 year olds who own their own home falling 10 percentage points between 1996 and 2001 (Bramble 2004: 15): young people’s low level of indebtedness relative to older Australians is not all good news for their long term prospects. What is more, a growing

Australians have increased their average levels of indebtedness with vigour in recent years, through home mortgages, other property mortgages and consumer spending. Ian Manning has pointed out that household debt servicing costs as a percentage of household disposable income have recently edged up to the 1980s peak level of 25 per cent – a peak which in Manning’s view precipitated the 1990 recession (Manning, 2004/5: 50). The overall debt to income ratio has risen very sharply, from 35 per cent in 1976 to 150 percent in 2004 (Murphy, 2004; quoted in Bramble 2004: 16). One estimate suggests that these rising levels of debt mean that a 2 per cent increase in interest rates now will have the same effect on capacity to repay as the 17 per cent rates in the 1980s (Murphy, 2004; quoted in Bramble 2004: 15).

Some commentators attribute these patterns of indebtedness to the growth in ‘consumption fever’ (Hamilton 2003)<sup>30</sup>. Most of the new debt is home mortgage related, reflecting both increasing housing costs and increasing material aspirations in terms of the size and nature of housing. It is also the case that consumer spending has risen rapidly: it increased by \$110 billion in the five years to 2004 (Bramble 2004: 16).

The uncomfortable issue of the relationship between consumption, time and work is a significant question in relation to work but has been little studied<sup>31</sup>. Expectations of high levels of consumption – by adults and young people – contribute to (though far from explain entirely) longer hours of household work, and these in turn drive more spending for relief from time-poverty in a classic work/spend cycle (Schor 2000).

This link between work and consumption has been a rich vein for markets: time poverty and parental guilt are powerful spending stimulants, as workers (especially mothers) try to buy help which is more easily found on supermarket shelves, in childcare centres and from cleaning and gardening services than from children (who need training) and partners (who need *retraining*). They also contribute to guilt-induced spending as parents use purchases to make up for absence or disappointment – with limited success in the eyes of children<sup>32</sup>.

Material aspirations (private schools, boats, wide screen televisions) are joining with rising asset prices (especially for housing) and increasing costs for what were once publicly provided goods (like health insurance, education and even roads) to drive greater consumer spending and debt. This creates a higher level of political sensitivity to interest rates. This is, in turn, contributing to a remaking of the political landscape.

A worker without debt, or a low level of debt, has quite different political sensitivities from one without such vulnerability. Clearly, if doubt around rising interest rates is successfully attached to the ALP – at was in October 2004, without effective repudiation - then it represents a powerful trigger in

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number are carrying rising levels of HECS debt – over a third of women aged 18-24 and just under a quarter of men (NATSEM 2004: 16).

<sup>30</sup> Indeed Hamilton goes further arguing that long hours are voluntarily undertaken to finance rising material and status aspirations. Specifically he says ‘the greater part of the culture of long hours is entirely voluntary’ and that much of it is motivated by workers’ beliefs about ‘how much income they need in order to maintain an acceptable lifestyle and because income and job status remain central to social status (2003: 173). This is hard to square with the fact that the greater portion of long hours is in fact unpaid (Campbell 2002), hardly contributing to increased spending power, though perhaps partly motivated by the desire to avoid retrenchment and thus maintain earnings.

<sup>31</sup> Clive Hamilton’s 2003 book, *Growth Fetish* is a significant exception (Allen & Unwin, Sydney).

<sup>32</sup> For some discussion of this see Pocock and Clarke (2004) *Can’t Buy me Love; Young Australians’ View on Parental Work, Time, Guilt and Their Own Consumption*, The Australia Institute, Discussion Paper No. 61, Canberra. This ‘work-spend cycle’ is also very relevant to the future of the next generation of citizens many of whom are actively entered upon a youthful ‘work-spend’ cycle well before they leave high school. While the benefits of earning and work for young people can be profoundly positive, they also embed consumerist identities and provide a rich vein for markets to mine over coming decades and a fine consumer training ground.

the long-term for workers to turn away from Labor and to replace work-based concerns with other economic worries. Any old loyalty to the ALP as the party of labour is as a straw in the wind, it seems, compared to the fear of economic ruin or serious loss. This may not mean that Australian workers are more narrowly economic in their thinking than in the past, merely that their level of vulnerability is much higher, so that economic issues figure much larger in their political calculation.

➤ **A Summary of the Changing Identity of the Australian Worker**

To summarise, the Australian labour market has seen several distinctive shifts in recent decades, which – in combination with changing perceptions about work and economic security - are affecting political preferences:

1. Overall, there are no signs of a decline in labour market attachment, with a gently upward trend in overall participation as a greater proportion of Australians take on paid work. The male labour fetish of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is increasingly a fetish that women share, though on different terms;
2. Positive evaluations of work as an enjoyable activity beyond monetary return, confirm the centrality of work to Australian's sense of themselves. For many, work is a positive source of enjoyment. This is especially the case for the growing proportion of white collar, service sector, 'knowledge workers';
3. While Australians are increasing their workforce attachment, through rising overall participation, the gendered nature of the worker is significantly shifting. Employees are increasingly likely to be women, as male participation continues steadily down, and women's continues steadily up;
4. A growing proportion of workers in all industries are casual. Many are young people in jobs that will perhaps be short-term and underpin their post-compulsory studies. But a growing proportion are not: they are in long term casual work, and a growing proportion are men and non-students;
5. Amongst casuals, some are positive about their casual terms. However, a sizeable proportion are not. They find that unpredictable and insecure work, low time-sovereignty, weak workplace voice and the absence of conditions like sick leave and paid holidays, have negative consequences for themselves and their households;
6. Blue-collar workers are now a minority of employees, and they are in decline as white-collar and pink-collar employment grow rapidly;
7. Similarly, primary industry and manufacturing employment is a much smaller portion of employment than 30 years ago;
8. Services industries are where employment growth is especially concentrated;
9. Amongst total employment, owner-managers are growing in absolute (but not relative) numbers. However, owner managers in property and business services and construction increasingly replace those on family farms and running small shops;
10. Workers with families are increasingly located in households that experience a time squeeze and turn to the market for commodified goods and services that make up for the missing homemaker. Many male breadwinners are working longer hours, while the majority of workers with families live in dual earner households, and others cope as sole parents who hold down jobs as well. They are looking for a new level of 'give' in their workplaces, as households try to combine care with paid work;

11. Debt is certainly higher, but it is not clear that this results only - or even mainly - from 'consumption fever', given the centrality of mortgage debt to that consumption and the shift of public goods to private provision;
12. A rising level of debt makes many workers much more sensitive to economic factors like interest rates. It is unclear whether this represents a new level of economism, or individualism, in the Australian worker or simply represents a response to rising levels of vulnerability to debt;
13. Australian workers are being encouraged to a higher level of individualism through the privatization of previously public goods (education, health, labour market risk, retirement incomes). They are shouldering a higher level of labour market risk as a result of casualisation and self-employment. This means they are more keenly aware of economic issues in shaping their fortunes and those of their families.

### **The Implications for Politics**

There are still many signs in Australia of community and political values that are not economic, materially motivated or individualistic (Bramble 2005). Many Australians are in favour of public provision of key services and paying taxes to provide them. They also support fair labour market standards, safe jobs, and decent care for children, the aged, sick and infirm, and disadvantaged groups like Indigenous Australians. However, it seems that winning their votes will depend upon pathways that go well beyond a narrow appeal rooted in old workplace identities, or 'identities of disadvantage' and 'bad work'. Attempts to create and stimulate 'nodes of disgruntlement' – always playing to the down side – will not connect with many Australians who see themselves striving in the labour market, who enjoy their work, and who optimistically go into debt to create their lives and homes.

What do the changes in the labour market that I have summarized mean for politics in Australia?

Firstly, it seems that the issue of *work* is of growing significance – not less – to the identity of Australian workers. For all the talk about cultural and 'values' identities in Australia and elsewhere and their role in shaping political preferences, labour market status remains *a critical element* of the construction of political preferences. It may not be dominant or over-riding, but it is *very alive*.

While there has been growth in self-employment, it remains a minor form of employment in the larger labour market. Far from being 'all petite bourgeois' now, Australians are in fact increasingly likely to be *employees* now - but different kinds of employees, with different concerns and with weak historical memory of a 'labour-ALP contract or connection and less loyalty to such a connection. That said, the reconstitution of the self-employed (the replacement of the farmer and shopkeeper with the property services manager, or construction worker) is significant and probably having the effect of draining traditional Labor support while boosting the Coalition's.

Labor's failure to properly recognise and understand the 'new worker' results in a failure to connect with their concerns, leaving a gap which canny conservatives interpolate themselves into, chummying up to the broader identity of workers, and cultivating the relationship with appeals to carefully marshaled touchstone cultural and values issues – including race. Serious weaknesses in the generation of Labor's parliamentary candidates - their long Labor party and sometimes union apprenticeships - reinforce this gap, as does their leaden-footed approach to policy innovation in response to the new worker and her situation. This impedes an authentic rapport with many worker-voters.

The Coalition, and the Prime Minister in particular, have proved themselves adept at discursively appealing to the western suburbs worker and their family, while delivering for the north shore in material terms. A traditional conservative redistributive policy agenda has been shielded by a discursive trick. This is not easily done, but it is greatly facilitated by an opposition that is sometimes flat-footed in *naming* the trick (talking equality while delivering widening inequality), and then

*articulating* another road. The opposition's alternative policy frame, and its articulation of that policy frame, are both weak.

The Labor Party is watching the wrong bellwether if it thinks blue-collar workers hold the key to its electoral fortunes. This worker is increasingly scant in the labour market. Re-wedding him to the ALP is the equivalent of fiddling while the ballot box burns – or swells – with the votes of white and pink-collar workers, women, service sector, professionals, casual and part-time workers. Their concerns are in many ways different to the traditional blue-collar ALP voter – though they may well overlap. Such workers are certainly less voluble than the average forestry worker in Tasmania. These workers and voters are to be found in every electorate in Australia, and in growing numbers. Many will not be able to follow any of the detail of traditional industrial relations discussion and policy formulation<sup>33</sup>. They are not in unions. Despite the voter disconnect from policy and legislative detail, many labour movement officials spend a great deal of time on these issues (like wage increases, union governance, right to strike, unfair dismissal and bargaining regulation), while spending very little on the great range of workplace and social policies that are having just as significant effect on working people – like access to flexible working arrangements, decent leave, some sovereignty over their working time, childcare and aged care services and so on<sup>34</sup>. These voters may well be interested in policies of two kinds: firstly, policies that *make their jobs better*, that build upon the things they already view as positive, including time sovereignty, fair wages, and flexibility for workers. And secondly, policies that *ensure a fair labour market*. At present there are few clear signs that the ALP stands for a practical way of making jobs better and the labour market fairer. A plausible, practical vision is a vital precursor of electoral confidence, hope and votes.

The blue-collar worker who might have been reliably identified with the party of labour, is increasingly pushed or pulled into 'owner-manager' status (especially on the terrain of the CFMEU), lives in a dual earner family, has a lot of debt, and is concerned about job security and say over working time perhaps more than a pay packet. He or she is less and less likely to be in a union and to be receiving any kind of political education by that means – a significant shift since the 1970s.

Although there are still plenty of votes to be had in this blue-collar quarter, many more lie elsewhere and have no traditional affinity with the ALP. Winning their support requires a significantly different approach to the labour market and policy, one that places workplace flexibility and facilities that support working carers more centrally on the policy agenda and treats the work experience as deeply rooted in the home and larger community. A 30 per cent reduction in childcare costs in this household is the equivalent of a very significant pay rise, while a jump in interest rates may place the family in dire straits – especially when health insurance, school fees, HECS and transport costs are factored in – all this before coming to the widescreen television.

Meeting the broad range of diverse concerns of this 'new worker' requires a long-term strategy on a wide canvass. It cannot be 'launched' in the short, heated moments of an election campaign. It requires a new industrial and domestic settlement, which, to date, the Labor party and the larger labour and progressive social movements have failed to provide.

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<sup>33</sup> Indeed many lifelong aficionados, including industrial relations academics, have trouble getting their minds around the detail of traditional industrial relations policy and current legislative reform.

<sup>34</sup> This is not to say that unions and Labor politicians do not, or should not, attend to 'traditional' issues, but that the balance is wrong. Australian unions at present face a fork in the larger policy road: will they speak for all working people or choose to focus on the unionized heartland as Grant Belchamber recently recommended. He says: 'the union movement will have to focus sharply on maintaining good order in its own house and fight first and hardest for the immediate interests of its own membership. The industrial wage must be the foremost concern' (2004: 64). In my view, this latter course would be a very serious mistake and an historical turn to narrow union economism of the kind pursued in the US labour movement for much of the last century, with fatal consequences.

By contrast, Howard has recognised the new worker and her household. A political transformation is underway. He has learned to nod – just enough, and the calculation is careful - in the direction of the dual earner – the policeman and his retail assistant wife. He has seen the power of family payments that are less punitive for dual earners and single parent households, and he now concedes that childcare is a real cost for many households<sup>35</sup>. Some ideological baggage has been jettisoned – or at least pruned - and the Coalition is determined to make the part-time woman worker and her self-employed mate their own, whether they drive a logging truck in Tasmania, or provide part-time word processing services from home. Most importantly the Coalition has made interest rates a long-term burn issue for Labor, which that party has yet to respond to. This issue is unlikely to go away.

In the opening decade of a new century, Australian political life is seeing an active discussion about public working life and its intersections with private and political life. The new worker and their political concerns are having some political effect. The question is, which political party can respond most adroitly to the remade ‘labour’ that it confronts – no longer an assured vote and a standard kind of guy – instead: diverse and politically unattached - but someone to whom *work* continues to matter a very great deal.

In this environment, industrial relations research has an important role to play: it can lament the fall of the old industrial settlement, or it can inform the creation of a new one.

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<sup>35</sup> This is not to overstate the Howard government policies which remain on balance on the side of breadwinner households, refuse paid maternity leave (as does Labor in real terms) and is far from the workers’ friend (especially the casual or long hours worker) on so many fronts.

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## Appendix 1: Casual Density by Sex, Industry and Occupation, Various early years, 2003

Sex	1992	2003
Males	14.0%	20.7%
Females	30.4%	30.6%
Persons	21.5%	25.5%
<b>INDUSTRY</b>		
	1994	2003
Agriculture, forestry & fishing	45.7%	50.6%
Mining	8.3%	13.8%
Manufacturing	12.8%	15.7%
Electricity, gas & water supply	2.7%	10.1%
Construction	26.6%	24.3%
Wholesale trade	13.3%	15.4%
Retail trade	43.9%	44.2%
Accommodation, cafes and restaurants	55.6%	58.8%
Transport and storage	15.5%	18.9%
Communication services	7.0%	12.4%
Finance and insurance	5.3%	7.6%
Property and business services	23.2%	25.8%
Government administration and defence	8.4%	8.0%
Education	15.9%	17.4%
Health and community services	20.1%	20.5%
Cultural and recreational services	42.8%	42.7%
Personal and other services	21.4%	23.6%
Total	22.6%	25.5%
<b>OCCUPATION</b>		
	1996	2003
Managers and administrators	4.6%	4.0%
Professionals	13.1%	13.1%
Associate professionals	11.2%	12.1%
Tradespersons and related workers	16.2%	16.3%
Advanced clerical and service workers	19.4%	19.1%
Intermediate clerical and service workers	25.2%	27.2%
Intermediate production and transport workers	23.0%	26.5%
Elementary clerical, sales and service workers	52.0%	55.9%
Labourers and related workers	42.7%	47.3%
Total	24.4%	25.5%