

## FROM THE PRESIDENT

## Howard's July 1 grab for power

“ In the face of mounting criticism from state and territory governments about the Coalition grab for power, set to occur after the Senate changes in July, John Howard recently took the opportunity to portray the proposed changes to the industrial relations system as, in fact, steeped in Liberal tradition rather than a radical departure from it.

In a carefully crafted address to the conservative Menzies Research Centre in Melbourne, Howard linked nationalisation with football and rugby; with law firms in Sydney establishing offices in other cities; and with the movement of 80,000 students from one state or territory to another each year. He cited the issue of water reform as an excellent example of cooperation between the Commonwealth and the states. Howard said that, while he preferred a cooperative approach to industrial relations, in its absence the federal government would “do what it reasonably can to move towards a more streamlined, unified and efficient system”.

Howard implies that the proposed changes are about “cooperation”, and simplifying and streamlining systems. This is downright dishonest. The intention is to reduce conditions and entitlements and remove protections. Talk of a unitary system is deliberately designed to focus on questions of process rather than of substance.

And it's not about being “reasonable”. A glance at the higher education legislation linking funding to specific industrial relations requirements shows how easily the English language is abused by politicians in their daily work.

The university sector arrangements provide for workplace agreements,

policies and practices to be scrutinised by the federal government to ensure compliance with the government's agenda. This means they must not restrict the employer's right to make decisions on course offerings and associated staffing requirements, irrespective of the individual employer's wishes.

Further, the agreements must include a management scheme to reward high-performing individual staff as well as efficient processes for managing poorly performing staff. These arrangements were to take effect from 29 April, despite the fact that the legislation had—at the time of writing—not been presented to the Parliament.

Nelson has flagged similar legislation for TAFE with funding dependent upon compliance by the states and territories.

Both Howard and IR Minister Kevin Andrews have said the changes would be “incremental” and “evolutionary”, rather than revolutionary. What is being proposed makes a mockery of that claim.

Put together, the changes go far beyond “incremental”. They represent fundamental changes that will have the effect of placing individual employees under pressure to negotiate their own conditions without the assistance of a union and without redress to the Industrial Relations Commission.

A key proposal is to abolish the award minimum wage classification and establish a single minimum wage using a committee of “experts” to consider improvements to the minimum wage. This committee will replace the Australian Industrial Relations

Commission (AIRC) minimum wage process as we currently know it.

Also, the scope and number of matters that can be included in awards will be further reduced. For teachers this could mean the removal of long-service leave provisions, transfer rights and incremental salary scales.

Linking funding to the requirement to offer individual workplace agreements is a way of taking workers out of a collective bargaining process. If individual agreements are also allowed to override collective agreements, employers will be able to undercut a Certified Agreement by offering individual contracts on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. There will be no redress to an independent arbiter.

The changes are also aimed at reducing union involvement—which will make collective bargaining much more difficult to achieve. Employers are expected to be given greater powers to refuse entry to union officials and it will be harder for unions to gain permits to access workplaces.

In addition, workers will lose access to unfair-dismissal provisions.

In his eagerness to assure his own supporters that he is not embracing centralism, Howard characterises these changes as “expanding individual choice, freedom and opportunity”. This is identical to the rationale being used to justify the Coalition's education funding policy that works to undermine public education and all that it stands for. We know who the winners are in that battle.

The industrial relations scenario will be no different.

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