

Australian government recruits high-profile public servant to sell unpopular IR laws

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The Howard government has launched a new blanket advertising campaign in the print media and on television and radio in an attempt to hose down widespread popular hostility to its WorkChoices industrial relations (IR) laws, in advance of this year's federal election.

The advertising campaign features high-ranking public servant Barbara Bennett, recently appointed head of the Workplace Authority, the government's refashioned IR watchdog. Bennett strains to present a caring persona—described by one media commentator as the “tightly wired friendliness of an actress on *Desperate Housewives*”.

Unfortunately for the government, her performances only bring to mind the image of a used car salesman attempting to offload a clearly shonky automobile. This is because Bennett's brief is to convince workers that allowing employers to impose individual work agreements that strip away longstanding conditions will actually safeguard those conditions.

In one advertisement, an actor playing a father says he is concerned that his teenage son can be forced to sign an individual work contract on inferior conditions and that employers will be allowed to “rip off kids”. Bennett responds, “No, they can't,” claiming: “I understand that is an important issue for parents, so let me be clear. All Workplace Agreements for people under 18 have to be signed off by a parent or guardian. It's the law and the Workplace Ombudsman will enforce it.”

Under the conditions created by Howard's laws, Bennett's assurance is completely meaningless. WorkChoices requires only that employers include five guaranteed minimum conditions in any work agreement and allows the exclusion of a raft of once-protected award conditions such as penalty rates, shift

allowances, rostered days off, public holidays and annual leave loading.

Bennett also suggests that the agreement being offered can be subjected to some sort of negotiation. This is not the case. Getting the job is contingent on the applicant unquestioningly accepting the conditions determined by the employer. In a situation where it has become increasingly difficult for youth to find employment—especially fulltime jobs—both they and their parents are placed under considerable pressure to sign off on whatever contract is offered.

While the official national unemployment rate is around 4.6 percent—a 30-year low—the real level is far higher. When the “hidden unemployed” are included—for example, those deemed employed because they perform one hour's paid work a week—the jobless rate leaps to over 12 percent. And youth unemployment is even higher. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures last year revealed that the national unemployment rate for 15- to 19-year olds stood at 20.7 percent in April last year and 21.5 percent just one month later.

As for appealing to the government's recently-created Workplace Ombudsman, the office will only ensure that a parent has signed the contract and that it contains the five minimal conditions stipulated under WorkChoices.

Bennett also conveniently neglects to mention that under the government's new stringent social security regime young job seekers can be stripped of their entire benefit for eight weeks if they are deemed to have breached Centrelink rules three times, including refusing to take a job offer. The punitive measures are just one more spur to drive workers into jobs with inferior pay and conditions.

In another advertisement a worker says he has heard that employers can take away longstanding conditions

like penalty rates. “Not true,” Bennett declares, and goes on to claim that employers cannot change conditions “unless you agree” and that if you do agree then you must receive “fair compensation” in return.

Again Bennett’s position is false. When current work contracts expire, employers can legally demand their employees go onto individual workplace agreements—known as Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs)—that abolish a raft of conditions. At the same time, agreement is hardly voluntary, as Bennett would have us believe, because the employer’s offer is made on a “take it or leave it” basis. Refusal can see workers lose their jobs or be locked out.

The claim that under the government’s new “fairness test” provision, workers will be offered “fair compensation” is another lie. The “fairness test” itself is a fraud and was only introduced in May this year in a bid to placate deepening anger at the IR laws and create the illusion that at least some protections were belatedly being provided.

Financially compensating workers for the destruction of their conditions runs against the entire grain of WorkChoices, which was specifically designed to strengthen the hands of employers to slash costs and lift profits.

If any employer does decide to give “compensation”, it will not be “protected” under WorkChoices. Any sweeteners can be clawed back at any time, while the conditions that have been taken away—worth up to tens of thousands of dollars to workers over the period of an employment contract—will never be regained.

It appears that the government hopes that using a leading public servant in the advertisements, rather than a government minister, helps convey a sense of impartiality. Bennett, however, is anything but neutral. She was specifically chosen to head the new Workplace Authority because of her unstinting support for the government’s draconian laws.

This was made clear when she publicly defended her appointment to head up the government’s advertising campaign—unprecedented for a public servant. She told the media: “WorkChoices is something I believe in very much or else I wouldn’t have accepted the job (head of Workplace Authority). Young people are very much the target of the campaign, and we know they watch television, and so this is a way of reaching them.”

Bennett has other credentials that make her highly suitable for the job. She has worked in high-profile government jobs for more than 25 years, including a stint in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet during the time of former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating. As treasurer in the Hawke Labor government from 1983 until he became prime minister in 1992, Keating was responsible for implementing historic and far-reaching attacks on the social position of the working class.

Bennett has also served as Group Manager for Workplace Relations Implementation and for the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. Prior to her most recent appointment, she was chief executive of Comcare, the federal government’s workplace occupational and health scheme. As such, she was instrumental in assisting large companies to move from the more stringent state-based schemes to the federal Comcare, which is based on voluntary compliance.

During a recent unsuccessful legal challenge by the Victorian state government against the major communications company Optus moving to Comcare, Bennett openly demonstrated her big-business sympathies, contemptuously dismissing the need for independent and regular safety inspections.

“Our employers are very large, sophisticated and mature in our jurisdiction,” she declared. “Because of the work that we do with them in making sure their systems are in place and regular auditing, we don’t need a parking inspector approach to safety.”

At the same time, Bennett exists in a highly-affluent and closeted social environment in the nation’s capital, Canberra, living in the most expensive suburb, largely immunised from the daily struggles and concerns of the vast majority of ordinary working people.



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