

Eckersley, R. 2005. A headlong rush to riches and unhappiness. *The Canberra Times*, 25 October, p. 9.

## **A headlong rush to riches and unhappiness**

*There's another way to assess the Government's proposed IR reforms, says **Richard Eckersley**.*

A lot of people – politicians, journalists, unionists, business people, church leaders and welfare advocates – are scrutinising the Federal Government's planned industrial relations changes to try to separate political intent from political spin. But many ordinary Australians will have neither the time, interest, nor expertise to understand the legislative fine print, however reluctant they may be to take the Government's word on what it means.

There is another way to assess the proposed changes: look at the political philosophy behind them.

Prime Minister John Howard makes no secret of what this is; there is no spin on his beliefs about what matters most in government. It is the economy. On this occasion, as on many others during his Prime Ministership, Howard has made it clear he believes the economy has priority over everything else. Wealth is the foundation for building a better society.

As I have argued on this page before, this belief reflects an outdated view of the world – shared by political leaders the world over - that is growing evermore costly and dangerous. There is increasing evidence that this view is not only irrevocably damaging the earth's environment – global warming is just one example – but that it is undermining human health and wellbeing.

Here is some of the latest evidence on mental health. A report of a major study of over 9,000 adult Americans, published in June this year, shows that almost a half of Americans will experience a clinical mental disorder during their lives, while over a quarter will suffer a disorder in any one year. The lifetime risk increases for successively younger generations: those aged 18 to 29 have a fourfold higher risk than those aged 60 and over.

A UK study of adolescents, published late last year, found increases in emotional and behavioural problems across three comparable surveys conducted in 1974, 1986 and 1999. The increases occurred across all social classes and family types, suggesting trends such as increasing disadvantage or divorce could not fully explained the trends. In fact, several recent US studies of rich kids – a little researched group – show they may be experiencing higher levels of substance abuse, depression and anxiety than children overall. Possible explanations are excessive pressures to achieve and greater isolation – physical or emotional - from parents.

There is another stream of evidence that is relevant to this issue: public opinion. Surveys suggest a growing loss of faith in the 'official future' based on material progress, economic growth and technical fixes to social and environmental problems.

Sociologist Michael Pusey found in his *Middle Australia* project that over a half of those surveyed felt quality of life was falling, with the most common reasons given being, in order: too much greed and consumerism; the breakdown in community and social life; too much pressure on families, parents and marriages; falling living standards; and employers demanding too much.

The 2005 *Mind & Mood* report from Ipsos Mackay, published in June, says there is growing concern about the state of Australian society - rougher, tougher, more competitive, less compassionate - that is producing stress, edginess and a feeling of personal vulnerability. Australians feel 'we seem to be lurching from one difficulty to another with the prospect of a serious crisis emerging'. Who do we blame? 'Repeatedly, the finger is pointed at politicians who seem to have been so preoccupied with balancing the Budget - or producing massive surpluses - that they have neglected investment in Australia's future.' 'Short-term thinking' is one of the most common accusations levelled at political leaders.

In a recent pilot replication of part of a 1995 survey, I found that young people (women in this instance) were, if anything, more pessimistic about the future of Australia and the world now than they were then, including being less likely to expect the future for Australia that they preferred. An increased majority of young women agreed that science and technology were alienating and isolating people from each other and nature, while dwindling minorities believed science and technology would make democracy stronger and give people more control over their lives, solve environment problems without the need to change lifestyles, and produce enough food for the growing world population.

Business people, who, like governments, tend to continue to believe in the old pipeline model of progress - pump more wealth in one end and more welfare flows out the other - might think of the situation this way: what would be the prospects of a corporation in which most of the employees had lost faith in its vision and goals and a quarter were struggling to cope with their jobs?

At the International Conference on Thinking in Melbourne in July, the noted American management and leadership writer Peter Senge spoke of the error, from a management perspective, of regarding a business as a machine for making money rather than as a human community. Yet increasingly we think not only of businesses but entire societies as machines for making money.

The lesson seems clear: if we were to make optimising human health, potential and wellbeing the aim of progress, we would be forced to recognise that the basis of these things is much more complex, and often less tangible and material, than current strategies presume.

Wellbeing comes from being connected and engaged, from being suspended in a web of relationships and interests, which give meaning to our lives. The intimacy, belonging and support provided by close personal relationships seem to matter most; isolation exacts the highest price.

Money and what it buys constitute only a part of what makes for a high quality of life. And the pursuit of wealth can exact a high cost when it is given too high a priority – nationally or personally – and so crowds out other, more important goals. The need to belong is more important than the need to be rich; meaning matters more than money.

Policies that make our working lives longer, harder or more insecure, and so increase pressures on families and other relationships, will diminish our wellbeing, however richer they make us.

Our politics is lagging far behind both scientific evidence and public opinion on what makes life worth living – a dangerous development for democracy.

When political leaders claim a strong, dynamic and growing economy is the *overriding* responsibility of government, and bend all else to this objective, we might ask them this: the bottom line of growing the economy at 3-4 per cent a year is that we will be, on average and in real terms, earning *and consuming* twice as much in 20-30 years as we are now. Should this really be our top priority as a nation?

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