

'Dead, Buried, Cremated' and Exhumed? Consensus in Industrial Relations Policy and Politics in Australia 2007-2015

Rae Cooper

We shouldn't allow it to be driven by ideology, and that's on both sides. We shouldn't procrastinate on the things that are common sense and just need to get done. Most importantly, we need to reframe this discussion ... It will not be built by scare campaigns. It will be built through honest, respectful conversation, through having the facts on the table and letting the community decide.

(Westacott, 2015)

Introduction

Delivering the Kingsley Laffer Memorial Lecture at the University of Sydney in August 2015, Jennifer Westacott, head of the Business Council of Australia laid out a case for consensus in regulation of industrial relations which reflected what she called the realities of 'the new workplace'. She argued that without greater levels of cooperation and agreement between the major actors and political parties as to the central objectives of such a system reforms would be impossible and debate would remain rhetorical. This chapter examines industrial relations policy and politics in the period from 2007 to 2015. During this eight-year period IR was both a highly contentious policy area and a key political issue upon which elections have pivoted. In the three federal election campaigns of the period IR policy was either a key issue of difference between the major parties or an important 'shadow' issue which the government or opposition sought to neutralise. Beyond campaigns, the hot contestation of IR policy played out in the media and in and alongside various

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Conclusions

The period 2007-2015 has been a volatile political time and matters relating to industrial relations and workplace policy have never been far from the action. Government and oppositions are wary, in the post-WorkChoices period, of introducing changes which might be seen as too radical. This has been acutely felt by the conservative parties, which have expended considerable effort 'neutralising' community concerns about industrial relations in election campaigns and holding back policy innovation in government. Employing Beftor and Budd's, 'efficiency', 'equity' and 'voice' model gives us a framework to understand the underpinnings and the priorities of the major parties in workplace policy. It is clear that there is no consensus between the parties across the dimensions, the parties differ substantially in the ways that they frame each of the concerns in policy and practice. Given the disparate ideological approaches to these three areas, I see no evidence that consensus will emerge between the political parties in the near future. The consensus is also missing *within* the conservative parties in relation to industrial relations. Significant tensions are set to re-emerge government responds to the two major inquiries discussed in this chapter.

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