

ESSAY

The choices we make

A 'sliding doors' moment

David Peetz

BRISBANE, 15 JUNE, 2039: Chris shuffles into the homeless shelter. They've always been spartan places, but more so now than they ever were when she was a student and did some volunteer work here in 2014.

Not that she has time to dwell on those memories much. She knew she never wanted to come here, but she's finally given in. It's just too dangerous outside. The bashings are getting harder to avoid. And if they get you, there's no point in going to a hospital. If you don't have private insurance ('whatever that is,' she mumbles, though she knows what it is) you pay an up-front fee that she has no chance of handing over. Or they don't let you in.

Same with GPs, though at least the charge isn't so high there. It used to be called a 'co-payment' when it was lower, but eventually, she remembers, the government just stopped paying anything to doctors. 'Rightsizing government,' they said.

She wonders if she recognises the face on the other side of the soup ladle from her student days, but she says nothing.

'Where you from?' he asks, trying to make conversation as he half fills a bowl.

'Round here. I went away. Came back a few years ago.'

'What brought you back?'

'I had some work – well, from time to time anyway.'

'Doing what?'

'Oh, I was a sessional tutor at the uni. Had my last contract there about eighteen months ago, a few years after I got my PhD.'

BRISBANE, 15 JUNE, 2039: Chris has coffee with an old friend from her university days. She hasn't seen her for a quarter of a century. They've both aged since then, but both like to think the other hasn't.

They sit inside the café, next to the main window. Across the road is a sparkling new medical clinic. Her friend looks closely at it, then recognition dawns.

'Isn't that where we both did volunteer work for our degrees, back in 2014?'

'Yes, though of course the homeless shelter moved out long ago. They've much nicer premises now, but I hear it's rarely full.'

'You see quite a few homeless people sleeping out in the park. I guess there's nothing much to bother them.' She pauses. *'Ever used that clinic?'*

'Couple of years ago, I had a cough, real bad. My chest hurt so much I thought I was having a heart attack. They hooked me up and ran all the expensive tests, figured it was just a cracked rib. Well they weren't expensive tests for me – didn't cost me anything, of course. But it was really good.'

'And how's the job going, Chris?'

'Quite well. You know, it's pretty secure. I've got my hat in the ring for a promotion.'

'To senior lecturer?'

'Yes. It's a few years since I got my PhD, I've done my share of teaching and publishing. I think I'm about due. Is that your baby crying?'

'I'll bring her in. I thought she might sleep better in the sunshine. Never mind.'

IT'S THE SAME Chris in each vignette. It's not the choices Chris made that I'm writing about here. She had limited choice. It's about the choices *we* make. We, as a society, face choices that affect what we do, the way we work, the nature of work, and who benefits and who suffers from it. But it's the choices that we make, that make the difference to her – and to millions of others.

But before going further into the future, what's the back-story. How did we get to where we are? And where, exactly, are we?

Through several decades after WWII, living standards improved, unemployment was low and workers' slice of the cake gradually got more icing on it. Wages and benefits rose, annual leave got longer, working hours got shorter. Responding to pressures from numerous parts of civil society, the range of services provided by government widened and deepened.

This changed through the 1980s, in many countries. Major shifts in economy and society were brought about by financialisation, described by Thomas I. Palley as ‘a process whereby financial markets, financial institutions, and financial elites gain greater influence over economic policy and economic outcomes’. Increasingly, financialisation prioritises the monetary over the real, the volatile over the stable, the immediate over the sustainable, and the rich over the poor.

For many, financialisation in Australia was most symbolised by the decision by then Treasurer Paul Keating and Prime Minister Bob Hawke to deregulate foreign exchange markets and substantially loosen regulation of financial markets in December 1983.

For me, though, it was most symbolised by a meeting of the budgetary committee of the Labor Cabinet on 28 July, 1986, when a collapse in the terms of trade and a run on the dollar in financial markets engendered such a sense of economic crisis that some ministers feared possible intervention by the International Monetary Fund. A decision announced earlier that month to introduce seemingly esoteric changes to the treatment of international capital flows, which would have closed off interest withholding tax exemptions, was hastily reversed in the face of financial market disapproval and foreign investment policy loosened.

Perhaps more than any other, it was the day improvements in the ‘social wage’ – government spending on health, education, housing and welfare that directly boosted workers’ living standards – fell off the government priority list. Under the Accord with trade unions, the social wage had been near the top of that priority list, but no more. Through the remainder of the 1980s savings were made to social wage programs, product markets were deregulated, ‘competition policy’ reforms were introduced, and public assets were privatised.

Since then, finance capital has grown in strength. Governments in Australia and around the world have been attracted to ‘market liberal’ policies (sometimes referred to as neo-liberalism). Unions have declined in coverage and influence in the face of increasingly hostile employers under pressure from financiers, indifferent or hostile governments, and their own ‘institutional sclerosis’, as Barbara Pocock described it – their failure to make sufficient internal changes to accommodate the demands of the market liberal era. Globalisation has thus

developed in an environment that has been most conducive to the interests of capital, and most antagonistic to the interests of labour.

The ‘sliding doors’ portraits of Chris illustrate two alternative visions of the future for Australian workers. Which turns out to be true depends on the choices we make over coming years.

The earlier changes and choices have been followed by many changes in the world of work: changes in employer strategies, in the types of jobs, in the nature of work, in the distribution of income and power.

IN 1987, WOLFGANG Streeck wrote of how the great ‘uncertainty of management’ was dealing with the ‘management of uncertainty’. Managers have responded – to the volatility of the product markets in which they sell and the financial markets in which their equity and debt are nested – by a range of strategies, some consistent, many contradictory.

Chief among the consistent strategies is the search for greater flexibility. You hear a lot about employers offering greater flexibility *for* employees – more choice in their start or finishing times, perhaps in their total hours. This is in response to demands from employees themselves – more on that later.

But the principal form of flexibility is the flexibility *by* employees that employers seek, to help employers manage – and shift – their own risk. Sometimes they seek ‘functional’ flexibility – getting employees to take on multiple and quite different tasks and hence skills. Sometimes they seek ‘numerical’ flexibility, meaning that the number of workers, or the number of hours they work, or maybe even their pay rates, move up and down according to the needs of the enterprise.

For a long time, greater numerical flexibility was seen as an unequivocal plus, creating greater stability, or at least resilience, in labour markets. Governments were encouraged, including by bodies like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), to remove restrictions on hours and on hiring and firing, and to attempt to emulate the most flexible of them all – the US labour market, where employers hire and fire ‘at will’. Then the global financial crisis came along, and although Europe experienced a greater fall in economic activity than the USA, it was America that suffered the greater fall in employment. In its biggest test, the theory failed spectacularly. The OECD was having misgivings even before then;

after the crisis it recommended governments improve income support and unemployment insurance benefit systems, which it had previously said would decrease flexibility.

Alongside greater flexibility came the urge for control. But how? On the one hand, employees were demanding more voice at work and more control over their working lives. The decline of unions meant that, for many, an obvious mechanism for voice was no longer there. Some technologies inherently gave greater discretion to employees using those technologies. A case study by James R. Barker showed that employees were often more effective at exerting control over the behaviour of fellow employees, and extracting maximum effort, than were their supervisors. So, many employers gave employees greater control over their work.

But it is oh so hard for managers to 'let go'. The urge for control is human. How can you justify those big bucks if the workers themselves are in charge? And other technologies gave the opportunity to micromanage employees – in particular, to dictate their time. Swipe cards could tell warehouse bosses just how long their workers were taking to move a palette of cans from shelf to truck. Monitors could tell call centre bosses how many seconds 'customer service representatives' were pausing between calls, or taking to go to the toilet. Barcode readers could tell supermarket managers how long shop assistants took to process a trolley of groceries. All could be used to tell staff, 'Work more! Work faster!' So, many employers gave employees *less* control over their work.

Regardless of whether they gave employees greater or less *direct* control over their work, employers typically sought to reduce the indirect discretion employees exercised. For some, keeping out, or throwing out, unions became important. While decades of research had shown that employees could be, and commonly were, simultaneously committed to both union and employer, many employers could not stomach the idea of an alternative source of power. Sometimes through sophisticated human resource management policies that signalled 'we're all in this together', sometimes through aggressive policies of exclusion, those employers often succeeded in obtaining unilateral control of the workforce, precluding collective bargaining in favour of individual contracting.

These employers would often cloak individualistic rhetoric with a collective demand on their employees (though the term 'employees' was often replaced

with ‘partners’, ‘members’ or, more commonly, ‘associates’). Corporate ‘culturism’, as it was described by Hugh Willmott, sought simultaneously to make employees feel as if they were treated as individuals but needed to subvert their individuality in pursuit of the collective, corporate goals. Those who failed to toe the corporate rhetoric line, as Diane van den Broek found in her study of a telecommunications company, would be performance managed out. It was reminiscent of the scene in *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*, in which Brian, facing an adoring but uncomprehending crowd, calls out ‘You’re all individuals!’ They respond, ‘Yes, we’re all individuals!’ He pleads, ‘You’re all different!’ ‘Yes, we are all different!’ Then a little voice at the back pipes up: ‘I’m not!’

Willmott took a more sinister view of it all, likening ‘culturist’ strategies to Big Brother’s attempts at totalising control in George Orwell’s *1984*. Yet often these attempts failed because, unlike in *1984*’s Oceania, workers were exposed to all sorts of ideas outside the workplace. The HR Department could never be as softly persuasive as Orwell’s Ministry of Truth, or as violently persuasive as his Ministry of Love.

ONE OF THE biggest shifts on the location of work has been from the public to the private sector. In the public sector, ‘new public sector management’ became the rage from the 1980s. Some activities were totally privatised. Services were outsourced to the private sector, policy separated from delivery. But not all changes in work can be traced to market liberal policies or financialisation. Some simply emerged as part of the normal process of development in a trading world.

As in all industrialised countries, manufacturing has declined in Australia – from 17 per cent of jobs in 1984 to 8 per cent in 2013. Manufacturing instead provides the engine for rapidly growing third world or transition economies, for dragging people out of poverty. Still, government policies in industrialised countries influence by how much manufacturing declines, and what it would look like. When the Australian government dared Holden to leave, it could not simply blame the following collapse of component sector employment on forces beyond its control.

While mining is sometimes portrayed as the saviour of the Australian economy – not least by mining companies themselves and their acolytes – it accounts for only 2 per cent of jobs. Employment growth now and

in the future is in ‘services’, a term so broad it can mean ‘anything that isn’t primary production or manufacturing’. Some jobs classified as in the ‘services’ sector are ‘blue collar’ jobs in construction or utilities (electricity, water or gas). Employment in the former is very cyclical; the latter is in structural decline.

Much of the structural growth in new service sector jobs is in occupations that involve personal interactions. These jobs put demands on employees that were relatively unknown in manufacturing or mining – demands for the use of ‘emotional labour’. Employees are asked to evoke emotional reactions in clients or customers that bring about sales or at least make the targets feel more satisfied. From waitresses, bar attendants, sales assistants and customer sales representatives in call centres to air stewards, aged care workers and child carers, employees work with what Arlie Hochschild called the ‘managed heart’.

They may be required to ‘put on a face’ to boost sales, stressfully pretending to feel something they do not (Hochschild calls this ‘surface acting’), like in a ‘smile’ campaign documented by Emmanuel Ogbonna but seen many times over by bewildered customers of numerous firms. Or employees may actually embody, deep down, the emotions that are needed, for example in care work (Hochschild calls this ‘deep acting’). Often these skills are associated with ‘women’s work’. Often they are seen as ‘attributes’ rather than ‘skills’. Often, therefore, the jobs undergo ‘undervaluation’ and the workers are poorly paid for what the work requires.

Other emerging jobs in the service sector, though, may be alienated from human interaction. The rise of internet sales has caught many storefront retailers off guard, replacing shop visits with screen clicks. There are no book sales assistants in Amazon warehouses, where mobile technology monitors and directs workers to use the quickest route between two points. ‘You’re sort of like a robot, but in human form,’ said one manager to the *Financial Times*. Not just emotionless labour, some jobs are thoughtless labour.

The changes in economic structure had other implications. Manufacturing had long been a source of employment for migrant workers, and so its decline caused particular problems for that workforce. Manufacturing, once seen as the heartland of unionism, now accounts for only 9 per cent of unionists. The largest occupational group amongst unionists is now in health

and related areas, which account for 22 per cent of unionists, with another 18 per cent in education. Unionism has become white collar, like the workforce.

ONE PERSON'S FLEXIBILITY is another person's insecurity. The mythology of the 'portfolio' career, as if somehow workers like to be shunted from industry to industry over their lifetime, hides the fact that workers are treated as more disposable than before. Some, of course, may prefer changes of career, but for others career changes are a euphemism that is forced upon them by the growing impermanency of work.

Particularly in English-speaking countries, employers have become less hesitant about downsizing, and less reluctant to make big cuts. Yet research by Wayne F. Cascio showed that downsizing often results in lower morale, lower productivity and worse performance, in part due to 'survivor syndrome' amongst those left behind, and employer expectations that somehow those left will make up, at least in part, for those departed. It may be a contradictory strategy, but still a popular one. We've seen companies turning permanent jobs into casual jobs, shifting from direct employment into labour hire, converting employees to the status of dependent contractors.

For some workers, non-standard employment of this type is a means of gaining some control over their working lives. Nurses, for example, might choose labour hire as an alternative to the grind of rotating daily shift work. For other workers, though, it represents a deepening of risk and insecurity. Risk is passed on to workers, many of whom are no longer 'employees' but now responsible for their own sick leave, compensation and insurance.

It may also be a means of weakening worker organisation. In coal mining, formerly the vanguard of shorter hours, workers from contractor firms – once only a handful of those on a mine site – account for half or more of their workforce on some sites. This has facilitated, and been facilitated by, the move to rotating twelve-hour shifts, a sometimes gruelling existence for both mineworkers and their families, and the fly-in-fly-out model.

For workers in lower-skilled occupations, or at least those outside professional or managerial occupations, insecurity is likely to trump choice. But it's not only the low skilled who find themselves marginalised this way. Besides the food retailing and hospitality sector, it is in education where casualisation is greatest. We're not talking about workers who left school early and can find

no better work – we’re talking about highly skilled workers with doctoral qualifications, who spend semester after semester doing sessional tutoring or sometimes lecturing, some never quite sure when they’ll be paid, sometimes only knowing a week in advance that they’ll be teaching this semester.

Maybe just like Chris. Those ‘sliding doors’ portraits at the beginning of this piece were not extreme imaginations. The first was inspired by modern day USA. From there, reports have emerged in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* of adjunct (sessional) academic staff living in relatives’ basements or homeless shelters. The problems of the unaffordability of health care would be familiar to anyone who has spent time in USA – a country whose health, education and minimum wage regimes our present policy-makers seem to admire. Health insurance is a work-related issue. In America, unions battle hard to obtain it for their members; employers see cutting it as a means to make major cost savings; Canadian employers regard national health insurance as a competitive cost advantage that attracts businesses across the border; and Australian unions negotiated the introduction of national health insurance as part of their 1983 Accord with the federal government.

The second portrait was inspired by my time in Norway, with its more socially engaged public sector in health and other areas, where university vice-chancellors are elected by staff and students and resist state attempts to impose new public sector management techniques on universities, and where mutual trust is so high that parents routinely leave prams outside shops and cafés while they go inside. You can get arrested for that in the USA.

AS EMPLOYMENT BECOMES more insecure, and as management strategy toughens, work also becomes harder. Through the twentieth century, workers gradually achieved shorter and shorter working weeks through various rounds of industrial action and advocacy. Yet in the 1980s, this started to change. Working hours for full-time workers increased and continued to do so in the 1990s. Surveys showed large numbers of workers reporting increases in how hard they had to work and in the pressure they felt at work. They also showed increasing difficulties experienced by workers in balancing their work and family lives, and problems of work interfering in their personal lives.

No small part of this reflected the changing regulation of working time. Hourly wages with penalty rates and overtime premiums became less

common; annualised salaries that ‘incorporated’ these things became more common. Employers no longer paid the full cost when employees worked extra hours. So management could raise expectations, employees would inculcate them, and the extra work would get done. Some universities, for example, regularly expected their staff to increase research outputs annually with 10 per cent geometric growth.

If wages and premiums stayed in place, then employers might push for the introduction of rotating twelve-hour shifts, as in mining, already mentioned (now working the second longest hours of any industry), or some parts of manufacturing.

Alternatively, employers might push for the abolition of penalty rates and other time-related premiums. The Howard Government’s ill-fated WorkChoices legislation was a temporary culmination of such efforts. Despite its demise, employers in retailing and hospitality still push for the reduction or removal of penalty rates, and now they again look to government for support.

But these are not processes that can continue indefinitely. Eventually, increases in work intensity or working hours become unsustainable. Resistance grows, both organised – through unions and industrial action – and unorganised – through absenteeism, quits, losses in loyalty, problems in quality of output, even possibly sabotage. The employee goodwill or ‘organisational citizenship’ that firms come to expect and indeed rely upon (often without realising it) may disappear. It’s in this context that employee demands for greater flexibility in behaviour by employers have expanded. Some workers have the labour market power to achieve this; many do not.

So, too, resistance may grow to increasing insecurity, and be manifested in the same ways. We see evidence for this in the way that casualisation of the employee workforce has peaked. It reached a quarter of the workforce in 1998 but has been roughly that level since.

Indeed the rapidly growing fascination that employers had with part-time, casual employment (for a long time, the growth in part-time hours was mostly through growth in casual employment) has tapered off. Whereas two-thirds of part-time jobs were casual in 1996, by 2012 just over half were casual. In its place has come a growing recognition of the need for permanent, part-time employment (perhaps also partly under pressure from the demands of women returning to work from maternity leave).

On the other hand, employers continue to be interested in casual *full-time* jobs, with the proportion of full-time jobs that were casual growing from 8 per cent in 1992 to 13 per cent in 2007, though even that has since declined slightly.

Meanwhile, the growth in the working week for full-time workers has halted. The proportion of full-time workers putting in more than fifty hours in a week rose from 19.5 per cent through 1978 to 30.5 per cent through 2000. It gradually eased to 26.5 per cent through 2012. The unsustainability of such practices was apparent for employers to see. That said, the rotating twelve-hour shift still rules in mining and other areas; employers there still seek an increase in maximum shift length, and the attack on penalty rates in the service sector continues. But employer effort now seems focused on getting employees to work *whenever* suits employers, regardless of the cost to employee health or social life, rather than on getting individual employees to work longer and longer hours each week.

IN PUBLIC DEBATE, the rationale for the policy choices that have underpinned these changes in work has almost always been about improving economic wellbeing. You may not be made better off as a result of being more insecure, working harder or having less quality time with your family, it goes, but you're better off through the higher productivity that is brought about.

The trouble is, the evidence suggests that there has been no productivity dividend from all this. Annual labour productivity growth since the deregulation of foreign exchange markets has been no better than over the years that preceded it. During the WorkChoices years – the high point of workplace relations 'reforms' – productivity growth slumped.

Not all countries adopted the 'market liberal' model as enthusiastically as Australia. Generally speaking, it is the English-speaking countries that are most closely associated with the 'market liberal' model. But when you make long run comparisons across OECD countries, you do not find evidence that productivity growth, or productivity levels, are consistently higher in market liberal economies than in 'coordinated market' economies like Norway, Sweden, Germany or the Netherlands. (In fact, Norway has higher productivity levels than *any* of the English-speaking countries.)

But where these economic models really make a difference is in the distribution of income, wealth and power. Inequality is higher in market

liberal countries. Poverty is higher. The top 0.1 per cent typically gets more – though nowhere more than in USA – and the bottom half usually get less. As documented by Georgina Murray, Bill Carroll and others, a small proportion of (mostly) men really do occupy increasingly powerful positions. In a 2006 interview in the *New York Times*, one of the world's richest men, Warren Buffett, said 'There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning.' He said that with good reason.

Income and wealth inequality declined in Australia and other countries through much of the twentieth century, but they have increased since the mid 1980s.

Other inequalities persist. The gender gap in earnings between men and women, which closed substantially between 1969 and the late 1980s, has stagnated. Progress in achieving more positive attitudes amongst the populace at large and within institutional settings seems to have been offset by a greater distancing between working women and the regulation that protects their interests (for example, it is harder to regulate women's wages under an enterprise bargaining system than through awards). Women continue to be undervalued when in female-dominated occupations, discriminated against when in male-dominated occupations, and excluded from the top echelons of business. Recent migrants often find their skills and qualifications undervalued and end up in jobs that underutilise their skills. People with disabilities continue to encounter career barriers, while those with less visible chronic illnesses face the dilemma pointed to by Shalene Werth: do I 'disclose' and risk possible labelling as a malingerer, or hide it and manage the danger of an unexplained relapse and absence?

It is not as if the period before market liberalism was one without difficulties. In the 1970s and early 1980s, a key problem was competition for what economists like to call 'rents' – economic surpluses. In an economy with many areas where product markets were poorly competitive, especially in relation to overseas-produced goods, there were opportunities for parts of both labour and capital to extract rents. This competition for rents became a spiral that heightened the problems of simultaneous unemployment and inflation. That is what prompted Australia to have an Accord between unions and the government.

These days rents are still being extracted, but by different groups – essentially extremely high income earners, the chief executive officers, directors and managers of top firms, parts of the finance sector, and the like. The old

problem of general inflation (and of responding to it) has been superseded by the narrower inflation of executive remuneration and of the incomes of the rich (especially the top 0.1 per cent) and asset price bubbles. Market liberal 'reforms' have not solved our economic problems and delivered an acceleration of our growth in wellbeing. They have just changed the problems, and in doing so made life more difficult for many workers.

YOU MAY HAVE noticed that I have barely used the term 'globalisation' in this essay to describe the forces at work. It is easy to blame problems in the way we work on globalisation, as if some external, inevitable force is at work and nothing can be done about it. But globalisation – if we mean increasing trade and international communications – is neither good nor bad in itself. Its effects are complex and contradictory.

On the one hand, for example, increased trade helps third world countries industrialise and grow wages, employment and living standards. On the other hand, globalisation increases uncertainty and puts increased pressure on companies to find new flexibilities with the associated pressure on security and wages that this implies. The net effect of these two tendencies is not set in stone. It depends on the policy choices taken by states and the mobilisations by employers, unions and other parts of civil society that determine the conditions under which globalisation proceeds.

The rhetoric of 'free trade' is used by multinational corporations to pressure governments to relinquish powers to regulate environmental or workplace behaviour through special clauses in 'free trade agreements'. Yet governments don't need to do that. It is a choice they make. Other countries are more 'globalised' than Australia – in Norway, for example, trade is 49 per cent of its GDP, compared to 34 per cent of Australia's – but place more emphasis on 'job quality' or what the International Labor Organisation calls 'decent work' than is shown in Australia.

When the global financial crisis pushed millions out of work globally, the rationale for market liberal policies was demolished. The opaqueness of complex multi-layered financial instruments, and the perverse incentives created by reward systems in the finance sector – both results of financialisation – directly created the crisis. Governments and central banks in Europe and the USA were forced to rescue financial institutions from their own folly.

As economist John Quiggin pointed out, the credibility of the economic theories underpinning these policies was destroyed. Yet the ideas persisted – like zombies, they would not die. Remarkably, within two years Europe was plunged into a new crisis – a crisis of austerity politics – as enthusiasts for market liberal ideas successfully persuaded policy-makers that governments, not banks, were to blame and that workers, not the beneficiaries, needed to endure years of austerity to pay for the fiscal mess that others had created. More than anything else, this demonstrated the failure of civil society – in particular, unions and other bodies representing workers, children, the environment and the poor – to develop and articulate an alternative policy vision to challenge the failed market liberal paradigm.

Almost as remarkable now is how public debate in Australia proceeds as if there were a fiscal mass in this country when none exists (net public debt as a proportion of GDP is one sixth the average across advanced industrialised countries) – and then, of course, that workers, children, the environment and the poor have to pay to ‘clean’ it up.

Yet that is not the end of the story. Resistance happens, and choices have to be made. We have already seen how employees want voice at work and they want power to exercise some control over their working lives. Employees learn to cope or resist insecurity in their jobs and insecurity in their pay, through unorganised or organised means.

Unions have sought to reorganise themselves, devoting more resources to the workplace and sometimes to the formal and informal training of delegates, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and success. They have reversed the decline in membership, and substantially slowed (perhaps even arrested, we cannot be sure yet) the previously precipitous decline in their coverage of the workforce. That is probably a major accomplishment, though not enough to return to their former glory in the foreseeable future. Although in a hostile environment, unions’ future is in their hands. Democracy within unions is a precondition for success. In a world without wage arbitration, you can’t have power in the workplace if you don’t have power in the union.

Other social movements – representing women, the underprivileged, community groups, environment – need to be drawn into a major conversation if an alternative vision is to be developed, articulated and implemented. The Accord between unions and the government was many things, some of

which are irrelevant to today's economy, but most importantly for this purpose it was an alternative vision of the economy, a challenge to the liberal market orthodoxy of government departments of the day. The need to develop an alternative vision of what the economy, society and workplace should look like is greater now than ever before. Unions put resources into the ALP, which badly needs the resources but doesn't want the unions and believes they have nowhere else to go anyway, rather than putting resources into alternative institutions for advancing worker interests. Yet unions are probably the only group in Australia with the resources, the breadth of membership, and the organising capability to draw together the disparate groups and the individuals concerned. They showed an outstanding ability to mobilise resources and a much more limited ability to engage across community groups in the 2007 *Your Rights at Work* campaign. They now need to consider at least as challenging a process, one that spreads further and deeper outside their comfort zones.

So, there are choices about the directions of economic policy that need to be made; and there are choices to be made about the rights of people at work. Organisations think of 'organisational citizenship' as depicting 'good' behaviour by employees towards the organisation – doing things not in their job description that make life easier for their fellow workers, their managers or their customers, and that in the end help boost profits.

But citizens also have rights, not just responsibilities. We need to think and talk about treating people as *citizens at work*, people with a right to respect, job security, income security, and a voice. It means people have a right to decent work. And it can be done, if we make the right choices. As leading Canadian jurist Harry Arthurs recently said, it is not a question of going back to twentieth century labour law, as the problems for workers stem from wider forces that 'also adversely affect all citizens in their non-working lives as consumers, borrowers, tenants and recipients of social goods'. The project is one of restoring the primacy of democratic values and processes over markets.

David Peetz is professor of employment relations at the Centre for Work, Organisation and Wellbeing at Griffith University. He is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia and author of *Unions in a Contrary World* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), *Brave New Workplace* (Allen and Unwin, 2006), co-author of *Women of the Coal Rushes* (UNSW Press, 2010).