

Inquiry Into Older Workers

VIEW FROM AN UNPERSON

- A FACE IN THE STREET



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Signed: _____

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PREFACE

Crimethink

Summary of main points:

I tell of my personal experiences as a mature aged unemployed unperson and my views on unemployment including:

- depersonalisation
- social isolation and disruption
- suicide and divorce amongst mature aged unemployed
- lack of resources
- lack of real jobs available
- discrimination of various kinds
- the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer
- government prolefeed
- Bosses from Hell
- Mutual Obligation for the Australian Federal Government as described in Article 23 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights



PROBLEM

1. INTRODUCTION

Joy Camp or Room 101

I have been unemployed for the last year and am 46 years old. I have a wife and three daughters. World-wide there are 'More than 300 million are unemployed, thirty million in the wealthy countries ... many are disaffected and angry.' (Pilger, 1998:13) This includes me!

My previous employment as a Training Manager was terminated as a result of Dr Kemp's decision to revamp Social Security, employment agencies and training. Before this job I was a Training Officer at BHP Refractories, Mayfield, which was closed down as a result of BHP's move from the Hunter Region. Before that I was a Principal of a small independent school (K-6). My current employment prospects are bleak.

I am not registered as unemployed as I would be forced to apply each fortnight for 8 jobs that don't suit me, are mostly temporary, menial and demoralising and are outside my area of speciality which is education and training. (Despite government prolefeed there are no suitable permanent jobs in training or education available in the Hunter Region.)

Mature aged people are likely to face significant periods of unemployment before acquiring new work and may have differing needs than those of other age groups.

Spending on programs to help unemployed people with training has been decreased each federal budget since 1994. While educators may want to maximise the intellectual, cultural, academic, political and economic development of people such actions may be incompatible with current political discourse focused on employment figures and mutual obligation. (Marginson, 1993)

This is further worsened by a lack of employment opportunities within Maitland and age discrimination on the part of some employers. Maitland is situated in the heart of the Hunter Valley with a population of 50 000 people and is experiencing high levels of unemployment with the closure of large employers such as BHP and the mines.

23 per cent of the workforce are casual (and are not counted as being unemployed) Government figures show that Flex 3 has a 15% success rate (60,000 of the 400,000 people referred have been placed in work). Unemployed mature aged people are directly targeted by Flex 3. 'A Flinders University study shows there are 236,200 of them, with an average of two years out of work - more than any other group.' (Allard, 1999:7)

The NSW Committee on Ageing report *Never Too Late To Learn: A report on older*

people and lifelong learning (1998) has revealed some disturbing trends that include:

- reduced ability for mature aged people to access learning opportunities
- economic rationalism has resulted in an education and training system which is focused on outcomes rather than on people
- lack of adequate funding and resources
- mature unemployed people are likely to spend twice as long out of work as their younger counterparts. Some will never work again.
- high suicide rates amongst older men in the Hunter are perhaps related to higher levels of unemployment

My friends who are unemployed used to call the Department of Social Security the 'SS Gestapo' as a result of their uncaring heavy handed 'Nazi' tactics, including antics by the 'Pubic Hair Police' who checked whether people were in a defacto relationship.

Centrelink is now universally referred to as '*CentreStink*' - a title which reflects the mature unemployed's growing antagonism with the bureaucratic nightmare of forms, petty rules and an veritable army of Major Majors who seem to have stepped out of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*.

Last year I wrote a ten page letter to the Minister and CEO complaining about the lack of adequate customer service from Maitland Centrelink and received a page and a half reply filled with multiple apologies. Their service has still not improved to the satisfaction of their mature customers like me.

A copy of my poetry book *Original Copy* (1997) is provided with this submission. Of particular interest are the poems: *The Dole Queue*; *The New Nigger*; *Keep it To Yourself*; *I'd Tell The Boss* and *This Generation*.



2. SOCIAL ISSUES

Minitrue ... IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH (Orwell, 1989:433)

'The assumption that must be questioned is that economic policy is sufficient for social policy ...' (Marginson, 1993:65). It is clearly not sufficient and is causing immense social upheaval and hurt to many individuals including those 45 years plus.

People are depersonalised and treated as economic objects and 'commodities' for the workplace. We unemployed are treated as 'unpersons'.

'unpeople: human beings who impede the pursuit of high policy and whose rights, often lives, therefore become irrelevant'. (Pilger, 1998:55. Quoting Mark Curtis.)

Conservative forces within the Government's ranks, such as the Lyons Forum, believe that it is the family who should take responsibility for people's welfare and not the State. Yet the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 23) states that 'Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work, and to protection against unemployment.' This is a condition placed upon governments. It seems that this right is given only to the employed and us unemployed unpersons are excluded. The compliance to this Article does not seem high on the political agenda. Where is the government's 'mutual obligation' to comply with this edict? Conveniently forgotten!

As there a fewer real jobs available (as opposed to growing McJobs that are casual or part-time) I have growing concerns about individual rights being eroded both on the dole queue and in the workplace.

... we are tacitly returning to a form of the workhouse test and to a condition of denying person rights to many of the poor - and that this is becoming widely accepted ... (Apple, 1996:15)

Unemployment brings upon the mature aged person a sudden drop in both income and social contacts. As there is no money to spend on entertainment after the basic necessities of sustaining a meagre life are met, one cannot join one's employed friends in any outing that costs money. Furthermore, the mature aged person is faced with sustained depression as unemployment continues without respite. I know of people who have committed suicide as a result of unemployment at this stage in life. Others have undergone divorce or separation as a result of the strains placed upon them by unemployment. This in turn affects the children of such families. The help available is minimal and left to charitable agencies that are swamped.

Psychologists are not available with a Health Care Card and mature aged unemployed are unable to afford health insurance. These suffering unemployed people are real people like you, the reader - not just a number in statistical survey!

The mature aged unemployed are isolated with no forum or platform from which to deliver their concerns to government and information to the general public or to have social contact with each other. My employed friends are horrified when I tell them of the restrictions placed on we unemployed unpersons.

The general press do not cover the intricacies of the Social Security Act, the never ending multiple form filling with exactly the same data, the intrusion into one's personal life, the lack of sufficient information, the lack of customer service, the rudeness of staff, the surprise letters in the mail, the surprise home visits, the restriction on visiting family interstate, the lack of holidays (unemployed people never get holidays no matter how long they are unemployed) and the restriction from moving from a place of low unemployment to a higher one ... even if your family home happens to be in the higher area and you're paying high rent in the lower area! The list is endless! A Soviet would be excused if he thought the Australian unemployed were living in a Gulag.

The social stigma of being unemployed is still great. Brennan's experience is also mine:

So many people feel qualified and compelled to pronounce me ...

- psychologically deficient — I must be if I can't get a job. There's no broad community awareness that the whole country is running at around 20:1 unemployed people to available jobs; OR that nobody 'in the know' realistically expects full employment in the foreseeable future.
- mentally unstable — if I get angry sometimes and lash out at blatant injustice. "You've got to learn how to deal with that anger ..." At times, calm talk does nothing; a 4 X 2 rattles cages
- lazy; a dreamer; an idealist. (Brennan, 1996)

Government prolefeed implies that the unemployed are the cause of their unemployment. 'The denigration of the less by the more powerful is, of course, always a means of obscuring truth.' (Pilger, 1998:90) Our unemployment is a direct consequence of government policy, including Paul Keating's "Recession we had to have."

The Prime Minister, Peter Reith and other Members of Parliament have expressed the hope that the Work for the Dole Scheme (aka Slave For the Dole) will be extended to all unemployed people. I gather this eventually means the mature aged unemployed. I can just see my new CV after slaving for the dole for a pittance:

- Teacher
- Principal of school
- Training Officer
- Training Manager
- Weed Puller Outerer at local park (Slave for the Dole).

Sure to get me a job NOT!

Meantime training and education costs have skyrocketed (IF one can find training suited to one's requirements.) University costs for an unemployed person are a major drain of finances. It ensures that the unemployed are excluded and only the rich have a tertiary education.

A person with my extensive skills does not need literacy and numeracy training or job search skills to gain employment. I could teach these courses blindfolded if I had employment in the field! The courses I *do* need cost a small fortune.

In the not too distant future the following may reoccur:

Demonstrations by the unemployed became a regular Melbourne event. In one of the biggest, on 15 July 1931, more than 2000 people marched behind a pipe band through the city streets to the Treasury Gardens. (Carroll, 1977:124)

As a Christian concerned with social justice I would join in!

3. ECONOMIC ISSUES

Arbeit Macht Frei

(*'Work makes you free': From the gates at Auschwitz.*)

Early retirement, especially amongst men, is often a form of disguised unemployment. (NSW Committee on Ageing, 1998:60) These are the lucky ones! Other unemployed mature aged people face losing their homes because mortgages cannot be paid. The opportunity to use their redundancy pay to pay off the family home is now denied them thanks to absurd government policy.

There is an 'unprecedented disparity between the poverty of the majority of humanity and the power and privilege of a tiny minority who control the world's resources.' (Pilger, 1998:538) Australia is the most unequal society in the Western world (Pilger, 1998:104) and continues to see a 'redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich' (Pilger, 1998:93)

There are no superannuation payments as the mature aged unemployed unpersons cannot afford them. The longer the period of unemployment the less opportunity to pay superannuation. The less superannuation, the more reliance on the government in old age. It should be noted that the Baby Boomers will be the aged people, kicked out of employment by government policy, harassed by Centrelink, demanding pensions and, by then, ***having the majority vote!*** I know I will be using my vote for greater social justice.

On his return from the United States in 1997, ... John Howard, said how impressed he was with America's 'low unemployment rate' based on 'lower wages' and minimal unemployment benefits. He said that what Australia needed was a lower minimum wage and reduced dole payments. (Pilger, 1998:77)

As a tertiary qualified philosopher, such a suggestion horrifies me. It would be an immoral and unethical act to further cruelly subject the unemployed to such economic rationalist ratbagery. The basic mathematical statement that seems to be totally ignored by politicians is: ***If there are no jobs available one cannot be employed.*** If anything needs changing, the rates for benefits need to be dramatically increased for those who have been unemployed a year or more. Politicians get massive pay rises but the unemployed get nothing of any substance. A clear case of *Animal Farm* revisited.

At the Maitland Employment National office this year I was astounded to see 40 jobs advertised where the other local agencies had approximately 10 each - mostly part-time, casual or commission work. Upon further investigation I found out that 30 of the 40 jobs advertised at the Maitland Employment National office were for 30 casual jobs for 15 to 17 year olds at the new

McDonalds - each position entered separately!!! A example of how available job figures are fudged!

The real issue about unemployment is the availability of real full-time jobs which has directly decreased as a result of government policy. The issue is not the qualities or character of the unemployed. If anyone is to blame for the abysmal state of Australia it is politicians. The next in line for blame are the greedy employers and more greedy banks.

I would like to see the Prime Minister or any other Member of Parliament live on the pittance now given to the unemployed. A month on the dole should be compulsory for all politicians, before making decisions on the poor. Rich politicians, secure with an income for life, have no idea what it is like. Politicians should have training wherein they are certified as 'currently competent' in competency based training areas such as compassion, truth, ethics and morality.

Mature aged unemployed people cannot get loans or large finance. While a business partner of Paul Keating can have a \$11 000 000 debt written off by the Commonwealth Bank, the same bank will not reduce fees and charges or let one payment on a home mortgage or bank card go unpaid for its mature aged unemployed customers. This is hypocrisy and discrimination at its very worst.

4. DISCRIMINATION ISSUES

ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL

BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS (Orwell, 1989:63)

As a result of the scarcity of jobs, the current climate is one that is a Boss-From-Hell's Heaven.

We live with the hideous pre-supposition that some people are worth more than others because they have been able to build an empire and make millions. Do we ever stop to think how they make their millions? Or do we just assume that, if they make big profits, they must be doing the country good and therefore should be encouraged and their philosophies extolled? (Stretton 1992). Behind many fortunes lies a crime which cannot be prosecuted. (Brennan, 1996)

This secondary labour market is part-time or casual, with more and more workers defined as private contractors, many working from home. These workers are often paid wages below award rates, are not paid benefits such as annual leave or superannuation ...Is this not discriminatory? Does it not perpetuate and worsen the present malaise? The stated intent may not be there, but it is happening. And we're letting employers get away with it. (Brennan, 1996)

The longer one is unemployed the less likely one is to gain employment because one is 'out of touch'. How do the unemployed get experience? My 25 years experience is not as important as the fact that I haven't worked in the last year. From contacts in various businesses, I have been told that applications by unemployed people, or those 45 and over, are simply placed to the side and not even looked at.

It would also seem that reverse discrimination is being applied and that males are no longer welcome in the workforce.

I would like to relate two pertinent stories of Bosses from Hell.

BOSS FROM HELL 1

I was employed in a large famous multinational company as a Training Officer. The manager of my section, Steve W., regularly told staff (male and female) at weekly staff meetings that he would be 'fucked up the arse' by his Manager if targets were not met. He told staff that if that happened he would 'fuck yous up the arse too'(sic.). Steve repeatedly delivered this piece of information with repeated pelvic thrusts. The top Manager considered this not to be sexual harassment or, indeed, harassment of any sort as it was 'common in industry'. A major environmental hazard occurred where Steve and his Manager found out that bricks containing hazardous materials had been regularly dumped and buried on a property owned by a employee's relative. The bricks were retrieved by convoys of company trucks and front-end loaders but the incident was never reported to the EPA. How do I know? I was a member of their Human Resources Department. He told staff that certain people were targeted for dismissal because he didn't like them and that excuses had to be found for their being unsuitable for their jobs.

He targeted me with an unfounded failure in a Performance Review - luckily I had kept a very detailed diary. His main worry was that I was a 'shit teacher who could not communicate at all'. This was interesting as I was a musician, author, poet, painter, ran my own community radio show, had been a teacher, Principal of a school, etc. Steve W. however could not write a sentence without a spelling mistake, thought 'yous' was the plural of 'you' and held a trade certificate. I was made redundant - along with a number of other staff members opposed to his tactics. The factory closed and Steve W. is now a manager elsewhere, hiring a firing and earning more money than I will in a lifetime.

I am unable to divulge his or the company's name as I have signed a secrecy agreement in order to get some money to live on after being illegally dismissed.

BOSS FROM HELL 2

I applied for a job as a 'training professional' advertised by a training company in Newcastle. I arrived early but had to wait over half an hour after the agreed appointment time before I was seen.

At the interview the Manager, Kerry S., spoke on the phone while sitting at a huge desk with a high back. Another staff member on the interview panel of two, sat on a comfortable seat at the front of the desk. I was given the lowest and most uncomfortable chair. They asked my area of speciality. I answered that I was a generalist who knew much about the process of training and education and had worked at the NSW Department of School Education, independent schools, BHP and TAFE .

They proceeded to give me a lengthy tirade about all the evils of the education system, how teachers and educators didn't know how to train, about the dreadful workers that come form



schools, how the training certificates they had were better than degrees and how they could not market someone who was a generalist or who was a 'academic with a degree' such as myself.

It is interesting that a friend of mine, who has a M Ed in Computer Education and is the Head Teacher of a local public High School, worked temporarily at this company. He told me that the particular training company's training practices were antiquated and educationally unsound and would not be acceptable in his High School.

I found out, at interview, that the training company job advertised was casual (not in advertisement) and conditional on anyone bothering to contact them. It was the only interview in which I have stated that an interview was also an opportunity for those looking for work to decide whether the company was a decent employer. It was the first and only time I have ever walked out before the close of the interview.

I wrote a letter of complaint. The Manager wrote back with a letter full of punctuation, spelling and grammatical errors. The company has placed a similar advertisement in this weekend's Newcastle Herald. I haven't bothered to apply again. I pity the poor individual who is eventually hired at that place of business.



PART B: PARTIAL ANSWERS

1. A CHANGE OF PARADIGM

The *Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics* of January 1990 was issued jointly by over one hundred theologians and economists, ethicists and development practitioners, church leaders and business managers who come from various parts of the world. It stated:

In assessing economic systems from a Christian perspective, we must consider their ability both to generate and to distribute wealth and income justly. ..

26. The right to earn a living would be a positive or sustenance right. Such a right implies the obligation of the community to provide employment opportunities. Employment cannot be guaranteed where rights conflict and resources may be inadequate. However the fact that such a right cannot be enforced does not detract in any way from the obligation to seek the highest level of employment which is consistent with justice and the availability of resources.

If this was done there would be much pain and suffering alleviated from mature unemployed unpersons. At the moment the government seems to be putting Band-Aids on the cancer of unemployment instead of ridding itself of the greedy, inhuman and appalling philosophy of Economic Rationalism and related Human Capital Theory. There needs to be a change of paradigm to accommodate people ahead of money and profits.

The main factor is there are not REAL JOBS to apply for. McJobs do NOT provide an adequate living standard or security to families.

The unemployed should not be victimised because they are unemployed. The paradigm shift required is that of placing blame on government and business. Unemployment is the fault of government and business not the unemployed who are merely the victims of economic rationalism, government policy and business decisions.

The massive numbers of people who, in the vast overall majority of primary votes, voted against the Howard government suggest that people are not happy with the Howard government's current policies. The government doesn't have a mandate to implement policies which continue to hurt the poor such as a GST. This is echoed in a hostile Senate elected by the people. The next Federal election will be a landslide defeat for the Liberal party as a result of its 'lean mean' policies which do not meet the needs of people suffering under its policies. In the annals of history the Howard government may be more despised than the Keating government.

Is *any* politician taking notice of the Australian people and their suffering?

Politicians are supposed to be servants of the people. They are there to help not to hinder. The last two governments (Howard and Keating) have shown no compassion to the masses of people who they have inflicted their economic rationalist suffering upon. No wonder so many people wish a plague on both your houses!



The mature aged unemployed seek social justice - something they are currently denied.

2. FACES IN THE STREET

(From Henry Lawson, 1888)

They lie, the men who tell us in a loud decisive tone
That want is here a stranger, and that misery's unknown;
... I sorrow for the owners of those faces in the street. ...

I wonder would the apathy of wealthy men endure
Were all their windows level with the faces of the Poor?
Ah! Mammon's slaves, your knees shall knock, your hearts in terror beat,
When God demands a reason for the sorrows of the street,
The wrong things and the bad things
And the sad things that we meet
In the filthy lane and alley, and the cruel, heartless street. ...

(Lawson, 1984:48)

GLOSSARY

Arbeit Macht Frei

Government prolefeed. Slave For the Dole motto.

Baby Boomers

A majority generation waiting for revenge on the greedy at the ballot box.

Boss From Hell

Inhuman bastards the government writes policy for.

CentreStink

Centrelink.

Economic Rationalism

The Final Solution for the unemployed.

Employment National

Incompetent version of CES.

Major Major

Any Centrelink officer.

McJob

Part-time or casual work.

Mutual Obligation

The government's obligation under Section 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Conveniently forgotten by Australian federal politicians.

Prolefeed

Rubbishy entertainment and spurious news which the Party in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* handed out to the masses. (Orwell, 1989: 609) Anything said by a politician.

Real Job

Not a McJob. Full time work with decent pay.

Recession we had to have

Cliché made by forgotten ex-Prime Minister but not forgotten by Baby Boomers.

SS Gestapo

Department of Social Security

Social Security Act

The Unemployed Gulag Rules.

Slave For the Dole

Work For the Dole Scheme.

Unperson

Human being who impedes the pursuit of high policy and whose rights, often lives, therefore become irrelevant. (Pilger, 1998:55. Quoting Mark Curtis.) Unemployed person.

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