

Full Employment and the Discipline of Labour: A Chapter in the History of Australian Social Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes up two arguments which have been made about the political conditions of sustained full employment: (1) that full employment requires an incomes policy to compensate for the loss of unemployment as a discipline over labour, and (2) that institutions and policies sustaining full employment imply the ‘increased power of the working class.’ How did the Labor government of 1944-5 consider these issues when drafting the White Paper *Full employment in Australia*? Drawing on archives of the Department of Postwar Reconstruction, this paper depicts a debate among politicians and officials about whether the White Paper should consider alternative systems of wage fixation in Australia. The immediate political value of the White Paper to the Curtin government — assuaging trade unions’ objections to Labor’s demobilisation policies — did not favour such frankness.

Keywords

Arbitration, Full Employment, Labor Government, Labour Movement, Repatriation Policies

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The British political economist Andrew Glyn has drawn on the work of Michal Kalecki to describe ‘social democracy’s historic challenge’ (Glyn 1995, 38) in a full employment economy. In 1943, Kalecki predicted that businesspersons, while appreciating the high profits associated with full employment, would be deeply perturbed by their loss of discipline over labour. Rentiers would also be provoked by the inflationary possibilities of workers’ enhanced wage-bargaining power. To hold off these worried capitalists, suggested Kalecki, the institutions of capitalist governance would have to change. Full employment capitalism, he wrote in 1943, must ‘develop new social and political institutions which will reflect the increased power of the working class. If capitalism can adjust to full employment a fundamental reform will have been incorporated in it’ (Kalecki 1990, 356). Glyn’s Kaleckian point is that full employment policies were more than a revision of the aims and methods of macro-economic policy; sustainable full employment implies and requires a new political order.

The fact that ‘full employment’ is an accepted description of the condition of the Australian economy from c.1945-75 has obscured an important fact: that that period saw no political transformation of the kind envisaged (in rather unspecific terms) by Kalecki. It would be interesting to write the post-war political history of Australia around the theme of the failure or absence of the lasting political correlates of an economics of full employment. A recent collection of articles on *The unemployment crisis in Australia* (Bell ed. 2000), whatever the strengths of its economic analyses, does not attempt a narrative of the evolution of Australia’s political framework which would make sense of the current marginality of the economics its contributors advocate. There are no references to the Curtin and Chifley governments, and only one to Menzies. Thus, we are not offered a critical account of the institutional history of our contemporary political incapacity to achieve full employment. Though the editor invokes Kalecki to make the point that ‘For the social democratic and Keynesian left, wage moderation is needed to make a full-employment regime *sustainable*’, there is no index entry on ‘Arbitration’, the most important Australian institution that a history of this problem must consider (Bell 2000, 5, emphasis in original). Tim Battin has recently served us much better with a suggestive few pages about roads not taken in Australian governance in the 1940s (Battin 1997, 54-8, 75-7). He also refers us to an almost forgotten book by one of Australia’s enthusiasts for Kalecki — Bruce McFarlane (McFarlane 1968). There are more recent studies which could be taken as contributing to a history of capitalist governance inspired by Kalecki’s words. For example, James Walter’s essay (Walter 1988) depicting competing conceptions of state responsibility within the Australian political and business elites in the 1940s can be read as a splendid early chapter for the history I have in mind.

The essay which follows is intended as a further stimulus to such a history. My theme is the difficulty of resolving *within the Labour Movement itself* different views about the

governance of labour under conditions of full employment. How would Labor govern labour? was and remains a difficult question for social democrats.

Because this essay arises from biographical research, the figure of H.C. Coombs, Director-General of the Department of Postwar Reconstruction 1943-48, looms large.

From war to peace, from class to nation

Coombs' wartime thoughts about 'full employment' arose in part from anticipations of the short-term domestic problems of demobilising enlisted men and women and of converting production from war to peace supply. 'Reconstruction', if it achieved nothing else, should avoid reproducing the social chaos occasioned by returning soldiers in 1919-20. To secure training and/or jobs for all service personnel became central to the Curtin government's vision. The significance of the White Paper *Full employment in Australia* has usually been discussed in terms of the proposed relationship between the public mandate to maximise employment and the prerogatives of investors to maximise profits: what demands did this blueprint make of Capital? Here I want to focus on a forgotten context in which the White Paper also had a political meaning — the politics of repatriation. In an exchange of comments about an early draft of the White Paper in 1945, Coombs reminded his Director of Public Relations, Lloyd Ross, that the Minister was pushing for an early tabling of its commitment to full employment partly in order to answer the ACTU's criticisms of the Curtin government's plans for demobilisation (Coombs 1945). Through its forthcoming *Re-establishment and Employment* bill the Curtin government intended to give returned service personnel priority access to civilian job vacancies, *whether or not they were members of trade unions*. The ACTU's long-standing demand that trade union membership be compulsory for all workers was to be refused. Though Coombs covered this issue in a single sentence in his letter to Ross, it is worth pausing to consider its magnitude in the history of the Australian Labour Movement.

One of the fundamental concerns of any organised labour movement is 'representation'. Throughout the inter-war period, Australian trade union leaders had been developing their representative capacity in three respects (Waters 1982), each of which was problematic within the Labor Party. First, some union leaders sought to replace small craft unions with large industry-wide unions, thus posing problems for those Labor figures with a craft union power base. Second, pressure from militants in the Communist Party and the Australian Industrial Workers Union in the early 1920s had led to the formation of a national body, the Australian Council of Trade Unions, in 1927. However, the ACTU's claims to speak for all workers continued to be contested by the Australian Workers Union (AWU). The AWU remained a significant force within the Labor Party, a bulwark against the perceived influence of communists within the ACTU (Hagan 1981, 179).

Third, it was ACTU policy to make union membership compulsory for all employees.

The war, with its acute labour shortage and its Labor government (after October 1941), presented the trade union movement with the best chance ever to advance these three organisational strategies, especially the third — compulsory unionism — as this matter lay squarely within government's legislative power. As Hagan (1981, 187) writes: 'Throughout the whole of the War period the ACTU urged the government to use its powers to introduce absolute preference for unionists and to reject any preference for ex-service personnel.' However, the Curtin government resisted the ACTU's pressure, and its *Soldiers Repatriation Act* 1942 gave preference in Commonwealth employment to those who had served in combat zones. The government had incurred a further debt to service men and women when Curtin persuaded his party, in January 1943, that conscripts should be placed in overseas combat duty — overturning the deeply-held anti-conscriptionist convictions of a whole generation of the Labour Movement. In framing law and policy about mass demobilisation, the government was also motivated in part by memories of the homecomings of Australian service-men and -women after world war one, an occasion of significant social unrest. Determined to avoid repeating this debacle, the Curtin government formulated a demobilisation strategy that would give training and job priority to any who had served. According to Coombs (Coombs 1980, 98), his Department had generally been opposed to giving employment preference to those who served because of its offence to trade unionists and because it implied doubts about the Government's commitment to full employment. Such objections did not prevail. Faced with two competing notions of the needs and rights of 'the people' for whom it acted, the Curtin government chose to privilege war service to the nation at the expense of a fundamental mechanism of class solidarity.

This was a most significant, but almost forgotten, moment in the history of Labor's representation of the working class. An employment policy which rewarded war service and downgraded union membership breached the traditions of the Labour Movement, as many trade unionists understood them, while no doubt addressing the popular patriotism of the times. One of the purposes of the White Paper therefore was to ameliorate the severity of that rebuff by foreshadowing, indeed guaranteeing, that no one who wanted a job would lack one. Full employment would soften the politically sensitive distinction between unionist and service person entitlement.

However, dedication to this immediate political purpose helped to vitiate the White Paper's ability to confront straightforwardly one of the social democratic imperatives of 'full employment': working out a new social contract which would assure the discipline of labour — in matters of productivity and price — under conditions of 'full employment.'

The new disciplines of labour

Coombs made the first detailed public sketch of 'full employment' policies in his Joseph Fisher Lecture at the University of Adelaide on June 29 1944, 'Problems of a High Employment Economy' (Coombs 1944). He stated one assumption of policy: that 'the Government will continue to limit the rights of property to a greater extent than it did before the war, but will abandon its war-time control of persons'. He avowed neither approval nor disapproval of this course of action, and he said little to specify these new limits to 'the rights of property'. To regulate private investment, in an effort to make predictable the economy's total demand for labour, would be 'undesirable unless it serves a sufficiently important social purpose'.

So much for Capital, what about Labour? Would a 'man power policy' such as had been necessary to ensure full use of labour during the war continue to be necessary to ensure that all labour was used in peace? Coombs thought not. Instead, he suggested, the government should set up an employment service which would better inform job-seekers of opportunities, help mobile workers with housing, provide financial aid, wage incentives, training and early retirement — all to increase, without coercion, the marginal mobility of labour. The Trade Unions would accept in peace this degree of intervention into the labour market, he hoped, as they had benefited from it in war.

The attitudes of the Labour Movement would also determine the government's way of dealing with inflation and inefficiency — two great risks of a full employment policy. To avert inflation governments would want to control the *price of labour* and of other basic commodities. Full employment would enhance 'pressure from wage earners for increased wage rates greater than justified by rising productivity', for 'the wage earner will be in a strong bargaining position'. He canvassed several ways to discipline that pressure. A wages policy, he suggested, should be based on frequent review of the Basic Wage, so that workers would be assured that their incomes were rising in step with increases in the productivity of their labour. Coombs did not envisage a redistribution of wealth through wages policy, but through progressive taxation. He hoped to limit workers' wage bargaining power by re-distributing workers from places and industries where their bargaining power was relatively high to places and industries in which it was low. A government employment service would see to that. Wage rises could be limited also if the prices of basic commodities could be subsidised.

Labour's *efficiency* would be endangered by high employment because, for 'a hundred and fifty years', labour discipline 'was based essentially on a threat.' High employment would remove that threat. Incentives to efficiency would thus have to be developed — partly through education. Workers should be brought to a better understanding of the relationship between efficiency and national income, and between efficiency and the survival of individual firms. They could be made more conscious of their

‘participation in the total achievements of the economy’ and of ‘the principles on which [their] wages are based’. Welfare and safety on the job could be improved, and so could the quality of workers’ housing and community facilities. Workers and management should be given ‘common responsibility’ for production and management.

Coombs’ remarks in his Fisher Lecture on the cost of labour and its efficiency summarised a continuing conversation within his Department about working class militancy. The main contributors to this discussion were L.F. Crisp, Lloyd Ross and G.G. Firth. In the weeks leading up to the Fisher lecture, Firth had summarised his worries in the remark: ‘we should not embarrass our general policy by a too liberal attitude’ (Firth 1944a). That is, full employment policy required a government to maintain as much control as possible over all the main economic actors, including the trade unions. Coombs in his Fisher lecture had not, in so many words, warned his audience about the dangers of being ‘too liberal’. His thoughts on labour’s cost and efficiency seem to have drawn on two internal papers: L.F. Crisp’s ‘Incentives and full employment’ and Lloyd Ross’s ‘Trade Unions and full employment’.

The economy as pedagogic spectacle

Crisp (1944) explored the propaganda tasks of a full employment policy, arguing that labour would be more disciplined if workers had general confidence that governments were advancing their interests across all policies: people should be ‘instructed and interested’ in how the national income was being spent on communal services. ‘People want to feel satisfied with the directions of [government] spending — e.g. social services, houses... etc.’ As well, they must be ‘constantly interested by the government in stories and figures of production, costs and efficiency — industry by industry and plant by plant (as in Russia) — must be impressed by the need to boost national income as well as to distribute it more evenly...’ The people should also be ‘educated in the essential inter-relationships of wages, productivity and inflation — this as much for the union leader’s and the boss’s sake as for the sake of the Government and of the community at large.’

As for ‘the man on the job’, he ‘must believe his work to be needed and significant.’ He must also ‘be convinced, not only that the boss is sincere in his attitude towards the full employment objective, but also that industry is subject to some degree of government planning and control which will ensure that it serves more than simply profit motives.’ He mentioned the need for a policy on profits, to defend workers against exploitation, and some guarantees of the best possible working conditions. He instanced housing, industrial welfare, safety, pay rising with productivity, reasonable hours and other matters of interest to employees. Finally, Crisp argued, there might have to be direct incentives, in some situations, to keep the worker motivated.

Managements must also be convinced of the soundness of full employment policy; they must be trained in consultative techniques and in the use of indirect incentives.

Ross's advice (Ross 1944) was similar:

Public interest and the development of individual responsibility are in fact the motivating forces that must take the place of the old, harsh, purely economic incentives or of the present patriotic desire to win the war. As in wartime (and more so once security no longer demands secrecy) must the full spotlight of publicity and propaganda be focussed on the facts of industrial production; output figures, efficiencies, costs of production — for individual factories and for whole industries — must be published. The whole people must be interested in the broad details of the national income and in the way it is spent — not only on personal wages but also on the communal services. Parallel with this publicity on a national scale must be the encouragement of democratic participation at every level...

Like these two colleagues, Coombs assumed that workers could be persuaded by governments to adopt a wider view of the economy; the social equity of public policies would be made plain to the people in some kind of national accounts.

Incentives to productivity

After the Fisher lecture, the Departmental conversation was directed toward the formulation of the White Paper. What could a Labor government say about the future control of wages and the discipline of Labour?

On August 17, Firth gave Coombs some notes on the problem of 'price stability with high employment' (Firth 1944b). Since the government's wartime warrant for price controls and rationing would soon end, Firth suggested, in the transition to peace the policy emphasis must be on wage control. The next day, Firth offered Coombs his second thoughts. 'It will only be practicable (and in any case, only just) to maintain the "wages stop" in transition provided that arrangements for the periodic review of wages generally are put in hand immediately. The "politics" of this are obviously sticky, and we shall need to tackle the question in a big way if it is to be resolved.' In the short term, the government could subsidise some producers' transitional increases in wage costs; he hoped that increases in 'efficiency' of the subsidised industries would then allow the gradual removal of such subsidies. Firth also suggested that the White Paper should discuss an issue which Coombs had neglected in the Fisher Lecture — 'periodic review of labour's "distributive share" of real income'. The Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration could be instructed to review at least once in every 12 months the capacity of the economy to pay higher real wages and to adjust the Basic

Wage in accordance with its findings. Similar arrangements should govern State Courts and Wages Boards. 'These adjustments will, of course, be additional to any adjustments to be made to take account of changes in the price level.'

In further discussion, an unsigned note speculated that perhaps 'the problem of labour discipline is short-run; perhaps the sack was never the potent sanction some think it to be...' (Anon 1944). Rather, the note continued, might not 'reasonably good workmanship, attendance, etc. [be] largely a matter of custom, carrying its own social sanction'? If that were so, then perhaps the foreshadowed Commonwealth employment service could demand references from those for whom it was finding jobs. The writer suggested some 'short-term reinforcement' of labour discipline 'by more specific inducements'.

- (a) modified piece-rate systems above a basic minimum,
- (b) bonuses and profit-sharing schemes,
- (c) fines imposed preferably by shop committees, proceeds in any case going to an approved 'welfare' fund.

All such measures may be undesirable, impracticable or both. None the less, if we are satisfied that the problem exists, it seems rash to wait for a Change of Heart. The main point, however, is that no *uniform* solution is likely to exist... the problem is essentially one of group psychology rather than of 'economics' in any ordinary sense.

The writer acknowledged that these ideas were political dynamite: it would not be possible for a government to introduce them without agreement by both employees and employers.

From this May to November 1944 discussion, wholly within Coombs' Department, emerged a first draft of the White Paper (known as Draft 'A'), completed on December 14. According to Crisp (Crisp n.d.), Coombs and Chifley had 'oral discussions' while Firth and James Nimmo were preparing draft 'A'. Coombs' revisions of 'A' gave rise to draft 'B'. On the issue of labour's cost and efficiency, Draft 'B' (Department of Postwar Reconstruction n.d., par 178) proposed to promote a new 'sense of responsibility' among Trade Unions by giving workers 'a fair share of the increased production which flows from the increasing productivity of labour... equipped with steadily increasing knowledge and more complete and up to date machinery.' This would require reform of the Conciliation and Arbitration Court's 'present system of irregular reviews of the basic wage on an ill-defined basis of "industry's capacity to pay"'. Draft B suggested five yearly reviews of the Basic Wage taking into account not only improved productivity but also changes in the terms 'on which Australia exchanged her exports for goods made abroad.' However, there was

nothing to guarantee that the terms of trade would always improve for Australia. Therefore, the authors were prepared to entertain reductions (or at least slower rises) in the Basic Wage.

When the authors of Draft 'B' turned their attention to the long-term redistribution of wealth from capital to labour, they admitted to finding this 'a complex and difficult question' (n.d., par 181). Wage increases in excess of productivity would probably be passed on to the consumer as higher prices, neutralising any rise in the real value of wages. The draft therefore argued that 'effective progress towards more equal distribution of goods and services is likely to come from the steady development of social services financed by progressive taxation.' Social services included 'education, free medical and health benefits, and the development of community facilities such as infant welfare centres, kindergartens, libraries, and the provision for leisure time activities.

When Coombs, Firth and Nimmo took up the question of labour's efficiency under full employment conditions, they consciously challenged Labour Movement thinking by canvassing 'methods of payment based upon individual output' (Department of Postwar Reconstruction n.d., pars 198-199)

The Labour Movement in the past has generally been opposed to the development of such 'piece-work' systems of payment. The Government shares the fears of employees that such systems are capable of being used to undermine established standards and to develop an intensity of work which can impair the long-term health and efficiency of the individual. At the same time the Government is conscious that recent developments overseas suggest the possibility that where a strong trade union movement exists to protect the interests of the worker and modern methods of wage fixing are employed that it is possible to raise the general level of production and the wages and standards of living of the employees themselves. Before accepting such developments, however, the closest investigation is necessary to ensure that the long-term interests of the employed are not impaired.

The authors were determined to place 'piece-work' on the Government's agenda.

Arbitration and labour traditions

The circulation of 'B' within the Department in January 1945 stimulated a criticism of the way in which Coombs, Nimmo and Firth had been approaching the issues of wages and labour discipline. B.W. Hartnell wanted it made more explicit that the paper was trimming notions of social justice to 'the limits set by productivity' (Hartnell 1945a).

He suggested to Coombs that the Department consult the Trade Unions formally on some of the more contentious proposals on secondary industry, labour relations and the reform of Arbitration. If the Unions could agree to a delegation to study overseas experiments in labour discipline, issues such as piece work could be left open by the government, without political damage (Hartnell 1945b). Against Hartnell's advice, Chifley and Coombs decided against a 'formal' conference with Unions. Instead, Crisp recalled many years later (Crisp n.d.), the Ministry 'took the opportunities then presenting themselves fairly frequently for less formal discussions between departmental men and particular trade union (and particularly ACTU) men.'

In 1945, Crisp conceded the difficulty of drafting a persuasive wages policy (Crisp 1945). While payment by results was 'the ideal' regime, that ideal assumed a fundamental shift in the balance of power from Capital to Labour which was not in Australia's immediate prospect. On the contrary, a period of transition from war to peace, with its heightened economic insecurity, was 'second only to the depths of depression' as a circumstance giving advantage to capital. 'In those circumstances payment by results seems to me the entrepreneur's (indeed, more generally, the capitalist's) dream weapon for atomising the trade union movement as a whole, and the trade unions individually (except for a fortunate few).' Crisp advised caution and respect for the Australian traditions of industrial relations, however much they 'pamper the "bludger"'. The present basis of wage fixation was simple and understood by both employers and employees, requiring neither side to 'build up large bureaucracies'. Moreover, it 'has the strength of longstanding custom and acceptance, and is grounded in the egalitarian social philosophy which for good or ill is extraordinarily deep-rooted in Australians generally and Australian workers in particular.' Thus, Crisp doubted the political wisdom of challenging trade unions' habituation to arbitration. The union movement consisted of many small unions, and the tasks of invigilating piece rates at every work place would be beyond the resources of most of them. The draft White Paper, Crisp noted, nowhere envisaged the consolidation of the movement into a few big unions, yet its promotion of piece rates implied such a development. Here Crisp touched insightfully on one of the deep tensions within the Australian Labour Movement. The authors of draft 'B', by advocating piece-rates, might unwittingly be drifting into taking a position in the long-term struggle over the political soul of the trade union movement. As Crisp explained, the small unions which would be most threatened by a piece work system were among the ALP's staunchest supporters, and the larger unions (in the metal trades, mining and on the water front) who might cope with and accept piece work were Communist strongholds; they might welcome the chance to build up their bureaucracies with more Communist cadres in order better to implement a piece work regime.

Whether or not it is in fact so, it seems to me it would be fatal for a Labour (sic) Government to come out for a principle which lends itself to

slogans (in Lang's mouth, and in those of many solid Labour men, too) about smashing the Arbitration System and the gains of fifty years struggle.

Labour could be split by a debate on piece work, finding itself in the political wilderness, 'with anti-Labour and the Communist Party as the gainers.'

Anodyne outcome

The White Paper 'Full Employment in Australia' was tabled in the House of Representatives on 30 May. Crisp's estimate of Cabinet's sensitivities proved accurate. On the question of how to deal with labour discipline in full employment, the Labor government (Commonwealth of Australia 1945, par 78) minimised political risk with an anodyne statement.

The Government is considering the setting up of a special committee on which employers and employees will be represented to report on possible changes in the principles and machinery for making general adjustments in wages and industrial conditions.

The surrounding paragraphs link rising wages to rising productivity; they also promote attention to social services as a supplement to wages.

These few sentences attest the defeat of one conception of the White Paper — the officials' hope that it would explore the wider institutional implications of 'full employment', to the extent of questioning Australian traditions of wage-determination — by another, more immediate political imperative: the short term political point of the White Paper was to placate the ACTU's grievance about the defeat of unionist preference in employment when Labor legislated its demobilisation policy early in 1945.

Accordingly, after tabling the White Paper, the government appears to have lost interest in circulating it. The NSW Department of Education set the White Paper for Leaving Certificate Economics in 1946. When students wrote to the Department of Postwar Reconstruction for a copy, stocks had so dwindled that a roneo precis was sent out instead.

Conclusion

In this essay I have highlighted a previously neglected aspect of the formulation of the 1945 White Paper *Full employment in Australia* — the sensitivity, within the Labour Movement, of the mechanisms and rationales of incomes policy. I take Battin's point (Battin 1997, 58) that the Curtin and Chifley governments sought to reconstruct the institutions of government in ways consistent with Kalecki's argument that 'full

employment capitalism' would require 'new social and political institutions which will reflect the increased power of the working class.' Battin adduces: the Powers Referendum of 1944, the attempt to nationalise air transport, the attempt to establish a national program of public works, the reform of the banking system (with or without the nationalisation of the private banks), the setting up of a social security system and the referenda in 1946 and 1948 on price, rent and other controls. However important this list of efforts might be to establishing the social democratic public policy intentions of the Labor governments of the 1940s, it is an incomplete basis for an account of the Labor Party's approach to governing full employment capitalism. I have drawn attention to another equally important dimension of 'social democracy's historic challenge' — the possibility of a social contract built on new practices of wage determination. To have broached that issue would have raised the question of the relationship between the political and the industrial wings of the Labour Movement.

Labor politicians and their senior bureaucratic advisers, in contemplating 'full employment' policy in 1944-5, had no choice but to consider how to reform the culture of the trade union movement itself. However, the Labor leadership shrank from enunciating a program for such reform in the White Paper — to the disappointment of its economic advisers — because that would have undermined one of the immediate purposes of the White Paper: to ameliorate the hurt of an historic political defeat of the trade union movement, by the leaders of the Labor Party, in the long-term struggle over the instruments of working class representation.

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