



Sharon Beder



Garry Brack

Photos - David Kuroudis

Is paid work merely a triumphant culture where the wealthy are respected and inequality justified or is it more about how individuals trade their talents for a just wage? Sharon Beder, author of *Selling the Work Ethic* (Scribe), is a professional engineer and an associate professor at the University of Wollongong. She believes the view that work is a triumphalist culture. Garry Brack, Executive Director of the Employers Federation of NSW, however, disagrees. On Monday 27 August 2001, Garry Brack and Sharon Beder addressed The Sydney Institute canvassing their very different approaches to work and the work ethic.



## SELLING THE WORK

**ETHIC**

Sharon Beder

In modern industrial societies work and production have become ends in themselves. Employment has become such a priority that much environmental degradation is justified merely on the grounds that it provides jobs. And people are so concerned to keep their jobs that they are willing to do what their employers require of them even if they believe it is wrong or environmentally destructive. The social benefit of having the majority of able-bodied people in a society working hard all week goes unquestioned, particularly by those who work hardest.

Few people today can imagine a society that does not revolve around work. They never stop to consider why they work and whether they want to work. Work is seen as an essential characteristic of being human. No matter how tedious it is, any work is generally considered to be better than no work. Work has become central to our individual identity and a means of fulfilling our social aspirations.

How did paid work come to be so central to our lives? Why is it that so many people wouldn't know what to do with themselves or who they were if they did not have their jobs?

An ideology of work has been promoted in Western societies since the early days of modern capitalism. Those who don't have to do manual labour have extolled the dignity and nobility of manual labour. The work ethic has justified and legitimated jobs that are characterised by boredom and drudgery. To make sure there is no social identity outside of employment, the unemployed are stigmatised. They tend to be portrayed in the media as either frauds, hopeless cases or layabouts who are living it high at taxpayers' expense.

The work ethic, which has been at the heart of capitalist culture, has evolved over time to suit the changing social conditions. From its religious origins, as a calling and moral duty to God, it evolved into a secular success ethic in the nineteenth century. Work came to be valued according to its productivity and wealth creating potential. The myth of the self-made man, with its promise that anyone could advance in

society through hard work, was promoted by writers, teachers, businessmen, and politicians.

For the upwardly mobile, work still has meaning as a road to material success. But for those who have little chance of climbing the occupational hierarchy, the work ethic is formulated as an ethic of responsibility – to the family and the nation. The hard work of citizens is advocated as being necessary to national prosperity. This latest manifestation of the work ethic is most pronounced in the rhetoric of welfare reforms, in the language of obligation, responsibility and dependence.

Throughout the evolution of the work ethic, hard work has been associated with good character and virtue. Work has become the central feature of most people's lives, the source of their self-identity, income, status, and social respectability. It gives them their purpose and provides them with social relations and a structure to their day. In a work-dominated society, happiness must be earned through hard work. The suffering and boredom associated with work is the price one has to pay in order to attain happiness.

And just as important as being a motivator for work, the work ethic with its promise of fair rewards for hard work, has legitimised the social structure of inequalities. It has been the lens through which social inequalities have been viewed. Poverty tends to be attributed to deficiencies in the poor rather than structural aspects of the society. From this perspective those who are poor deserve to be because they lack a work ethic and don't take advantage of the opportunities which are available to everyone.

Gramsci used the term "hegemony" to describe the phenomenon by which the majority of people accept the values and political axioms that ensure their own subordination to the ruling elite. However, this hegemony is not stable and requires constant reinforcement. Reinforcement occurs through social conditioning, aided by leading social institutions, as well as the rejection and marginalisation of those who propose radical change. It requires the promotion of the virtues of the existing system and the denigration of alternatives as unworkable, disastrous, undesirable.

This is exactly what has occurred with the work ethic. The values associated with the work ethic have permeated every institution of modern industrial societies; schools, government, the media, churches, family, unions, clubs. The dominance of these values has been driven by business interests with the help of large donations, infiltration of these institutions by business people, and the use of public relations and advertising. But it has also been made possible by the co-option of key intellectuals, including economists, scientists, psychologists, sociologists and others who have all provided an intellectual rationale and demeanour for ideological beliefs.

The work ethic, however, is based on assumptions and premises that are fast becoming outdated. Those pushing the work ethic today claim that every person needs to work, and work hard, if productivity is to increase. All progress, it is argued, depends on increasing productivity. The fallacy of this assumption is becoming clear as fewer and fewer people are required in the workforce and more and more products are being forced on consumers.

Whilst the work ethic has been important in the past to attaining high living standards, the compulsion to work has clearly become pathological in modern industrial societies. Together with the compulsion to create wealth and consume, it drives the imperative to go on producing goods at the expense of everyone's quality of life. Workers in many countries are in fact working longer hours today than 20 years ago. Leisure time has also been eaten away and leisure activities themselves tend to be dictated by work patterns and demands. Many people do not know how to relax.

Millions of people are devoting their lives to making or doing things that will not enrich their lives or make them happier but will add to the garbage and pollution that the earth cannot accommodate. They are so busy doing this that they have little time to spend time with their family and friends, to develop other aspects of themselves, to participate in their communities as full citizens. Far from being happier as a result of work, rates of depression, suicides, and drug taking are all increasing in the most affluent countries.

Escalating production and consumption are degrading the environment at rates that undermine any improvements that can be achieved through technological and legislative change. Lester Brown notes in his introduction to the Worldwatch Institute's well respected State of the World 1998: "Forests are shrinking, water tables are falling, soils are eroding, wetlands are disappearing, fisheries are collapsing, rangelands are deteriorating, rivers are running dry, temperatures are rising, coral reefs are dying, and plant and animal species are disappearing."

But despite the international efforts to do something about this degradation, development and economic growth have such priority that changes are minor and no real change can be effected. The European Environment Agency found in 1998 that in the 44 countries it surveyed there had been little progress on environmental improvements since its previous assessment in 1995. The loss of species had not been halted and waste from manufacturing, mining and urban centres had increased by 10 per cent since 1990.

The international conferences and agreements that have taken place in the last decade have failed to address the key cause of the problem – the ever increasing production and consumption by the world's most affluent nations. Surveys show that the majority of people

in most countries are not only concerned about the environment, they think environmental protection should be given priority over economic growth and they believe governments should regulate to protect it. Yet this public concern is not translating into either cultural change or government action.

Too much work is clearly not healthy for individuals and many of the products it produces are not healthy for the planet. Yet governments everywhere pursue policies aimed at encouraging more jobs, preferably jobs in the private sector aimed at producing things that people will pay for individually. Despite the dysfunctionality of the work ethic it continues to be promoted and praised, accepted and acquiesced to. It is one of the least challenged aspects of industrial culture, one that has also been incorporated into other cultures and political ideologies such as socialism.

Even when dissidents challenge capitalism they are usually loathe to advocate the dismantling of the ethical foundations and institutions that underpin national productivity, particularly the work ethic. Social activists almost always seek to accommodate their demands to the centrality of work and economic growth. This is particularly true of modern environmentalists in their search for solutions to the environmental crisis. It is for this reason that sustainable development has become so popular as a solution.

Sustainable development embraces the idea that economic growth and environmental protection are compatible. Sustainable development seeks reforms that do not challenge the political, institutional or cultural status quo and as such the doctrine has been unsuccessful at achieving the sorts of significant changes that are necessary to protect the environment. National and international sustainable development policies leave power in the hands of the corporations that are responsible for some of the worst instances of environmental degradation and avoid any measures that might reduce rates of production and consumption that are clearly unsustainable.

A major problem with envisaging alternatives to a work-centred life is that many people have become so reduced by their work focus that they have difficulty envisaging what they would do if they had a lot of extra time. Most people spend almost all of their time working, resting from work, or spending the money they earned working. A life that is not fully taken up with work and consuming seems to offer not only boredom but also purposelessness.

Work need not be so all embracing and time consuming. But the endless production of consumer products necessitated by a work ethic, our acceptance of the quest for ever increasing profits as the highest motivation, and our granting of status and power to those who provide us with jobs that enable us to fulfil these goals, prevent us pursuing alternative, superior goals and a better quality of life.

It would be a sad world indeed if people's only function in it was to produce goods for consumption, if this was the highest they could reach for. Yet this seems to be the case today. The centrality of work in the lives of many people reduces their ability to find meaning in anything else. If work was not so predominant we could develop multiple potentials in children at school, encouraging play, creativity and experimentation. Non-vocational subjects such as philosophy and history and politics would become more popular at university. People would have time to develop their relationships with family and friends.

Unless the work/consume treadmill is overcome there is little hope for the planet. History has shown that the values underlying such compulsions, such as the work ethic and respect accorded to those who accumulate wealth, are socially constructed, and temporal. They are not inevitable, they are not an essential part of human nature, they are historical and they are shaped and in contemporary society they are reinforced by corporate interests and by all of the major institutions in modern societies.

It is time to reconsider our unquestioned submission to employers and the value we accord to work and wealth creation. History has shown that the values underlying the work ethic and the respect accorded to those who accumulate wealth, are socially constructed, and temporal.

# WORK ETHIC DOWN

UNDER

Garry Brack

Thank you for the opportunity to speak – although I was so totally depressed after hearing all that (Sharon Beder's talk), I don't wonder about the masses of "stress" and depression alleged to exist in the community. It seems to me that if you tell people often enough and long enough that they are unhappy, they will be unhappy; that they are unwell, they will be unwell; that there is no hope, they will believe there will be no hope. So the question here is not about the work ethic in isolation; it really is a question about optimism and pessimism, and choice.

There was a show on ABC News Radio on Saturday night about Bangladeshi women in a particular village who had recently started travelling to work in clothing factories. They had become the new elite in the community. The men of the community were aghast at this. The women came back with mobile phones and they had money. There was a fundamental re-orientation of everything that society was about. Nobody wanted to work in rural society anymore. The men perhaps had to; they had no choice. But the women were the ones who acquired new lives as seamstresses and doing other jobs outside the village. And they came back with the "goodies" of what they thought to be a more sophisticated developed world. This was an opportunity they previously lacked. Subsistence agriculture held no promise for them anymore. They now had a choice. They had all of the aspirations that people in developed economies have – better education for your children, a community free from disease, with purified water, good homes – aspirations perhaps more modest than our own in a far wealthier, more consumer-oriented society, but nonetheless aspirations – and choices.

So what is the future for hope and aspirations in a community like ours where we are continually fed the negative message that there is nothing of value left in our Western, post materialist, post consumerism society?

According to those critical of the work ethic, work holds us captive to consumerism and materialism, and trapped in a system

which values products and profits more than people. They see a better world in which most of us don't have to work; in which the elements of materialism they deem unacceptable dissipate. It is now widely fashionable in the media, in academic research, and within the union movement to portray those in work as working too hard and too long, suffering from a variety of conditions ranging from "stress" to a work-life imbalance, whatever those terms mean.

Given this onslaught, it is surprising anyone turns up to work at all. Work has been re-cast as a threatening, damaging experience, likely to injure health and the continued well-being of society. Sharon Beder and organisations like the ACTU and Sydney University's ACIRRT seem to be devoted to exposing the purported damaging consequences of deregulation and increased exposure to international competition. They claim that labour market changes have benefited employers at the expense of their employees. All of which have resulted in a "high stress, low trust work culture" in Australia.<sup>1</sup>

Businesses are being told they must now organise themselves around their employees. But there are competitive pressures internationally that make this very difficult. And for these "researchers", and many in the media, there is little incentive to let the facts get in the way of a good story.

On the question of working hours, the ACTU says shorter hours are essential for our health and well-being, that they will create jobs and increase productivity. It is following the EU Directive on working hours, pushed through the European Parliament on the basis that it was an occupational health and safety issue. This was a strategy involving accounts of workplace stress, depression and ill-health, the purported result of working longer hours. Yet it wasn't so long ago that people were working 48 ordinary hours plus overtime and the averages have since come down. In concert with this, the ACTU asserts or implies that most people are working much longer hours and much unpaid overtime, and that the problem is so serious that a case for hours control is to be run in the industrial relations commission.

## Who is working all those hours?

Unfortunately for the ACTU, not as many as in the past, and mostly not amongst its constituency. ABS data show that, by and large, and following tradition, those working the longer hours are actually the managers, professionals and associate professionals. Longer hours are also worked in the "traditional trades" where an employer's ability to recruit and retain tradespeople is very much contingent on their ability or preparedness to guarantee substantial overtime.

Apart from this, working patterns are shifting away from the traditional range of 38 to 40 hours to both shorter, and longer, working

hours. The net measured effect is that over the past three decades average weekly hours have remained around 37 hours. (See Table 1.)

**Table 1: Average Weekly Hours Worked**

	Male	Female	Total
1968	41.1	33.1	38.6
1978	40.1	30.2	36.6
1988	42.8	30.9	38.8
1998	42.1	30.8	37.2
2001	42.3	31.6	35.8

Source: ABS Labour Force C6203. Employed Persons, Occupation and Hours Worked

Those who work 40 hours or more are not spread across the workforce. In the main large hours are worked by owner managers, and the professional groups. The impliedly vast numbers of people the ACTU asserts are working hours that can be described as "working themselves to death", and whose work has made them "time poor", don't seem to have made much of a statistical impact overall. Certainly not of the magnitude resulting in the kind of fundamental and widespread ill-health effects the ACTU alleges. But given the ACTU strategy, it's important to portray it that way. The ACTU has been arguing for some considerable time that work makes you sick.<sup>2</sup> To the extent that they succeed in convincing people about that, no doubt there will be more "stress" and depression claims. And this will provide a further area for ACTU sponsored intervention and regulation.

Wittingly or otherwise, Sharon Beder is an ACTU ally in this debate. Despite her paradoxical enjoyment of work (she says she enjoys work so much it's not like work at all), she asserts that virtually everybody else is enslaved by work and a materialist culture that feeds our need to earn an income. And it seems she hankers for a "return" to a romantically subsistence lifestyle – perhaps the kind which the Bangladeshi women are escaping at speed, lured by the very trappings of a materialist world which to them represent a desirable future – advancement!

For its part, the ACTU has developed a marketing strategy for regaining the lost legions of union members. It revolves around reducing and restricting working hours and building a case for that in the public mind by arguing that work is essentially injurious; that large numbers of employees are being "worked to death" and/or are performing substantial overtime without pay; that if they are not being overworked and underpaid, they suffer the precariousness of temporary, part-time or casual employment; that the workplace is hyper-stressful and that employers are to blame; and that all of this

makes it impossible to devote as much time to the family as employees may want.

The ACTU goal is substantially the same as it was 20 years ago – more leisure, increased pay and more jobs, and, of course, masses of new (or renewed) union memberships.

In the early 1980's the ACTU claimed a great victory as working hours were reduced (via a rostered day off in many workplaces) and wages increased significantly. Sadly, however, the increased leisure was enjoyed only by those who retained their jobs. The increased costs and the lost productivity cost jobs – over 100,000 jobs according to none other than, then Treasurer, Paul Keating.

### Is work more precarious?

Temporary, part-time and contingent work are said to be another fundamental problem. So we have to ask, should workers hold onto an "outdated, manipulative" work ethic in which they "give of their all", while employers allegedly "shove them around" in precarious, casual and part-time jobs, with no future prospects?

Part-time and casual jobs are frequently portrayed as the last nail in the coffin of a civilized, equitable workforce, providing us with even less incentive to work. Or the mythical golden age of full-time, permanent employment is said to have been replaced with insecure, casual and short term work. As much of media and academic comment sees casual and part-time work, combined with longer hours, as an inimical employer plot, it is worth taking a quick look at some measures of job stability.

### How many are forced to work part-time?

The denigration of part-time work is an interesting development. Employers were unwillingly "encouraged" to make part-time work available in the 1970's by "supply side" pressures. Now, the anti-work lobby labels part-time work "non standard", "involuntary", "a source of under-employment" which presents workers with limitations, rather than opportunity.

The issue here is not the numbers who are working part-time, but how many people are working part-time who want more hours of work and where longer hours are actually productively available.

In its last aggregate survey of under-employed workers (September 1999), the ABS found 471,300 or 4.9 per cent of the working population worked part-time AND wanted more hours. This proportion of the workforce has not changed dramatically since 1990 when 320,000 or 4.5 per cent wanted more work hours, and is a mere 3 per cent higher than in 1980.<sup>3</sup> Not a huge jump over two decades, particularly given the change in workforce diversity, and the much greater numbers of working women in particular.

Whilst the proportion of women in each age group working part-time and wanting extra hours is fairly uniform (20 per cent), by far the largest concentration of "part-time" males are under 24 years (44 per cent) many of whom are in some form of training, but only 14 per cent of these want extra hours. It seems that it is the older males who seek more hours of work.

There is still a clear preference amongst those working part-time not to work full time. In February this year, 15 per cent of "part-time" males looked for full-time jobs and only 6 per cent of women.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 2: Working part time but wanting more hours**

	MALES		FEMALES	
	Looked for full-time work	Preferred more hours	Looked for full-time work	Preferred more hours
	%	%	%	%
Feb 1978	10	21	3	13
Feb 1985	14	26	5	17
Feb 2001	15	33	6	21

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics C 6203 February 1978-2001 TABLE 34

The jump in numbers of women wanting more work hours, from 13 per cent to 21 per cent over 20 years, is unsurprising, with women's increased workforce participation rate and wider spread across occupations and skill levels over two decades.

With estimates varying between 65 per cent and 76 per cent of part-timers stating they prefer to work this way, we are plainly not facing a situation of instability and precariousness.<sup>5</sup> The vast majority of part-timers seem to be satisfied with the particular combination of work and other things they do and would no doubt object strongly if their current choices were removed.

### Are increasingly large numbers of employees trapped in unpredictable and irregular casual employment?

Until the recent release of a new ABS survey there was much discussion about the growth in casual employment – based on ABS data showing a 10 percentage point (from 16 per cent to 26 per cent of all employees) increase from 1984 to 1999 – almost half the growth in employment.<sup>6</sup>

In some quarters, this was seen as evidence that employers were generating undesirable, precarious jobs, which should be curtailed. However, the Productivity Commission has estimated that less than half the people so classified by the ABS, were in fact casuals.<sup>7</sup> In its new surveys, with a revised definition of casual, the ABS estimates:

- the level of casual employment to be 18 percentage points above the 1984 figure
- 75 per cent expect to be with the same employer in 12 months
- one in six casuals had worked for the same employer for at least 5 years
- just over 40 per cent were under 24
- 77 per cent of 19 year olds and 35 per cent of 20–24 year olds were in full-time study.

The gross over-estimate in the 1984–1999 figures is partly explained by ABS' inclusion of owner managers and many employees who worked regular hours and had a long-term relationship with their employer.

So, the overall level of casual employment is not vastly different from Australia in 1972. However, the nature of casual employment is very different. Casual employment then meant on/off, short term employment on an "as needed" basis. Today, casuals have evolved into many varieties, including "permanent" casuals who are entitled to maternity leave, unfair dismissal protection and so on. A casual position in the 2000s is frequently "much more permanent" than it was in the 1970s.

### Are we changing jobs more often?

Over the past three decades, the length of time people stay in a job has changed little up to 5 years in the same job, as Table 2 shows, while the structure of medium term employment has changed markedly:

**Table 3: Length of Time in Job**

	1972	1980	1990	2000
	%	%	%	%
Under 1 year	24.9	25.1	26.5	23.6
1-2 years	14.9	13.7	13.3	12.7
2-3 years	10.3	9.7	9.8	9.7
3-5 years	12.20	15.30	13.2	13.1
5-10 years	37.70	39.00	15.5	16.4
10-20 years			14.2	16.1
20+			7.7	8.3
			(37.4)	(40.8)

Source: ABS Labour Mobility C6209.0 February 2000, September 1983

In 12 out of 16 OECD countries surveyed by the ILO, job tenure had either remained unchanged during the 1990s, or had in fact increased,<sup>8</sup> a finding that did not seem to please the ILO which remarked that it was the result of an aging workforce (job tenure always increases with age). This is somewhat ironic, however given that we hear so much about the vulnerability of aged, technologically illiterate workers.

Labour market statistical data do not reveal that working life in Australia has been transformed, that hours are longer, job security diminished, nor that work has become more precarious. So what about the depression and "stress" all these are said to cause? It has been said there is much of it about. If you read the literature you couldn't be other than convinced it is there. Well, we've actually looked at the question of "stress" and psychological injury to see whether indeed the case adds up, because everywhere it is said that we are suffering a deluge of "stress" and that work is the problem and employers are to blame; that the volume and pressures of work are unacceptable, people can't cope, and, as a result, there are fundamental medical problems.

In our study, we have looked for the evidence. And you know what? The evidence is not there. And the academics and those others from the "stress industry" who assert it's there, simply cannot provide clear, scientific evidence about the connection between what are said to be stressors at work and the ultimate injury that people are said to suffer.

The stress myth, along with the claimed demise of jobs, is a clear case of not letting the truth get in the way of a good story. In response to widely reported surveys finding, for example, that over half the workforce suffered from "stress",<sup>9</sup> and the OHS implications of this, my organisation found:

- Stress can be defined to mean anything or used as a label for anything. Not even the scientific community, including the medical community, has reached agreement on definitions of stress (despite over 2,700 articles since 1990 in psychology journals alone about occupational stress, work stress or job stress), let alone its causes or its effects
- Research on stress suffers from a number of significant conceptual and methodological problems. Two major problems are that studies of work stress use research techniques which tell us nothing about cause and effect, and the vast majority rely on self-reporting techniques
- Research in the area has been exponential, and an entire workplace stress industry has emerged. However, in the words of one researcher, the only non-debatable issue is the amount of investment made by academic communities each year, replicating inconclusive research designs and further clouding the issue<sup>10</sup>
- Despite this vast amount of research purportedly showing "stressors" at work causing physical or mental illness, we still do not have evidence demonstrating this causal link. Additionally, research showing the effects of stress on job performance, absence, morale, and turnover, is similarly inconclusive.
- What the research does show is that stress is not a disease, not a particular physical or physiological state and it is not a particular

psychological state of mind or behaviour. Stress remains a highly subjective concept.<sup>11</sup>

- Researchers, faced with these theoretical and research shortcomings have shifted to a new, all encompassing model of stress which says that stress is the inability to cope with, or at, work.
- Evidence shows that "remedies" or interventions for stress generally have little or no effect, and where they do, the effects are not always positive for the employee.
- The incidence of stress increases markedly with employee awareness campaigns, etc, introduced ostensibly to help employees "cope" (e.g. the UK)
- Stress is used by unions and others as the means for negotiating workplace change, such as reduced hours, work-life balance, etc

I have gone into some detail on this subject as I think it is a good illustration of the ways in which work and the value of work are being attacked. It is fashionable to be "stressed", it is a convenient vehicle to push for change while disregarding the facts. Unless, of course, you are an employer who has to bear the financial and legal consequences.

Having said all of that, there remains the question about the continued viability of the work ethic. Why have a work ethic? Why is it important to hold on to jobs, and to create employment? Is it simply our blinkered, culturally determined inability to see the alternatives to work in a post materialist society? The lunacy of encouraging business to shed jobs, or not create new ones would appear to be readily apparent. But that is already happening. We have just emerged from a five year period of sustained economic growth. Whilst new jobs have been created, more should have been generated by the level of economic activity we experienced.

Let me raise some questions with you. If you impose on businesses so much regulation that they simply cannot cope, in the end they'll disemploy and/or disappear. They'll try to limit their exposure to people. It's partly a competitive issue and partly a question of how you try to reduce your risks. The unfair dismissal laws are a perfect example, now complete with a whole raft of insane decisions. Courtesy of Laurie Brereton and his ideas about unfair dismissal, we had many employers in a position where they simply didn't believe they could manage their businesses effectively. There were cases involving employees competing against their own employers, running their own businesses from inside their employer's establishment. They were reinstated or given compensation when they challenged dismissal. Many businesses, particularly the small ones, couldn't cope, so they reduced jobs and didn't fill vacancies.

The Occupational Health and Safety Regulations have changed fundamentally in NSW. The government has introduced what is called

the risk assessment philosophy, which as a theory is wonderful. If you've got lots of resources it's possibly workable. But small and medium businesses will not have a hope. Employers now have to foresee, and prevent, **every** hazard and risk which may occur at their workplace. Any avenue of defence has been deliberately blocked by the drafters of the legislation in NSW WorkCover. The Occupational Health and Safety Act even says that compliance with the Regulation is no defence to a prosecution but failure to comply can be used as evidence against the employer in a prosecution.

One example of what employers now have to contend with is provided by the requirement to guard against workplace violence. This is just one of a thousand of things an employer has to consider. And workplace violence is defined broadly according to the ILO definition and includes gesticulation and swearing, etc. So, as an employer, if you or your employees swear at somebody or gesticulate, you could be in trouble.

It's the same with workplace consultation. Consultation, if it's organic, can be absolutely productive in business. But if you put so much consultation into the consultative requirements for business, they simply won't get their business done. They'll be out there "consulting" all the time.

Businesses are being buried in restrictive law and regulation, so they try to limit their exposure to employees. This is not a competitive response, its risk avoidance.

In this post-industrial, post-consumerism society, where do we end up in regard to consumption decisions? Sharon Beder's book argues that those who don't want to work, should not have to work; that the majority, in the end, will be those who don't want to work and the minority will be those who do. It is implied that those who work will be so productive and so well paid they will happily pay increased taxes to enable governments to fund those who don't want to work. The non-workers will be on the beaches or, theoretically, in the third sector, volunteering.

But who will decide what it is that the non-workers will have available to consume? How much will the government be able to give you to spend and on what? What will be the choices if there is no earned income, simply a redistribution? Who will make those decisions? The planned economies made a disastrous mess when their power elites made all the choices. There are many things that are imperfect in our society, but one of the things you usually get to do is to make your own choices. This is unlikely to be the case in Sharon Beder's world. Those who work would have to be exhaustively taxed to provide inevitably inadequate government revenue to be transferred as subsistence income to non-workers.

Sharon Beder says that those at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy know they will never make it to the top and therefore they work only because it's an economic necessity. And she argues that work at this level should be a matter of choice. But is it true that promotion to more challenging positions is not possible, and can we sustain our society by paying large unearned incomes to everyone who chooses not to work? There are many people on the shop floor who demonstrate they've got the "gears" to make it up the line. And there are others who prioritise their commitments. On the weekend, they may run the local football club, employing significant organisational skills and yet at work they may be disinterested. It's not that they don't have the intellectual capacity; rather their keenest interests lie elsewhere. There's nothing more certain however, than that if you demonstrate capacity and commitment on the shop floor, you will be offered opportunities to move upwards when those opportunities become available. Alternatively, as your skills, experience and confidence develop, opportunities to move to more challenging jobs with new employers will be open to you.

But if you are constantly told, from school onwards, that there is no hope in the future; that all jobs are menial; that the workplace offers nothing but drudgery and exploitation; that personal aspirations for advancement are doomed from the outset; and that consumption itself is both futile and immoral, why would most people not ultimately forsake the notion that work has anything to offer.

And how, indeed, will the incomes of the few remaining workers (who eschew this propaganda), yield sufficient taxes to support the vast population who now surf the waves or, curiously, work in the third sector for transfer payments unrelated to the quantity or quality of their work.

The ACTU, for its own marketing and industrial objectives, seeks to convince us all that these allegedly manifest deficiencies exist and that the solution lies in voluntarily destroying our competitiveness in domestic and international markets – 1981 revisited – goodbye profits, investment and jobs. And Sharon Beder says we don't need the jobs – just stop consuming and everything will be okay.

Well, all of this raises a host of issues. Among them is the consequential removal of the need (as most non-workers would see it) for education.

If you don't require education to work then do you require an education? The intelligentsia would want education for its own sake. But you don't need a formal education to ride a surfboard. Surfing is about balance, and subtlety and flair, the latest shape of the board and how you wax it. But will you actually need to go school? If you don't require education, do you and your generation and then your children in the next generation become the ones for whom education will not be funded?



Will governments say "we can't afford that, because the transfer payments to the non-workers are so massive we cannot afford to educate those who don't need it for work". Supporting current social security expenditure levels is hard enough, raising the payments to cope with ever increasing numbers is going to require both a very buoyant economy, generating massive tax revenue and workers with all the skills, experience and drive to achieve at a high level, but who are prepared to work for virtually zero net income.

Somehow, traditional economics always gets in the way of another good story. Even if we demolish our current measures of GDP and focus on indices of well being and social and environmental health, income will still need to be generated to support the needs of the non-workers within a global economy.

The debate about the work ethic seems to me to be a debate from another age. We have moved on from that. It's now a question of choice. Rather than taking the depressing view of work as a cultural construct which needs to be assigned an entirely new set of values, we should be focussing on what is it that creates opportunity and choice in society.

Perhaps a little less denigration of work, and the work ethic, and a little more effort in protecting and encouraging jobs may result in a more equitable and saner society. The alternative is the negative society, constantly proselytising for new victims of the world of work, yet without a rational strategy for real improvements in people's lives, just the hollow ring of the ACTU's 1980 mantra: "More leisure, more jobs" or Sharon Beder's fond hope: "Buy nothing, go nowhere, subsist and be happy".

## Endnotes

1. *The Bulletin* February 1999; "Australia at Work: just managing"
2. For example see ACTU National Stress @ Work Campaign Press Release 19 October 1997, B Pocock et al, "Tifty Families - what unreasonable hours are doing to Australians, their families and their communities" - ACTU 2001, and its current website
3. Australian Bureau of Statistics Labour Force 1978-95 C 6204.0, Underemployed Workers September 1999 6265.0
4. Australian Bureau of Statistics C 6203 February 1978-2001 TABLE 34
5. In a 2000 survey, the ABS asks employees if they "preferred more hours for more pay", and 35% of part time employees preferred to work more hours. ABS Survey of Employment Arrangements and Superannuation C 6361.0
6. ABS Survey of Employment Arrangements and Superannuation C 6361.0
7. Productivity Commission: *The Growth of Non Traditional Employment: Are Jobs Becoming More Precarious?* July 2000
8. ILO Work Employment Report: *2001 Life At Work In The Information Economy*
9. ACTU op cit
10. Ganster G "Interventions for Building Healthy Organisations" in Murphy et al *Job Stress Interventions* American Psychological Association 1995
11. J Rick et al, 2001: "A Critical Review of Psychosocial Hazard Measures: - UK Health and Safety Executive Contract Research Report 356/2001



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5. Clare Walker, Cath Towle  
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