

**The erosion of the Australian national model of employment and its impact on social cohesion and long term economic performance: the role of individualism and changing social values.**

A distinctive feature of the Australian national model of employment has been the capacity of national and state based industrial tribunals to promote a floor to employment conditions which extended well beyond a minimum wage. This occurred, inter alia, through union recognition rights, compulsory conciliation and arbitration of industrial disputes, and through acceptance of the importance of equitable outcomes in tribunal decisions. This national model, however, has been in gradual decline since the early 1990s, and the pace of change will soon accelerate with a proposed substantial narrowing of the functions of the foremost industrial tribunal, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. This paper will examine the decline in the national model of employment, from the perspective of encroachments upon the model through the development of independent contracting and temporary agency work. The steps which unions have taken to resist these sources of decline are discussed, along with the role of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission in supporting these union objectives. The paper then turns to the question of how the promotion of these alternate models of employment, and the associated degradation of collective employment rights, has contributed to a loss of social cohesion in the workplace, and a loss of investment in the maintenance and future development of skills and commitment at the workplace. The assumption that long-term competitiveness is developed through the generation of skills and high quality employment, and that this process may be best supported by a pluralist framework representing broad stakeholders' interests, has been discarded in the Australian context. In its place is the promotion of an individualistic model, based upon highly flexible workplace relations and an ideological commitment to the free market. But where does such a model take an economy? And are collectivist and egalitarian principles so readily displaced?

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