

Public policy and industrial relations in Australia: From centralised collective norms towards decentralisation and individualism

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ABSTRACT

Successive Australian governments have adopted a deregulatory approach to the labour market and linked workplace reform to enterprise productivity (Whitfield and Ross, 1996; Bamber and Davis 2000). Australia has implemented many of the recommendations of the OECD Jobs Study (1994) including the shift towards enterprise based bargaining, the restructuring of the national job placement service, strict inflation targeting and more directed work-testing for unemployment welfare support. Wiseman (1998) suggests that Australia has been one of the exemplars for a national neo-liberal economic policy agenda, including the free trade policy program. Facilitating the process of change has been the legislative actions of governments within both the state and federal jurisdictions. The Australian industrial relations system has been transformed over the past two decades from one with strong centralised industrial relations institutions and collective norms to one that emphasises decentralised bargaining and facilitates individual employment contracts (Wooden, 2000). These changes are likely to progress further towards individualism once the Coalition parties obtain control of both houses of Federal parliament in mid 2005. This paper outlines the public policy programs of successive Australian governments that have contributed towards the transformation in the industrial relations and bargaining regime. The analytical focus in this paper is to examine the broad change in public policy intent as well as to examine the impact of policy changes on industrial relations. Part of the process of industrial relations change is related to changes within the public sector and changes associated with the policy program associated with “microeconomic reform”.

References

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