

WORKING TITLE: Some jobs are more equal than others

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When Tony Abbott promised to shed more than 13,000 full time jobs from the public service there was a deafening silence from the Australian business community about the impact of job loss on Canberra communities and families. Likewise, you could hear crickets when Campbell Newman sacked 10,000 teachers, nurses and other Queensland public servants.

But in Australia, not all job losses are treated equally. As this week's focus on the hundreds of jobs that will be lost when Hazelwood power station shuts down shows, some job losses appear to be more important than others. Just as Australian conservatives clearly distinguish between 'worthy' welfare recipients (such as aged pensioners) and 'unworthy' welfare recipients (such as single mums and the unemployed), the political Right has a keen sense of which jobs losses are worth celebrating and which require feigned concern.

When Jeff Kennett privatised the Victorian electricity sector in the 1990s an estimated 10,000 people lost their jobs, mainly in the Latrobe valley. To be clear, the Liberals and the business community saw these job losses as good and the impact on the community as a small price to pay for the Neoliberal dream of smaller government. But when the French owners of the 50 year old steam engine finally announced this week that the plant will close the opportunity for some to attack the environment movement for its indifference to workers and communities was just too irresistible to pass up.

Unemployment is devastating. Whether it is caused by a Free Trade Agreement, privatisation, budget cuts or a shift in technology, the personal, community and economic consequences of unemployment are sometimes unrecoverable. Not surprisingly the data makes clear that unemployment can trigger mortgage default, marriage breakdowns and even suicide. But unless there is an opportunity to link such pain to an attack on their political opponents the Coalition are largely silent about it.

Since the 2013 election the Australian Bureau of Statistics says that the number of unemployed people has risen by 19,100 to 705,100 today. We would have to open over 1000 Hazelwoods to create enough jobs for all of Australia's unemployed.

Hazelwood isn't the only example of environmentalists being blamed for causing unemployment. In Queensland during the mining boom the number of unemployed people never fell below 73,700 and today the figure stands at 151,000. The Coalition and the conservative press argued that subsidising the construction of the Adani coal mine and offering them free coal, a project that would create around

1,400 jobs, is a good way to tackle unemployment. Were the mine to go ahead it is not obvious that the boosters of the Adani would care at all about the remaining 149,600 unemployed. It's not likely that they would support an increase in the \$264 per week unemployment benefit.

Of course it's not just the issue of job loss in the resource sector that brings out the hypocrites; the feigned concern about the impact of rising electricity prices on the poor is just as galling. Only 4 weeks ago the Federal Government and the business community were arguing that the incomes of the unemployed should be cut by \$8.80 per week via the removal of, you will never believe this, the clean energy supplement.

Leaving aside the fact that the modelling commissioned for Tony Abbott's inquiry into their Renewable Energy Target found that renewable energy was pushing electricity prices down, if the Coalition or the business community wanted to help poor people cope with energy prices, or anything else for that matter, they could simply increase the meagre benefits on which an unemployed public servant, car worker or power station worker is expected to live.

The Punch and Judy show that is Australian public debate performs a very important role. All of the colour and movement, all of the parliamentary intrigue, indeed all of the talk by politicians about jobs serves to conceal some enormous truths in plain sight. Put simply, over the last 30 years we have come to accept that having at least half a million unemployed people is OK; we have come to accept that cutting taxes for the rich and benefits for the poor is OK; and we have come to accept that there is nothing we can do about it.

The fact that other countries have higher taxes, lower unemployment and more generous safety nets has been largely expunged from polite conversation. Sure, other countries might spend more on education, do a better job of helping retrenched workers retrain and fund such an approach through higher taxes but... that would never work here. Whatever you do, don't mention that it used to.

While losing a job can be devastating, what causes the real psychological and economic harm is the inability to find a new one. And it is a lot easier to find a new job when the unemployment rate is below 3 per cent (like in the 1960s) than when it is 5.6 per cent as it is now. But of course we blame the plight of unemployed power station workers on environmentalists who think we should reduce greenhouse gas emissions - not on politicians who claim to be great economic managers but can't reduce unemployment.

Between the late 1980s and the early 2000's the coal companies shed more than 20,000 jobs. The halving of the coal mining work force had nothing to do with cutting greenhouse gas emissions and everything to do with cutting costs. Changes in technology allowed the mine owners to buy bigger machines and employ a lot fewer workers so they jumped at the chance. New mines, like the one proposed by Indian company Adani, would naturally bring the latest technology, meaning fewer jobs per tonne of coal.

The mining industry is spending up big on robot trucks and remote controlled trains so that they can employ a lot less mine workers. Multinational resource companies are as keen to ship Australian jobs offshore as they are to shift their profits offshore. But somehow, despite the fact that their plans to replace workers with machines are completely public, mining companies manage to depict themselves as the workers' friends, and those who care about the environment as selfish.

No government can prevent the fact that over the coming decades millions of people will lose their jobs and millions of people will find new ones. And no economist can predict exactly which jobs will come and which ones will go. But the world's climate scientists can predict what will happen if we continue to build new coal mines and burn enormous amounts of coal to make electricity.

Whether we work hard to reduce emissions or let them continue to grow, unemployment and job loss will be a major feature of the Australian economy. If we wanted to be more generous to the unemployed, invest more in retraining and well planned structural adjustment programs and try and tackle unemployment at a macroeconomic level, we could do that. We have in the past and many countries still do. Or we could just blame the environment movement and get back to cutting welfare payments. I think I know which way we will go.

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