

Launch of *Work and Industrial Relations Policy in Australia*

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Remarks by the Hon. Dr Sarah Kaine

When I first perused the contents of this book and started reading, I felt like it was a bit equivalent to Spotify feeding me a playlist based on past listening patterns – but then making valiant efforts to bring me up to date.

I was going to hear a good selection of classics, starting with the birth of the arbitration system, and its associated riffs – from Harvester, then moving to fruit pickers etc., up to the social workers case, through to the Accord years, and the Howard era. It was familiar listening even though in the case of Howard, I hadn't liked the lyrics at the time.

Like any decent current compilation, it made sure that previously overlooked tracks were given priority not only in the chapter on gender equity, but in the retelling of the early history; and then there was the inclusion of the newer, edgier sounds of the climate change chapter.

In amongst the familiar tracks, I did note that there was a remake thrown in early in the list. While the book was explicitly going to address the role of the state in IR policy, it was going to nuance the framing it used – sure, it would lean into the pluralist, neo-institutional bassline, but it would foreground the policy objectives of efficiency, equity and voice (previously released by Befort and Budd in 2009).

What really grabbed me about the book, though, was not that it played to my algorithm, which it does, but that after settling me in nicely I did reach a moment when I noticed that the rhythm had changed – that it caused me to pause and skip back to reconsider something. I'd just read the chapter about equity: gender and work which finishes with this sentence on page 80: 'In each case examined in this chapter, reform has been made by newly elected national Labor Governments.'

And it's here that I will leave my way too laboured analogy: not because I don't want to torture you some more with it, but because this is where it gets serious for me, and I think where the book really hits home.

To be clear, I'm not highlighting that sentence for partisan purpose (although I am glad to be on the side of light in this case), but because for me it speaks to the underlying themes of the book – that who runs the government matters, that the state matters, that ideology has shaped every permutation of our industrial relations system and continues to do so.

I note that in the opening chapters the authors cite the famous Keynes quote – that those:

'...who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence are usually the slaves of some defunct economist...the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the encroachment of gradual ideas...'

Now, I might disagree with Keynes about the vested interests aspect, and I think modern Australian IR is replete with examples of powerful vested corporate interests having sway (Qantas and JobKeeper, anyone?), but as I read the book that brings us up to date with IR policy in Australia, I was struck by

how much unacknowledged ideology has been infused in policy decisions and debate. The chapter on efficiency and productivity illustrates this perfectly. While the authors, following Berfort and Budd's conceive of productivity or efficiency as of equal importance as equity and voice, they acknowledge that employer associations and governments with unitarist or neoliberal 'orientations associate 'efficiency' with managerial prerogative, hard management strategies...and as costs to be minimised.'

While I mostly agree with this, I would argue that to be accurate, tracking the neoliberal view of productivity needs to extend way beyond employer associations and unitarist governments – that we have been living through decades of what I have previously called 'ambient neoliberalism' (with my apologies to Thomas Picketty for bastardising his term).

I'm not suggesting that others haven't thought about or written about the impact of neoliberal thought on Australian politics and IR. Of course they have – many of them are in this room – but I guess what I have seen in my current role is the extent of this privileging of economic rationalism and business first ideology on all sides of politics. I think outsiders to politics don't see how much this thinking still permeates everything – and I mean everything!

In case you think I am exaggerating, I have a few examples to hand: the first is, unsurprisingly, about universities.

In attempting to counter my arguments for running an Inquiry into University Governance, I had a colleague ask me if I understood how Corporate Boards ran. Now, putting aside the patronising tone (with difficulty, I must say) I said that I did think I had a general idea of how corporate boards worked, but that I didn't understand his point because corporate boards are not the same as University Councils. But he argued that they were – because corporate boards are there to serve only the interests of the corporation; likewise, University Councils should only serve the interests of the University (of course as determined by the council itself), free from outside interference. Depressing.

Second, a colleague of mine (and I'm not going to say in which jurisdiction) has been doing some thinking about the regulation of AI to better protect workers, and on approaching someone with a policy decision-making role in this space, was told something along the lines of 'it's probably an area in which it is better if we let the market sort it out.' Seriously...

And I think part of this is just laziness – we have gotten used to this pro-business, economically rational approach and it is what is cognitively at hand for people; it's there, it's embedded, we've absorbed it for so long. I think that explains what the authors describe in the productivity chapter: that is the confounding stickiness of 'productivity as the proven route to higher wages', despite the well-documented decoupling of wages and productivity (with thanks to Jim Stanford and David Peetz for all of the work that they've done over time to research this but also try to explain it to people.)

This sounds very pessimistic and like I am having a go at current policy makers – on the contrary. The book left me feeling hopeful.

The pause that I took at the end the Equity chapter about positive reforms of Labor governments followed me into the proceeding chapters, which highlighted changes to the regulations of gig work and the beginnings of improvements for vulnerable migrant workers. It made me hopeful that at least in IR at a federal level, we are beginning to punch through the tired policy trope of business first, second and third. It also reflects what the authors describe as the shift in policy advocacy and development from creating policy to deal with 'problems of labour', to 'problems for labour' that

represent a conceptual change from treating labour as a problem that hinders the market and thus needs to be solved...and I hope that this also reflects movements in those damaging underlying ideological assumptions and economic shorthand that we have been subjected to for so long.

But it's the final chapter that I like the best. It's no nonsense. It's where the authors tell us what they really think. It's where we get the conclusion about that productivity debate referenced early, that 'the push for policies that supposedly drive productivity are really about other 'p' words, namely, power, profit and politics' (p152), and an invocation to think about the 'economy, work and industrial relations in relation to the natural world, a world that provides value to labour and capital but is now facing a climate calamity.' This is a compelling way to end the book because it reminds us that though we as IR nerds may get distracted with the latest changes to legislation, that IR policy has and always will be inextricably linked to almost every other social and economic policy.

And so, returning to my tortured analogy, returning to the playlist I began with, this book doesn't just serve up familiar tracks and a few bold new releases – it curates a list that makes you listen harder, question the algorithm that shaped your tastes, and realise that what comes next depends very much on who gets to choose the music.

I commend this book. I really enjoy it, and I love the artists.