

# The Australian Government's business-friendly employment response to COVID-19: A critical discourse analysis

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has created economic crises and considerable loss of employment throughout the world. In the Australian context, social distancing restrictions and business closures contributed to a dramatic increase in unemployment, with 780,000 people losing work within weeks of the first COVID-19 outbreaks. Job losses were concentrated in casualised industries such as retail, recreation, arts and culture, hospitality, and accommodation. We examine policy discourses framing independent work, entrepreneurial workers and flexible work relations as essential for ‘economic recovery’, where this means business flexibility, productivity and future economic prosperity. We draw on these framings to show how the equation of flexible work relations and productivity underpins the Australian Government’s response to unemployment caused by the pandemic, as reflected in policy announcements and proposed changes to industrial relations law. In these proposals, constructions of ‘job creation’ and ‘economic recovery’ rationalise industrial relations changes that further empower business, through conflating public and business interest. At the same time, ensuing labour market deregulation and the changing profile of business renders the very idea of ‘jobs’ tendentious.

**JEL Codes:** J08, J28, J31, J38

## Keywords

Casualisation, COVID-19, deregulation, gig economy, gig work, independent work, industrial relations, labour, precarious work

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created labour market instability and widespread unemployment globally. As organisations have had to either close or drastically scale back their operations, the ensuing economic crises in countries such as Australia have created uncertainty, financial hardship and poverty. This article analyses the Australian Government's announcements of responses to widespread unemployment and approach to economic recovery, focusing on the 'JobMaker' package. JobMaker is an outline of how the government intends to shape Australia's economic recovery in relation to employment, education, taxation and infrastructure, ostensibly for the purpose of job creation.

The analysis situates these policy announcements within the broader context of economic and labour market restructuring in Australia, which has contributed to increased casualisation of the workforce and the emergence of independent work through the 'gig economy'. Successive Australian Governments have drawn on discourses of choice, flexibility and freedom to enable a casualised and contingent workforce. Emphasising flexibility and efficiency promised through these work modes, policy discourses frame work as an evolving series of 'gigs' completed by agile, independent contractors, operating remotely and in competition with other independent workers throughout the world. This evolution is positioned as essential to ensure businesses can operate efficiently, productively and with maximum flexibility, therefore helping to drive economic performance. The economic instability following the COVID-19 crisis has given additional impetus to the Australian Government's vision of a business-centred economic recovery.

We use critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how constructions of flexible/independent work, and the social and economic inequalities which it fosters, are legitimated in discourses that construct a business-friendly regulatory environment as being in the interests of the broader society. This article explores how these constructions have framed the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 crisis in relation to initiatives designed to protect employment, provide financial support in case of job loss and create employment in the midst of the pandemic.

## Neoliberalism, flexible labour and mobile capital

The background narrative is a familiar one. Globalisation, characterised by minimal restrictions on trade between nations and the mobility of capital and labour, has underpinned the changing nature of work in Western economies, including Australia. Trade agreements, reduction in regulations such as tariffs and state intervention in markets, and the rise in multinational and transnational corporations have 'encouraged nation-states and businesses to establish increasingly flexible production processes and employment systems' (Kalleberg, 2013: 700). Relaxing regulations governing the movement of capital has enabled corporations to move their business to parts of the world where economic conditions support profit-making (Kalleberg, 2012, 2013).

In this context, private investment is framed as the means for increasing productivity, understood as economic growth, and economic growth is portrayed as essential for job creation (Business Council of Australia, 2019). Successive Australian Governments

have sought to remove market regulations protecting labour entitlements in order to make investment in Australia appear attractive (Buchanan et al., 2006). Pierce et al. (2019: 86) note this approach reflects a substantial shift in the role of Western governments, from focusing on full employment towards creating flexible labour markets, affording firms greater freedom to ‘hire and fire workers in response to demand’. According to Bessant (2018: 791), Australian neoliberalism seeks to ‘remove all external constraints on the freedom of employers’.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Australian Governments deregulated labour markets, introducing workplace laws aimed at reducing trade union interventions and workers’ rights and increasing use of individual work contracts (Bessant, 2018; van Barneveld et al., 2020). This approach to labour policy was coupled with an emphasis on free trade, reduction of corporate tax, reduced social expenditure, removal of tariffs, and privatisation and marketisation of government-owned and operated industries (van Barneveld et al., 2020). Employer flexibility and freedom were prioritised over social interests, disadvantaging less powerful, more vulnerable members of society (Bessant, 2018; Cahill, 2010). Diminishing workers’ rights, representation and entitlements have reduced bargaining power, which, along with labour market deregulation, have driven declining wage growth and increasing economic inequality (Pierce et al., 2019; Stanford, 2017; Stanford et al., 2018).

There has been a steep rise in casual, temporary and contract work in Western economies, in the service of creating flexible workforces (Bessant, 2018; MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019; Shibata, 2020). Flexibility, as an overarching aim of labour policy, underpins the shift towards precarious work (Buchanan et al., 2006; Wilson and Ebert, 2013), enabling employers to replace core workforces with more contingent ones. This process is both caused by, and contributes to, the shift in power away from labour, and towards managers (Kalleberg, 2012, 2013; Wilson and Ebert, 2013). Flexible work arrangements are claimed to offer workers freedom, autonomy and choice but are often characterised by reduced income and poor working conditions (Burrows, 2013; Johnson, 2015).

### *Emergence or resurgence of the ‘gig’ economy*

Discourses of individual freedom, flexibility and choice have rationalised labour market deregulation, declining union power and increasing unemployment and underemployment. Stanford (2017) suggests these broader macroeconomic and political forces have contributed to the demise of the Standard Employment Relationship (SER; see, for example, Vosko, 2008). This is nowhere more apparent than in the emergence of the gig economy, with its emphasis on on-demand piece work, where employers only pay for the work they need and receive (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019; Shibata, 2020; Stanford, 2017; Stewart and Stanford, 2017). Sharma (2020: 2) defines the gig economy as involving ‘short-term, unpredictable and contingent work arrangements where the market for personal services is transacted in a digital marketplace’. MacDonald and Giazitzoglu (2019: 724) note these short-term arrangements ‘are advertised by companies through online platforms with workers bidding a (wage) price to undertake the job as an independent contractor, working on a series of discrete “gigs”’.

This shift is accompanied by a representation of the idealised worker as a self-reliant, entrepreneurial individual (Ikonen and Nikunen, 2019). Oinonen (2018) points out that entrepreneurialism focuses attention on the individual and their choices, and away from the social and economic structures contributing to reduced supports and protections for workers. The worker is positioned as succeeding or failing based on their capacity to reinvent themselves according to what the labour market demands (Ikonen and Nikunen, 2019). Against the discourse of worker autonomy, flexibility and control, MacDonald and Giazitzoglu (2019) highlight the gig economy as part of a wider process of increasing precariousness of work. On this view, the emergence of the gig economy is an intensification of the casualisation and fragmentation of work underpinning labour market restructuring in Australia since the 1980s.

Gig workers are positioned as independent contractors or freelancers, lacking the rights, working conditions and benefits of more permanent employees (Churchill et al., 2019; Healy et al., 2017; Shibata, 2020). The employment relationship is murky – with an implication that employers have a diminished responsibility towards gig workers, defining their role as facilitators of work arrangements between workers and clients, rather than as employers (Minter, 2017). Sharma (2020) highlights how gig workers are related to as independent contractors, while resembling blue-collar employees of platform companies. This relationship enables firms to limit their obligations to employees, and in turn reduce costs and enhance the flexibility and efficiency of resource use. Workers' individual and collective bargaining power is undermined as they are pitted against each other for work (Healy et al., 2017; MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019; Shibata, 2020; Wood et al., 2019).

Workers in the 'gig' economy are subject to informal discipline, surveillance and manipulation by firms, underpinning their lack of power, choice and control, all of which the flexibility of gig work is claimed to provide (Shibata, 2020; Wood et al. 2019; Zwick, 2018). Wood et al. (2019: 939) note that the capacity to monitor workers extends, in some cases, to clients being able to view screenshots of workers' computers, as well as mouse and key board movements. Furthermore, workers are monitored through ratings systems ranking workers according to clients' reviews (Wood et al., 2019). Thus, while freedom and flexibility is promised to workers, with independent work positioned as a means for workers to reclaim their autonomy, many workers experience limited control over the prices they can charge, the work that they accept and their work schedules (Anwar and Graham, 2020; Dean and Spoehr, 2018; Goods et al., 2019; Sharma, 2020). Shibata (2020) argues that the freedom promised to independent workers is a 'fictitious freedom', which effectively legitimises exploitation, particularly for marginalised workers who are often compelled to engage in gig work out of necessity (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019; Shibata, 2020). Rather than being a new work form, arguably it is a restoration in new guise of old managerial forms (Quinlan, 2012; Stanford, 2017).

Precarious work has a range of established harms. People employed precariously have been shown to experience

- Gender-based discrimination (Chan and Tweedie, 2015; Vosko, 2008);
- Poor job quality, job security and low income (Blustein et al., 2016; Rubery et al., 2018);

- Compromised health, well-being and work–life balance (Dean and Spoehr, 2018; Sharma, 2020);
- Housing insecurity (Beer et al., 2016);
- Negative impacts upon family planning and social life (Anwar and Graham, 2020; Chan and Tweedie, 2015);
- Reduced social mobility (Burgess et al., 2013).

The impacts of precarious work are felt most acutely by people at greater risk of social and economic marginalisation, particularly young women (Nielsen et al., 2019; Rubery et al., 2018), workers with limited skills and education or who lack knowledge of workplace rights (Buchanan et al., 2006; Burgess et al., 2013; Johnson, 2015), single mothers (Chan and Tweedie, 2015), and migrant workers (Anderson, 2010).

The next section of the article outlines an approach to CDA, as a method for analysing how these impacts are obscured through discursive reframing. This is followed by analysis of discourses on independent work and agile organisation, before linking this conceptual context with the Australian Government’s response to the economic and employment crises following COVID-19.

## Method

### *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*

CDA examines language and discourse, ‘by analyzing latent and manifest structural relationships of dominance, power and control as these are constructed and mediated in language’ (Smith-Carrier, 2020: 3). Analyses emphasise how constructions and uses of language portray and, in some instances, legitimise social inequalities (Carant, 2017; Smith-Carrier, 2020). Smith-Carrier and Lawlor (2017: 107) explain,

the intent of CDA is to reveal the nature of power in social relations and how these are represented, both tacitly and overtly, in texts, verbal interactions and communicative events.

Research using CDA employs a broad analysis of discourses and texts, going beyond a focus on individual sentences and words to consider and analyse the broader contexts of usage. For Carant (2017), CDA can illuminate change in the social and economic context and, how this shapes, and is shaped by, the ways dominant discourses ‘delineate social phenomena’ such as social and economic inequality.

The following analysis is of constructions of independent work and independent workers in the context of government announcements of COVID recovery plans. Documents illustrating policy discourses in this article include secondary sources by government, lobby groups and consultancy firms, which contain projections of the future of work and organisations in terms that link productivity and efficiency with flexibility and agility. Primary sources representing the Australian Government’s policy announcements responding to the COVID-19 pandemic include ministerial media releases, transcripts of speeches and interviews conducted with government ministers, and government initiatives such as JobKeeper, and the draft legislation announcing the outline of the economic recovery plan.

These discourses illustrate constructions of entrepreneurialism, control, freedom and choice in relation to independent work. The language of the policy discourses frames relations between organisations and workers regarding responsibility, risk and power. Analysis of discourses of the future of work shows disaggregated work positioned as a future work model and highlights how business interests are framed in relation to social prosperity. This part of the analysis provides the analytic context for understanding the Australian Government's announcements. The analysis focuses on policy discourses introducing Australia's COVID-19 response to unemployment and loss of work, exploring how constructions of business, workers and work are shaping the response, and the continuing restructuring of work in Australia.

## **New economy – advanced capitalism, business-friendly society and the future of work**

From the mid-1980s, Australian Governments have perceived their role as that of 'market steward' (O'Keeffe, 2019). Creating a 'business friendly society' is positioned as the most effective way of creating jobs and increasing wages (Business Council of Australia, 2019; McCormack, 2017). This argument is illustrated by the Business Council of Australia (2019):

One of the best ways to drive faster economic growth is to increase productivity. This means attracting more investment and innovation, so businesses can improve the way they operate; working smarter and more efficiently to lift productivity. This has always been, is currently, and will always be the central plank to delivering lasting increases to wages and living standards. (p. 5)

However, while growth in the value of capital has accelerated in the past few decades, Australian wage growth is stagnating, with the minimum wage declining from 65% of average wages in 1983 to less than 45% in 2017 (McKenzie, 2018: 56). Casualisation and underemployment have increased considerably in this period (McKenzie, 2018), suggesting that government attempts to attract business investment through increased labour market flexibility, framed as 'working smarter and more efficiently', have undermined job security and slowed wage growth. These trends indicate that the government's continued messaging and policy of a business-driven economy as building prosperity for all is not supported by the Australian evidence.

Associated with this shift is the transition from firms as vertically integrated organisations, to 'lean' organisations employing few people directly and instead engaging contract organisations and workers to complete 'projects' or 'gigs' (Davis, 2013; Zwick, 2018). The rise of shareholder capitalism since the 1970s has gradually contributed to the decline of vertically integrated, multinational corporations (Davis, 2013; Morgan, 2014; Zwick, 2018). Morgan (2014) highlights three key elements of this change:

... the rise of a more dominant and aggressive definition of the role of the firm as being to maximize shareholder value; secondly, and associated with this, the growth in scale and scope of financial markets as influences on firm strategy; thirdly, the focus on the firm as a bundle of

financial assets and financial flows to be managed primarily by responding rapidly to market prices (of capital, labour, technology etc.) in order to maximize returns on capital. (p. 185)

Each of these elements is part of a broader process of financialisation, ‘whereby the objectives of the corporation have been increasingly narrowly defined as maximizing shareholder value’ (Morgan, 2014: 184). This is critically important to consider in relation to the reconstruction of work as more flexible and contingent, and the deregulation of labour markets. The shift towards financialisation and reconstruction of firm value in terms of share value raises questions around the assumed relationship between corporate investment, job creation and wage growth, and to the construction of ‘productivity’ within a narrow frame of profit-making.

This shift has contributed to the emergence in the 2000s and early 2010s of corporations which operate primarily through outsourcing and offshoring work through short-term contracts, rather than direct employment (Davis, 2013). This change in firm structure, made possible through reduced restrictions on the mobility of capital and labour, has meant firms are reducing reliance on waged employees (Pierce et al., 2019: 85; Zwick, 2018: 660). This has enabled the emergence of gig work, compatible with an emphasis on making work as contingent as possible (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019: 732).

Flexibility is framed not in terms of precarious work, but as evidence of organisations’ ‘agility’ and capacity to innovate and create value. Private sector think-tank McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) is an influential organisation in Australian policy making, having received numerous major contracts from both Liberal and Labour governments, and regularly providing consultancy services for government (Australian National Audit Office [ANAO], 2020). Specifically, MGI has been a major proponent of flexible work arrangements. For example, MGI (2018a) claims

To meet the continually evolving needs of all their stakeholders, agile organizations design distributed, flexible approaches to creating value, frequently integrating external partners directly into the value creation system . . . These companies can also allocate resources flexibly and swiftly to where they are needed most. Companies like Google, Haier, Tesla, and Whole Foods constantly scan the environment. They regularly evaluate the progress of initiatives and decide whether to ramp them up or shut them down, using standardized, fast resource-allocation processes to shift people, technology, and capital rapidly. (pp. 6–7)

The emergence of digital platform companies is enabling the reconstruction of work and organisations (MGI, 2016, 2017; Jobs for NSW, 2016). Digital platforms are framed as creating efficient and transparent markets for labour, connecting workers with ‘buyers of services’ (MGI, 2016). Firms are reconstructed as ‘buyers of services’, rather than employers, while workers are the suppliers of that service, rather than employees. This construction reinforces the notion that workers are one-person enterprises rather than employees.

### *Agile workers for the agile workplace*

In the discourse of the future of work, the reconstruction of pared-back firms as agile, efficient and productive precipitates a reconstruction of workers as needing to be equally

agile to succeed in the new environment. MGI (2017, 2018b, 2018c) associated potential productivity growth afforded by digitisation and automation with the need for individual workers to upgrade skills and education, becoming agile and flexible themselves. For example, MGI (2018c) states,

Individual citizens must also seek to actively embrace the digital transformation and deal with its impact on them as workers, entrepreneurs, consumers, and citizens. As workers, they may need to develop a mindset focused on lifelong learning and become more proficient at adapting their skills to the changing workplace environment. Developing agility, resilience, and flexibility will be important at a time when the nature of work could change. (p. 125)

This comment illustrates how the overall restructuring of work is primarily intended to support business flexibility and meet consumer demand, with an increasingly precarious work environment as the context to which workers are required to adapt. As Jobs for NSW (2016) highlights, workers must adjust by developing the skills and experience that firms want. This shift for workers is couched in terms of choice, freedom and independence, drawing heavily upon the neoliberal construction of the self-reliant, rational, entrepreneurial individual, who shoulders the risk and responsibility for the decisions that they make. This is evident in MGI's (2016: i), introduction to 'Independent work: Choice, necessity, and the gig economy':

Anyone who has ever felt trapped in a cubicle, annoyed by a micromanaging boss, or fed up with office politics has probably dreamed of leaving it all behind and going it alone. The intensifying demands of corporate life are making [independent work] more appealing for millions of workers around the world.

This statement positions independent or 'gig' work as offering ultimate freedom, as something which workers aspire to achieve. However, MGI's own study of independent workers in the US, UK, Sweden, Germany, France and Spain found that 70% of people engaged in gig work out of necessity, either to supplement an income or because they were 'financially strapped' (MGI 2016: ix). In addition, high proportions of young people, women and people in low-income households were employed through gig work (MGI, 2016: 6). Despite the clear indication that marginalised workers employed in gig work do so due to lack of access to full-time, permanent employment, engaging in independent work is framed as a choice. As MGI (2016) states, 'For them, independent work is simply better than the alternative of unemployment or an undesirable traditional job' (p. 7). The discourse around self-reliance and the 'be your own boss' rhetoric omits experiences of independent work as disempowering (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019; Shibata, 2020).

### *An unbundled vision of the future of work*

Describing a world of agile 'buyers of services' and entrepreneurial 'service providers' engaging through flexible labour markets, MGI (2016, 2018a, 2018c), Jobs for NSW (2016) and Business Council of Australia (2019) sketch out a future of work which is claimed to boost productivity, economic growth and, subsequently, living standards.



This new pathway towards a prosperous society has novel features. First, workers remotely access digital platforms to potentially engage a number of employers, working on short-term agreements. MGI (2012) describes this shift as providing ‘employers unprecedented flexibility to deploy labour more precisely. Often this means more use of part-time schedules or hiring only on a temporary or contingent basis’ (p. 51). Second, employers pay by task, rather than pay salaries. Independent workers, ‘unlike salaried employees . . . are not paid for time not spent working’ (MGI, 2016: 2). This implies that through engaging independent workers, employers can save on paying labour costs and benefits, while also suggesting that salaried employees are often paid for not working. Presumably, this might relate to annual leave, sick leave and other forms of leave, while also implying that for parts of a typical working day, salaried workers do not work.

Third, independent work, performed remotely and providing payment by task enables the disaggregation of jobs, otherwise known as fragmentation or job unbundling (Jobs for NSW, 2016; MGI, 2012). ‘Unbundling’ reduces jobs to tasks, enabling outsourcing of some tasks to lower-skilled, lower-cost employees, or machines, potentially in an entirely different location (O’Keeffe, 2018); ‘more of our jobs will be unbundled – their different tasks being performed by the most competitive specialist businesses, wherever they may be’ (Jobs for NSW, 2016: 5). Similarly, MGI (2012) predicts, ‘What can be disaggregated will be. And, often, what can be disaggregated can be outsourced and offshored’ (p. 47). Disaggregation, or unbundling, conceptualises workers in terms of discrete tasks. Ultimately, this reconceptualises what it means to have a job.

## Constructing a post-pandemic economy in Australia

The Australian Government COVID-19 pandemic response included substantial stimulus packages in the form of ‘JobKeeper’ and ‘JobSeeker’ payments announced in March 2020 and claimed to represent a subsidy of AUD 189 billion (Morrison and Frydenberg, 2020). As COVID numbers initially stabilised and then declined in Australia, the government’s focus turned to economic recovery, with a ‘JobMaker’ programme announced by the Prime Minister on 26 May 2020. The announcement constructed the development of a business-friendly society as central to economic recovery.

In response to increasing unemployment resulting from business closures, or substantial reductions in operations, JobKeeper provided employers with a payment of AUD 1500 per fortnight for all eligible workers. Eligibility for JobKeeper was extended to permanent full-time or part-time workers, long-term casual workers, Australian citizens, permanent residents and residents for taxation purposes (Australian Government, 2020d: 2–3). Many casual workers were excluded from this programme. Predominantly, affected workers were in the industries most impacted by the business shutdowns in response to the pandemic, and which have high rates of casualisation, such as accommodation and food, arts and recreation, hospitality and retail (Cassells and Duncan, 2020). Migrant workers who comprise a high proportion of workers in ‘gig’ employment are not supported through JobKeeper (van Barneveld et al., 2020).

Employees excluded from JobKeeper payments were able to apply for the lesser JobSeeker supplement (AUD 550 per fortnight). While JobKeeper enabled workers to maintain a relationship with their employer, JobSeeker did not. Workers supported by

JobKeeper were repeatedly assured that they had lost their employment through ‘no fault of their own’, while casual and independent workers were encouraged to ‘stay job-ready’, ‘develop their skills and job preparedness’ and be prepared to ‘contribute to their community’ (Australian Government, 2020c: 3). This discourse was reproduced by Frydenberg (2020c) stating that Australia’s economic recovery will focus on

encouraging personal responsibility; maximising personal choice; rewarding effort; and risk taking whilst ensuring a safety net which is underpinned by a sense of decency and fairness. Unleashing the power of dynamic, innovative, and open markets must be central to the recovery, with the private sector leading job creation, not government. (pp. 3–4)

Frydenberg’s speech envisaged a market-driven recovery led by the private sector, made possible through government prioritising business needs. Empowering business through the further relaxation of market regulation was framed as the solution to the job losses to casual and independent workers caused by the pandemic. Research shows that such a shift in power towards business has already widened inequalities, creating unstable, insecure work arrangements for many people. Promising recovery through further concessions to business lacks basis and will accelerate social and economic inequality in Australia.

### *JobMaker Using crisis to accelerate a business-friendly society*

JobMaker was presented as the strategy to enact the vision of a business-driven economic recovery. Outlining policy measures in the name of ‘job creation’, Prime Minister Morrison (2020a), Treasurer Josh Frydenberg (2020b) and Attorney General Christian Porter (2020b) presented the crisis in terms of loss. Frydenberg (2020b) stated,

So many Australians, through no fault of their own, are doing it tough. Lives have been lost. Businesses have closed. Jobs have gone. Our cherished way of life has been put on hold.

The discursive construction of this loss positions businesses and the jobs which they provide as integral to peoples’ ‘way of life’, and recovering what has been lost as an essential task of government. The recovery of business is constructed as the necessary first stage, from which job creation will follow, and subsequently return the way of life which we had all previously enjoyed. Framing the crisis in terms of the disruption to business activity, and the subsequent loss of prosperity, employment and quality of life is essential in positioning business as the driver of the economic recovery. This provides the rationale for economic restructuring which privileges business interests.

This rationale was articulated by the Prime Minister (Morrison, 2020b), who presented JobMaker by emphasising the need to remove restrictions on business, stating that ‘We must enable our businesses to earn Australia’s way out of this crisis’. Empowering business to begin ‘earning’ is framed as an essential step in creating employment. The government response discourse repositioned workers’ rights and pay as potential restrictions on economic recovery and job creation. Morrison (2020b) forecasts reforms to taxation, industrial relations and education as central to the business-driven recovery, with the JobMaker plan focused on

The skilled labour *businesses* need to draw on, the affordable and reliable energy *they* need, the research and technology *they* can draw on and utilise, the investment capital and finance that *they* can access, the markets *they* can connect to, the economic infrastructure that supports and connects *them*, the amount of government regulation *they* must comply with, and the amount and the efficiency of the taxes *they* must pay. (Authors’ emphasis)

Work is framed as something to be organised around the financial interests of business, rather than the needs and rights of workers to secure, regular income, rights and representation, or the ability to engage in decent, meaningful work. Workers are constructed as instruments of business, conceptualised as components who should fit with what business requires to enable business to ‘go faster’. Tax reform, industrial relations reform and deregulation are presented as essential responses to the crisis to enable business prosperity. Regulation protecting workers and the environment, and taxation that contributes to redistribution are framed as impediments to business and, significantly, it is argued that these measures stifle job creation and economic recovery. This announcement also presumes that any profits businesses earn as a result of the JobMaker initiative will be re-invested to create more employment opportunities. This assumption was not borne out in the case of JobKeeper payments that were redirected towards shareholder dividends (Butler, 2020).

Business prosperity and profitability is framed here as the key ambition, where it is assumed that individuals who can fit within the needs of business, and contribute to this profitability, will benefit. The crisis, in this sense, is used to demonstrate the need for action supporting reforms that create favourable conditions for business, and accelerate the shift towards an independent, fragmented and contingent workforce highlighted by MGI (2012, 2016, 2018a, 2018c), Business Council of Australia (2019), Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) (2014) and Jobs for NSW (2016).

‘JobMaker’ comprises a AUD 74 billion package including tax reform for businesses and individuals (described as ‘tax relief for hard-working Australians’), significant government investment in construction and ‘shovel ready’ infrastructure projects, reform of Higher Education funding through the Job-Ready Graduates legislation, a ‘deregulation agenda’ aimed at the barriers which ‘stifle business activity’, and an investment in research which can be commercialised (Australian Government, 2020a; Morrison, 2020b). Fundamentally, the JobMaker package is focused on ‘creating the right incentives and enablers for businesses to compete so they can create more jobs and keep more Australians employed’ (Morrison, 2020b). One example of incentives provided to business is the hiring credits initiative, which provides business a weekly payment of AUD 200 per week for hiring a person aged 16 to 29, and AUD 100 per week for hiring a person aged 30 to 35 (Australian Government, 2020a; Frydenberg, 2020a). The stipulation is that workers must work at least 20 hours per week. Ostensibly, this provides a financial incentive for employers to create a more flexible workforce, as payment is provided on the basis that employers increase headcounts, rather than full-time, permanent employment (Australian Council of Trade Unions [ACTU], 2020b).

JobMaker also envisages economic recovery as contingent on workers’ capacities to develop new skills which business will require in the future. For example, Morrison (2020b) highlights the need to ‘Better [link] funding to actual forward looking skills

needs, based on what businesses need'. However, the focus of the initiative is on creating skills and education opportunities, rather than clearly defined employment. Workers are positioned as responsible for adapting to the situation, while the recovering society is organised around what works for business. The emphasis on re-orienting training and education around the skills and knowledges that businesses require links with the disaggregation of work explained by business-oriented organisations such as MGI and Jobs for NSW. Workers are understood as flexible, resource units which exist to support business that can be inserted or removed from work, according to the needs of business. The onus is on workers to keep adapting to make sure that they fit with business need.

### *Industrial relations reform proposed through the JobMaker plan*

This construction of workers as atomised human resources is evident in the industrial relations changes proposed by the Morrison Government. Introducing the *Fair Work Amendment (Supporting Australia's Jobs and Economic Recovery) Bill* on 9 December 2020, Christian Porter argued that it provided certainty to businesses, and 'removes barriers that stifle the job growth of today and limits the job creation of tomorrow' (Australian Government, 2020e: 11). Previously, Porter (2020a) had claimed that 'The pandemic has put a spotlight on the inflexibility of our current IR system, which was in many respects found wanting back at the start of the year'. In problematising existing regulations, Porter repeatedly refers to the need to address complexities inherent within the awards systems and argues for greater simplification to save employers time that could otherwise be spent creating jobs (Australian Government, 2020e: 9; Porter, 2020a, 2020b). This frames job creation as a central function of business, promoting the idea that businesses are as invested in supporting Australia's recovery as the government. This constructs businesses as citizens oriented towards social objectives, rather than as profit-making entities oriented towards shareholders.

The bill is framed as providing business with enhanced flexibility in relation to employment, which is constructed as being essential in increasing productivity and facilitating employment growth (Australian Government, 2020b: 38). First, the bill suspends the 'Better off Overall Test', which is intended to ensure that employers are not able to reduce the wages and conditions of workers (Australian Government, 2020b: 43). This allowance is open to employers if they can demonstrate an adverse impact due to COVID-19 (Australian Government, 2020b: 43). However, this effectively legitimates agreements which reduce wages and benefits, on the assumption that it will lead to new jobs being created. The bill stipulates that agreements must not be contrary to the 'public interest' however, the policy discourses around JobMaker and subsequent restructuring constructs increased business flexibility and reduced business costs as co-extensive with the public interest. Thus, agreements which undermine workers' pay and rights can be claimed to be in the public interest, despite disadvantaging members of the public. Here, 'business' is again framed as comprising undetermined entities which form part of 'the public'.

A further change proposed by this bill is the provision for part-time employees to trade their entitlements for increased shifts (Australian Government, 2020b: 24). For instance, a part-time worker could be offered work on weekends and public holidays, on

the proviso that they are paid normal rates and that penalty rates do not apply to these shifts. This shift is claimed to create a simpler award system; however, it could lead to workers completing weekend shifts, public holiday shifts and overtime, without additional compensation for this work.

The ACTU (2020a) framed the changes as ‘dangerous and extreme’ in directly threatening workers’ wages and conditions. Through framing business flexibility as essential to the economic recovery, policy initiatives which potentially undermine workers economic prospects and quality of life are equated with the broader public interest. This raises questions around what the ‘economic recovery’ is intended to achieve for whom, how peoples’ welfare and well-being are considered in relation to this ‘Recovery Plan’, what understanding of work underpins the governments’ interpretation of ‘job-creation’, and how the government is interpreting ‘business’ and its relation to society.

### *Job creation and economic recovery: How does JobMaker understand ‘jobs’?*

Two key phrases underpin the associations between economic recovery and market deregulation: ‘job-creation’ and ‘enabling business’. Both phrases reference constructions of employment and organisations that the research and grey literature discussed in previous sections suggest are dwindling features of the contemporary labour landscape and employment relationship. The terms ‘job’ and ‘business’ have become floating signifiers; ‘job’ can refer to anything from a negotiated ongoing position with an employing body that has specified terms and conditions, to a series of tasks negotiated separately for several platforms. Similarly, ‘business’ can refer to anything from a bricks-and-mortar shopfront to a large transnational corporate platform. In its future lean/agile construction, ‘business’ is not a mechanism for job creation. Given the ambiguity elided by repeated invocation of these phrases, and the growing research documenting the equation of flexibility and precarity, the central role accorded to ‘business’ in economic recovery imputes a shared social interest that conflicts with the reframed role for business under shareholder capitalism. Business flexibility will enable increased profits, with no obligation to engage in job creation. Productivity is constructed as mutually beneficial for workers, businesses and the wider Australian society, as a key ambition for ensuring economic recovery. However, productivity is instead used to provide the rationale for policies enhancing business flexibility and profitability.

A new necessity has been framed into the response to the economic crisis, which equates ‘job creation’ and ‘Australia’s economic recovery’ with accelerated deregulation of the terms and conditions of work. The idea of meaningful, secure work is subordinated to this necessity, with employment protections that are proposed to be modified by the *Fair Work Amendment (Supporting Australia’s Jobs and Economic Recovery) Bill 2020* reframed as impediments to job creation and economic recovery.

## **Conclusion**

This article has analysed policy discourses framing independent, fragmented and remote work, individualised and entrepreneurial workers, flexible work relations, and increased

business agility as the future of work. These framings are applied to key aspects of the Australian Government's COVID-19 pandemic response in relation to support provided to workers and business, and its vision for a restructured, post-pandemic economy.

In both the 'future of work' and 'crisis' discourses, workers' experiences and needs are overlooked, in favour of constructions of opportunity and entrepreneurialism. Business requirements are central to this discourse, positioned as being beneficial for society and workers, through a claimed association between productivity and job creation. Increasing business flexibility through the disaggregation of work and the digitisation and proliferation of remote work are framed as essential measures to enable greater efficiency and productivity. Agile businesses and disaggregated, flexible work which adapts to business needs are framed as the inevitable future of work, with the contradiction between 'flexible workforce' and 'job creation' obscured by indeterminate use of the word 'job'.

These framings of workers, work and business as the cornerstone of social prosperity underlie the Australian Government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent loss of employment. JobKeeper and JobSeeker prioritised people employed in permanent, full-time and part-time roles, while casual workers and independent workers, who comprise a substantial proportion of employees in the most-affected industries, including tourism, arts and culture, and retail and hospitality, were encouraged to stay job-ready and develop the skills business will need in a post-COVID future.

CDA of government announcements in the context of ongoing changes to work modes illuminates irreconcilable tensions between further labour market deregulation and social prosperity. It highlights the superimposition of a construct of business-as-citizen obscuring the conflation of productivity and profitability, and private and public interests. Finally, it indicates the overarching rationalisation as achieved through ambiguous reference to 'job creation' as the inevitable outcome of a business-friendly regulatory environment.

In light of this analysis, the Government appears to be capitalising on the uncertainty created by the crisis to facilitate a further shift in power in employment relations towards business, positioning impediments to business prosperity, such as labour and environmental regulation and taxation as requiring change, to allow business to 'go faster', in the assumption that this acceleration will propel Australia's economic recovery, leading to jobs growth. The deregulation of labour markets and proliferation of casual and gig work in Australia continues the shift in the balance of power towards business over the past three decades, with considerable consequences for socially and economically marginalised citizens.

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