

The Rake's Progress

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In the seventies Robert Hawke, then President of ACTU, was an industrial warmonger. Almost no term of abuse was too strong for those few employers who defied him. He strengthened the unions and encouraged them in demands that caused considerable damage to the economy. In the early eighties, when he was seeking Prime Ministerial office, he had apparently undergone a change of heart and style. Then he was an industrial pacifist, preaching consensus among the powerful in the name of industrial reality. That is, he promised 'peace in our time' appeasement of unions which his own leadership had made even more powerful. By the end of the eighties he is again a warmonger. But now the target of his abuse is a union, the Australian Federation of Air Pilots, and Mr Hawke is now the employers' champion.

He has not, however, been simply inconsistent. An easily discernible thread running through all of this is his dedication to increasing the power of the centrally organised labour unions and their organisation the ACTU---not unattended by a passing concern for his own position. Each change of direction was intended to advance either the ACTU's or his own authority, in the circumstances of the time. Each time he was merely making common cause with people who could advance his immediate ends.

He has traded power as others trade goods and services. The individual deals he struck have often not served Australia badly, in the short run. To claim otherwise would be unfair. However, the closed-door power-sharing management style, he did so much to advance, is inherently anti-democratic. Power sharing, that is corporatism, necessarily excludes the powerless and has had an unfortunate record. It is, thus, unlikely to serve ordinary Australians well in the long run.

Throughout his career as union boss, or super boss, Mr Hawke's success depended on use of the monopolist's power to withhold the supply of a good or service. He was as strong as the monopoly---the ability to exclude outsiders. His strength was derived from the solidarity tradition, industrial relations law and bullying. He guarded all three sources of power because that is how to win in the Australian industrial relations.

Industrial relations' governing principles are those of *real politics*: at bottom it is power, not legitimacy, which determines success. When Mr Hawke entered politics he gained power that was no longer derived from the damage he could do. Instead it is derived from widespread respect for his office. When dealing with those who had succeeded him in the union movement, however, he continued to do deals based on the relative strength of the parties, buying union cooperation by allowing the ACTU to control aspects of government policy.

The success, in terms of national interests, of the deals he now struck depended on the judgement and good intent of the union elite with whom he shared his authority. Mr Hawke's success as Prime Minister---and he has had some---has sometimes depended on the commitments made to mates in the union movement or in business. By locking his government into events which had their own unforeseeable momentum, he inevitably risked becoming committed to actions that were unwise, improper or politically untenable. The subsidising of Ansett and Australian Airlines is a case in point. Misuse of taxpayers' money was forced on him by ACTU threats, and the imperatives of the strategy he had adopted. Politics is inherently volatile, but this slip from propriety could well damage the Hawke Government electorally, particularly if it is perceived to be similar in character to the Rothwells bale out.

The industrial relations mills, however, grind slower and finer than those of politics. Mr Hawke's handling of the pilots' strike is setting precedents in industrial relations which will be far reaching. Although his first intention was undoubtedly intended to protect centralised union authority, he forgot, or deliberately ignored, the fact that the ultimate source of union power is the ability of unions to withhold the supply employees, for which they need a monopoly.

By calling in the Air Force---reminiscent of the time when Chifflery called troops into the coalfields---and calling on foreign labour to man the aeroplanes, Mr Hawke has adopted a formula that may in future be applied on the wharves and elsewhere.

By basing his case against the pilots on the comparative productivity of pilots here and in other countries, he has set a precedent for dealing with the much more extreme overmaning in, say, the grain-handling industry.

By advising civil court action against the pilots he has encouraged it in other cases. Western Australian teachers, in pursuit of a pay settlement which is said to be also outside the wage setting guide-lines, have threatened to withhold students' marks which are needed for University entrance. (This surely a far more objectionable course than any undertaken by the pilots.) Already the WA teachers find themselves threatened with action in a real court, should they proceed.

The Opposition, the H.R. Nichols Society and other responsible organisations calling for Industrial Relations reform, have all based their case against present union arrangements on the right of freedom of association. By employing the power of the State to destroy the Pilots' Federation, as opposed to opening it to competition, Mr Hawke has shown, for all to see, that the so-called New Right are true champions of unionists' rights. That will take some living down!

These are watershed changes. Dicky birds tell me that some in Labor's parliamentary ranks are asking whether the Prime Minister has not gone too far. Until now Mr Hawke had demonstrated political judgement. Nevertheless, his troops might well end up asking whether the Prime Minister did not, in the end, lose his political marbles.

If so, how did he go wrong? We find a clue in his rhetoric. In this dispute Robert Hawke adopted the rhetoric of war. He seems to see himself as a John Curtin resolutely leading his nation against 'the enemy'. But the pilots are not the Japanese Imperial Army, he is not John Curtin, and in peace time his proper role is to be an impartial ring keeper. It is not for him to conduct Ansett's and Australian Airlines' battles for them.

Has he, after a long period in office, got too big for his boots? Has the habitual exercise of power given him delusions of grandeur? He would not be the first leader to succumb to hubris.

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