

The Robe River dispute is really the 'Coleman Dispute'. Peko sacked its management and changed several work practices. This increased production by 30%. Then Mr Commissioner Coleman ordered a return to former practices he had not identified - which no-one, not even the unions, will defend - and low! a dispute arose between the commission and the company.

The company challenged the jurisdiction of the commission in court - not the best place to sort out optimal labour relations, which should be, as Mr Keating said, a matter for management and workers. When it lost the appeal it returned to work. The company, by abiding by the law, managed to demonstrate that the system was rather silly. That is why the Industrial Relations Club is so cross with its general manager, Mr Copeman.

Premier Burke does not seem to accept that it was the Commission which created the dispute by trying to coerce the company which was, at the time, working better than ever.

The Premier asserted that, in the face of attempted coercion by the Commission, Peko should not exercise its legal rights. Worse he backed the assertion with a threat that Peko would not be welcome in WA. Companies will not choose to invest in WA (instead of, say, Black Africa) if they find their lawful rights are not more secure here. No one who is prepared so casually to abandon the rule of law should hold office in a society that claims to be free.

I cannot believe he had thought about the implications of his threat but, although there has been some ducking and weaving, Mr Burke has not apologised and recanted. Until he does he should not be given the benefit of doubt about his intentions nor lose them in a smoke screen of invective against the 'new right'.

Mr Burke's ideas of the rule of law are important but not the most pressing issue, which is: do Peko WallSEND and by implication other enterprises have the right to raise productivity. The issue cannot be expressed as a list of spectacularly bad work practices which need changing; it is the ability to keep improving as yet undefined work practices as fast or faster than foreign and domestic competitors.

Is the Labor Party, as distinct from the IR Club, really paranoid about the threat to centralised industrial relations, or did it need to invent a 'new right' to divert its 'old left' which is cranky about uranium and the SBS? For whatever reasons, the attack on its invention has been full-blooded and some MPs turned nasty. In the context of Commissioner Coleman's dispute, Trade Minister Dawkins accused people exercising legal rights of treason. Treason is a strong word with a precise meaning; it should be employed more carefully. Are unionists who use the system to reduce production also treasonable? Is it possible that the system causes conflict and lost production? Stop play-acting,

Mr Dawkins.

The H R Nicholls society is no more than an ideas factory. As I delivered a paper to its only meeting, and MPs keep emphasising its importance, I might be able to win 'a regular time slot' on a radio station by 'revealing' titillating bits of what is well known. The main cloud on that horizon is the unhappy experience of the Minister for Immigration, Mr Chris Hurford, when he offered to 'reveal' the banal and the obvious to an Adelaide radio station.

Surely, the nation has more important things to worry about than whether the chairman of Peko Wallsend, Mr Copeman, is a member of the H R Nicholls Society and the Opposition can find greater government failings than Mr Hurford's heavy-handed humour.

Nevertheless I feel a revelation upon me: the media attention the H R Nicholls Society is receiving is not a stunt by the publishers of 'Arbitration in Contempt' which may be purchased for \$25.00 from Box 424 GPO Melbourne and from October 1 from leading booksellers. This remarkable publication reveals the entire proceedings of that weekend in Toorak. We did not discuss any impending industrial disputes.

Conspiracy theories are fun, but the Robe River dispute raises more important issues than membership of the Nicholls society.

The principal issue at Robe, is will the company be allowed to increase productivity and invest to develop the more costly ore bodies across the Robe River or will it be forced out of the market by the unions?

Peko's interest is properly the narrow one of its shareholders. There is, however, much more at stake than that. As Premier Burke noted, the future of arbitration is at stake. He got that point right.

As so often happens events spoke louder than words. The rather academic consideration of the industrial arbitration system by members of the Nicholls society, although elegantly argued, will be as nothing to the future of arbitration compared with the monumental incompetence of Commissioner Bill Coleman to settle the West Australian dispute. Such is the fate of authors: but buy the book all the same, it will help to understand why Commissioner Coleman was doomed by the system to fail.

In every farm, factory or mine minor work practice issues arise several times a day. Australia cannot overcome its economic problems until it can improve these quickly and that is not possible until decisions about them are taken as they arise by the people directly involved. The future of centralised industrial relations is threatened by its manifest failure to facilitate what is necessary much more than by the H R Nicholls Society. Nonetheless debate is important.