

# THE MYTHS OF UNEMPLOYMENT

So general is the acceptance of widespread unemployment as normal that a recent survey amongst otherwise thoughtful people disclosed that very little thought of any kind is directed to the problem. When questioned on their perceptions of the reason for unemployment the answers were many and varied beginning as like as not, with the comment "there are not enough jobs to go around". There followed "Migrants taking Australians' jobs, the mechanisation of industry displacing labour, overproduction, women in the workforce, big business maintaining competition for work to keep wages down" and any number of even more specious reasons.

The general perception of unemployment is all wrong. It is time to take a more objective view of human activities which must surely abolish public tolerance of unemployed, its burdensome cost, its human tragedy.

For centuries past we have lived with the conventional wisdom, that there is a limit to the number of jobs available but without looking at the implications of the word "available".

The whole idea of "limited jobs" is a myth. It draws its credibility only from the distortion of reality created by the errors of our present socio-economic system to which I will return.

But having accepted the myth on which we rely to explain the army of the unemployed and dispossessed we are equally obliged to accept what certainly appear to be the logical corollaries which promote so much misunderstanding and social damage in our society.

*If jobs are limited, women entering the workforce*

must do so at the expense of male employment. When migrants are at work and Australians are unemployed, it is easy to conclude that migration is responsible so stirring resentment and anger against the Government because of its migration policy. There is encouragement for early retirement of skilled workers in the mistaken idea that this provides opportunities for the employment of younger men coming into the workforce. The immediate result is to deprive still active workers of employment necessary to save them from the boredom of idleness no matter how attractive the idea looks in the first instance. More serious is the fact that it also deprives industry of the skill and productivity of workmen at the height of their experience. The scheme renders no service at all to industry or to society in general.

Part time work and job sharing appear to be the only courses to take in the face of apparently limited job opportunities. These devices do little more than share the misery.

We talk of exporting raw materials as exporting jobs. We fear the onrush of mechanised and automated production as condemning workers to unemployment. Some people even reach into the future to the ultimate absurdity of how industry can continue when production is completely automated. How will unemployed people with no purchasing power acquire the goods when all is made by machine! What will manufacturers do when the warehouse is full?

Governments are obliged under the threat of electoral oblivion to spend enormous sums of public money on public works, job training wage subsidies and more which still leaves official anticipations of double figure unemployment until the end of the century. And for all of these bankrupt schemes the income earning taxpayer must foot the bill in addition to the billions of dollars

already expended in social transfers from the people who have earned it to the people who haven't!

*The apparent absence of work to be done which bedevils society is the question of availability. The all pervasive myth of "not enough work" must be rejected outright.*

There is a standing demand which could provide a bonanza of presently unavailable employment opportunities in the production of all manner of materials and their transformation into useable commodities. Work is not an end in itself. It is merely the handmaiden to production and consumption for which there is unending demand.

Even if basic needs were satisfied there remains the observable truth of the salesman's code that: the satisfaction of one demand leads to another. If a man has a house he will look for a better one. If he has a car he will seek to upgrade. If there are domestic electrics in the kitchen the housewife will seek more modern ones and so on to the limits of income.

The idea that there is no work to do is utterly ridiculous. To accept that involuntary unemployment is unavoidable one would have to believe that every want and need of society has been fully met which is certainly not so!

Perhaps now a notional excursion into basics would not be out of place.

However man first appeared upon the earth, his needs were modest. In his primitive society he was responsible to produce his own needs or do without. Production was from the earth and its resources to which he had free access.

Such hunting and gathering as he was prepared to do yielded his primitive requirements of food, clothing and shelter. Since nobody stood between him and the opportunity to apply his skill and energy he virtually

established his own standard of living. He had no knowledge or need for either money or the market. What he captured or gathered was truly the wages for his effort.

As society developed so individuals found special skills in particular activities or learned to produce more than they themselves needed. To take advantage of the situation barter developed. Now whatever the individual produced beyond his own immediate needs readily exchanged for something he could not produce. Life became a little easier. Basic conditions remained and indeed, continue. Everything man needed still came from the earth and he had to consume only what he produced or gained by exchange.

Again, as society grew, so direct barter became inconvenient to the point of difficulty as the partners to a desired exchange might be physically separated by distance. To overcome the disadvantage the market developed and with it money so that now the producer might deliver his surplus to a market and draw equivalent value in other forms of production from the store or, if that were not needed immediately, he could take money or tokens having equivalent exchange value so that, as consumption became desirable, he might now surrender money or tokens for his needs.

But, without working, the individual had nothing to consume or exchange. It was his choice to work in order to satisfy his needs or go without. But production was still from the earth to which access was free.

Social cohesion grew with population. Wants became needs. It would become obvious that the productive value of certain lands exceeded that of others generally available. It would quickly occur to the smartest of the primitives that this difference in value between two parcels of land could be of great advantage if someone gained ownership of the land. He could then demand the

value of the superior productive opportunity for access and that without personal effort.

So land ownership was born out of occupation and with it rent which measures the value of superior land over that of the poorest generally in use.

Still people - all people - depend on the land for everything they need as a casual look around you in any circumstance will confirm. There is nothing in human possession that didn't come from the land and its resources. Even people who work in what are euphemistically called the service industries far removed from the land now exchange the value of their effort for earth sourced needs through the mechanism of the market.

However the landlord of antiquity gained ownership of the land, it endowed him with the power to demand a share of the production for access. He may even withhold access altogether so drying up the opportunity the landless might have had to produce anything. He may demand so much in rent as to make production unviable. Thus develops unemployment and having no production the unemployed have nothing either to consume or exchange unless given a share of the earnings of someone more fortunately placed.

Here is the origin of the great wrong against society at large which has been given legal protection and to which is paid lip service even by those suffering under a system they either do not understand or lack the strength to overturn

Human suffering on a monumental scale is the cost of the private appropriation of land by which device landlords may legally acquire values created by the very presence and activities of the community. It is the reason why millions of peasant farmers and workers throughout the world have been reduced to virtual slavery by the owners of great estates who are able to demand what they

will of the worker's production. This situation will continue while ever there is private ownership of land and resources through which landlords can demand in rent the major share of produced wealth which ought to go to labour.

Meantime the jumping up and down of the doyens of business and government is play acting while we lack the wit to see the real cause of the social malaise, unemployment, poverty and the maldistribution of opportunities to create wealth rather than present wealth itself.

But having the wit to grasp the situation is one thing. Having the courage and determination to do what is essential to correct it is something else again.

If there is no shortage of demand and the produce of labour is the wages of labour, when inability to produce rules one out of the right to consume, unemployment must have its roots in the denial of opportunity.

Against the magnitude of the problem there must be a better answer than constantly reverting to superficial devices which invariably fail. Their only virtue, if virtue it be, is to give the appearance that Government is "doing something".

It goes without saying that unemployment is a general breeding ground for poverty when individual incomes have been withdrawn and dependence on state enforced contributions from others for sustenance takes over.

There are two million poor people throughout Australia living below the poverty line, seven hundred and fifty thousand of them children. We are then left to contemplate the second and consequential evil of our socio economic system . . . poverty.