

WORK FOR THE DOLE: STILL THE WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

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As I was running along the banks of a river a few weeks ago, I came across a patch of cleared land and rows of now-overgrown shrubs. A rusty sign informed me that this regeneration was a part of a 'Work for the Dole' initiative. It got me thinking, and I wondered how many people involved in the project actually utilised their shrub-planting skills in subsequent employment? Was the project to provide job-seekers with valuable skills training, or was it to simply get them to work?

On 1 July 2009, the previous Federal Government unemployment scheme woke from a coma and re-emerged with a new identity: 'Job Services Australia'. However, the memory of 'Work for the Dole' lingered, its effects modified by an increase in funding for skills and training over recent years and some of the changes introduced by Job Services Australia. Despite these changes, it is fundamentally still the same ineffective scheme as before.

Under the previous scheme for job seekers, people unemployed for a period longer than 6 months were required to participate in work experience activities. The default option for people receiving Newstart, Youth Allowance or Parenting Payment assistance was 'Work for the Dole'. This involved community-based work in a variety of sectors. It is still a part of the current system, integrated together with other options through Job Services Australia, and it still appears to be the default option for young job seekers, but the focus on it has shifted slightly.

'Work for the Dole' is part of a mode of welfare known as 'workfare'. In 'workfare', job seekers must weigh the benefits of being in paid employment against the requirements placed upon them if they are not. These requirements include having to actively search for work and being forced to undertake forms of government-prescribed work, with monetary assistance cut off if participation is not satisfactory.

Underlying 'workfare' schemes are economic and social considerations. Not only do 'workfare' policies aim at increasing employment, but they are also linked the idea of 'mutual obligation': that the unemployed are collectively obliged to 'give back' to the community through some form of participation for the assistance they receive. The previous Minister for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs outlined it best when he said, 'Welfare is a two-way street'.

Workfare sounds like a logical policy, and certain aspects of it such as job search requirements have been successful in leading to employment. However, a strict-workfare government thinking has over-emphasised short-term work placements and under-emphasised skills development. 'Work for the Dole' provides little work skills, with projects such as regenerating bush sites doing little to assist in obtaining employment. While some placements may be of benefit, like those within fields that job-seekers may desire to go into (such as retail), choice is often restricted to fields that job-seekers may have no interest in pursuing in the future.

In fact, cynics like me tend to think of 'Work for the Dole' as something that is aimed at disciplining and regulating the unemployed, as opposed to remedying the real causes of unemployment. While the rationale exists that 'Work for the Dole' and other community work requirements push idle job-seekers into paid employment as they will have to work anyway to receive payments, the monetary incentives for staying unemployed are low. 'Work for the Dole' is thus not about helping the unemployed, but is instead about appeasing a misconceived notion about them: that they are lazy, devious and must be forced to work. John Howard alluded to this when he said that part of the reason for 'Work for the Dole' was to "satisfy general community desire to see the unemployed have the benefits of active work; reduce abuses in the payment of unemployed benefits and encourage the voluntarily unemployed to secure genuine employment".

Various studies have shown that 'Work for the Dole' is highly ineffective in assisting people to find subsequent full-time paid employment. The Federal Government in 2005 released figures showing that three months after completing the program, only roughly one-third of participants move into paid employment, with over half of these people in part-time work. In their report 'Work for the Dole: Obligation or Opportunity', Ann and John Nevile make the point that the majority of people who subsequently find work would have done so regardless of their participation in the scheme.

In line with this idea of punishing the unemployed, the name of the scheme itself is linked to the disparaging rhetoric employed in recent years by government to describe unemployment benefits and those receiving them. Giving the scheme a name with negative connotations does not mean that people are deterred from entering into it and subsequently take up employment. It simply means that those who are affected by market forces and must participate are further demeaned and locked into a 'dole-bludger' label, which acts as a further barrier to gaining employment.

It may be that some people find the scheme beneficial in terms of being given general work skills. However, regardless of any general communication and time-management skills that 'Work for the Dole' may provide, it has long been the poster child for curing unemployment, something which it clearly does not do. Given the current specialised skills shortage in Australia, trade-specific skills training should surely be the priority.

Recent increases in skills development and training funding since 2006 have, however, shifted the centrality of 'Work for the Dole' as a solution to unemployment. These are positive developments as they actually attempt to solve the major cause of unemployment, which is not the laziness of job seekers but a lack of trade-specific skills. Recently, the Productivity Places Program experienced the effective doubling of placements from 57,000 to 113,000. This does mean that the focus has shifted somewhat from a situation where for many years labour market reform expenditure ran at a rate that was almost half of pre-1996 levels, to one where skills training is promoted. In fact, 45% of places under the Productivity Places Program will be allocated towards those who are currently unemployed.

Similarly, the Job Services Australia scheme brings along several changes that promote training and give job seekers a wider range of options as to their 'mutual obligation' requirements. The ability to combine 'Work for the Dole' with training opportunities is now present. Job Services Australia also separates job seekers into different streams with different levels of funding depending on their level of need. This offers a more personalised option which has the potential to help job seekers better plan their work and training options.

While these changes mean that the automatic redirection of job seekers into 'Work for the Dole' is relaxed and the real causes of unemployment are addressed to a larger extent, a major question looms above all this: Should 'Work for the Dole' be removed, along with all the other 'mutual obligation' requirements?

The answer to this is yes, as while the increases in skills training and the changes with respect to Job Services Australia are commendable, they do not change the flawed nature of 'Work for the Dole' and the other similar community work mutual obligation schemes. If the goal of government policy is to help in obtaining employment, then such schemes should be voluntary, as this will allow greater self- autonomy and would remove some of the stigma involved in participation. However, if the goal of mutual obligation requirements is to punish the unemployed, then 'Work for the Dole' and its skill- less bush regeneration activities should be kept.

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