

**The Future of Employment Debate  
Opening comments by ACTU Secretary Dave Oliver  
to the National Press Club  
Tuesday, 31 May 2016**

**\*\*\*Check against delivery\*\*\***

Thank you for the invitation today.

Good afternoon, James, Chris, members of the national press club and guests.

Firstly let me acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders both past and present

To debate the future of employment- we must examine how we are going to lead Australian workers into a prosperous future – we must build an economy that works to meet the needs and hopes of people; not trap them in an American style underclass with low wages, insecure work and a fear that their next rent or mortgage payment comes before the next pay packet.

As I travel the country talking with workers, certainly it is in their own words but, what they are telling me their number one concern is the Americanisation of our country.

Australians don't want the levels of income inequality, corporate tax avoidance, high cost healthcare, dysfunctional education systems, and social problems that have become prevalent in America.

People want high quality, high paying jobs, secure employment a strong safety net and a greater share of the benefits of increased productivity.

This high road future comes from investments in education, skills, infrastructure and research and development. We are unapologetic in our view that government has a role in both regulating and creating markets.

When ACCI launched its 10 business priorities for the election last week I had hoped to see a high road plan for Australian businesses that would create growth, not just corporate profits but also decent jobs, better living standards and social cohesion.

We hoped that despite the Turnbull government announcing a \$48 billion corporate tax cut, seemingly lifted from Ronald Reagan's 1984 stump speech, that ACCI would have a fresh approach.

What the Turnbull government is trying to push, and ACCI seems happy to try and sell, is the same old trickle down economics "give corporations tax cuts, reduce worker wages, get rid of protections from exploitation and the invisible hand will take care of jobs".

This low road approach is deeply disappointing.

There are significant challenges confronting us with the changing nature of work.

With the exponential growth of technology we are now confronting the uberisation of work where people can end up bidding in a reverse ebay style auction for parcels of work.

This presents significant challenges for governments, regulators, employer organisations and unions alike and our current workplace laws are struggling to keep up with the impacts of these changes.

The danger is that the promise of anywhere anytime opportunities becomes everywhere all the time work or no work at all.

We've already seen how a leave it to the market approach has failed people in places like Doveton, Elizabeth, the Latrobe Valley and Georgetown where unemployment can be as high as 30%.

We have lost our car industry and our steel industry is now at risk.

When we look at job creation we should be working together to make sure that governments actively support and attract investment for existing and new industries.

I was amazed that I couldn't find a single reference to climate change or a just transition for workers and their communities in the ACCI policy platform.

There is a six trillion dollar global market in clean energy technology and we want to make sure that Australian workers are getting a chance at these jobs.

It is also remarkable that you've entirely ignored the growth of women's participation in the workforce. We need to create opportunities that will improve both the participation and prosperity of women across the course of their lives as workers, parents and carers.

The other question is: where is our innovation boom? I'm deeply concerned Innovation has become the new one word slogan of the Turnbull government.

Why this government is cutting the funding of the CSIRO is simply beyond me.

We see the same thing happening to our higher education sector. Now is the time to invest more in these institutions, in building linkages between them and fostering cooperation.

Instead we see the door being closed to anyone who cannot take on a one hundred thousand dollar university debt. Career decisions should be made on people's hopes and aspirations not their capacity to pay.

We currently have a government that is cutting needs based education funding, is pushing a botched \$4 'PaTH' to nowhere and has cut \$1 billion dollars from apprenticeships.

The real path to employment is ensuring young people are properly educated, trained and skilled up. And not used as a source of exploited labour for Coles and Woolworths to stack shelves and chase trolleys.

While clearly there is much we disagree on about the future of employment, I do welcome your support on the issues of apprenticeships and infrastructure.

There are one hundred and twenty two thousand fewer apprentices under this government than when they came to power.

We need proper apprenticeships to give young people a chance. We want to lift the completion rates above the current low water mark of 48%.

Instead of cutting funding we should be putting more resources into TAFE if we are serious about this issue.

We are on a unity ticket when it comes to nation building infrastructure. And of course we want to make sure that we maximise local content to help create and sustain local jobs.

But James we will never agree that a worker has to cut their take home pay by slashing penalty rates and freezing minimum wages, or that there is any benefit in stripping annual leave, sick leave, parental leave and long service leave out of awards.

If you are suggesting that the path to prosperity for this nation is to force workers to accept these cuts when people like the owner of 7/11 watch their wealth grow by half a billion dollars while their company is still ripping off workers then you're suggesting we make Australia more like America. It is not something most Australian's will support.

In fact I'd have thought that what would be keeping you up at night is stagnating wages. I would imagine that instead of going down a path that cuts wages and conditions you'd be supporting us in lifting the minimum wage. Higher wages means more money being spent in the shops and businesses you represent. Wage stagnation is a drag on everyone's prosperity.

I sincerely hope we can move beyond the low road race to the bottom of trying to cut wages, stripping workplace conditions and a misplaced faith in discredited trickle down economics.

The proponents of trickle down economics have got it the wrong way around. More money in the pockets of workers means more money trickling down to businesses, which creates a need for more investment and more jobs

In closing it is our responsibility to ensure the future of employment in Australia looks more prosperous, not less,

Has more opportunity for people, not less

And doesn't rely on an American style underclass of low paid workers but is built around well paid, highly skilled and valued working people.

Thank you.

ENDS