

Our Country: Our Choice. Heather Newell

Our Country: Our Choice Work Heather Newell* Once upon a time some people dreamed of a future where the human race had been released from the drudgery of work by automation. In the meantime the more practical amongst us fought hard to win the right to a 40 hour working week. In the 1970s we still held this 40 hour concept dear to our hearts. A two day weekend was seen by workers as sacrosanct, and for an employer to breach the limits of the 40 hour week meant heavy financial penalties in the form of overtime. But by the 1980s economic changes had started to bite into New Zealand's social structure. Unemployment, virtually unknown in the early 1970s, was growing. When some major employers in the car assembly industry mooted a four day week to combat overproduction, the positive thinkers got into high gear. This could be turned into a benefit for workers. A four day week would give people more quality time to visit aged relatives, to work voluntarily for the community, to pursue worthwhile hobbies and to spend time with families. A discussion even developed within the Education Department as to whether we ought to be training people how to cope with increased leisure time. Computerisation was heralded as another release from the drudgery of work. With computers, we could become more efficient. Essential administrative work would be done in a shorter time. By harnessing communications technology people could work from home and turn their commuting time into recreation time. Work hours could be flexible to allow women, in particular, to spend quality time with their children. Boring, tedious and manual work could be done by automation. Yes, it was an idealistic option that ignored an important sociological fact. The fact is that people feel the need to work, not just for economic reasons, but for self-esteem and identity. And this is not just a Protestant determinism. One need only look at the Japanese culture to see the equal importance of work in that society. If one accepts that the need to work is a given, what will be the work choices for New Zealand society in the future?

A new hegemony Let's start our look at the future of work by examining some relevant aspects of the economic structure of our society in the latter part of the 1990s. Although historically many New Zealanders took pride in their creation of a welfare state, a new, ideological hegemony has emerged in the last decade. The state backs off as a universal provider of services and allows market forces to determine the economic environment, within certain parameters of course. The community itself is required to become more responsible for the services it determines to be important. There have certainly been economic benefits from this approach. The inflation rate has been held in check, unemployment has, at least currently, been stabilised, New Zealand products can compete in the world market, and the growth of technological developments means we no longer need to suffer from the geographic constraints of former years. The downside of this hegemony, however, has been the creation of a new society with a growing gulf between those who have benefited from the market-driven economic policy and those who were unable to jump aboard the spinning carousel. Those who lack knowledge-based skills have consequently fallen outside the workforce and must eke out an existence from a shrinking welfare budget. Those who were able to retain work are now working harder and longer as they cling to what they have.

Threats and opportunities Take retailing as an example. A liberalisation of the retailing legislation and the Employment Contracts Act were essential, we were told, to ensure the viability of the sector. More people would be employed to cover the longer opening hours. Lower wage rates would allow more competition into the market which in turn would benefit the consumer. Some of those predictions have eventuated. On the other hand, the reality for owner-operated businesses is that the proprietor now has to work longer hours. Chris and Jane, a young married couple with toddler Jake, work in their own retail shop six days a week, plus a late night on Friday. During quiet times in the shop Chris manufactures the products they sell. Together they administer their accounts, complete GST requirements and chase bad cheques. Six times a year they take a stall at a trade fair to broaden their market. All this hard work ensures they earn just a little more than the equivalent of the dole. Some workers have been well rewarded for their toil. At least three New Zealanders earn more than a million dollars a year. We applaud and celebrate hard working entrepreneurs like Susan Barnes whose telemarketing business has been sold to an American conglomerate for \$40 million. Our success at the America's Cup has increased the reputation of New Zealanders working in the fields of computer software development and technical innovation.

What's in our future? With this background we look to the future of work. There are many options for work in the future but broadly they can be broken down into three categories. Opting in, opting out and making the best of both worlds.

Opting in Many people will see the future of work as one with little choice. The future of work for them will be much the same as today, particularly if they are in paid employment. Hard work, long hours and plenty of stress are the key ingredients, no matter what sector of society they are in. Naturally we'll see a different type of commercial organisation, probably with a much flatter structure. Its mission might be different and its outputs certainly will be. Manufacturing-based industries will be replaced in the coming information society by organisations which reward knowledge and intellectual capital. Information and knowledge-based skills, rather than materialistic products, are likely to be the new commodities. Those who can contribute information and knowledge skills will be able to evolve to cope with this moderate change. It will be in the manufacturing, construction and engineering industries that the most radical change in work will take place. Automation, robotics and computerisation will continue to cause a major shift away from manual production, and this will be of great significance to many Pacific Island immigrants who came here specifically to work and earn money from our manufacturing industry. Until fairly recently a factory relied on people to work throughout the production chain. Now the production of a new washing machine is initiated by the retailer's computer which sends an electronic order to the factory. This in turn activates the production line. From the time of purchase to the restocking of the retail outlet the most

essential human activity is to drive the delivery vehicle.

Opting out Either by choice or by necessity there are going to be a number of New Zealand residents who will be outside the workforce. For many of these the concept of work will be alien. Even though the current government is placing a high priority on increasing the work skills of young people, there are already people in their twenties who have never worked. And however many work schemes we initiate, however much money we throw at the problem, there are always going to be people who cannot fit into 'work.' For many it's just a question of time. In time they will come to see work as important. In time someone will offer them an appropriate job. In time they will find that they need a regular income. In time someone will create a work scheme for them. For others it's an impossible request. The inability to socialise appropriately, major disabilities, behavioural problems, lack of skills or motivation are just some of the problems that disable many long-term unemployed. Some people are either currently unemployable or will never want to work in the economy. Will our society continue to provide them with support? Opting out by choice may be harder in the future if the state continues to reduce its social welfare role. In the middle of this decade one can still return to the country or to the beach or to one's marae, and live in spartan circumstances. Will that be possible if the dole is reduced still further or even discontinued?

New work There is a compromise for some people. One can opt out of the rat race, city environment through telework. In fact telework is nothing new, but to date there has been little incentive for employers to adopt it as a valid working policy. Real estate has been relatively cheap in recent years, traffic problems in New Zealand are still relatively minor, and administrative workers are not in short supply. As we move towards an information society, however, certain skills are going to be highly sought after and the people with those skills will be able to call the tune. With sophisticated information technology they can easily communicate with 'head office' from their preferred working location. The benefit for the worker is freedom and flexibility. The benefit for the employer is retention of skilled labour and the possibility of a reduction in overheads. An increased teleworking labour force will have wider implications. If skilled, and therefore highly paid people are working outside of cities, regional economies are likely to flourish in the servicing of these teleworkers, which in turn may provide work opportunities for the less skilled, and consequent redistribution of wealth. A more evolutionary change will be in our attitude towards unpaid work, which at the moment is largely sustained by women. Unpaid work includes essential tasks such as caring for children and the elderly, supporting those who are in paid work, and volunteering. Alongside those 'jobs' we should also count work done within a household such as child bearing and raising a family, administering the household budget, providing food and clothing and caring for sick family members. Traditionally these activities have been undervalued and are not counted as part of the economic product of a society. James Robertson in *Future Work* (1987) goes as far as saying: "In the industrial age men's work has become more abstract, impersonal and instrumental than it was in pre-industrial times. Men have typically shuffled things around in offices, they have shuffled things around in factories, they have shuffled things around in banks and they have shuffled things around in universities. Women, on the other hand, have been directly concerned with meeting the needs of people." As the state continues to withdraw from its traditional role of provider of welfare services, so the community as a whole is starting, albeit slowly, to value those who give unpaid time to meeting the needs of people. Non-profitable work will be on the increase if our current work ethic remains as is. Some authors such as James Robertson and Charles Handy, *The Empty Raincoat* (1994) have broadened the traditional description of work to include non-paid and unprofitable activities. Robertson suggests that the state ought to provide "an unconditional basic guaranteed income, under which all citizens rich and poor, men and women, old and young, will automatically receive a weekly basic income from the state." This he argues would result in a socially equalising effect. Work options increase, therefore, to include voluntary work, self-advancement through education, productive leisure, family responsibilities. Charles Handy divides these work options into four categories; paid work, gift work, study work, and home work. As a future option for New Zealand this has its weaknesses. New Zealand already has a guaranteed minimum family income but it's not the universal wage given to everyone. It's restricted to those with children. It's a family, not an individual benefit, and only those paying income tax can receive it. New Zealand has moved away from the universality of state funded welfare. Even if a basic guaranteed income was made available to people, would they really be able to afford Handy's other work options?

Conclusion We can be quite sure that, in the near future at least, most New Zealanders will not be released from the drudgery of work. However idealistic it sounds, most of us would not be happy unless we were engaged in some form of productive labour. What is also certain is that we are a long way from becoming a society in which most people are sufficiently free of economic constraints to make choices about work along the lines put forward by Handy. However there will be choices for those who have specialised skills, particularly choices of relocating in another region or country. There will also be a choice for those who have little in the way of skills - either join the service sector or opt out completely.

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