

Re: The work ethic

Harry Edwards, Newport, New South Wales

I find myself at variance with Dr Sharon Beder's views expressed in 'Selling the work ethic' (AR #55). Sharon appears to ignore the attributes and foibles of human nature and is convinced that the work ethic is a disincentive to the progress of society. To the contrary, I believe that without it society would regress and anarchy would reign.

Addressing Sharon's major points:

1. That the work ethic has developed historically and wasn't completely based around work. People needed to produce food to live.

Obviously true, but their lives still revolved around the work ethic, otherwise they would have starved. Times have changed however. Society has developed in roughly three stages — from hunting and gathering through agriculture and husbandry to the industrial age. Money has taken the place of bartering as the latter has extreme limitations. To earn money to live most of us must work, and work involves the application of the work ethic.

2. That anyone can make it — is a myth.

Not so. It depends on the individual. Examples of those who started from humble beginnings and made it to the top are legion.

3. New generations aren't improving their lifestyle and position in society in comparison with the previous one.

I find it difficult to comprehend this conclusion. Go back a generation at a time and review the standards of living and lifestyles. Look at the improvement in housing, education, health, sanitary conditions, child welfare, longevity, race relations, social conditions and equality. The advances in medicine, communications and travel. I can't think of a single example of how my teenage son is worse off than I was at his age. Regarding position in society the sky's the limit. Among Australia's former prime ministers and premiers we have a book seller (Billy Hughes), a train driver (Ben Chifley), a real estate agent (Jack Lang), a peanut farmer (Joe Bjelke-Petersen) and a bank clerk (Robert Askin).

4. It's becoming harder to own a house.

Apart from the fact that owning a house is not the be all and end all of life, much depends on where you desire to live. While one suburb, city, district or area may be out of reach there are plenty of others that are within one's means. In my own suburb \$600–700,000 is an average price for a residential block. In some country towns one could buy a street of houses for the same price. One doesn't have to live in a penthouse with a harbour view to be happy.

5. People can work hard all their lives and still be poor at the end.

True — but who's to blame? Certainly not the work ethic. Again it depends on the individual — sacrifice, planning, budgeting, priorities and the willingness to work for one's goals can achieve remarkable results. Sacrifice — does a student really need the expense of a car to drive to school when the government provides a free bus? Planning — how many

couples delay having a family for a few years instead of within the first 12 months so that they can establish themselves better financially? Budgeting — how many people ask themselves this simple question before going into debt, 'Do I really need it or do I just want it?' Priorities — how many people are there walking around with a mobile phone clutched to their ear who really need a mobile phone?

6. We have a biased attitude towards those on welfare rather than acknowledging that there isn't enough work for everyone.

This is not surprising when people get more support through an overly generous welfare system than those who contribute. Why do you think Byron Bay became so popular with young people who flock there knowing full well there are no prospects for employment? Why do the young Melbourne unemployed move to tropical Cairns in the winter? How come some people have more than one job while others are out of work? Australians complain that immigrants take Australians' jobs. If jobs are there to be taken by outsiders why didn't the Australian unemployed take them in the first place? Is it because the jobs were too demeaning and we are not prepared to work our way up the ladder? What happened to the work ethic that Dr Beder insists is controlling our lives?

7. Debt is a very big part of ensuring that people keep working.

Barring an unfortunate and unforeseen mishap debt is the self-inflicted result of bad planning, poor budgeting and the inability to get one's priorities right. Even when they are comparatively well off some people still get into debt.

The work ethic has always been with us and its application is determined by the attitude of the individual. It's an essential part of our being and needs to be encouraged. We don't all want to live like ferals in a rainforest.

Sharon Beder replies:

1. The work ethic is not the same as a willingness to work for a living. Someone with a work ethic will work whether or not they have enough income to support themselves. The work ethic attaches a moral value to work that is above and beyond its utilitarian value as a means to an end.

2. Just because a few people at the top began from humble beginnings, does not mean that anyone from humble beginnings can make it to the top. By definition only a few can make it to the top and studies show (see *Selling the Work Ethic* for details) that the majority of those at the top today were born into affluent families. The myth of the self-made man is not that individuals can't make it to the top from poor origins, but rather that there is some sort of level playing field and everyone has an equal opportunity to make it, no matter what their origins, if they work hard enough.

In large plants employing over a thousand employees (and by 1947 this accounted for 84% of factories with 64% employing more than 2500 employees), personal recognition for merit or hard work is difficult to gain. The career ladder for factory workers has few rungs and is unlikely to go beyond foreman. Such workers, who earn minimum wages, cannot save

enough money to start their own businesses. How are such people supposed to make it to the top?

3. It was once true that each new generation tended to have higher living standards than their parents but that is no longer the case. Collectively standards of living may have improved over the past 20 or 30 years but it is not clear that the poorer half of the population has a better education (look at what's happening to public schools), better housing or sanitation or anything else. In Australia, while companies are making record profits and aggregate personal wealth has increased by more than 40 per cent in the last decade, average wages have hardly changed and wages have fallen for the bottom third of male Australian workers. An Australian National University report found that boys between 15 and 19 earn, on average, 30–50 per cent less than males did 20 years ago and are more likely to remain poor as they grow older. They are less likely to find full-time work and less able to support a family than their parents were. At the same time the number of people living in poverty has almost doubled since 1973 to 11.5 per cent of the population.

4. It is true that houses in country towns are much cheaper than those in Newport. But why are they so cheap? Could it be that there are not enough jobs in such towns to allow young families to both own a house and make a living? Most people need to have jobs to save a deposit and pay off a mortgage, and where jobs are more plentiful housing is expensive. What is more, someone earning a minimum wage in an insecure job will find difficulty getting a bank loan for a house purchase. One in three Australian jobs is now either part-time or casual compared with one in 20 in the 1970s. These people don't lack a work ethic, they lack a decent wage and secure work.

5. Harry Edwards sounds like an affluent person who is completely out of touch with the reality of what it is like to be earning the minimum wage if he thinks that people's inability to save comes down to not buying their children a car or doing without a mobile phone. The Textile Clothing and Footwear Union (TCFU) estimates there are 329,000 garment 'outworkers' with some 70,000 children involved in working in sweatshop conditions as part of the contracting out in the garment industry. The children work before and after school and during holidays to help their parents who are paid as little as \$2 per hour. How does he expect these people to save money?

6. People on welfare only get more support than the sort of workers mentioned above. Why should people have to take jobs that don't even pay a living wage for a 40+ hour week? Whilst the number of people wanting work exceeds the number of available jobs then it is fair to say there is not enough work for everyone. If a few of those who don't have work choose to go and live in warmer climates where heating, clothing and entertainment (e.g. surfing) is much cheaper, what is wrong with that? The majority of unemployed people live in the major cities and constantly look for work. Whilst there are plenty of people in the cities looking for work and unable to find it, what harm does it do if a few unemployed people find some degree of comfort elsewhere? I suspect that

Edwards would like to see the unemployed suffer because he believes that the unemployed have only themselves to blame. This is a typical manifestation of the work ethic. However, unemployment in Australia is not the result of thousands of people deciding they don't want to work anymore. Hundreds of thousands of Australians lost their jobs as a result of corporate and government downsizing during the 1980s and more than half a million per year in the early 1990s. This included 30,000 banking jobs, and 50,000 manufacturing jobs that were downsized out of existence in the first half of the 1990s. Downsizing continued in Australia in the late 1990s with 60 per cent of firms reducing staff numbers in 1997 and 1998.

7. Edwards claims that debt is the result of bad planning, poor budgeting etc. How does he expect everyone is supposed to afford to buy their homes, as he suggests, without going into debt? Is a mortgage bad planning?

Dr Sharon Beder is Associate Professor and Head of the Science, Technology and Society Program at the University of Wollongong.

Re: Feeling sorry about aborigines

James Gerrard, Kew, Victoria

What we really should be sorry for:

Instead of worrying about questionable matters of the past for which only our ancestors had any responsibility, we should feel sorry, if

1. We are not scientifically literate so as to understand that the real Aboriginal problem is how best we can help a hunter/gatherer culture to adapt to our modern technologically-based society. We must encourage Aborigines to discard those elements of their culture that are no longer relevant such as tribalism and patriarchy, foster those qualities that are beneficial such as their artistic and sporting abilities and accept as a number one priority the need to be educated. Otherwise they will remain unemployable and unable to enjoy like other Australians a standard of living many hundreds of times greater than that possible for hunter/gathers.

2. We, as journalists, have ignored our responsibility to seek the evidence as a basis for our articles. Robert Manne in his article "In Denial: The Stolen Generation and the Right" (The Australian Quarterly Essay) is a sorry example, indulging in one-sided acceptance of evidence when not ad hominem or politically attacking opposing views.

3. We have not asked for a scientific evaluation of what is labelled "the stolen generation". This evaluation would include an assessment of benefit versus harm ensured by the "stealing"/removal of the half-caste children. The Wilson/Dodson inquiry was clearly not such a one with uncritical acceptance of what some aborigines stated and rejection of any opposing views. The nearest approach so far to "seeking the evidence" was the legal case in the Northern Territory by the two who claimed to have been stolen but whose case was not legally accepted. Surely if there was a stolen generation it would be easily proved in a court of law.