

## In his own words

When he was Workplace Relations Minister, Tony Abbott displayed a casual disregard for workers' rights and lack of sympathy for working Australians. He regularly sided with employers against workers.

Abbott was a staunch defender of WorkChoices in the Liberals' first years in opposition – it was only recently, when he realised how unpopular WorkChoices remains – that he has changed his language.

Here are some of his more memorable quotes:

### On his plans for working Australians

- “Well, the phrase WorkChoices is dead. No-one will ever mention it again, but look, we have to have a **free and flexible economy.**” (press conference, 1 December 2009. Full press conference can be viewed at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifNbQt\\_gSGk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifNbQt_gSGk))
- “If we are going to have productive workplaces, we can never bring down the curtain on workplace reform.” (ABC 7.30 Report, 27 July 2009, found at <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2009/s2638036.htm>)
- “You know, at four elections running we had a mandate to take the unfair dismissal monkey off the back of small business and we will once more seek that mandate. At four elections running we had a mandate to introduce statutory, non-union contracts and we will seek to renew that mandate. Labor has interim transitional employment agreements. We will make them less interim. Labor has individual flexibility agreements. We will make them more flexible.” (speech to the Queensland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 12 February 2010. <http://www.tonyabbott.com.au/LatestNews/Speeches/tabid/88/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/7267/Address-to-the-Queensland-Chamber-of-Commerce-and-Industry-Brisbane.aspx>)

### On the Howard Government's IR legacy

- “The Howard Government's industrial legislation, it was good for wages, it was good for jobs and it was good for workers, and let's never forget that.” (doorstop interview, 19 March 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysbcRWOBzw0>)
- “Let me begin my contribution to this debate by reminding members that workplace reform was one of the greatest achievements of the Howard government.” (Hansard, House of Representatives, 13 August 2009 at <http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/rep/dailys/dr130809.pdf>)
- “It's important to note that the Government didn't reform the waterfront — Chris Corrigan reformed the waterfront — and, while we don't need another waterfront dispute, we still need business leaders who are prepared to tackle self-indulgent cultures to build sustainable enterprises with secure jobs,” (Dennis Shanahan and Geoffrey Newman, “Abbott urges bosses to do a Chris Corrigan”, The Australian, 17 December 2002)

### On WorkChoices

- “Workchoices was a political mistake, but it may not have been an economic one.” (Tony Abbott, Battlelines, Melbourne University Press, 2009, page 87)
- “WorkChoices did not cost the former Government the election; it was the temporary abolition of the No Disadvantage Test which, more than anything else, cost the former government the election — and WorkChoices was far more than just that.” (Hansard, House of Representatives, at: <http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/rep/dailys/dr130809.pdf>)

### On paid maternity leave

- “Compulsory paid maternity leave? Over this Government's dead body, frankly.” (speech to Liberal Party conference, 22 July 2002, as quoted on ABC's 7.30 Report. Found at: <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2010/s2841197.htm>)

### On the construction industry

- “...it will be important for a future coalition government to restore the rule of law in the commercial construction sector, otherwise it will be subject, as the Cole Royal Commission and the subsequent Wilcox inquiry demonstrated, to widespread industrial intimidation.” (Tony Abbott, Battlelines, Melbourne University Press, 2009, page 89)

### On paying rural workers (like nurses) less than city workers

- “That would, I think, be quite positive...” (The Age, 6 September 2003 as quoted by Ms Pike (Minister for Health) in VicHansard on 18 September 2003.)

**“If we're honest, most of us would accept that a bad boss is a little bit like a bad father or a bad husband, not withstanding all his faults, you find that he tends to do more good than harm. He might be a bad boss but at least he's employing someone.”** (speech to industrial relations conference, 1 July 2002, as cited by ABC Radio National's AM, found at: <http://www.abc.net.au/am/stories/s596135.htm>)



# Tony Abbott's Ministerial record: A record that shows he can't be trusted by working Australians.



Since becoming Liberal Leader, Tony Abbott has tried to convince Australians that he is not committed to the extreme WorkChoices industrial relations policies of the Howard Government.

During this Federal Election campaign he has changed his story almost daily, insisting that WorkChoices was dead while hiding his real agenda to bring back the worst aspects of WorkChoices.

But Tony Abbott's record as a Minister shows he can't be trusted by working Australians.

Industrial relations policies that tip the balance completely towards employers, and attacks on workers are in Tony Abbott's DNA. He not only supported WorkChoices, but was specifically responsible as a Minister for anti-worker policies and decisions.

In his actions as a senior Minister in the Howard Government, including three years as Workplace Relations Minister and his own words over many years, Tony Abbott has form.

## The Minister who laid the foundations for WorkChoices

Tony Abbott was the Howard Government's Minister for Workplace Relations from 2001 to 2003.

He was appointed to continue driving an agenda begun by Peter Reith that actively sought to undermine workplace rights and attack collective bargaining and unions.

He laid the foundations for WorkChoices in an environment where even though the Coalition did not control the Senate, there were a myriad of ways in which Abbott was able to pursue an agenda of attacking workers and their rights during his time as Minister.

So let's look at his record as Workplace Relations Minister . . .

## Opposing decent wage increases for the low paid

- During Abbott's three years as Workplace Relations Minister, the Federal Government repeatedly opposed the ACTU's claim for an increase in the minimum wage. Commonwealth submissions under his Ministership would have left minimum wage workers up to \$20 a week worse off, compared to the outcomes of national wage decisions. *(Australian Industrial Relations Commission Safety Net Reviews 2001, 2002, and 2003)*

## Opposing improvements to awards

- He opposed the ACTU's claim before the Industrial Relations Commission in 2002 to improve redundancy provisions in the award safety net, including increasing the amount of severance pay and extending it to small business and casual employees. *(Australian Industrial Relations Commission 'Redundancy Test Case' PR032004 <http://www.e-airc.gov.au/redundancycase/>)*

## Winding back unfair dismissal protection

- In the first Parliamentary session of 2002, Abbott introduced two pieces of legislation which would have taken away protection from unfair dismissal for millions of workers. The Fair Dismissal Bill sought to exempt businesses with less than 20 employees from unfair dismissal laws, and was rejected by the Senate. *(Workplace Relations Amendment (Fair Dismissal) Bill 2002. <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/bd/2002-03/03bd051.htm>)*
- But the Senate did pass the Fair Termination Bill which excluded some employees including casuals and people on fixed term contracts from protection from unfair dismissal. *(Workplace Relations Amendment (Fair Termination) Bill 2002. <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/bd/2001-02/02bd095.htm>)*

## Cole Royal Commission

- In July 2001, based on a report penned by Employment Advocate Jonathan Hamberger, a former chief of staff for Peter Reith, Abbott announced a royal commission into the building industry. Costing \$65 million, it was first royal commission under the Howard Government, and its terms of reference were framed to allow unprecedented attacks and investigation of building workers and their unions. Despite inconclusive findings on lawlessness in the industry, the Howard Government used the royal commission's report to set up the Australian Building and Construction Commission. *(Paul Robinson "In their sights", The Age, 27 July 2001; [http://www.royalcombc.com.au/docs/tor\\_letter.pdf](http://www.royalcombc.com.au/docs/tor_letter.pdf); <http://www.abcc.gov.au/abcc/LegalInformationandAction/Legislation/>)*

## Taking legal action against workers

- As IR Minister, Abbott proudly pursued an activist legal agenda to support employers against workers. He announced a special fund of Commonwealth money for employers to mount court action against workers and unions involved in disputes. *(Dennis Shanahan and Geoffrey Newman, "Abbott urges bosses to do a Chris Corrigan", The Australian, 17 December 2002)*
- In November 2001, during a dispute about wages and entitlements at carpet manufacturer Feltex, Abbott met with the company's management to discuss the Government assisting in legal action against the workers and their union. He urged the workers to drop their claims and supported the company's plan to sue its employees. "We are going to be a more activist government in courts and tribunals than we have until now. Once employers have gone to the commission or the courts, we have to leap to the fray!" *(Michael Bachelard, "Industry leader defends Abbott's union-busting plan", The Australian, 8 December 2001)*
- He helped employer groups appeal the *Emwest* decision of the Federal Court that gave workers the right to take protected industrial action for a redundancy pay deal if their collective agreement didn't include one. *(Paul Robinson, "Alarm as court exposes flaw in jobs law", The Age, Saturday 16 August 2003)*
- He also supported an appeal by employer groups in *Electrolux* to restrict the right of workers and their unions to bargain over employment related matters. *(Jane Williams "Unions cleared to bill non-union members", The Advertiser, 22 June 2002)*
- He refused to release documents detailing the Howard Government's involvement in the protracted dispute at G&K O'Connor meat works, where union members were locked out for nine months and endured pay cuts of up to 60%. *("Union-busting tactics", Daily Telegraph, 9 April 2001)*
- Abbott used his Ministerial powers to overturn a Federal Court ruling that included casual employees in a federal award, thus denying casuals at KFC protection from unfair dismissal. *(Phillip Coorey, "Abbott tightens unfair dismissal casuals", The Mercury, 8 December 2001)*

# Tony Abbott's Ministerial record

- **Opposed decent wage increases for the low paid**
- **Opposed improvements to awards**
- **Wound back unfair dismissal protection**
- **Cole Royal Commission**
- **Took legal action against workers**
- **Demonised ordinary workers exercising their rights**
- **Backed employers to sack Australian workers**
- **Attempted to spread WorkChoices-style policies in the public service**
- **Blackmailed industry to implement his IR agenda**
- **Linked Federal Government funding to his IR agenda**

## Demonising ordinary workers for exercising their rights

- During a dispute at BHP Steel's Westernport plant in June 2002, Abbott branded 250 workers as "industrial vandals" because they took strike action for a new collective agreement. He encouraged car companies waiting on steel to sue the unions involved, and threatened the unions with legal action by the government even though BHP didn't want to sue. *(ABC Online, 11 June 2002, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200206/s578419.htm>)*

The same year, Abbott backed Morris McMahon's refusal to negotiate with workers and its "right" not to collectively bargain. *(Matthew Denholm, "Can the strike get back to work: boss", Daily Telegraph, 22 May 2003)*

After building workers at Grocon overwhelmingly rejected a non-union agreement, he attacked the union and accused them of "coercion". *(Paul Robinson, "Watchdog for building industry", The Age, 21 August, 2002)*

When workers at Tristar in Adelaide engaged in a legal strike partly to ask for a scheme to protect their entitlements, Abbott introduced a Bill into Parliament to curtail the activities of unions in the car industry. He also accused the workers of "industrial and economic treason". *(David Eccles, "Stalemate as car crisis talks stalled", The Advertiser, 6 August 2001).*

## Backing employers to sack Australian workers

When shipping line CSL Australia sacked its 35 Australian seafarers and replaced them with a Ukrainian crew it could pay much

less in 2002, Abbott encouraged the company to use legal action to stop union resistance to the move. *(Michael Owen-Brown, "Ship firm takes on unions", Herald Sun, 30 July 2002)*

## Attempting to spread WorkChoices-style policies in the public service

- A secret Cabinet document was leaked to the media which showed that Abbott wanted new public service rules including that AWAs must be offered to all new APS staff, all promotions and transfers be contingent on AWAs, and agency heads must offer AWAs to all employees. *( "Little Hope for move to crush PS union", Canberra Times, 18 December 2002)*

- Staff in Abbott's own Department of Employment and Workplace Relations voted by 90% in July 2002 to reject a non-union agreement. *(Source: ABC Radio National, 22 July 2002, <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/stories/s613678.htm>)*

## Blackmailing industry to implement his IR agenda

- He explicitly and publicly sought to "trade" Government financial support for the car industry (which employs 50,000 people) for the companies implementing a radical IR agenda, including individual contracts. He insisted the car companies set up a \$1 million fund to sue workers and unions. Abbott also encouraged employers in the industry to adopt the tactics of Patrick Stevedoring's Chris Corrigan. *(Dennis Shanahan and Geoffrey Newman, "Abbott urges bosses to do a Chris Corrigan", The Australian, 17 December 2002)*

## Linking Federal Government funding to his IR agenda

- In June 2002, he made \$90 million in federal funding to the Victorian Government to upgrade the MCG to host the Commonwealth Games contingent on Victoria attacking the building unions. This was opposed by both building unions and the construction company Grocon. The project was forced to go ahead without federal funding. *(Alison Croswell, "Abbott boxes clever on MCG", The Australian, 14 June 2002)*
- Even more notoriously, Abbott introduced funding guidelines for higher education that required universities to offer AWAs and strip Award conditions, even if they didn't want to, or lose Federal funding. He had earlier tried the same thing with school funding. A \$458 million offer of funding to the cash-strapped university sector in 2003 was made on the proviso that the universities had to implement individual contracts along with conditions restricting industrial action. *(Jim Buckell, "Not so happy campus", The Australian, 17 May 2003)*
- The National Code of Practice for the Construction Industry was also used to dictate the Liberals' IR agenda through the tender processes for government projects. *(Kristine Gough, "MCG upgrade union friendly", The Australian, Wednesday 26 June 2002.)*

## Refusal to protect employee entitlements

- In the wake of the Ansett collapse, when employees of the doomed airline faced losing hundreds of millions of dollars of their own entitlements, Abbott wrote an article which attacked the Ansett redundancy agreements as too generous and saying the Award maximum of 8 weeks was enough. *(Tony Abbott, "How the ACTU winged Ansett", Herald Sun, 13 August 2003)*