

## THE SHIFT TO LONG WORKING HOURS: A SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CRISIS IN THE MAKING

### Ernest Healy

*It is commonly believed that the labour market is becoming polarised. Many people work fewer hours than a 'standard working week' of 35 to 44 hours and would like to work more while others work much longer hours. More attention is paid to the former group than to the latter because commentators tend to believe that their situation is more problematic.*

*During the period 1986-87 to 1998-99 the proportion of the labour force working long hours (45+) increased far more than the proportion working fewer than 35 hours. This trend was particularly marked for older men and to a lesser degree for older married women. In 1998-99, more than 47 per cent of men in the labour-force aged 45-54 worked for longer than the standard working week, compared to just under 36 per cent in 1986-87.*

### INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been increased speculation about the prospect of a significant reduction in unemployment levels towards a lower limit which would be determined by a combination of frictional and structural unemployment.<sup>1</sup> In marked contrast to the 1980s, when there was much talk of Australians having to put up with high unemployment indefinitely, sustained growth in the Australian economy during the 1990s has led to a situation where 'full employment' again appears within reach. In turn, the prospect of full-employment has led to the speculation that the Australian economy will experience a decline in the growth rate of the labour force and that this will lead to supply-side restraints in the

Australian labour market. Such restraints may in turn become a barrier to continued growth. In the face of these concerns, some economic commentators are advocating an even higher level of labour market 'flexibility' than that experienced during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

In light of pressures for a new phase of labour-market 'reform', including presumably even greater 'flexibility', it is timely to ask what the present 'flexibility' outcomes have been in terms of hours worked.

### THE DATA

The unpublished data examined below are from the quarterly Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Labour Force Survey (LFS). The survey includes employed

persons 15 years and over, and the data sets used here allow a comparison of the hours worked by all men, married women, and single women by occupation. The period of comparison is 1986-87 to 1998-1999. Data were also included for 1995-96. For 1986-87 and 1995-96 quarterly LFS data for August, November, February and May were averaged to avoid spurious comparisons because of temporary fluctuations. However, for 1998-99, only data for November, February and May were available.

### **THE DECLINE OF THE STANDARD WORKING WEEK**

The major shifts in the structure of the Australian labour-market over the last two decades have been well documented and widely communicated. These changes include: the greater involvement of young people in part-time work; the growing work force participation rate of married women; the declining participation rate of men, particularly older men; the significant increase in the proportion of part-time, casual, and temporary work; a rapid growth in service sector employment; and a trend towards longer working hours for many workers.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1990s, increased attention has been given to an alleged growing gap between the 'work poor' and the 'work rich', that is between those with less work than they need, and working less than the standard working week, and those working well in excess of the standard week. The greater emphasis, however, has been upon those with too little work.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, attention has begun to shift to those working long hours. For example, several trade unions, under the auspices of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), conducted a conference in November 1998 to address

working hours and job security issues. A briefing paper, entitled *Work/Time/Life: Reclaiming the Working Agenda* (WTL), was prepared for the conference by researchers from Sydney University and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT).<sup>5</sup> The report asserts that there is an increasingly unfair distribution of hours worked. While many full-time workers work excessive hours, others remain either unemployed or under-employed, often with unpredictable, irregular and insecure hours. Overall, work is becoming increasingly intense. There is also a weakened connection between the number of hours worked and earnings.<sup>6</sup> The Report concludes:

The promise of flexibility has often failed to deliver a better balance between work and family, but has instead delivered increased unpredictability, less control over hours and increased insecurity, stress and unemployment — especially for women workers.<sup>7</sup>

Peter Sheehan, from the Victoria University of Technology, shows that, over the period 1978 to 1995, the growth in employment has been overwhelmingly confined to jobs with working hours outside of the standard working week (Sheehan defines the standard working week as being between 30 and 44 hours).<sup>8</sup> He emphasises an increasing dispersion of hours at both ends of the hours distribution for the period 1978 to 1995.<sup>9</sup> Although it is evident from the data Sheehan cites that the shift away from the standard working week has been more towards longer rather than towards shorter hours, he does not explicitly point this out.

However, the present study shows that, for the period 1986-87 to 1998-99, the predominant shift is towards long working hours and that this shift is not distributed evenly according to age,

gender and marital-status.

### FINDINGS

Tables 1, 2 and 3 show the change in weekly hours worked for the period 1986-87 to 1989-99 for men, married women, and single women respectively. In the cases of men and married women, the major trend was an increase in weekly hours worked, above the standard working week, defined here as 35 to 44 hours. With single women, the major trend is

towards an increased proportion working fewer than 35 hours per week (defined by the ABS and in this paper as part-time work). But this trend is due to the influence of younger single women, many of whom work part-time while studying. If younger women, between 15 and 24 years, are excluded, the trend towards part-time work is either stemmed or reversed. This is evident from Table 6 below. The situation is similar for young men, for whom the main trend is towards

an increased proportion working part-time (Table 4).

Table 4 shows that, for men between 35 and 59 years of age, there is a strong trend towards increased working hours in excess of the standard working week. This is striking for men in the 45-54 and 55-59 age groups. By 1998-99, 47.2 per cent of 45-54 year old men were working more than 45 hours per week compared with 35.8 per cent in the same age group in 1986-87. In the case of 55-59 year old men, the figures are 40.4 and 29.4 per cent, respectively. Most of this increase is due to a reduction in the proportion working the standard working week. At the same time, there is a marginal decrease in the proportion of men working less than the standard working week. Therefore, for the

**Table 1: Weekly hours worked, employed men, 1986-87 to 1998-99, and difference in the percentage working specified hours 1986-87 to 1998-99**

	Hours worked in the week prior to survey (%)					Total	No. of workers ('000s)
	Didn't work	Part-time 1-29	30-34	Standard 35-44	Long hrs 45+		
1986-87	5.3	9.9	7.7	45.5	31.5	100.0	4,237.3
1995-96	4.4	13.0	6.1	38.5	38.2	100.0	4,716.0
1998-99	4.3	14.2	5.9	36.8	38.8	100.0	4,915.0
1986-87 to 1998-99	-1.0	4.3	-1.8	-8.7	7.3	-	
		2.5					

Note: Minor discrepancies in totals are due to rounding.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Surveys, unpublished

**Table 2: Weekly hours worked, employed married women, 1986-87 to 1998-99, and difference in the percentage working specified hours 1986-87 to 1998-99**

	Hours worked in the week prior to survey (%)					Total	No. of workers ('000s)
	Didn't work	Part-time 1-29	30-34	Standard 35-44	Long hrs 45+		
1986-87	5.6	43.0	9.3	31.8	10.3	100.0	1,692.8
1995-96	5.0	40.5	9.3	30.6	14.6	100.0	2,191.7
1998-99	5.0	40.9	9.9	29.7	14.5	100.0	2,241.0
1986-87 to 1998-99	-0.6	-2.1	0.6	-2.1	4.2	-	
		-1.5					

Note: Minor discrepancies in totals are due to rounding.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Surveys, unpublished

**Table 3: Weekly hours worked, employed single women, 1986-87 to 1998-99, and difference in the percentage working specified hours 1986-87 to 1998-99**

	Hours worked in the week prior to survey (%)					Total	No. of workers ('000s)
	Didn't work	Part-time 1-29	30-34	Standard 35-44	Long hrs 45+		
1986-87	5.0	25.5	9.6	49.9	10.0	100.0	1,089.5
1995-96	4.4	34.6	8.3	38.4	14.3	100.0	1,379.5
1998-99	4.3	36.5	8.6	35.7	14.8	100.0	1,519.7
1986-87 to 1998-99	-0.7	11.0	-1.0	-14.2	4.8	-	
		10.1					

Note: Minor discrepancies in totals are due to rounding.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Surveys, unpublished

**Table 4: Weekly hours worked, employed men by age group, 1998-99, and difference in the percentage working specified hours 1986-87 to 1998-99**

	Hours worked in the week prior to survey (%)						No. of workers ('000s)
	0	1-29	30-34	35-44	45+	Total	
<b>15-19 years</b>							
1986-87	4.5	28.4	8.4	47.0	11.6	100.0	329.6
1995-96	3.7	48.1	6.2	31.5	10.5	100.0	296.3
1998-99	3.4	50.9	6.2	28.5	10.7	100.0	311.0
Difference	-1.1	+22.5	-2.2	+18.3	-0.9	-	-
<b>20-24 years</b>							
1986-87	4.9	11.0	9.2	53.5	21.4	100.0	522.2
1995-96	4.0	17.6	7.1	46.1	25.1	100.0	543.6
1998-99	4.2	20.2	7.0	43.3	25.3	100.0	522.7
Difference	-0.7	+9.2	-2.2	-10.2	+3.9	-	-
<b>25-34 years</b>							
1986-87	5.2	7.7	7.9	46.3	32.9	100.0	1,152.8
1995-96	4.2	8.8	6.4	41.6	39.1	100.0	1,208.3
1998-99	4.2	9.9	6.1	41.2	38.6	100.0	1,217.0
Difference	-1.0	+2.2	-1.8	-5.1	+5.7	-	-
<b>35-44 years</b>							
1986-87	4.7	6.7	7.1	41.9	39.5	100.0	1051.7
1995-96	3.9	8.0	5.7	37.5	44.9	100.0	1192.9
1998-99	3.9	8.4	5.4	36.5	45.8	100.0	1252.7
Difference	-0.8	+1.7	-1.7	-5.4	+6.3	-	-
<b>45-54 years</b>							
1986-87	5.7	7.1	7.0	44.4	35.8	100.0	697.3
1995-96	4.5	8.1	5.4	36.1	45.9	100.0	963.8
1998-99	4.4	9.0	5.5	33.9	47.2	100.0	1047.7
Difference	-1.3	+2.0	-1.5	-10.5	+11.4	-	-
<b>55-59 years</b>							
1986-87	8.0	9.0	7.8	45.8	29.4	100.0	273.9
1995-96	6.4	11.7	5.9	36.6	39.4	100.0	274.8
1998-99	5.2	13.0	5.7	35.7	40.4	100.0	309.3
Difference	-2.8	+4.0	-2.1	-10.1	+11.0	-	-
<b>60-64 years</b>							
1986-87	7.5	12.2	8.1	44.6	27.7	100.0	149.0
1995-96	6.2	18.5	6.6	36.9	31.8	100.0	148.0
1998-99	6.0	21.5	6.8	33.1	32.5	100.0	161.0
Difference	-1.5	+9.3	-1.3	-11.5	+4.8	-	-

Note: Minor discrepancies in totals are due to rounding.  
 Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Surveys, unpublished

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the proportion working the standard working week. But, for those in the 25-34, 45-54, and 55-59 years age groups,

1998-99 as shown in

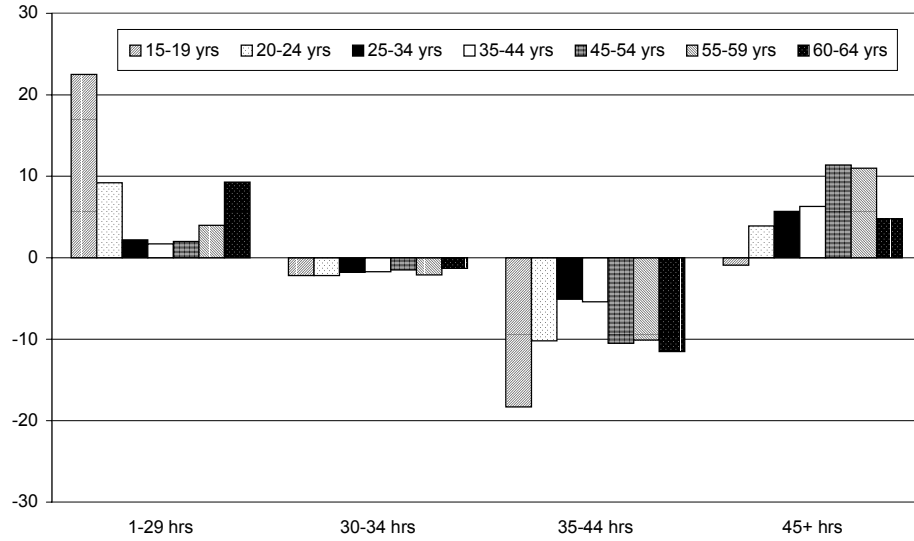
Figure 1, there has been no process of polarised dispersion in weekly hours worked for men in the 25-34, 35-44, and 55-59 years age groups of the type claimed by Sheehan and other commentators.

Sheehan's conclusion appears to be in part an artefact of his too-inclusive definition of the standard working week: 30-44 hours. As is evident from Table 4, by including those men working 30-34 hours within his definition of the standard week, Sheehan overstates the extent of the decline in the proportion working the standard working week. He also thus overstates the proportional increase of those working part-time.

Table 5 and Figure 2 show a similar trend for married women if those other than the young and the 60-64 years age group are considered. A higher proportion of married women too are working long hours. However, the trend is more varied than for men. For married women of 35-44 years, the increased proportion working forty-five hours or more is almost entirely due to a reduction in

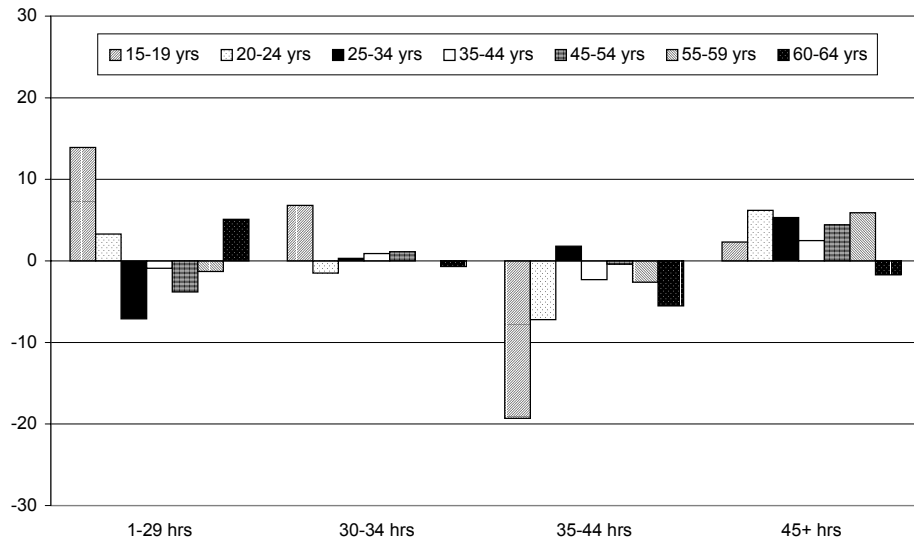
the increased proportion working longer

**Figure 1: Difference in men's working hours by age group, 1986-87 and 1998-99**



Source: Table 4

**Figure 2: Difference in married women's working hours by age group, 1986-87 and 1998-99**



Source: Table 5

longer than the standard working week is in part due to a reduction in the proportion working less than the standard week.

Table 6 and Figure 3 show that the work patterns of single women are

different from those of men and married women. Here, the decline in the proportion working the standard working week has resulted in significant increases in the proportion in part-time work and

increased proportions in working hours above the standard in nearly all age groups. Again, the major trend for the 15-19 and 20-24 years age groups is an increase in part-time work. Table 6 shows that, between 1986-87 and 1998-99, the proportion of employed 15-19 year old single women working between 1 and 29 hours per week increased from 41 per cent to 71 per cent.

Overall, these findings show that, for men and married women the idea of a growing 'polarisation' in hours worked, associated with the decline of the standard working week, is misleading. The main trend since 1986-87 has been from the standard working week to a longer working week of 45 hours or more.

## ISSUES

### Productivity, but at what social cost?

The question as to whether the productivity gains of the 1990s have been achieved in part through the tendency towards longer working hours has not been seriously explored and requires further research. A 1999 study by the Productivity Commission

**Table 5: Weekly hours worked, employed married women by age group, 1998-99 and difference in the percentage working specified hours 1986-87 to 1998-99**

	Hours worked in the week prior to survey (%)						No. of workers ('000s)
	0	1-29	30-34	35-44	45+	Total	
<b>15-19 years</b>							
1986-87	8.0	20.9	10.6	54.1	6.4	100.0	8.2
1995-96	7.0	41.9	6.9	37.9	6.4	100.0	8.5
1998-99	4.3	34.8	17.4	34.8	8.7	100.0	7.7
Difference	-3.7	+13.9	+6.8	-19.3	+2.3	-	-
<b>20-24 years</b>							
1986-87	5.9	24.7	10.8	51.3	7.3	100.0	138.5
1995-96	4.0	27.4	8.8	47.4	12.5	100.0	119.3
1998-99	5.1	28.0	9.3	44.1	13.5	100.0	103.7
Difference	-0.8	+3.3	-1.5	-7.2	+6.2	-	-
<b>25-34 years</b>							
1986-87	5.9	44.0	8.7	32.0	9.4	100.0	510.4
1995-96	6.1	39.6	8.8	32.9	12.7	100.0	580.0
1998-99	5.6	36.9	9.0	33.8	14.7	100.0	560.7
Difference	-0.3	-7.1	+0.3	+1.8	+5.3	-	-
<b>35-44 years</b>							
1986-87	4.5	45.9	9.7	28.6	11.3	100.0	579.1
1995-96	3.9	44.1	9.6	28.3	14.1	100.0	739.2
1998-99	4.3	45.0	10.6	26.3	13.8	100.0	726.7
Difference	-0.2	-0.9	+0.9	-2.3	+2.5	-	-
<b>45-54 years</b>							
1986-87	6.2	42.9	9.3	30.7	11.0	100.0	333.0
1995-96	5.1	37.3	9.8	29.9	17.8	100.0	564.7
1998-99	4.7	39.1	10.4	30.3	15.4	100.0	632.3
Difference	-1.5	-3.8	+1.1	-0.4	+4.4	-	-
<b>55-59 years</b>							
1986-87	7.7	45.6	9.2	27.3	10.3	100.0	80.8
1995-96	6.3	44.3	9.5	25.9	14.1	100.0	119.7
1998-99	5.6	44.3	9.2	24.7	16.2	100.0	137.7
Difference	-2.1	-1.3	0.0	-2.6	+5.9	-	-
<b>60-64 years</b>							
1986-87	6.9	50.5	8.3	21.6	12.8	100.0	31.8
1995-96	7.1	52.3	7.3	20.3	13.0	100.0	41.7
1998-99	6.3	55.6	7.6	19.4	11.1	100.0	48.0
Difference	-0.6	+5.1	-0.7	-2.2	-1.7	-	-

Note: Minor discrepancies in totals are due to rounding.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Surveys, unpublished

explored the relationship between high and low productivity industries and a range of labour-market variables. Although the Commission devoted a chapter to examining the prevalence of

part-time work and the possible relationship of this to changes in productivity, no such attention was given to extended hours of work. The chapter of the report which did examine the relationship between income and changes in productivity, by industry and by occupation, systematically excluded overtime as a factor in the analysis.<sup>10</sup>

**Table 6: Weekly hours worked, employed single women by age group, 1998-99 and difference in the percentage working specified hours 1986-87 to 1998-99**

	Hours worked in the week prior to survey (%)						No. of workers ('000s)
	0	1-29	30-34	35-44	45+	Total	
<b>15-19 years</b>							
1986-87	4.2	41.0	8.2	42.1	4.6	100.0	305.6
1995-96	3.6	68.1	4.6	20.3	3.4	100.0	282.7
1998-99	3.5	71.0	5.5	17.6	2.4	100.0	303.3
Difference	-0.7	+30.0	-2.7	-24.5	-2.2	-	-
<b>20-24 years</b>							
1986-87	5.2	17.1	10.3	58.7	8.9	100.0	302.6
1995-96	3.9	28.7	9.3	46.5	11.8	100.0	363.3
1998-99	3.8	32.6	9.7	41.1	12.8	100.0	354.3
Difference	-1.4	+15.5	-0.6	-17.6	+3.9	-	-
<b>25-34 years</b>							
1986-87	4.8	16.0	10.4	54.3	14.5	100.0	231.1
1995-96	4.7	21.3	9.1	45.4	19.4	100.0	313.1
1998-99	5.0	21.1	8.8	45.5	19.6	100.0	362.7
Difference	+0.2	+5.1	-1.6	-8.8	+5.1	-	-
<b>35-44 years</b>							
1986-87	5.0	24.1	9.9	45.0	15.9	100.0	119.8
1995-96	4.5	25.7	8.8	39.8	21.2	100.0	198.1
1998-99	4.9	29.2	9.8	35.5	20.5	100.0	230.7
Difference	-0.1	+4.5	-0.1	-9.5	+4.6	-	-
<b>45-54 years</b>							
1986-87	6.7	21.4	10.7	46.9	14.2	100.0	74.4
1995-96	5.0	24.3	10.0	40.8	19.8	100.0	154.1
1998-99	4.3	25.7	9.6	38.6	21.7	100.0	191.7
Difference	-2.4	+4.3	-1.1	-8.3	+7.5	-	-
<b>55-59 years</b>							
1986-87	6.3	26.5	9.6	50.2	7.4	100.0	29.2
1995-96	6.2	29.9	9.4	38.5	16.0	100.0	36.4
1998-99	5.0	33.6	9.3	35.0	17.1	100.0	46.7
Difference	-1.3	+7.1	-0.3	-15.2	+9.7	-	-
<b>60-64 years</b>							
1986-87	8.2	35.4	7.3	38.0	11.1	100.0	15.4
1995-96	4.0	37.2	10.5	31.1	17.3	100.0	19.0
1998-99	5.8	36.5	11.5	26.9	19.2	100.0	17.3
Difference	-2.4	+1.1	+4.2	-11.1	+8.1	-	-

Note: Minor discrepancies in totals are due to rounding.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Surveys, unpublished

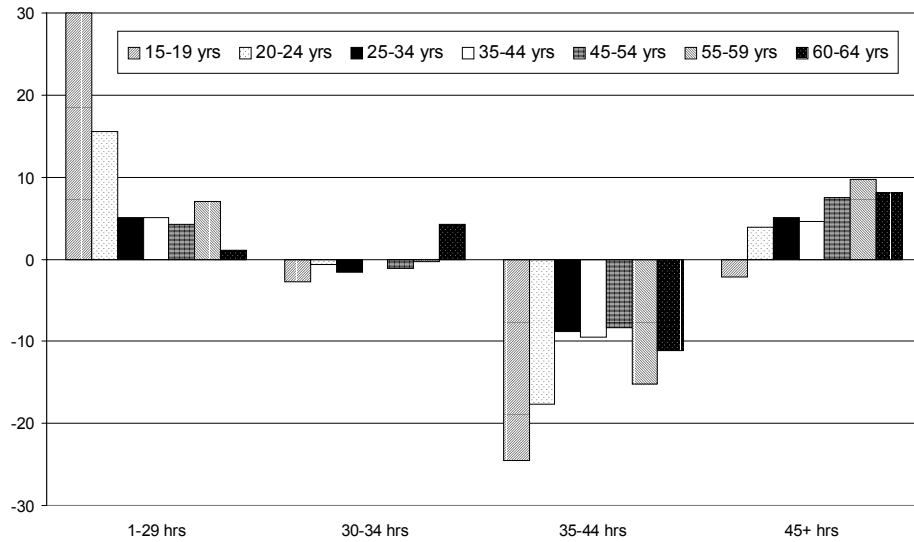
#### 'Flexibility' and labour-market coercion

The 1980s and early 1990s were characterised by a good deal of misleading rhetoric, much of it emanating from the labour movement, concerning the emancipatory potential of 'flexible' work place arrangements, including hours of work.<sup>11</sup> It was often asserted that people would have a greater choice concerning hours of work and in balancing work commitments with family and other responsibilities. While it is now more frequently recognised that part-time workers often desire more work, it is still not sufficiently recognised that the trend to long hours may be, for many workers, involuntary, even coercive.

The extent to which full-time Australian workers are either contented or discontented with the weekly hours they work was explored in a 1998 survey conducted by the ABS.<sup>12</sup>

Source: Table 6

**Figure 3: Difference in single women's working hours by age group, 1986-87 and 1998-99**



The survey found that 27 per cent of full-time workers would prefer to work fewer hours. Although the survey did not distinguish between those working the standard working week and those working long hours, given the data considered above, it may be concluded that a high proportion of those wanting fewer hours were working long hours. The proportion wanting fewer working hours was highest amongst Managers and Administrators and Professionals, but remained significant amongst other occupational groups, including Tradespersons, Advanced Clerical and Service Workers, Intermediate Clerical and Sales Workers and Intermediate production and Transport workers. The proportions for these occupational categories were 39.4, 28.9, 19.4, 20.1, 17.1, and 17.4 per cent respectively.<sup>13</sup>

It was noted above that the shift towards long working hours between 1986-87 and 1998-99 was strongest for men in

the 45-54 and 55-59 age groups. This shift occurred despite a slight decline in the labour-force participation rate of these older men. For Australian-born men of 45-54 years, the labour-force participation rates in 1986-87 and 1998-99 respectively were 91 and 88 per cent. For Australian-born men in the 55-59 years age group, the participation rates were markedly lower at 78 and 74 per cent respectively.<sup>14</sup> The pattern is similar for overseas-born men, but approximately several percentage points lower. If men in the 55-64 years age group are considered, the decline in labour force participation is more striking. In this respect, in 1999, the Allen Consulting Group noted that:

...decreases in labour market participation in recent decades have been distinctly a male phenomenon. Male participation rates in the 55 to 64 age bracket fell from nearly 90 per cent in 1960 to under 65 per cent in 1992. Clearly this is where the greatest decline has occurred.<sup>15</sup>

The authors further note that the decreasing labour-force participation rate of older men is associated with increased unemployment, and that, after considering the reasons given by men for their early retirement, ‘...many older males retire by reason of having lost their job, rather than voluntarily’.<sup>16</sup>

The coincidence of these two trends is of concern because the decline of labour-force participation for men of this age has often been associated with the inability of older men to remain within the labour market as a consequence of economic restructuring and loss of traditional jobs.<sup>17</sup> Many older men, knowing full-well the plight of others similar to themselves, may feel they have no choice but to endure employer demands for very long hours at work. A further round of deregulation and rapid economic restructuring might further exacerbate this situation.

**Do long working hours support a core/periphery model of development?**

Peter Sheehan argues that the dispersion of working hours and the decline of the standard working week can be:

...interpreted as evidence of the development of the core/periphery model — some employees are central to the firm’s operations and work exceptionally long hours, while many others have a more marginal attachment, and work only a small number of hours per week.<sup>18</sup>

Although there may be evidence that

**Table 7: Percentage of employed men, married and single women working long and very long hours by occupation, 1986-87 and 1995-96**

Occupation	45-48 hrs per week		49+ hrs per week	
	1986-87	1995-96	1986-87	1995-96
<b>Men</b>				
Man/Admin	10.4	9.8	54.2	57.6
Professionals	10.4	11.1	25.6	33.2
Para-Professionals	8.6	10.7	13.8	21.3
Tradespersons	9.6	10.9	16.3	23.2
Clerks	6.6	8.8	8.2	14.7
Personal Serv. Wkrs	8.9	9.4	24.2	25.9
Plant & Mach. Ops	10.5	11.6	20.9	28.6
Manual Lab. & Related	7.1	7.5	11.9	14.4
<b>Married Women</b>				
Man/Admin	5.7	7.2	30.5	32.3
Professionals	7.0	9.4	9.2	14.9
Para-Professionals	3.4	3.6	3.1	4.5
Tradespersons	5.1	5.4	10.4	15.6
Clerks	2.0	3.8	2.5	4.9
Personal Serv. Wkrs	3.3	3.7	7.4	9.3
Plant & Mach. Ops	3.0	5.4	3.2	7.3
Manual Lab. & Related	2.0	2.5	2.4	5.0
<b>Single Women</b>				
Man/Admin	8.5	10.5	32.3	41.9
Professionals	8.5	11.9	12.5	18.4
Para-Professionals	6.2	5.3	6.5	9.5
Tradespersons	9.5	8.2	8.2	10.9
Clerks	3.1	5.5	2.6	5.6
Personal Serv. Wkrs	2.9	3.2	3.4	4.8
Plant & Mach. Ops	5.8	6.1	5.2	9.3
Manual Lab. & Related	2.7	2.6	4.2	4.1

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Surveys, unpublished

the labour market is developing on a core/periphery basis, the shift in hours worked described above only weakly supports such a model. The data show that the shift to long working hours is not confined to professional and managerial workers, as Sheehan suggests, but is more broadly based. Table 7 shows the extent of the shift to long working hours between 1986-87 and 1995-96 by gender, marital status and occupation.<sup>19</sup> For example, there have been marked increases in the proportions of men working long hours who are tradespersons and plant and machine operators. Although the proportion of male sales and personal

service workers working long hours did not increase much over this period, the proportion working long hours was high to begin with.

Part of the problem with Sheehan's argument is that it fails to recognise the involuntary nature of the shift to long working hours for many workers. The core/periphery model, as he defines it, portrays those persons who work long hours as advantaged and strategically important in a systemic sense. Table 7 suggests this is often not the case. Many workers in occupations characterised by a marked shift to long hours resemble the 'periphery' in Sheehan's model more than the 'core'.

### Gender, marital status and long hours

A close examination of persons working long weekly hours reveals some marked differences by gender and marital status.

Although it is generally understood that the relatively low labour-force participation rate of married women is partly a result of women's greater role in family management and child rearing, the data indicate differences in hours worked between men and women which are not easily accounted for in these terms. After taking the family responsibilities of

women into account, there still appears to be a propensity for women to work fewer hours than men.

This is suggested by a comparison of weekly hours-worked for professional men and single women. Although some professional single women have child-rearing responsibilities, this alone does not seem sufficient to account for the difference observed, especially since the difference persists among women who are no longer of child-bearing age.

Table 8 shows that there has been a shift to long working hours for men, married women and single women between 1986-87 and 1995-96,<sup>20</sup> and that the proportion of single women working long hours is greater than that for married women. Nonetheless, there is still a marked gap between men and single women in the proportion working long hours.

The data examined here raise important questions which require further investigation. Ideally the working hours of single women should be compared with those of single men. Unfortunately, no data on men by marital status are available. Perhaps single men also work fewer hours than married men. If so, this would raise serious questions as to the impact of long working hours on the

**Table 8: Percentage of professional men, married women, single women working long and very long hours by age group, 1986-87 and 1995-96**

Age	Year	Men		Married women		Single women	
		45-48hrs	49+ hrs	45-48hrs	49+ hrs	45-48hrs	49+ hrs
25-34yrs	1986-87	11.5	23.7	7.0	8.8	9.9	14.1
	1995-96	13.0	29.7	9.3	13.1	12.4	19.9
35-44yrs	1986-87	10.9	29.7	6.5	9.1	10.3	14.5
	1995-96	11.4	36.1	8.9	13.9	13.8	25.9
45-54yrs	1986-87	10.0	29.7	8.6	10.9	9.9	13.9
	1995-96	10.7	40.3	10.6	19.0	10.9	23.1
55-59yrs	1986-87	8.6	24.6	4.1	9.2	2.3	7.4
	1995-96	10.2	37.5	9.9	14.3	10.3	12.7
60-64yrs	1986-87	9.7	22.9	5.1	3.1	10.1	10.3
	1995-96	6.3	24.5	8.1	14.8	8.9	14.0

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Surveys, unpublished

family life of married men, as married men would then be working extraordinarily long hours.

**A shorter working week — what does it now mean?**

We are currently in a period in Australia when many industry and enterprise agreements have expired, or are due to expire. The issue of the length of the standard working week invariably arises in negotiations for new agreements. The building and construction unions, for example, have included a reduction of the standard working week, from 38 to 36 hours, in their ambit log of claims to employers, and a spate of industrial action, including strikes and lockouts, has ensued within this industry over the claims.

However, it is no longer clear what social or political significance is being attached to demands for a reduced standard working week by unions, given the rise in the proportion of employees working very long hours. Current demands for a reduced standard working week by many unions bear little relationship to the view of worker interests historically associated with demands for a shorter working week. In the past, demands for shorter working hours were linked to improved quality of life for workers and the community as a whole, made possible through a working week which provided material well-

being for workers and their families, and for a fair division of time between work, sleep and recreation.<sup>21</sup> This was the essence of the eight-hours movement as early as the mid nineteenth century in Australia. This broad political and social goal is currently reduced, in many cases, to a demand for an hour or two extra overtime payment with little or no regard for actual hours worked or for the associated social impact of hours worked. The construction industry is a case in point. Table 9 shows the increased proportions of persons who work long or very long weekly hours in a selection of occupations which are covered by the building and construction industry.

**CONCLUSION**

In popular and specialist commentary, there has been an overemphasis on part-time work as an outcome associated with the decline of the standard working week.

**Table 9: Percentage of persons in selected building and construction industry occupations working long and very long hours, 1986-87 and 1995-96**

Occupation	1986-87		1995-96	
	45-48hrs	49+ hrs	45-48hrs	49+ hrs
Structural Steel & Weld.Tr.	11.2	13.6	12.7	24.6
Bricklayers	9.8	13.4	13.9	15.1
Carpenters And Joiners	10.4	15.6	11.7	21.5
Painters And Decorators	8.0	12.2	10.0	19.7
Plasterers	11.0	15.5	16.4	25.6
Plumbers	11.2	14.6	11.1	27.3
Roof Slaters & Tilers	10.2	6.3	2.2	19.2
Wall & Floor Tilers	10.3	24.0	9.4	25.1
Excavating And Earthm. Pl.Ops	7.1	20.9	13.5	30.4
Paving & Surfacing Pl. Ops	12.4	11.7	10.1	19.9
Crane Operators	12.1	10.3	13.3	31.2
Hoist & Winch Ops	9.8	15.6	13.4	23.3
Concrete Workers	7.8	17.6	10.0	18.0
Str. Steel & Rel. Constr Lab.	10.3	17.4	15.1	30.0
Earthmoving Lab.	7.3	6.7	2.5	15.6
Pav. & Surfacing Lab.	6.6	7.9	8.8	16.6
Survey Hands	7.3	1.0	20.0	12.6
Other Constr. & Mining Lab.	10.3	13.0	9.6	18.6

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Surveys, unpublished

Between 1986-87 and 1998-99, the major outcome of the decline in the standard working week has been a marked shift in the proportion of persons working long and very long hours. This has been particularly marked for men in the 45-54 and 55-59 years age groups. Although less marked, a similar tendency is evident for married women. For single women, changes in hours worked has been more polarised, with an increased proportion of young women working part-time, but a higher proportion of those over 25 years working longer hours.

A distorted regime of hours worked has emerged which may prove to be socially and politically unsustainable,

particularly for men in older age groups. While some older men appear trapped in long hours of work, others are involuntarily shut out of the labour market. A renewed round of labour-market flexibility of the type experienced during the past decade and a half, aimed at alleviating supply-side labour restraints, would likely exacerbate the labour-market tensions and inequities which have resulted, in part, from previous 'flexibility' measures. There is a strong case at present for linking demands for a reduced standard working week to job creation and to restrictions on the actual hours worked by full-time employees.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> 'Frictional' unemployment refers to unemployment resulting due to the delay between workers leaving one job and commencing another. 'Structural' unemployment refers to a mismatch between the skills of those seeking jobs and the skills required to fill job vacancies.
- <sup>2</sup> HSBC Bank Australia Limited, *Shifting Gears: The Australian Economy in the New Decade*, <http://www.hsbc.com.au>, 1999
- <sup>3</sup> Evatt Foundation, *Turning Point*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1997, pp. 16-38
- <sup>4</sup> For example see, Productivity Commission, *Productivity and the Structure of Employment*, Canberra, pp. 71-94.
- <sup>5</sup> The Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training (ACIRRT) *Work, Time, Life: Reclaiming the Work Agenda, An Issues Paper for the Australian Trade Union Movement*, November 1998
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p. 5
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p. 14
- <sup>8</sup> P. Sheehan, 'The Changing Nature of Work: Some Implications', *Australian Bulletin of Labour*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1998, p. 323
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Productivity Commission, *Productivity and the Structure of Employment*, Canberra, 1999, pp. 71-107
- <sup>11</sup> ACTU, *The Australia Reconstructed Proposal*, Melbourne, 1987
- <sup>12</sup> *Forms of Employment: Australia*, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Cat. 6359.0, Canberra, 2000
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> *The Australian Labour Force*, ABS, Catalogue no. 6203.0, Canberra, Aug. 86, Nov.86, Feb. 87, May 87, Aug. 98, Nov. 98, Feb. 99, and May 99
- <sup>15</sup> Allen Consulting Group, 'Rethinking Work and Retirement', Discussion paper, National.com.au/nfm, 1999, p. 19,
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p. 26
- <sup>17</sup> Evatt Foundation, *Turning Point*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1997, pp. 26, 35
- <sup>18</sup> Sheehan, *op. cit.*, p. 322
- <sup>19</sup> In 1994, the ABS adopted a new occupational classification system. Although there was a period of overlap between the two systems, generally speaking, occupational data before and after this time are not directly comparable. For this reason, data up to the present are not provided.
- <sup>20</sup> Changes to the occupational coding system by the ABS in 1994 do not allow a comparison of 'professionals' through to 1989-99.

<sup>21</sup> Clyde Cameron, former senior Labor Party cabinet member, in 1972, stated the following in defence of a responsible pursuit of a shorter working week: 'To reduce standard hours for the sole purpose of increasing overtime is a prostitution of a cause which deserves to be better understood and respected'.

In September 1974, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) put its case to the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission for a 35 hour week for the power industry. It is instructive to now consider the caveats which were placed upon the claim. The ACTU proposed an immediate introduction of a 35 hour week providing that unions co-operated in '...re-rostering, re-training, or recruitment of new labour...'; that '...the introduction of the 35-hour week would not be used as a device from merely increasing the level of overtime by five hours a week, but as a means of increasing jobs in the industry...'; and that unions tolerate a reduction in overtime "...as an essential element in the aim to increase the total number of employees should that become necessary.

See Clyde Cameron, *Unions in Crisis*, Melbourne, Hill of Content, 1982, pp. 115-116.

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