

# OPINION

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EDITORIAL

## Labor plan to weaken welfare requirements is a big mistake

**A**s saying favoured by the Federal Government is that the best form of welfare is a job. Meaningful work not only provides obvious financial benefits but can offer other spin-offs such as boosting self-esteem and personal confidence, and of course the collective income of those holding down jobs helps the wider economy as the money flows through in increased spending.

And then there is the financial benefit for taxpayers as the welfare bill to the Federal Government is reduced. That in turn frees up the money to be spent in other crucial areas such as education, health and on the infrastructure needed to keep the economy running and growing further.

Australians are a fair-minded and generous people who do not begrudge taxpayer support in the form of a welfare safety net for those who genuinely need it.

But they do not have time for those who see the safety net as a right to be enjoyed ad infinitum.

And they expect that in return for help to get back on their feet, those who receive welfare payments are doing all they can to support themselves by returning to the workforce.

This principle of mutual obligation underpinning Australia's social welfare network under the Federal Government has worked well.

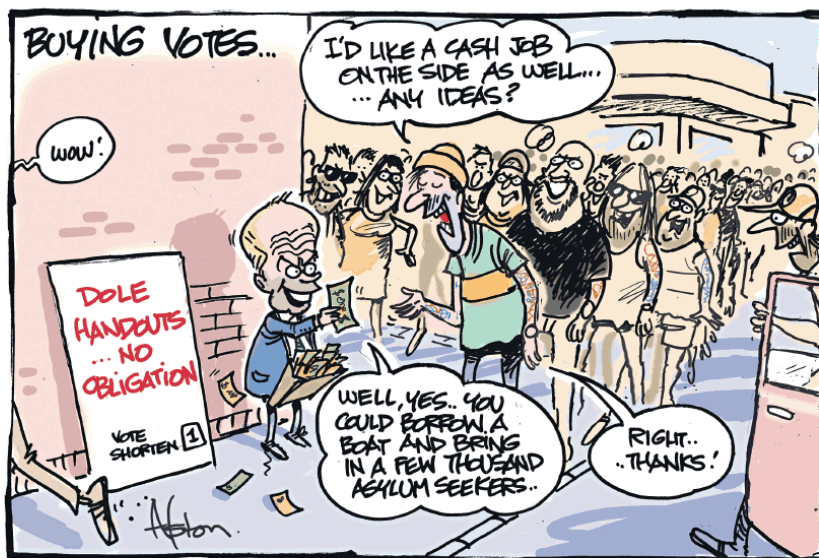
It has reduced welfare dependency to record lows and helped create 1.2 million new jobs.

The Government says the proportion of Australians receiving a welfare payment fell from 16.5 per cent when Labor last held government in 2013, to 14.3 per cent at the end of June last year, the last figures publicly available.

But Labor wants to dismantle the system. Shadow employment services minister Terri Butler yesterday flagged sweeping changes to the welfare system, including removing the requirements for people on the dole to apply for 20 jobs a month, a complete re-jig of work-for-the-dole and reducing the number of times employment service providers report to the Federal Government.

Ms Butler has previously criticised the \$630 million of savings in the Federal Government's Budget projections from "compliance measures" that result in dole recipients being cut off if they fail to meet job-seeking targets, describing them as "punitive", meaning their loss will need to be factored into Labor's election spending commitments.

No system is perfect and there is always room for improvement in areas as complex as social welfare. But to dismantle the structure which is paying economic and social dividends would be a mistake.



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## Bosses, workers butt heads over social media

■ Gary Martin

**T**he time when cigarette smokers gathered outside their office entrance to feed their addiction is almost a thing of the past.

While employers often turned a blind eye to a ritual that happened several times every day, they would have been left gasping for fresh air upon realising that the time lost through these unscheduled smoko breaks could — when aggregated — amount to as much as six full working days a year per smoker.

With smoking rates plummeting, employers can breathe a huge sigh of relief. But with more and more people jumping on the social media bandwagon, employers are bracing for a new and potentially more costly and damaging type of unscheduled addiction break: the need to down tools to check personal social media.

Whether you are in the workplace, classroom, cinema, theatre or at a concert, you need only glance sideways to see that people of all ages are hooked on social media. Many are unable to resist the gratification that goes with logging on to receive likes, view notifications and count shares.

For many in the workplace the yearning to check their smartphone, which is usually charging at their fingertips, the twitching and anxiousness between those scans, and the adrenaline rush associated with succumbing to the urge are reminiscent of a heavily addicted two-pack-a-day smoker.

Unlike smoking, social media surfing — and we are not talking about



It is unrealistic to expect employees to disconnect socially while at work.

work-related social media — is on the rise and therein lies the worry for employers.

Some experts suggest that those addicted to social media zap up to four hours of work time each week — equivalent to a massive five working weeks a year.

More alarming is the suggestion the social media addiction has fuelled unprecedented levels of workplace distraction as employees jump in and out of their feed up to 100 times during the working day.

Many workplaces will address the problem in an unrealistic way by banning the use of personal social media during work hours.

That approach is unlikely to succeed because if an employee is truly hooked, they will continue to check their feed regardless of any bans in place.

And unlike a smoking addiction where workers could be spotted congregating in the designated smoking area to satisfy their cravings, personal social media can be accessed discreetly from the comfort of the office chair.

Social media junkies will argue that not allowing them to check personal feed during work time is unfair since

they often attend to work-related emails and phone calls outside their regular working hours. And they will be quick to point out that in any modern workplace worth its salt, employee performance should be judged on output and not the time invested. The bottom line is that the social media craze is here to stay. Organisations must develop solutions to ensure that employees can access social media in an appropriate and responsible way.

A starting point to address this growing challenge is to acknowledge the line between our working and personal lives has become blurred in such a way that it is unrealistic to expect employees to disconnect socially while at work.

If we accept that blurring, we may see the old-fashioned but once frowned-upon smoko being replaced by the unofficially authorised — that is, not official nor prescribed but generally accepted — personal social media breather.

But here's the kicker: with more and more people hooked on social media the number of workers who opt in for those breathers will outstrip more than tenfold those who ever indulged in smokos.

This is something managers have to be acutely aware of and factor into their workplace productivity plans. It's probably time to have a conversation with your employees to acknowledge their use non-work-related social media as long as it is done responsibly and does not interfere with nor impede workplace outputs.

■ Professor Gary Martin is chief executive, the Australian Institute of Management WA