

# Fair wage, safe work, worth the paperwork



Phillip O'Neill

I HURTLE down the F3 before dawn a couple of times a week. The road is quiet until Wyong. Then the tradies join at all the Central Coast intersections.

By Mooney Mooney Creek bridge the road is a Monaco grand prix, a helter-skelter of utes, tray-tops and vans.

I enjoy guessing what their trade is as they rush by.

The brickies are easy to spot, even in the dark, their mixers hanging on in the back like country dogs.

The sparkies must get paid more. They seem to have newer vans with extravagant signwriting with lightning bolts and funny names like "Ohm, sweet ohm."

I keep well clear of plumbers' trucks, though; their extension ladders and poly pipes swaying to and fro always make me nervous. A bit like the clatter of cans in the back of the painter's ute. And why does the painter always have an elbow and a ciggie hanging out the driver's window, whatever the weather?

What tradies have in common is they drive fast.

I laugh, knowing all across Sydney households wait nervously for the arrival of their tradie.

Is there any other occupation other than a dentist or an obstetrician that has so much power over the "customer", who can drill when and where they like, leave mess all over the place for someone else to clean up, and present an exorbitant bill poker-faced?

Except, unlike the dentist and obstetrician, the tradie offers to knock a bit off the price if you pay in cash.

However, the tradie's love of the folding stuff caught the attention of the Treasurer's budget in Parliament last week, with warnings of a big crackdown on the cash trade in the construction industry, and on tax avoidance by contractors in general.

Last month the Australian Bureau of Statistics revealed that 1.1 million Australian workers now operate as contractors, and the number is rising quickly.

The biggest group, of course, are men in the construction industry, and



TRADIES: It's a good life if you choose it, but not for those forced to throw away legal protections.

a lot of these are self-employed tradies. But the number of contractors is rising in manufacturing as well as in service jobs like transport, cleaning, security and "temping" on the office circuit.

The problem here is not independent tradies with proper qualifications making good money in the building industry where there are skills shortages.

The problem is with those companies who force contracting onto those workers who don't have much choice in the labour market.

For what seems like a growing number of companies, contracting is a way of shifting an employer's obligations onto a worker, a way a boss can avoid paying proper wages and super, providing sick leave and annual holidays, and having proper workers' compensation insurance.

The lure of working for yourself, can come horribly unstuck when the business at the other end of a

contract goes broke, or an accident puts a worker in plaster with a stack of medical bills and no compo.

The construction union, the CFMEU, is concerned at the growth of what it calls "sham contracting" where workers are pushed onto contracts to avoid regular enterprise agreements.

Expect a stink over the new budget measures, then. Genuine enterprise-based contractors will cry foul over the red tape and paperwork, and perhaps they have a good case. There is no more pathetic sight than a tradie's kitchen table spread with crushed invoices, dirty cheques and a greasy ledger, overseen by a pair of bleary eyes that'd rather be watching the footy. Yet tradies will always find a way to keep their wallets thick and their bank statements thin, just like they always give pre-dawn highway patrol cars the slip.

Expect too that business groups will attack the crackdown with

claims that this is federal Labor doing its bit to maintain membership levels in its affiliated unions, and perhaps there's some truth in that as well.

But remind yourself of the person who doesn't have much choice about the work he or she can get. Sure, it's great that many are able to back themselves and go it alone. However, these same freedoms create opportunities for marginalised workers to be exploited.

The argument that always gets me onside is the one that says it is wrong for any boss to shed the responsibility that comes with being an employer. A fair wage and a safe workplace are always non-negotiable. A worker should never be forced to choose between them and a contract.

Professor Phillip O'Neill is director of the Urban Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney.

## Enemies are who you choose them to be

A stone speaks truth, writes Douglas Haley.

THERE'S a block of stone on a Palestinian road, facing an Israeli settlement, that has carved upon it these words: "We refuse to be enemies".

I don't know who wrote it, and ultimately it doesn't really matter; I suppose. What matters is that someone, somewhere, is willing to take that stand.

And it really is a stand. When we are attacked, when we are afraid, when we feel abused, or manipulated, or used, our instinctive reaction is to cast the protagonist in the role of enemy.

This allows us several emotional luxuries, like feeling ourselves to be in "the right" and hence somehow superior, or feeling justified in our

aggression or anger or hatred.

But do any of these emotional luxuries actually achieve anything other than soothing our delicate egos and further estranging an already strained relationship?

When Jesus came into the midst of Israel, and told his listeners that, despite the fact that they were being ruled by the Romans; despite the fact that basically every religious order around them was opposed to them; despite years of oppression and hardship, they were to love their enemies, he called them away from any emotional luxury and towards a very costly and very active love.

I don't think Jesus' call is any less radical or necessary today.

In a world where people burn Korans to make a point, where they dance in the streets for joy that someone has been assassinated, where they scream "death to the

infidel" at the skies, where they burn churches and retaliate in kind, Jesus' call to love our enemies has never been more needed, nor more difficult.

To love one's enemies in an international politico-religious climate such as ours requires far more than just moments of good will, it requires more than cheap political rhetoric about multiculturalism or tolerance.

It actually requires something akin to stubborn dogged resistance on the part of individuals in all their relationships and their language.

To love those who differ from ourselves, particularly when their self-understanding is that they are our enemies, requires a flat refusal to allow oneself to even accept the possibility that we may be enemies.

To love one's enemies, at its heart, involves the refusal to be enemies.

We refuse to be enemies. For the different ethnic groups

which make up our society, our neighbourhoods, our streets: we refuse to be enemies.

For the different religious groups who are all learning to either fear each other or pretend we're all alike, we need to realise that we are different, and yet, still, we refuse to be enemies.

Jesus told us to love our enemies. That doesn't mean agree with everything they do. What it does mean is that however we may differ, we won't let that make us enemies.

If Jesus is in any way your Lord, then today, resolve to refuse to be enemies.

Rev Douglas Haley is assistant minister at Newcastle's St Andrew's and St John's Presbyterian churches. Article supplied by the Churches Media Association.



### Come off it NBN

NBN's decision to cancel the new comedy from the Little Britain team, *Come Fly with Me*, wasn't well received.

I wonder if NBN sees the irony in the whole thing? I doubt it... Worried on the one hand if it will offend because of stereotyping groups in the community and then on the other hand telling everyone that regional viewers are different.

- Gauntlet

Come on James Joyce, this is a gee up. Nobody that's employed in the TV industry is that stupid. Plug a show prime time for 6 weeks then pull it. NBN the home of laughter, well that decision certainly is.

- Horse

This is akin to saying that regional viewers are unsophisticated, humourless wowsers. Thank goodness the ABC isn't quite as patronising as NBN or we wouldn't have been able to see *Angry Boys* until our metropolitan betters had decided it was OK for us. This is just insulting.

- Sarah

I hardly watch TV at the mo but stuff like this gets very smutty, someone will always air it. I tend to catch up with a bit of SBS at the mo and it freaks me out with all the unsettled countries. I appreciate our "distance" from the rest of the world. You can always pick up with the quirky smut any day. I have no objection to a refusal of this.

- PK

Are you kidding... just another reason to download shows or wait until they come out on DVD. NBN are really going to come undone after this.

- Really

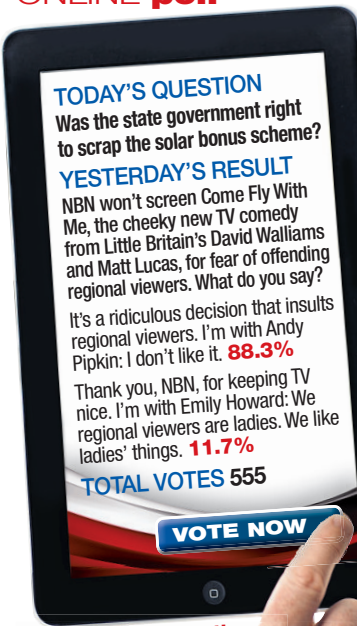
I've downloaded and watched it all already ad-free. Death to the TV networks!

- MickR

What a weak excuse I love the *Little Britain* characters and do not find them offensive. Wake up NBN.

- Screen

### ONLINE poll



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