

MUA, Here to Stay ... Today!

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THE much-criticized H.R. Nicholls Society held its nineteenth conference in Melbourne from 31 July to 2 August. The title of the conference was *MUA, Here to Stay ... Today!* The recent waterfront dispute provided the central theme of the conference, being the subject, directly or indirectly, of most of its papers.

The conference was kicked off on the Friday night by an address by the Hon. Peter Reith, Minister for Workplace Relations and Small Business. He gave the Society a serve for what he said were the inaccuracies and unfounded personal attacks (on him) of its *Mission Abandoned* document released in 1996 criticizing the *Workplace Relations Act* (or the 'Kernot-Reith Act', as the Society is wont to call it). It was clear that, 18 months later, the document's critique still irked him.

The next day, Des Moore and myself gave papers on unemployment and its causes—Des concentrating on rebutting standard criticisms of labour market de-regulation, using the US labour market as an example, while I delineated how poor Australian performance currently was and the role of politics in that performance.¹ The President of the Society, Ray Evans, read a lively paper by journalist and author Tim Hewat on the history of waterfront unionism. Ken Phillips once again entertained with an original analysis of the economic significance of the master-servant relationship in employment. Geoff Vazey, the Chief Executive of the Ports of Auckland Ltd, gave a thorough and, by comparison with the Australian waterfront, depressing picture of how far New Zealand had gone in achieving efficient waterfront practice. Andrew McIntyre gave an amusing, and disturbing, paper on the social role of anti-discrimination legislation.

The last paper of the day was a highly informative and entertaining presentation and question-and-answer session given by Paul Houlihan, the Managing Director of P&C Stevedores. Worrying information on the role of the Victoria Police in the dispute emerged during this session.

The dinner speech was given by Donald McGauchie, immediate past-president of the National Farmers' Federation, focusing on trade and competition as the only real basis for rural economic success—despite bad seasons and poor commodity prices there is still much evidence of vitality and successful entrepreneurship in the bush. Exports of processed foods are increasing rapidly and new science and technology offer great new opportunities for the future. He emphasized how critical to the bush are competitive enterprises in the service sector—particularly the waterfront.

The first paper on Sunday was the most disturbing of the Conference. Given by Stuart Wood, who acted for Patricks in attempting to clear the pickets by legal action, it provided documented information on the high level of violence on the pickets, how an accurate picture of the pickets was not conveyed via the media, and the role of the Victoria Police in not enforcing legal injunctions, in preserving a violence-appeasing 'order' rather than enforcing the law and, at times, assisting the picketing. Alan Mitchell, Economics Editor of the *Australian Financial Review*, discussed the role of the press, defended the interest in the Government's role, noted that MUA press management was generally far superior to that of Patricks or the Government and made some fairly trenchant observations on the ongoing performance of the ABC—which he characterized as flowing from poor management insufficiently willing to ensure the quality of its product.

The final session constituted a summing up by Ray Evans as President and a general discussion. A former importer pointed out the crucial role of the waterfront labour monopoly in enforcing union power—which he said was regularly exerted on small and medium-sized companies to get acquiescence on union demands in other industries. A contractor outlined how the large companies in his industry were frustrating award simplification, as complex awards acted as a protective device against competitors.

It was a very informative, and often very entertaining, conference. The attendees were given far more insight into the real story of the waterfront dispute than could have been gleaned even from the most assiduous consumption of the offerings of the press.

NOTE

- 1 My paper is available on the IPA website [<http://www.ipa.org.au/>]. All the papers from the conference will become available on the H. R. Nicholls Society website [<http://venue.exhibit.com.au/~nicholls/>].

Michael Warby is Editor of the IPA Review and a Board Member of the H.R. Nicholls Society.

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Congratulations to Gary Johns

IPA Senior Fellow, the Hon. Gary Johns, has been appointed by the Commonwealth to the Australian Citizenship Council, chaired by Sir Ninian Stephen.

The Council is to develop a report on contemporary issues in Australian citizenship policy and law, and advise on arrangements for the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Australian citizenship which commence on 26 January 1999. The IPA would like to congratulate Gary on this appointment, a well-deserved recognition of his continuing commitment to the betterment of Australia.