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Security of public holidays in doubt

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JOHN Howard's pledge to protect public holidays was in doubt last night as government amendments to his **workplace** legislation handed employers ``reasonable grounds'' to expect people to work on those days.

The Government will also take complete control over public holidays for the first time, with a new ministerial power to abolish any except for seven.

And people required by their employer to work on public holidays -- but who refuse -- might not be guaranteed payment if they take the day off.

The public holiday provisions are among 337 amendments attached to the Government's Work Choices legislation, which Mr Howard wants passed in the Senate today.

If successful, the Prime Minister will realise an ambition of 20 years to completely overhaul Australia's **industrial** relations system, replacing it with one that shifts negotiations more to individual enterprises and downgrades **union** involvement.

Labor and the Democrats accused the Government of rushing the bill yesterday, complaining they had no time to even read the 337 amendments contained in a 98-page document given to them 30 minutes before a short Senate debate.

The Prime Minister promised to protect public holidays after protests from Queensland Nationals senator Barnaby Joyce that people could be forced to work on days such as Christmas or Good Friday under the original bill introduced last month.

Amendments released yesterday recognise seven public holidays: Christmas Day, Boxing Day, New Year's Day, Australia Day, Good Friday, Easter Monday and Anzac Day.

They also allow ``any other day'' observed by states or territories, such as the Queen's Birthday, Labour Day, or Melbourne Cup Day in Victoria.

However, the Government gives the power to the **Workplace** Relations Minister to exclude ``a day, or any kind of day'' in addition to its recognised list of seven.

An employee will be entitled to a day off on a public holiday and may refuse a request to work based on ``reasonable grounds''. But the employee will not have reasonable grounds if their **workplace** agreement ``contemplates that the employer might require work on public holidays''.

A spokesman for **Workplace** Relations Minister **Kevin Andrews** said provisions giving employers the right to expect work on public holidays were intended to cover nurses and essential services.

But Opposition spokesman **Stephen Smith** said no workers had guaranteed protection and could be sacked for refusing to turn up. He said workers were not guaranteed penalty rates or lieu days for working public holidays. They also were not guaranteed payment for taking the day off if they refused a request to work.

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