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Work to rule

Author: Gwyn Topham

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Long hours are the badge of honour of the new elite in the office, writes Gwyn Topham.

CAN this really be Sydney? A city that draws young travellers and migrants from around the world on a promise of beaches and good living has a new reality: a cost of living higher than New York or Rome.

It's the seventh-most expensive place in the world to buy a house. Repossessions are again a familiar sight. With burgeoning mortgages, child-care bills and debt, people are stretching to the limit. For many of those, that means working longer hours than ever.

Australians work some of the longest hours in the Western world, despite relatively high living standards. So what's going on? Is it purely the economic pinch? Or as some suggest, do we now believe workaholicism is a badge of honour?

We have reached a point where hours that were once seen as exploitive are now passed off as a lifestyle choice.

Australian Bureau of Statistics research and figures show we have become addicted to work. Work has not only become a means of paying our increasing debt but has become bound up with personal identity.

Madeleine Bunting, British author of *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture Is Ruling Our Lives*, says overwork has become a sign of status. She quotes the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman: that now, workaholics preoccupied with the challenges of their jobs 24 hours a day are not found among the slaves but in the lucky, successful elite.

The hardworking elite in Sydney are likely to be found in law firms - from junior levels to partners - in hospitals and in banking and finance.

The trick, Bauman says, is no longer to minimise work time but "to efface altogether the line dividing ... work from recreation". The theme is taken up by David Brooks, a sociologist writing about young workers in the US: if "employees start thinking like artists and activists, they actually work harder for the company ... if work is a form of self-expression, then you never want to stop". Both could easily have been talking about Paul Bootliff,

33, a advertising executive who barely separates his job and life, and is happy to work all hours - "an ego-driven" thing, he says.

For those who don't find fulfilment at work and are locked into long hours, Bauman writes, aspirations to freedom are channelled into consumption. Hence, says Bunting, the desire for the perfect home, interiors, gadgetry - or a harbour view and drinking trendy cocktails. "Overwork and consumerism feed off each other."

But many, as American Barbara Ehrenreich describes in her book *Nickel and Dimed*, are locked into low-wage industries that make the idea of either conspicuous consumption or choosing a work-life balance a cruel joke.

Though as Bunting points out, even for the majority who have a degree of choice, those choices are made not in isolation: "They are the product of the organisational culture of our workplaces, which promotes concepts of success, team spirit ... and a powerful work ethic."

According to Helen Trinca and Catherine Fox, authors of *Better than Sex: How a Whole Generation Got Hooked on Work*, jobs now have "an often implicit requirement of full commitment", leaving little time or energy for anything else, a transaction that didn't exist even a decade ago. Michel Foucault's ideas of self-policing societies apply equally to the workplace, they say: firms no longer need a boss or a clocking-in card to ensure their staff stay on the job. And for those who break through the culture of presenteeism, mobile phones and BlackBerries keep alive the tentacles of work.

The Work Life Balance Foundation says one of the issues it tackles is that expressing a desire for work-life balance can brand you as uncommitted and unmotivated. Yet it also reassures employers that "many people love their work and for them the perfect balance is working very long hours". So what do the Gordon Gekkos, who think lunch is for wimps, make of those who find "perfect balance" means shorter hours?

Professor Sue Richardson, of the National Institute of Labour Studies, says: "Some employers do make some effort to accommodate the non-work needs of their employees - but there are very strong, subtle cultures here that say, 'By all means take that time off, but don't expect to be promoted'. Men pick it up very strongly and don't want to pay that price. Women pick it up, take a deep breath - and do pay that price, or don't have children."

This month, British unions are holding a Work Your Proper Hours Day. The date marks the moment when the average employee stops "working free" and starts earning, based on the number of days clocked up in unpaid overtime each year. For the one in three Australians who put in more than 48 hours a week, their unpaid overtime would stretch to March 26.

We are living through an "epidemic of overtime," says **Richard Marles**, assistant secretary of the **ACTU**. "It's the critical issue of our age. We're a nice, well-off Western society, middle of the road in terms of health, education, lifestyle. But where we really stand out is in terms of working hours."

Most recent figures from the Bureau of Statistics make startling reading. Average hours for full-time workers have been increasing for the past quarter of a century. The proportion working more than 60 hours a week has shot up by 81 per cent. And Australian full-time workers are more

likely to put in more than 50 hours a week than those in any other OECD country.

It wasn't always thus. Australia led the way in reducing work hours: the first country to achieve a 48-hour week, down to 40 by 1948. Marles says: "Once again, the place of work in our lives has got out of control. The cultural change we need to bring about is the same - placing work in the proper context in our lives."

While one result of Mark Latham's short tenure as leader of the Opposition was to highlight work-life balance as a political issue, the history of similar ventures abroad might prompt scepticism. The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, launched a work-life balance campaign in 2000, while ensuring Britain was able to opt out of the European Union's proposals for a maximum working week. After a decade of discussion of work-life balance in the US, rights to paid holidays and maternity leave remain far below those enjoyed in Europe. Now the issue is on the political agenda in Australia - at the same time as labour reforms that many believe will make it difficult for employees, on individual contracts, to resist overtime.

Should long hours be a matter for concern? "It really depends on the individual," says a Sydney career psychologist, Jim Bright. "Some people who absolutely love their work and have relatively few commitments or have a large support network can thrive on it."

But Bright warns: "For others with a small family or health issues, or those compelled to do it against their will, it can be exceedingly stressful and lead to a whole range of things such as accidents or mental illness."

The current route to tackling overwork is an appeal to corporate self-interest. US consultancy worklifebalance.com tells chief executives: "Work-life balance ... provides the biggest and easiest upside opportunity to immediately impact your business." A survey of Australian companies by Managing Work Life Balance International claims firms which have implemented life-friendly policies have experienced a drop in sick leave and staff turnover.

Companies also report increased productivity - a point emphasised by Marles, who says: "Human beings are not limitless sources of energy." He points to studies at the University of South Australia Centre for Sleep Research, showing that beyond 45 to 50 hours a week, time at work has little productive value. This applies as much to office jobs as manual ones. "The first thing to go is your brain, basically."

Businesses may not have the luxury of taking such decisions for long, however. Demographics point to a decline in young people coming to the workplace, meaning, Richardson says, that those who do will be in a much stronger position: "If we can sustain high levels of employment, for some types of worker the balance of power is shifting."

Those "ambitious to climb up the slippery pole" will just have to do the hours, she says. "For the rest, mental and physical health and the capacity to care for others depends on demanding better hours and conditions. But they need to learn that they have the power to say that to their employer."

You never know when inspiration's going to strike

Paul Bootliff, 33, works for Arnold advertising agency and is no stranger to long hours.

"I come in at 9am and finish on average at eight or nine in the evening," he says. "Most weekends I do a little bit of work. If there's something huge on - a pitch for an advertising account - I'd be in all weekend and probably work until midnight. That's quite common in advertising.

"I get off on the fact that it's not a nine-to-five gig. Every day's interesting and stimulating and you get new challenges thrown at you. You're juggling a lot of things."

And his working day doesn't finish when he leaves work. It spills into his social life and shapes his friendships and interests.

"We invariably end up going to the pub with workmates, talking about work. So the social life intermingles a lot of the time. I don't separate the two," he says.

"I tend to go to the movies, watch TV - trying to get plugged into popular culture - and that feeds back into my work. You never know when inspiration's going to strike; you're constantly looking for ideas where the next ad's going to come from.

"Money is important but secondary. It's an ego-driven job - being happy with myself and high creative standards.

"I have a girlfriend - she's constantly upset with me and wanting to spend more time with me. I have broken dates and stuff. She's understanding - to a certain degree. Less so when I work till 5am and end up going home and knocking on her door.

"I think if anything it's just going to get more hectic. I have more goals I want to achieve. If I lost my job tomorrow I'd have a well-earned holiday - and then probably get straight back into it."

Caption :PHOTO: Creative touch ... "Money is important but secondary," says Paul Bootlif. "It's an ego-driven job ..." Photo: Nick Moir

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