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We're not finished with workplace changes: Howard

Author: David Humphries

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JUST as the Howard Government thought it had doused the latest bushfire over whether it secretly plans radical industrial relations changes, the Prime Minister has lit another blaze.

The acting **Workplace Relations** Minister, Philip Ruddock, said last week that **John Howard** made it clear there would be no change to the workplace relations law as overhauled in March.

But yesterday, Mr Howard said that more industrial relations reform was essential for a stronger economy.

"I want to tell you the Government has no intention of getting lazy or tired on the job when it comes to economic reform," he told a public meeting in regional Victoria.

"My responsibility as Prime Minister, the responsibility of all the ministers, the responsibility of the entire parliamentary team, is to make sure that everything that we have achieved economically is not only maintained but it is added to as the years go by.

"And we can only do that, we can only entrench and strengthen the economy further, if we're willing to undertake further reforms such as industrial relations reform."

As industrial relations emerges as the key battleground for the election due late next year, the Government has fumbled efforts to allay suspicion that its workplace reform agenda is a work in progress.

The Treasurer, Peter Costello, set the hares running last year with his suggestion that exemption from unfair dismissal law should extend to all employers, not just those with fewer than 100 workers.

In March, the Finance Minister, Nick Minchin, said the Government wanted

an election mandate for "another wave of industrial relations reform".

He told an industrial relations reform lobby, the H.R. Nicholls Society, that there was still much to do in an evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, workplace change process.

Senator Minchin thought his comments were confidential, and the Government publicly backed away from them. Presumably, other ministers agreed with Senator Minchin's observation that the "great majority" of Australians "violently disagree" with changes already announced.

Last week, a document revealed that the country's biggest employer lobby was pressing for more changes. It showed that the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry met the **Workplace Relations** Minister, **Kevin Andrews**, on July 12 and asked for employers' rights to be extended.

That prompted Mr Ruddock to declare last week: "We will not be about fundamentally changing the arrangements we've put in place."

The Opposition Leader, Kim Beazley, said yesterday that Mr Howard was paving the way for "even more extreme" laws threatening holidays and the standard 38-hour week.

"John Howard is not finished with the Australian people yet," he said. "That's what the secret Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry agenda for Howard's Government was all about."

Yesterday, Mr Howard said advocacy of reform was never easy but its achievement was essential. "We can't rest on our laurels; we can't say ... prosperity is here, it will go on forever, let's all take a holiday."

That would invite legitimate criticism, Mr Howard said.

If prosperity fell, he said, Australians would ask of the Government: "Why did they get tired, why did they get lazy on the job? Well, I want to tell you the Government has no intention of getting lazy or tired on the job when it comes to economic reform."

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