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AWA pledge a crucial point of difference

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Labor leader Kim Beazley has, naturally, tried to claim the moral high ground in his pledge to abolish individual Australian workplace agreements (AWAs).

Beazley has argued they are a "lazy route to profit" for employers, which don't boost productivity and which hit the most vulnerable workers hardest.

For its part, the government has sought to portray Beazley as a weak, old-style Labor leader in thrall to union powerbrokers.

The government's spin follows Beazley - and his industrial relations spokesman Stephen Smith - coming under fire from labour leaders such as Unions NSW secretary John Robertson.

And there is no doubt that the abolition of AWAs was a central plank of what unions wanted in any Labor IR policy, and that unions would have fired up if Beazley had not delivered.

But the fact remains that Beazley has taken the plunge on AWAs because it proves a crucial point of difference between Labor and the coalition.

ACTU secretary **Greg Combet** says Beazley is acting for the right reasons, but that the Labor leader will also win voter support from his stance.

Combet says recent union opinion polling conducted in 24 key marginal seats shows strong community opposition to individual contracts.

Seventy per cent of respondents believe that individual contracts give too much power employers.

"The Howard government may be in line with the opinions of big business on its IR laws but it is greatly out of step with community opinion," Combet

says.

What the government has not acknowledged, publicly at least, is that it has a political problem with the Work Choices changes.

Internal opinion polling for both sides of politics is said to have detected that voters are not overly concerned about the evidence piling up at the AWB inquiry, despite the serious governance issues raised.

But the polling is also said to have indicated widespread unease about job security, including among the "Howard battlers" who supported the coalition in droves at the last election.

The government is relying on its strong employment record when staring down Labor and union attacks on Work Choices, but it will have to find better defences - or distractions - in coming months.

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