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Backer's reversal on new IR laws

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ONE of the original backers of John Howard's big push to deregulate the labour market has compared his workplace changes to the old Soviet system of ``command and control''.

The conservative H.R. Nicholls Society yesterday accused the Prime Minister of centralising power in his Government's hands under complex laws that trampled on states' rights.

Criticism from the usually government-friendly conservative think tank came as **ACTU** secretary **Greg Combet** claimed that Chinese, Croatian, Slovenian and Indonesian guest workers were taking the jobs of Australians and being paid low wages in their own currencies.

Mr Combet said the effects of a deregulated labour market encouraged by the Government could already be seen, with guest workers allowed into Australia for low-skilled jobs without checking whether locals were available.

He said these workers were paid through their home bank accounts and some received bonuses in Australian dollars.

The **ACTU** leader also yesterday admitted for the first time that the Howard government changes -- which take effect today -- could be very hard to reverse, contradicting Labor's line that it will wind back the reforms if it is elected next year.

``These will be very hard eggs to unscramble at the end of the day, depending on what the High Court says," Mr Combet said.

Speaking on ABC television yesterday, H.R. Nicholls Society president Ray Evans attacked the power centralised in the Government from the new changes.

``It's rather like going back to the old Soviet system of command and control, where every economic decision has to go back to some central authority and get ticked off," he said.

A spokesman for Mr Andrews dismissed the H.R. Nicholls Society, saying: ``What would you expect? Let's get a grip. The H.R. Nicholls Society is such a small group it is almost moribund."''

Earlier this month, Finance Minister and strong Howard ally Nick Minchin gave an address to the society flagging further workplace reforms ahead. Another past supporter of the group is Treasurer Peter Costello.

Mr Howard said yesterday he believed new laws to foster agreement-making in the workplace and allow more flexibility on working conditions would be very beneficial over time.

``I do not believe that the world is going to come to an end, or the sky will fall in next week, as has been predicted by Mr Combet and Mr Beazley," he said. ``More jobs will be generated in the small business sector as a result of the removal of the absurd job-destroying unfair dismissal laws."

As a rerun of **ACTU** advertisements opposing the changes began on national television last night, Mr Howard predicted a ``scare campaign" would continue. But he also predicted it would fail as people reacted according to their experience and many benefited by gaining job opportunities.

Mr Combet said Australians would not have any protection from unfair dismissal from today.

``The first person who's sacked unfairly can send a thank-you note to John Howard for that," he said.

The **ACTU** leader also criticised Labor for being distracted from fighting the workplace changes by its own internal bickering.

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