



Relaxed and comfortable - just like 1893

By Alan Ramsey

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JOHN Kelly lived more than a century ago. He ran the Peak Hill Gold Mine, in western NSW, and in August 1893 he sat down and wrote a letter which he circularised to his workforce. Eighty-six years later, in 1979, David Perkins found the letter reproduced in a newspaper stuffed as backing behind an old laundry wall mirror in a Newtown terrace. Perkins carefully framed the newspaper and the other day he sent me a copy.

The Howard Government is scheduled today to introduce into Parliament its hugely contentious industrial relations legislation, all 700 pages of it. At last we get to see the detail of what the Government has been spending \$55 million of public money propagandising for the past month.

A man now dead a century would surely have approved of what it will tell us. Similarly, John Howard, you feel, would have been wonderfully relaxed and comfortable putting his name to the ultimatum Kelly gave his mine workers all those years ago.

"Gentlemen," wrote Kelly.

"In order that there shall be neither misunderstanding nor any distorting of my words, I put what I wish to say to you on paper in the form of a circular. It is my intention - and no talking can alter it - to reduce the present rates of pay on the mine by 10 per cent from 1st September. This is to say, those who now receive 110 pence per day will be reduced to 100, those who receive 100 to 90, and so on down.

"It is, as it appears to me, only fair to afford you an opportunity of obtaining better pay elsewhere, and this is my reason for giving you a month's notice. You will not inconvenience me much by leaving, as I am simply beset by men begging for employment at any price, and I think I know where to lay my hands on what I want if you leave.

"I am not, bear in mind, acting for myself, but for a public company, and it would be dishonest of me were I to pay away one penny more of its money for any commodity than the market value. You would not remain in the mine for five minutes if you could get better pay elsewhere. Nor would I blame you for going. You would not pay 4d per loaf for bread if you could get it elsewhere for 3d, and what you would yourselves do, you surely cannot object to my doing.

"Further, the reduction will enable me to employ fully 50 per cent more workers, and in view of the present widespread [unemployment] distress, all men with hearts will willingly give away a little to make room for others willing to work if they could get it. Both [mine foremen] have assured me you are as good a gang of men as any in any mine in the colony. I have listened, and well know the difficulty in getting good men. I also know you have put your all in the mine, your brains and your [experience] as well as your hands.

"No one advantage in your favour has not been pointed out to me. [However] I am led to believe I can get any number of men at 20 per cent less than you are receiving. I therefore propose to reduce you only 10 per cent, giving you credit for qualities I cannot look for in strangers.

"I shall expect your answer on or before next payday. Every man will answer for himself by giving his signature to Mr Reidy over 'I will accept reduction'. If I receive no such paper, I shall act at once to [replace you].

"I am, gentlemen, yours faithfully,

"John E. Kelly, managing director."

The letter was reproduced in the four-page issue (price, one penny) of Saturday, August 12, 1893, of *The Australian Workman*, the "official organ of the Trades and Labor Council and Labor Electoral Leagues of New South Wales", a Sydney union newspaper which lasted a bare seven years, until September 1897. The Peak Hill mine lasted much longer, until 1917 or thereabouts.

And Kelly's ultimatum?

His workers called a meeting which Kelly black-balled and threatened anyone who attended with "instant dismissal". The miners retaliated by going on strike. I don't know how the impasse ended. What I do know is our Prime Minister thinks this is still 1893.

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