

THIS WOMAN CAN CUT OUR DOLE QUEUES

Author: Elisabeth Wynhausen
Publication: THE AUSTRALIAN (13/08/2004. p6)

AUSTRALIA could drastically reduce the growing ranks of the long-term unemployed by adopting a British program that drafts in captains of industry to identify skills shortages and design training courses. Australian **Toni Wren**, director of research for British Prime Minister Tony Blair's National Employment Panel, told a seminar in Sydney yesterday about a pilot program that has succeeded in getting disadvantaged jobseekers such as disabled people and lone parents into decent jobs that pay well.

Since Mr Blair came to power in 1997, long-term unemployment in Britain has fallen 77per cent, on the back of a strong economy. The strength of the Australian economy has also cut official unemployment figures, but the number of people on the dole for five years or more is 68per cent higher than it was in 1999.

The difference, according to Ms Wren, is the Blair Government's support for programs that assist the most disadvantaged jobseekers in finding work.

"Australia hasn't had the same investment in training and employer engagement," she said.

In Britain, the strongest support comes from the man who controls the purse strings, Chancellor Gordon Brown. "The employers' involvement has been leveraged by the Chancellor, who personally approaches captains of industry," said Ms Wren. "They don't say no to the Chancellor."

Instead of the supply-side approach -- in which the unemployed are put into available training courses -- the British Government's Ambition program is "demand-led".

"You work with employers in areas where they've got skill shortages to design training," Ms Wren said. "If an employer is standing up and saying there's a real job at the end of it, that has a huge effect. "

Though many of the clients are from the so-called "inactive" group -- that which is hardest to shift off welfare -- Ambition has succeeded in getting 61per cent of those who start the courses into jobs. Some 76 per cent are still in the job six months later.

By contrast, Senate estimates heard last June that in Australia, for the year to March 2003, just 12.3per cent of the most disadvantaged job-seekers going through labour market assistance programs found full-time employment.

Australia spends close to \$1billion a year on the Job Network, but its agencies were not dealing with the most disadvantaged job-seekers, said a media officer for Labor's Employment Services spokesman, Anthony Albanese.