

Shorten, Kelty, de Bruyn are worthy, moderate union leaders

Greg Sheridan, [The Australian](#), July 11, 2015

Some attacks on the kind of moderate, intelligent and productive unionism represented by the likes of Bill Kelty, Martin Ferguson and Bill Shorten when he ran the Australian Workers Union are becoming bizarre.

The polar opposite of Shorten's AWU was the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union. The CFMEU is radical, abusive and, according to evidence given to the trade union royal commission, sometimes violent. The economic dislocation it brings is enormous. The cost to the community, and to jobs, is significant.

Yet the one thing worse than that, apparently, is a moderate union concerned with productivity, flexibility and, above all, jobs, which are only ever guaranteed by profitable companies. This line of argument, pursued by many commentators, is frankly more than a bit weird.

But before returning to Shorten, let's consider a more conventional foreign affairs issue. Next month the Polish government will present a high award to an Australian citizen. Modern Poland is a 24-carat democracy, a very good friend to Australia, a beacon of strategic sense and decency in central Europe. It is perhaps the most successful ex-communist country in Europe. So which Australian is it giving an award to, and why?

The President of the Republic of Poland has awarded Joe de Bruyn, until recently the national secretary of the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association, with the Officer's Cross of his country's Order of Merit. This is a high award and it recognises a singular and magnificent commitment to fundamental human decency and wholly praiseworthy union solidarity.

And solidarity is the right term. De Bruyn is now the SDA's honorary national president. He has also recently retired as vice-president of the ACTU and a member of the Labor Party's national executive. He became national secretary of the SDA in 1978. In the Cold War days, he was an anti-communist union leader of a type to be found in western European social democratic parties and in the Democratic Party in the US.

In 1980 the free Polish trade union movement Solidarity was founded in the Gdansk shipyards. It was led by Lech Walesa. A year after its birth, Solidarity had a membership of more than nine million. In December 1981, the communist government of Poland declared martial law. Almost all of Solidarity's leaders were imprisoned. Two of the main Solidarity figures, Jerzy Milewski and Magda Wojcik, were out of the country at the time, so they remained at liberty.

The SDA, in collaboration with the clerks' union, brought them to Australia for an important tour. Putting international pressure on the repressive, communist Polish government was crucial at that time. All through the 1980s, the SDA acted in support of Solidarity. (Full disclosure: nearly 40 years ago I worked for de Bruyn for about 18 months and for a time in the 80s I was a member of one of the Australian committees in support of Solidarity.)

In 1989 a semi-free election was held in Poland, which led to the establishment of the first non-communist government in the Soviet bloc. The SDA, in alliance with the Solidarity Information Bureau, set up a charity that raised money in the crucial transition phase from communism. This money was mostly used for Polish hospitals. The union itself made a small donation and it helped others raise \$1 million for this cause.

Finally, in 1990, Walesa was elected president of Poland and this was critical in the fall of European communism and the dissolution of the communist bloc. This was not only an epic victory for the human spirit, for liberty and for elementary decency, and it not only represented the defeat of

communism — which, with Nazism, was one of the two most monstrous and murderous ideologies of the 20th century.

It also had profound beneficial effects in Australia. While the Australian Left remained ratty and destructive, after the fall of communism it was not trying to ape, or receive money from, or be led by, an international totalitarian movement.

De Bruyn and the whole SDA leadership played a small but significant role in helping the heroes of history, and incidentally helping Australia.

Yet de Bruyn has been relentlessly attacked in recent months, especially in the Fairfax media, which seems to prefer both the politics and the industrial strategy of the communists and their successors to that of the moderates.

Let's be absolutely clear about one thing. Australia is an infinitely better country because men like de Bruyn fought the political battles within the union movement to provide sane and sensible leadership. De Bruyn has been an effective union leader. He has built the SDA into Australia's largest union, with about 215,000 members, all voluntarily enrolled.

He is unpopular in the Fairfax zeitgeist because he has moderately conservative social views, as though it were a crime against nature for a senior labour movement figure to hold views similar to those held by millions of ordinary workers. Meanwhile he is attacked by the CFMEU strand in Australian unionism because he is not a destructive militant, and because one branch of his union dared to suggest that it might be worth investigating some flexibility on penalty rates. As it turned out, the SDA in South Australia was only prepared to trade penalty rates for higher base rates of a kind which mean that total labour costs would rise.

Which brings us back to Shorten. Kelty, formerly the ACTU secretary and one of the key architects of the prices and incomes accord under the Hawke government, said of Shorten: "He was brave and flexible when the country needed brave and flexible union leaders to make big changes. To be criticised for that flexibility and adaptability ... is the kind of thing you would expect from the loony Left."

Ferguson said that the kind of agreements Shorten championed were examples of what "the Hawke and Keating governments achieved".

Referring to Melbourne's EastLink tollway agreement, Ferguson said the leadership of Shorten in partnership with the Victorian government "was something we could only hope that was achieved on more infrastructure projects, especially when you compare it with the debacle and thuggery on parts of the upgraded West Gate (project) with the CFMEU aggressively trying to undermine the AWU and cause industrial disruption".

Shorten thinks it's a good idea for companies to succeed so workers have jobs. This is a crime?

This is not a blanket endorsement of Shorten's leadership or his program for government or even his industrial relations policies. It is a disgrace that Labor legislatively blocks the recreation of the Australian Building and Construction Commission. The ABCC under the Howard government is one of the very few bodies in recent years to have had any success in bringing a semblance of the rule of law and normally orderly procedures to the worst construction sites. Similarly Labor blocks the establishment of the Registered Organisations Commission, which would hold union officials to the same levels of disclosure and financial behaviour that companies must observe.

The serious critique of Shorten as Labor leader is his failure to conceive and advance a credible program of economic reform. It certainly has absolutely nothing to do with his time as a union leader.

The trade union royal commission has uncovered some shocking truths, but not about the strand of unionism that Shorten represents. Certainly there is a strong argument to be made for much greater

transparency, and much stronger disclosure laws, regarding the financial interactions of companies and unions.

But the shock-horror revelations that companies have donated money to unions would come as a surprise only to people who have spent the past half century on Mars and have certainly made not even the most cursory examination of Australian politics.

Moderate unionism is an important feature of almost every successful society in the world. In unionism extremists, not moderates, are the problem.

×