



Labor's class envy is in the past: Emerson

Matthew Franklin

LABOR frontbencher Craig Emerson says his party must broaden its appeal by burying its reputation for class envy and standing for all workers, regardless of whether they belong to trade unions.

In a significant shift in Labor's ideological emphasis, Dr Emerson told *The Australian* yesterday that Labor accepted true freedom in the workplace by acknowledging people's right to choose how they wanted to organise themselves in the workplace.

However, Dr Emerson, who returned to Labor's front bench on Sunday under new Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd, said Labor would continue to oppose the Howard Government's Work Choices laws because they denied real choice by allowing employers to veto their employees' right to collective bargaining.

"I want to work with my colleagues to ensure flexibility while also protecting the pay and conditions of vulnerable workers," he said.

Dr Emerson, a former industrial relations spokesman, was banished to the back bench under previous leader Kim Beazley.

But Mr Rudd revived the career of his fellow Queenslander by appointing him to the new role of Labor spokesman for the service economy, small business and independent contractors.

Dr Emerson said Labor had a reputation in the business community for class animosity, even though it had long since moved on from this position.

"We should affirm that, once and for all, we have put those class distinctions and class struggles behind us," he said. "We represent and support all working people regardless of... how they want to organise themselves in the workforce, whether it be through the organised trade union movement, as genuine independent contractors or through the choice of small business as a career. They are all workers, they all create wealth, they all take risks, they all deserve reward for effort."

Dr Emerson's approach broadens Labor's previous industrial relations emphasis, which focused on what it called the unfairness of the Howard Government's Work Choices Act, which encourages greater use of individual workplace contracts, or Australian Workplace Agreements.

He said Labor under Mr Rudd continued to oppose AWAs. But he shifted the attack to assert that Work Choices actually robbed workers of choice by limiting access to collective bargaining.

"In a free society, people should be able to make their own decisions and organise themselves in the way that best suits them,

rather than having those rights limited by industrial relations legislation," Dr Emerson said.

He said it was possible to provide ample flexibility within collective arrangements and common law contracts to tailor pay and working conditions to individual circumstances for the highly paid, while ensuring basic protections for the vulnerable.

Labor industrial relations spokeswoman Julia Gillard was travelling yesterday as part of her 10-day listening tour with Mr Rudd and said she would not give detailed interviews on Labor's industrial relations policy until the conclusion of the tour.

Dr Emerson also said it was wrong to assume that all small-business people backed Work Choices.

"The last time I looked, small businesses wanted to reduce compliance costs and red tape," said Dr Emerson, who ran an environmental and economic consultancy business before entering parliament.

"Work Choices increases both. Let's understand that this Government is in fact highly interventionist in its approach to most policy, including policy regulating the activity of small business and individual contractors."