

Just Another Day in the Life of a Dole Bludger

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'It is some time since you first registered with the CES.¹You are now required to attend this office for a brief interview'. These are the opening words of a letter, dated 16 June 1994, which I received recently. Although it is reasonable to assume that it is a form letter sent to all the long-term unemployed—in my case, the 'some time' is two and a half years—it is difficult not to take it personally. As well as the initial command to 'attend this office', it also contained a threat: 'If you do not attend or fail to contact the CES by 27 June 1994 your Newstart Allowance may be cancelled'. The 'may be' is a euphemism. What is actually meant is 'will be'. Although we number in the thousands, each of us is alone when we receive our letter, and each of us is commanded and threatened individually and personally. Before we even obey the command and 'attend', we are frighteningly aware that we have little or no rights even to the meagre income doled out to us, and on which we are fighting an increasingly hopeless battle to survive. On the back of the letter there is a section headed 'Your Rights'. It tells us that we have a right to appeal against decisions which 'you think' are 'not correct'. But that is the sum total of the 'rights' allowed. Nowhere does it say that our status as human beings entitles us to a dignified and secure standard of living.

The letter also said: 'We will discuss what you have been doing to find work and look at ways you can improve your chances of finding a job'. Thus the problem of unemployment is located squarely on the shoulders of the individual. The implication is clear—each of us individually is personally to blame for having failed to find paid work because we haven't been looking hard enough. The logic of this assumption is interesting: You are not looking hard enough for a job, and the reason we know you are not looking hard enough is that you haven't found a job. In fact, it doesn't matter what the individual does to look for work, as long as she hasn't found a job, it can never be enough.

I obeyed the command. I rang the CES office and was told that I had to attend a 'seminar'.

No mention was made of an 'interview'. The seminars were booked out two weeks in advance, so I made an appointment for a date two weeks ahead. I decided that I could cope with a 'seminar' (not that I had any choice about it, if I wanted to continue to receive the dole, euphemistically called 'Newstart Allowance'), and that I would just sit it out and say nothing.

As things turned out, however, saying nothing was not permitted. Not only were we to be subjected to a 'personal interview' after the 'seminar', the seminar itself was run along 'modern management' lines. We were expected to be chummy and chatty, on first name terms, and to answer questions directed to us personally and by name. A sheet of sticky labels was handed around, on which we were expected to write our names. I had just decided that I was not going to do any such thing, when we were told that it was not obligatory anyway. As each person stuck their label on, the staff member doing the talking would address a question to them. I thought I might avoid that by not taking a label. But as I passed the labels on to the next person (I was the only one who didn't take one), the staff member asked me something. (I don't remember what it was). I said: 'I am here under duress. I don't want to participate'. He said something else, and I said: 'I had no choice about coming here, so I'm not participating'. He dithered a bit, but then continued as if I had said nothing. When it was over, and everyone was leaving, he came up to me and said something in one of those pseudo-'caring' facile facilitator voices. I think he said: 'Are you all right?' although I don't really remember. At that point I let fly. I told him that this was a farce, an exercise in futility, mere window-dressing to con people. And then I apologised for shouting at him, and walked away. (It occurred to me some days later that he probably thought I was mad. I must be mad, mustn't I, to be able to resist the friendly, all-pals-together matiness?)

There were a number of interesting aspects to the seminar that passed unremarked (because I was still holding to my resolution to say nothing). One was the 'facilitator's' ignoring of my comment about being forced to come. He had been asking people to tell him if they had had any problems with the CES. 'We're only human', he kept reiterating, 'We do make mistakes but we want to correct them'. The other 'clients' were making pleasant, friendly comments about how helpful the staff always were. When I said my bit about coercion, he simply ignored it. I thought about telling him to write it on the board, but decided against it. We

were, after all, operating from completely different mind-sets, and there didn't seem to be much point.

He also made a couple of statements that I would have loved to challenge, but didn't. One was a remark to the effect that Australia's social security system was based on the belief that everyone was entitled to a certain standard of living, unlike Third World countries. I could see it coming before he said it, and it was on the tip of my tongue to say: 'And the US'. But I didn't. I could also have pointed out that it was a lie, given the level of harassment the unemployed are subjected to. But I didn't say that either. Such self-control! He also said that the current proposal before Federal parliament to raise the female retiring age to 65 was the result of a commitment to equality. I could have pointed out (but didn't) that equality could also be served by lowering the male retiring age to 60, and that that would be more rational, given the high level of unemployment. So I did exercise a great deal of self-restraint. I have decided, though, that next time I won't. I feel that the other dole bludgers at the seminar would probably appreciate a bit of light relief, not to mention a few concrete arguments to defend themselves.

But the worst aspect is the lies. There is the lie that we are all pals together, whereas the reality is that the CES staff have the power to make us jump through bureaucratic hoops under the constant threat of cutting off our income. There is the lie that we, the dole bludgers, are 'clients' of the CES, whereas the truth is that the bureaucracy has all the power and we are powerless supplicants forced into interactions we did not choose. There is the lie that the CES provides 'services', whereas what it actually provides is window-dressing to disguise the confidence trick perpetrated against the vulnerable victims of economic policies they had no part in framing. I myself feel a tremendous urge to challenge the lies, and it's a constant battle not to give in to that urge because the only person hurt would be me. Needless to say, I don't always win the battle to suppress what I really think. After the seminar, I went downstairs to make an appointment for my 'personal interview', only to find that I was last in the queue because of the interchange with the 'facilitator'. That meant that I had to wait around for an hour and a half. So I exploded and swore. I stormed over to one of the tables and flung down my share of the bits of dead tree we had been given. There was another dole bludger sitting at the table filling out a form, an Islander

or Maori. He looked up at me and we exchanged a grin of complicity. I went over the road to a coffee shop and did the crossword while I waited.

Now for the 'personal interview'! I was there for an hour. The interviewer was a young woman who never told me her name (and I didn't ask). I can't remember what happened in sequence, so I can just give general impressions. The strongest impression is an overwhelming sense of confusion. It is so very difficult to work out what is going on. It is hard to think straight when one is being treated as sub-human, i.e. as someone who has no entitlement to income. Being treated as a non-person, and having to suppress one's rage at that treatment, is not conducive to clear thinking.

Another difficulty in the way of understanding what is going on, is the staff member's commitment to the rules and regulations, and the mind-set that cannot allow her to see the contradictions and injustices. To give just one example: We're supposed to sign an 'Agreement'. I said to the young woman: 'That's not an agreement. That's coercion'. She said: 'I don't know what you mean'. I said: 'An agreement means a contract between equals, and there is no equality here'. She said again that she didn't know what I meant. I said: 'What happens if I don't sign it?' She said: 'Your allowance is stopped'. I said: 'You see? That's not equality. That's enforcement'. I think she got the point, but all she said was: 'Well, that's what it's called here', and pointed to the word on the form.

What I wanted to understand was the bare minimum of formal requirements I had to fulfil in order to keep getting the dole. When I first arrived at the 'interview', it looked as though I would have to apply for any jobs at all that didn't need qualifications, *and* demonstrate that I had applied for them. One of the bits of paper I was given was that form you have to fill in with two jobs a week. The young woman kept saying that I had to apply for jobs outside my area of qualifications, e.g. waitressing, kitchen hand, sales representative, receptionist, clerical work, etc. I explained about my back again (i.e. that I had a bad back and couldn't stand for any length of time), and she said I would need a medical certificate. I said I couldn't sell anything, not myself, my book, or even prime real estate in the CBD to a property developer. In response to the last, she said, quite seriously: 'Oh no, there's nothing like that required'. (Oh dear!) I said that employers don't want 54-year-old women. And

she said: 'Some of them do. They want someone with maturity'. Later, when I looked at another form, it listed 'Over 50 years of age' as a category of 'Special Disadvantage'. I pointed this out to her. She mentioned that the CES had two clerical jobs on their books at the moment. I asked her what they were and she told me, but she did not insist that I apply for them there and then, or at all.

Which brings me to the one glimmer of hope in all this. Not only did she not insist that I apply for those clerical jobs, she had also at some stage put away the job application form. The agreement I eventually signed states that I visit the CES once a fortnight, that I look in the papers twice a week (but that is 'not monitored', she said), and that I tell prospective employers about the 'Jobstart' scheme. As well, I said that I would enquire about ESL²training, with a view to the CES paying for it. But the form she gave me states that the CES only pays for courses which last 6 months or less, and I'm pretty sure all ESL courses are longer than that. That figures, since all the CES 'training' is mickey mouse stuff. They're not going to do anything that *really* helps people, because that would be intruding on the prerogatives of the private sector.

The glimmer of hope is that you can beat them down if you're insistent enough. It might be that I was just lucky—the young woman dealing with me had just heard that she had an appeal against her (I heard her talking on the phone to someone about it). So perhaps she was feeling a bit touchy and so was more careful in my case. Nonetheless, next time I'm going prepared with medical certificate and facts and figures. And talking about medical certificates, 'Sickness Benefit' was mentioned a number of times yesterday. It would seem that there is a push on to get people off the dole by transferring them to 'Sickness Benefits'. I don't know why, because it can't be any cheaper for the Social Security budget, but it was mentioned so often that the emphasis was unmistakable.

My 'interviewer' and I actually parted on good terms. At the end she relaxed a bit and asked me what I write. We had quite a nice discussion. Just before I left she said to me quite kindly that she could understand why people wouldn't give me jobs, I *was* a bit hard to deal with. She said it in a friendly fashion, meaning that I had certainly put her through the hoops. [A friend had] also told me that it is probably a good thing to stand up for oneself, that you can get some room to move that way.

Notes

1. The Commonwealth Employment Service, the public sector employment service since replaced by the Howard federal government with privatised 'Job Network' providers.
2. English as a Second Language.