

Looking Back, Looking Ahead: Marking 10 Years Since the End of Australian Car Manufacturing was Declared

A one-day research symposium
28 February 2024
Stretton Centre, Adelaide

Proudly supported by:

Stretton Centre, City of Playford, Adelaide
Regional Studies Association (RSA) Research Network on 'Putting the "Just" into Just Transitions'
'Future Work Future Communities' Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project

This one-day research symposium has been organised to mark 10 years since Australia's last carmakers announced plans to close domestic manufacturing operations. By February 2014, all remaining carmakers had announced plans to end the domestic manufacture and assembly of passenger cars over the following 3-4 years. By October 2017, Australia's car manufacturing industry had shut down completely.

The 10th anniversary of these announcements represents a timely moment to reflect on the significance of these decisions, to take stock of public and academic debates about the demise of domestic car manufacturing, and to continue critical discussion about the future of manufacturing in Australia, and the role of manufacturing in prosperous societies. The symposium has been organised to bring together researchers to discuss multiple issues related to the decline of Australia's car manufacturing industry.

The symposium is kindly hosted by [Stretton Centre](#), City of Playford, Adelaide. It has received support from the Australian Research Council (ARC)-funded Linkage Project, Future Work Future Communities (FWFC), which aims to shed light on the changes in Australian workplaces and communities which have been shaped by new business models, economic restructuring and disruptive technologies (see [FWFC website](#) for details). Finally, the symposium has received funding from the [Regional Studies Association \(RSA\) Research Network on 'Putting the "Just" into Just Transitions'](#), a three-year project which aims to support symposia internationally about just transitions in response to industrial, environmental and technological change, including plant closures, job losses and labour market transformations.

Symposium agenda (final)	
Date of symposium: Wed 28 February 2024	
<i>Time</i>	<i>Paper/agenda item</i>
830-930	Minibus taking participants from Hawke Building, UniSA City West Campus, North Terrace. Minibus takes participants to Stretton Centre, 307 Peachey Rd, Munno Para
930-1000	Arrival/welcome at Stretton Centre
1000-1015	Introduction to workshop (Tom Barnes)
1015-1030	Welcome & Opening Presentation, Dr Tom Madigan, Senior Manager – Business & Activation, City of Playford
1030-1100	Paper 1. Dr Helen Dinmore, UniSA <i>Agency and the Structural Determinants of Regional Growth: Towards a retheorisation</i>
1100-1130	Paper 2. Dr Mark Dean, Aust. Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), <i>Embedding Industrialisation and Deindustrialisation in South Australia: The institutional role of the state in the past and future of the automotive industry</i>
1130-1200	Paper 3. Nicolas Avery, Univ. of Sydney <i>The Unique Development of the Australian Industry Structure and Possibilities for Change: The case of manufacturing</i>
1200-1230	Paper 4. Dr Gemma Beale, The McKell Institute <i>Just Do It: Bring back the CES</i>
1230-1315	Lunch
1315-1345	Paper 5. A/Prof Sally Weller, UniSA <i>Theorising Australia's Automotive Closures: Deindustrialisation, disarticulation and dissociation</i>
1345-1415	Paper 6. A/Prof Paul Sendziuk, Univ. of Adelaide <i>The End of the Line: General Motors Holden's and its workers' perception and experience of employee separation</i>
1415-1445	Paper 7. Helena Steel, Swinburne Univ. of Technology <i>The Effects of a 3-year Prolonged Notice for Job Loss: A case study career intervention and transition comparison</i>
1445-1515	30-min break/afternoon tea
1515-1545	Paper 8. Dr Lynette Washington, UniSA <i>Gender, Place Attachment and the Transformation of Regions</i>
1545-1615	Paper 9. Tom Barnes, ACU <i>Challenging Elite-Driven Concepts of Agency: Preliminary findings comparing auto worker participation in labour market 'training' with occupational outcomes</i>
1615-1645	Collective discussion about papers and publication options Conclusion (workshop ends)
1645-1715	Pack-up; exit venue
1715-1830	Minibus returns to Adelaide city
1830	Rendezvous for drinks/dinner at Star of Siam restaurant, Gouger St, Adelaide

List of Abstracts (in order of presentation)

Agency and the Structural Determinants of Regional Growth: Towards a retheorisation

Helen Dinmore (University of South Australia)

This paper addresses debates on the role of agency in shaping the economic future of regions. Scholarship on agency departs from the earlier focus of evolutionary economic geography, which highlighted the role of pre-existing structural conditions. This paper challenges the notion that agency is only found in intentional action and is limited to key actors within a region. It questions exclusive focus on the impact of entrepreneurial leaders, place leaders and government, and identifies agency in the accumulated micro-decisions of multiple decision-makers, using the example of workers affected by the closure of Australia's passenger vehicle industry. In so doing, it underscores the twin roles of collective vision and meaningful implementation in the successful transformation of regions.

About the presenter: Helen Dinmore, Research Fellow, UniSA Business, is a writer and researcher with a background in the Humanities and a particular interest in housing, work, and the stories we tell about social and economic disadvantage. She is currently a Research Fellow on the NHMRC-funded Centre of Research Excellence in Healthy Housing, where she focusses on policy translation.

Embedding Industrialisation and Deindustrialisation in South Australia: The institutional role of the state in the past and future of the automotive industry

Mark Dean (Australian Manufacturing Workers Union)

This paper utilises historical and empirical data to demonstrate that the role of the state in South Australia was central to its industrialisation in the early 20th century, giving rise to Australia's automotive industry with the establishment of General Motors-Holden in the early post-war period. It employs a theoretical framework of capitalist regulation to demonstrate the critical role of the state, as a regulatory institution, in responding to the crises of capitalism. In the interwar period, the SA state's *laissez-faire* approach to economic development did not lead to economic development and risked economic crisis; whereas its role in embedding a post-war Fordist regime of accumulation and a Keynesian model of social regulation drove industrial development in the SA economy. The paper presents evidence that such industrial development would not have taken place without the state's interventionist role and that it was pivotal in mobilising a range of social, political and economic institutions to the cause. This has implications for how deindustrialisation in the present context should be understood, specifically where the state's neoliberal responses to capitalist crisis have entrenched deindustrialisation because such policy responses do not address structural changes in the economy nor develop institutions capable of withstanding crisis. In the current context of the energy transition, this presents an important framing for the way the state might think about structural economic changes that bring justice for workers and communities in Adelaide's north, who have been at the frontline of economic crisis since the 1980s.

About the presenter: Mark is National Research and Planning Officer at the AMWU and previously worked at the Centre for Future Work. He has held academic roles at Flinders University and The University of Adelaide where he completed his PhD in 2017, critiquing policy responses of Australian governments to automotive manufacturing deindustrialisation.

The Unique Development of the Australian Industry Structure and Possibilities for Change: The case of manufacturing

Nicolas Avery (University of Sydney)

Low pay is a persistent feature of employment in many parts of the Australian economy and is integrally related to the industry structure. It is imperative to understand the development of the industry structure if we are to move beyond explanations premised on simplistic narratives of technological change and individualistic policies aimed at improving workers 'human capital.' Industry transformation in advanced capitalist economies is typified by an aggregate decline in productivity growth and disparate outcomes for firms and workers. In the manufacturing sector, some industries remain globally competitive, others retain slim profit margins due to the employment of relatively cheap labour, and others cease production altogether. This pattern accords with what James K. Galbraith (1998) refers to as a splitting of the US manufacturing sector, or what Christine Craig and her colleagues (1982) describe as uneven development. However, to understand what is distinctive about the Australian experience of deindustrialisation it is necessary to unpack the unique trajectory of competition within and between industries, of macroeconomic performance, government policy and industrial conflict. As such, I trace the development and transformation of the Australian manufacturing sector in the context of the breakdown of Australia's post-war social settlement from the mid-1970s and the unfolding of microeconomic reforms into the present, with key moments clarified by comparison with developments in the US and the UK. Such an account allows us to critically evaluate contemporary labour market reforms and chart the terrain of possibilities for improving outcomes for low paid workers.

About the presenter: Nicholas Avery is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Economy at the University of Sydney. His research seeks to explain the role of capitalist competition in the persistence of low paid work in different segments of the Australian economy.

Just Do It: Bring back the CES

Gemma Beale (The McKell Institute)

10 years after the last red Holden rolled off the production line in Elizabeth it is time to consider how best to apply the lessons of the auto closure to the large-scale and complex disruptions presented by the just transition agenda. It is now well established that the transition to a carbon-neutral economy, and its ensuing economic and environmental challenges, as well as the related – but distinct – challenges posed by climate change will significantly disrupt workers' lives and the future of work. This paper draws on qualitative findings from a short-running longitudinal study of the closure of the (South) Australian automotive manufacturing industry and is specifically concerned with the just transition agenda as it relates to transition support for workers. It discusses these lessons in the context of the contemporary Australian industry, employment and welfare environment. It argues that precarious employment needs to be understood as a central problem for our future worker transition programs (including improving the quality of work across the board in addition to the creation of good new green jobs). And posits that the combination of the widespread precarious employment in Australia - and the likelihood that climate change and energy transition will lead to a situation of continuing and concurrent employment disruptions – will require a significant re-evaluation of individual place-based transition solutions.

About the presenter: Dr Gemma Beale joined the McKell Institute in 2023, before which she was a researcher at AITI where she developed expertise in a range of policy areas, including industrial relations, the future of work, and gender analysis. She was awarded her PhD (Flinders University) for a worker-focused study exploring the social, economic, and policy impacts of insecure employment on workers' employment transitions following the closure of the Australian automotive manufacturing industry.

Theorising Australia's Automotive Closures: Deindustrialisation, disarticulation and dissociation

Sally Weller (University of South Australia)

Industry closures in the global north—including the closure of Australia's automotive industry—are commonly characterized as an expression of the long-standing process of deindustrialization. This paper begins by arguing that an adequate understanding of Australia's automotive closures must draw simultaneously on the three contemporary perspectives on disinvestment, with deindustrialization as the root cause, disarticulation from production networks the mechanism, and disassociation of brands from the closures the objective of intervention. The expectation, from a deindustrialization perspective, is that a disruptive event such as plant closure will instigate a spatial redistribution of economic activity. When left to market forces, this process will inevitably create winners and losers, with the 'losers' concentrated in close proximity to the site of the closure. But is this still true in a world of mobile labour, where people live farther from their workplaces, and in a context where government interventions seek to support regional economies through the restructuring process? This paper examines the employment trajectories of localities within the Adelaide metropolitan area over the ten years since the closure of the Holden production plant and many supplier firms. It asks: To what extent do the fates of individual displaced workers correspond to the fates of the affected localities? The conclusion reflects on how this case can enhance understandings of deindustrialization in peripheral places.

About the presenter: Sally Weller is Associate Professor of Industry Restructuring in the Business School at the University of South Australia. Her work focuses on regional economic restructuring and labour market change, with an emphasis on understanding how these processes play out in the Australian context.

The End of the Line: General Motors Holden's and its workers' perception and experience of employee separation

Paul Sendziuk (University of Adelaide)

In 2017 General Motors Holden ceased manufacturing vehicles in Australia, thus ending more than a century of automotive production in this country. As South Australia's largest private employer for much of its life-span, and the linchpin of the state's manufacturing sector, the closure of Holden's operations evoked grave concern for its workers and the hundreds of smaller component manufacturers and local businesses that figuratively and literally fed its factory and workforce. This paper examines Holden's closure and the experience of employee separation, from both the perspective of the company and its employees. Drawing upon documents and evaluations produced by the company, and oral history interviews undertaken with Holden workers who were 'separated' from the company, it will compare and analyse the way in which the two parties understood what was happening and the effectiveness of programs aimed at helping Holden workers transition to new employment.

About the presenter: Paul Sendziuk teaches Australian History at the University of Adelaide. He is an experienced oral historian, specialising in the histories of disease and public health, migration and labour. He is currently researching a project titled 'People, Places and Promises: Social Histories of Holden in Australia'.

The Effects of a 3-year Prolonged Notice for Job Loss: A case study career intervention and transition comparison

Helena Steel (Swinburne University of Technology)

The literature on job loss, plant/factory closures, job displacement, redundancy and mass industry/factory restructures has been ongoing and available since the 1930's. The wider impacting consequences of job loss, plant closures, future of work and specifically the closures within the automotive sector with impact to employees, regions, communities/countries are also ongoing (Beer et al, 2019; Dinmore, et al, 2022; Irving et al, 2022; OECD, 2023; Spoehr, 2014; Yildrian, 2021). This paper (or discussion) addresses new research in a case study comparison of the Australian automotive manufacturing closure announced for, Ford Australia, Toyota Australia, General Motors Holden Australia and 260 Parts Organisations in 2013 till 2017. Australia was the first nation in the global economy facing such a phenomenon in industry manufacturing, with the closure of its entire passenger vehicle industry, all at the same time and providing three years of advanced notice (Barnes 2016; 2021; Beer, et al, 2023; Irving, et al, 2022). The thinking at the time was that the provision of a sufficient three-year notice of substantial restructuring would provide a time for intervention assistance for employees and service providers in coping with the adjustment and transition (PC, 2014a). This closure created a unique extended period of three years for employee transition. This research investigated the value of prolonged notice, and the efficacy of the HRM/career interventions that followed for employees to transition and adapt. What is not so well known, is does a long or prolonged notice period for job loss assist career transition? Also, in long/prolonged notice situations, what are the best career interventions that assist employees to adapt and transition? The theoretical background and evidence this study draws on is Transition Theory and the development of career adaptability and career transition, specifically with regards to the 4S Model -Situation, Support, Strategies, & Self (Anderson et al, 2022; Goodman et al 2012; Schlossberg, 2006, 2011). Within Australia there are current and ongoing examples of prolonged notice provided with the National Australia Bank (NAB) providing 3 years notice for job loss/restructure in 2017, with jobs to end in 2020. More recently, 7 years notice of notice for job loss and industry closure has been provided to Australia's Victorian and NSW's Coal fired PowerStation plant employees due, to close in 2028. This study also contributes to the development of a prolonged notice model of career transition for Australia and internationally.

About the presenter: Helena Steel (FAHRI, PCDA, MAICD) is a former senior practitioner in Human Resources (HRM) a lecturer in employee relations/human resources/career development and a current Early Career Researcher. She also serves as a Non-Executive Board Director, Executive Career Coach, and a Business Founder. Completing her Doctorate in job loss, prolonged notice, career adaptability and employee transition was inevitable, as a result of managing the HRM challenges of a number of company closures, (including Australia's largest to date – Ansett Airlines in 2001). At the HRM forefront when employees lost their jobs, it was common for her to administer a redundancy to employees receiving no or little notice of termination. This experience informed her current research and changed her own career. Her experience and research in HRM/career transition has enabled her to re design career programs and use relevant tools to assist employers transitioning their employees to a new “future of work.”

Gender, Place Attachment and the Transformation of Regions

Lynette Washington (University of South Australia)

This paper advances regional research through an examination of gender stereotypes and the leadership of places experiencing change. We apply recent insights into the persistence of gendered stereotypes to the examination of place-based leadership and respond to calls to include a gender lens in debates on place leadership. Through interviews with leaders in regions experiencing profound change we garnered several key insights. First, women and men leaders agreed on the characteristics that make a good leader in crisis, however, they disagreed on whether gender and leadership were connected. Second, women dismantled the gendered stereotypes of leadership; we conclude from this that gendered leadership tropes are fragile narratives. Third, women identified four modifiers of gendered leadership (industry, generational change, socialisation, and hierarchy), which allowed them to challenge stereotypes that limit regional leaders. Fourth, men did not believe that gender had any effect on leadership, challenge the dominant stereotypes, or attempt to deconstruct the narratives attached to leadership stereotypes. We conclude that while women and men leaders both construct ideas about leadership, women leaders see gender as a modifier of leadership and work to challenge gendered prescriptions, thereby bringing gender-incongruent leadership to life. However, men leaders are gender blind and therefore accept dominant stereotypes. Greater awareness of gendered assumptions of leadership, and their impact on place-based leadership, would empower places experiencing economic, social, or environmental change to move to a more promising future. There is a pressing need for these issues to be debated amongst researchers to inform emerging policies and programs.

About the presenter: Dr Lynette Washington is a Research Fellow with UniSA Business. She has worked extensively in the private and public sectors across diverse industries including banking, information technology, health, publishing, and education. Her research interests include leadership and labour markets. Lynette enjoys applying gender and narrative lenses to her research.

Challenging Elite-Driven Concepts of Agency: Preliminary findings comparing auto worker participation in labour market ‘training’ with occupational outcomes

Tom Barnes (Australian Catholic University)

Concepts of regional and industrial branching have received criticism in recent times for a lack of attention to human agency. New critical perspectives have emphasised the interaction of human agency with structural economic change and path dependencies. Others have gone further in stressing the non-elite, subaltern foundations of agency, implicitly criticising the focus of the new change agency literature on elite-driven agentic processes by emphasising the decisions that workers make during periods of crisis and uncertainty (Dinmore et al, 2023). This paper extends this critique further by analysing the case of a large group of workers whose jobs were displaced by plant closures. In this case, workers exercised agency by effectively *disregarding* attempts by employers, state agencies and labour market institutions to nudge them into sectors unrelated to their occupational and employment histories. Framed by critical concepts of labour branching (MacKinnon, 2017) and intra-labour agency (Warren, 2019), this paper analyses the interplay between the decisions of elite and subaltern groups, with the former comprised of senior executives and state actors who managed the closures and the latter comprised of workers who refused to abandon long-held careers and occupations. By applying quantitative and descriptive methods to data from longitudinal surveys of over 1200 workers, the paper shows that workers, not elite decision-makers, drove the process of branching into industries of related variety. It argues that this collective outcome was motivated by the desire of workers to maintain the integrity of their occupations and workplaces—a characteristic less apparent among actors in elite groups. The paper thereby advances scholarship by demonstrating the multi-layered, conflictual and contested nature of change agency. It also contributes to critical understandings of manufacturing occupations in deindustrialising regions and the management of labour market programs.

About the presenter: Tom Barnes is a sociologist of work and economy at Australian Catholic University (ACU) in Sydney. His research focuses primarily on insecure work, labour regimes and labour markets, with industry expertise on logistics and manufacturing and country expertise on India and Australia. He has written two academic books – *Informal Labour in Urban India* (Routledge, 2015) and *Making Cars in the New India* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) – and his articles have appeared in many international journals, including *The Sociological Review*, *Environment & Planning A* and *Urban Studies*.