According to the Australian Council of Trade Unions (2009), unionism has played an important role in the development of Australia’s workforce. In 1791, the First Fleet’s convicts protested about their work conditions and rations (Australian Council of Trade Unions [ACTU] 2009). This, and many other protests sparked a movement in Australia - trade unionism. Employees recognised their inferior bargaining power when compared to their employer, and thus, formed unions in hope of influencing their work conditions (Bramble 2013, pp. 6). Many other employees shared the mentality of acting collectively to influence individual solutions at work (Bramble 2013, pp. 6). Two hundred years on, Australian unions helped provide maternity leave, accident compensation, superannuation and many more benefits for Australian employees (ACTU 2009).

However, since 1976 to 2013, “Australia, a country which once had the highest membership density (the proportion of employees belonging to a union) in the world, is facing a crisis of membership” (Peetz 1998, p. 3). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012), union membership density in 1976 rested at 51% but, in 2012, membership density plummeted to 18% (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2012). This essay will discuss the decline in Australian trade union coverage and, determine the relevance of trade unions in the current Australian workforce.

The following section will include four significant factors that are responsible for the trade union decline. These factors include the structural shift in employment, shifting government policies, roles of management, and attitudes towards unions.

The first factor involved with the decline of Australian union membership is the “structural shift in employment away from traditionally, highly unionised sectors into less highly unionised sectors” (Griffin & Svensen 1996, pp. 507). These structural shift factors include “occupation, the ratio of public sector to private sector membership density, the ratio of part-time and full-time employees, and the average establishment size of workplaces,” (Griffin & Svensen 1996, pp. 507).
Change in occupation refers to the 5.5% reduction in the membership density of ‘blue-collar’ employees (e.g. Tradespersons) from 1986 to 1996 (Griffin & Svensen 1996, pp. 510). Establishment size of workplaces has found that unionisation decreases in the small business sector (Griffin & Svensen 1996, pp. 511). The public sector membership density has outweighed the private sector membership density since 1982 but still, in 1995, there was a significant decline of 16.6% union membership in the public sector (Griffin & Svensen 1996, pp. 512). Many anticipated this steep decline in the 1980s after forecasts of social and technological changes, in particular, the trend towards automation (Griffin & Svensen 1996, pp. 507). To conclude this factor, it is important to recognise that Australia’s workforce did not just go through a structural shift in employment, but rather an overall decline in union membership in every industry (Bramble 2013, pp. 35).

The second factor involved with the decline of Australian trade unions is shifting government policies. Since the late 1980s, there has been immense hostility from governments and employers towards trade unions (Bramble 2013, pp. 36). However, Cranston (2000) discovered that in the early 1990s, the Keating Government unintentionally began a landslide decline in union membership density (Cranston 2000, pp. 1). At a Federal level, the union movement did not see the Keating Government as dependable after the implementation of the *Industrial Relations Reform Act 1993* (Cranston 2000, pp. 1). Waddoups (2005) explains that enterprise bargaining distracted the union workers about the influence of arbitration, and so, they became more focused on negotiating enterprise agreements (Waddoups 2005, pp. 609). In 1996, the Howard Government implemented the *Workplace Relations Act 1996* which created individual contracts, now known as Australian Workplace Agreements, (Katz 1993, pp. 6). This essentially stifled the power that unions had in collective bargaining (Katz 1993, pp. 6), which weakened the appeal to many potential members in hope of joining a union, and pre-existing members to come back. According to Hall (2005) *WorkChoices 2005* brought “greater flexibility in bargaining, decentralisation of the industrial relations system, deregulation of the labour market,” (Hall 2006, pp. 3) and, “the restriction of the...
unfair dismissals jurisdiction,” (McCrystal 2006, pp. 194). From an act of conservative governors and state legislators, it is evident that they were trying to reduce the bargaining power of their workers. Legislates like *WorkChoices 2005* reduces the number of items of which their unionised workers can negotiate (e.g. Wages, fringe benefits, health insurance, etc.). This certainly weakens the incentive that any potential union member has to be apart of a union. Furthermore, *WorkChoices 2005* restricted its union member’s strikes and placed severe consequences on those disobeying the law (McCrystal 2006, pp. 194). As most union members are playing it safe for themselves, it is unattractive for potential members as they believe that strikes are the collective and effective way to make your voice heard (Bramble 2013, pp. 38).

The third factor involved with the decline of Australian trade unions is the role the manager can play in their workplace. It is a role intrinsically woven into the fabric of their workplace, but can be one that is detrimental to employees that belong to a union, or employees that have interest to joining a union. According to van den Broek (1997) the acts of a manager excluding members in their own workplace can sometimes be a subconscious one. When managers design workplace policies and practices, it is common to ‘substitute’ union practices for their version of union policies to avoid unions interfering with their workplace (van den Broek 1997, pp. 238). Van den Broek (1997) suggests that the following are some examples of these substitutions policies, enhanced communication processes, employer shareholding schemes, or decentralised decision-making (van den Broek 1997, pp. 238). These passive aggressive acts can lead to the decline of union membership density as members can feel victimised, and can be peer pressured by their manager and co-workers to leave their union (van den Broek 1997, pp. 238).

The final factor is the attitudes towards unions. This factor must be recognised within and outside of the union. Peetz (1998) argues that, “the failure of some unions to provide the infrastructure, or act with sufficient vigour, or cohesion to prevent employer strategies from leading to a decline in union membership (Peetz 1998, pp. 3). Much of the decline in union membership is
attributed to poor leadership amongst union members. Griffin & Svensen (1996) believes that union effectiveness will come from the influence of employer behaviour and, the legislative environment surrounding the union (Griffin & Svensen 1996, pp. 512). It is also important that people outside unions picture union members as valuable members of our Australian workforce history. For without them, many voices, opinions and changes would have gone unheard. In the following section, this essay will explain the most significant factor in explaining the decline of union membership and, consider how trade unions are still relevant.

The most significant factor in explaining the decline of union membership is the shifting government policies. As previously mentioned, WorkChoices 2005 was created by the former Prime Minister, John Howard. WorkChoices 2005 was implemented for the following reasons: “greater flexibility in bargaining, decentralisation of the industrial relations system, deregulation of the labour market,” (Hall 2006, pp. 3) and, “the restriction of the unfair dismissals jurisdiction,” (McCrystal 2006, pp. 194). It was the Howard Government’s WorkChoices 2005 that shoved unions out of their collective bargaining mentality, and into a neoliberal, independent Australian workforce mentality. With conservative governors trying to reduce the bargaining power of their workers, legislate like WorkChoices 2005 reduced the number of items of which their unionised workers could negotiate (e.g. Wages, fringe benefits, health insurance, etc.).

According to Hall (2006), “those without strong labour market power, or strong collective bargaining would now confront their employer about an issue, and their employer would have a few set ‘take it or leave it’ solutions,” (Hall 2006, pp. 4) for the unionised employee. This is one component of why shifting government policies has had the biggest impact on the decline of union membership. Shifting government policies has not only limited negotiations between unions and governments/employers, but also, restricted union’s industrial action. According to Hall (2006), WorkChoices 2005 only “permitted protected industrial action (i.e. Lawful Strikes) in the bargaining period, which is subject to an elaborate set of secret balloting, and the Minister can declare and end
the bargaining period at any time,” (Hall 2006, pp. 6). Also, union rights to “enter workplaces have been severely restricted, and the legal sanctions against unprotected action has also been increased,” (Hall 2006, pp. 7). The two arguments presented above are the most significant in explaining the decline of union memberships.

First, with conservative governors and state legislators trying to reduce the bargaining power of their workers, legislates like WorkChoices 2005 reduces the number of items of which their unionised workers can negotiate (e.g. Wages, fringe benefits, health insurance, etc.). Here, with the introduction of WorkChoices 2005, unionised employees are participating in a very low level, if any, of collective bargaining and so, they are not having their needs to join a union met. Second, Bramble (2013) puts forward the view that the “key to mass recruitment in past generations has been a preparedness of unions to strike, even in defiance of the law,” (Bramble 2013, pp. 38). However, during this decline of union membership, unions are threatened by severe fines (Bramble 2013, pp. 38). “Withholding their strongest weapon, unions have become ineffective and thus, become less capable of demonstrating to non-union members that joining a union can make a difference and protect workers’ rights,” (Bramble 2013, pp. 38).

This essay has discussed the four factors that sparked the decline in Australian trade union coverage. These factors included the structural shift in employment, shifting government policies, roles of management, and attitudes towards unions. However, it was concluded that shifting government policies was the most significant factor in explaining the decline of membership density. Two hundred years on, Australian unions helped provide maternity leave, accident compensation, superannuation, and many more benefits for Australian employees (ACTU 2009). It is important that we remember the benefits trade unions have provided the Australian workforce, and it’s a shame something so influential in Australia could be so easily influenced. Imagine a world without trade unions. Imagine many workers being too frightened to speak up as individuals and ‘calling in sick’ just to not have to face their work conditions. Imagine a high labour turnover due to

Gardiner, Z. 42901189
employees complaining about their working conditions, and their employer just finding replacement
workers instead of working together to achieve a common goal. Imagine a dissatisfied work-life
balance for employees because “employees have very little in the way of savings, and therefore,
cannot refuse to work on conditions offered by employers - the alternative is only unemployment,
or another job where the same bargaining inequality prevails,”(Bramble 2013, pp. 4). This is why I
believe in trade unions as they play a very important part in the Australian workforce. They are
vessels for unionised employees to try and influence their working conditions to change them for
the better. They are also vessels for those too afraid to speak up for themselves. Unions may be in
decline, but they should always have a place in the Australian workforce.
Reference List


Bramble T, 2013, *MGTS2607 lecture 5 - Parties in employment relations: Trade unions*, The University of Queensland, St. Lucia.


