

## Gillard hot seat on history, work

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### Signs are there that Labor's deputy will be busy indeed.

DEPUTY prime minister-elect Julia Gillard has made a welcome promise to put basic skills at the centre of a national curriculum and for Labor to take its time reimposing unfair dismissal laws on small business. Both issues are likely to provoke strong reactions and demonstrate the heavy workload Ms Gillard has accepted by taking responsibility for both industrial relations and education. With cabinet not yet sworn in, the potential is already there for Ms Gillard to get bogged down fighting demands that Labor abandon moderate positions put forward during the election campaign in favour of more extreme policies. On education, Ms Gillard has been quick to highlight the importance of basic numeracy and literacy skills and keeping social agendas out of the teaching of history. Ms Gillard mirrors Kevin Rudd's stand on these issues, but faces the potential of deep conflict with elements of the state teachers' unions over development of a national curriculum.

On industrial relations, the predictable demands that Labor go further than it promised during the election campaign in unwinding the Howard government's laws have already begun. Trade unions are calling for the scrapping of Australian Workplace Agreements to be brought forward and made retrospective. Others are calling for a sunset clause to prevent employers signing up new long-term workplace agreements with employers before Labor's new laws can be introduced.

Ms Gillard says Labor will act quickly to prepare legislation to abolish AWAs for workers earning less than \$100,000 a year as promised during the election campaign. A transition bill ending the ability of employers to make AWAs will go to cabinet before Christmas ready for the opening of parliament next year. *The Australian* has always supported the workplace flexibility provided by individual workplace agreements, but we accept the election gave Labor a clear mandate for its policies. We welcome Labor's amendments to allow high-paid workers to continue on individual contracts. Many of the benefits of the Howard government's Work Choices legislation had been undermined with the belated and rushed introduction of the so-called fairness test in any case. Like many employers, we believed Work Choices had become overly cumbersome and the process bogged down in red tape.

Against expectations, Labor's initial industrial relations legislation will not include the reintroduction of unfair dismissal laws for small business. Ms Gillard revealed yesterday the unfair dismissal provisions would be dealt with in a second package of legislation that will involve a period of consultation and be ready some time next year. At its party conference in April, Labor said it would reintroduce unfair dismissal laws for companies employing more than 15 people, compared with the 100-employee threshold that exists now. Companies with fewer than 15 employees will have a 12-month exemption from unfair dismissal laws for new employees compared with six months for companies with

more than 15 staff. Some people claim a delay in reintroducing unfair dismissal laws will encourage companies to sack staff before the new laws take effect. We believe Labor should think carefully before making any changes. The evidence is that the removal of unfair dismissal laws has helped to create many thousands of new jobs. Scrapping the laws now may, in fact, hurt most the people it is supposed to protect.

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