The Precariousness of Work   *Phil Aspinall*

Insecurity is affecting the world of work from several directions. This article brings together the reflections from our weekend at Holland House in February 2001.

Jobs are under pressure. Despite national legislation many new jobs only offer low pay or unsocial hours. Those who are in paid work find they have to work increasingly long hours - we are expected to sign out of the Working Hours Directive. Increasingly people leave paid employment and drift towards self employed or agency work – this is true of professionals as well as manual workers. The expectations and scope of every job change.

Information Technology changes ways of working – both the speed of transactions and activity, and dependency on the technology. IT has become a new enslavement.

"Unskilled" work / jobs are fewer and are usually in the public sector or service industries. But what do we mean by Unskilled – the work that in the days of large factories employed many people – but even the person pushing a pallet truck has a skill. Different skills are needed today

Many new jobs are in service related activities. Women employed more than men as many new types of job are no longer dependent on physical aspects which used to dictate which jobs were possible. Some are person based - Call centres, waiters, shop assistants. Others are non-personal jobs - Cleaning, Washing up, Shelf stacking ("Refurbishment Assistant").

But the training and skills base is still vital Can you (you can) train anybody for anything. Recognising skills - discerning talents – takes us back to the idea of the body of Christ. Vocations – what does it mean to be called? Called but not equipped ? The place of peace (can we call it God) is where skills, vocation and work overlap.

Business always has had to change to grow and to develop - a business without investment will starve. There are threats of take over – or the current trend large organisations being broken done into smaller competitive bits. We encounter different perspectives on change in different sectors (Industry, health, teaching etc).....but the same problems and issues

As the world becomes more interconnected, the "knock on" effect of decisions becomes less predictable. Everything increasingly has a Global impact. But in this world of Globalisation, who is in control – who makes the decisions? Globalisation may bring loss of jobs in one location, but it also stimulates opportunities for further service. New contexts demand new ways of being.

Even in national issues - whose agenda is driving the change (e.g. in Health and Education)...is it the media or the government. Is it still only the share price or has the concept of Stakeholders begun to take hold (for the benefit of everyone who is affected by the business)

The change from manufacturing to non- manufacturing base has been achieved by increased automation – on one hand automation is seen as dehumanising, but it has removed the need for inhuman manual labour and conditions of the past (although these may be transferred elsewhere short term). New businesses grow form the people freed from manual labour. Manufacture is conducted as a global business; but Services are local – delivered to an individual in a place (Are call centres manufacturers? - services detached from the local context)

Businesses used to have a paternalistic concern for their employees, which was repaid in loyalty and a sense of community and belonging. The loss of paternalism leads to a loss of identity and the feeling of belonging that paternalism provided – paternalism provided support. In parallel with this loss of the corporate there has been a transfer of risks from the institution to the individuals. With this loss of the "corporate" has disappeared ways of working such as the. Unions collaboration with business.

Where then does the culture or ethos come from? Small is beautiful ....or is it, or does this lead to increased fragmentation ? The overarching value and purpose is missing to create meaning for both global and smaller units.

Change for change's sake? Who initiates changes ? Change is popular with those who start it - "No one ever initiates change to their own disadvantage ".

Re-structuring has become a way of life – indeed it has become a mantra that continuous change is the only way of progress. Many take-overs are finance driven, but change is often seen as a matter of service – of responsiveness to the needs of others (customers). But where are the perceived needs of the customer created

Change can give the freedom and stimulation to new opportunities and new ways of working - Insecurity is not *necessarily* negative. We are told that there is a time for pruning and a time to stay our hand - when it would be a disaster. How is pruning to be done? – for more growth, generously, for the good of others .... or to show our skill with the shears (selfishly) !

All change needs to be managed but poor Management of change often lets organisations down. It can lead to conflict in the community and it needs handling differently for the internal and the external. Is it to be carried out through consultation or by finding scapegoats for previous poor performance.

How is success to be measured? It is by the product or service delivered or only by the profit generated. Is value only equated with money or are there other drivers - money is only an indicator, not an input control.

Change will always be with us. Changing demands lead to changing responses and hence to the organisations which deliver them. This in turn leads to changing work and job requirements, and so to an uncertain present and insecure future for the population.

Personal. Most people need enough to make ends meet – to pay for daily living. The fear and insecurity arise when the means of achieving this are threatened. Many live in fear of the future.

But it has become a truism so say that there are no longer careers for life.

But the shock of redundancy is about far more than this – it threatened the reason for existence (despite the talk that it is the job which is redundant not the individual). The work force and the individual feel that they have no control over the events surrounding them. To find new work may disrupt home and family life: "How far do I have to travel to find new work" – "Am I prepared to take a cut in pay or extended hours to stay in the same area"?

But it is equally true that we are breeding new individuals for whom change is the norm – moving on, changing job is seen as a means of progression. The entrepreneurial spirit of the 1980's has transformed our expectation of a job. There has been a move to individual responsibility and provision – the company or the government no longer provides.

This independence is reflected in the way we work. We increasingly only deal with a person for a single topic transaction rather than working on a community of multiplex interactions. We deal with a client on a single call in a dislocated call centre, or act as a consultant or agency staff for a discreet piece of work. Relationships are reduced to the monoplex.

You are on your own, always having to sell yourself – to prove your worth and value. This self worth is only based on the output – there is little assessment of the quality of the process or the input we make. But the irony is that teams are important, and teamwork matters all the more for the time that we are part of them – being loved (team building) does produce out put.

We remain part of the team, but only if you are coming up with the goods – however, we someone is not delivering or working as required, do we throw them out or train them in? We were reminded of the parables of vines: God loves us unless we don't bear fruit – then we are cast into the fire

When thinking of the individuals we need to remember that Managers are as important as workers – and share the same human needs and live with the same uncertainties. The centre is as important as the edge.

Precariousness is universal - Everything contributes to uncertainty

We who are caught up in the currents of change can say and do lots of things locally in pastoral support and encouragement. But we are also called to engage with the global and the structural – to challenge and encourage change as a force to bring Kingdom values.

But it may be worth reflecting that the purpose of creation is not my, or even our, survival – it is the outworking of something bigger. To what extent can we as Christians so the Christian Hope behind all this – the Good News. The gospel proclaims that - suffering and dying precede new life; pruning produces better fruit and more flowering; we live with insecurity and God lives in it too.

Insecurity at work stems from the measures used to attribute value which are not rooted in the Kingdom of God Stuff – the things that make people whole – but in Money and Politics. Those in power determine the measures and exert pressure to obtain the desired outcomes and may directly challenge or undermine the well being of the workforce – so they either leave or are forced out.....

Challenge Management to encourage teams to set input measures to improve performance. Affirm the bits that are going right – where God is already at work

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The only certainty in the word of work is uncertainty. What we "know" is always insecure, but without insecurity there would be no change – and much change is positive. The positive effects of insecurity and change are disproportionate, on those least able to control their own destiny. The Gospel calls us to be prophetic to those who can mitigate its effects, and to stand with ALL those who are affected.

What can we do ?.............Be there !

As humans we share the fundamental precariousness of mortality. There is tension always between the positive and negative aspects of our insecurities. In work we share the cost of that tension. We strive with others to bring justice, enable people to flourish, and bring fuller life to the world.