

# **RSA Events 2024: Looking Back, Looking Ahead: Marking 10 years since the end of Australian car manufacturing was declared**



EVENT: Looking Back, Looking Ahead: Marking 10 years since the end of Australian car manufacturing was declared

RESEARCH NETWORK: Putting the 'Just' into Just Transitions

DATE AND PLACE OF EVENT: 28 February 2024

ORGANISER(S)' NAME(S): Associate Prof Tom Barnes, Prof Andrew Beer, Associate Prof Sally Weller

## **What was the aim of this event?**

This one-day research symposium was organised to mark 10 years since

Australia's last carmakers announced plans to close domestic manufacturing operations. The 10<sup>th</sup> 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 was organised to bring together researchers to discuss multiple issues related to the decline of Australia's car manufacturing industry and as they relate to the problem of just transitions.

**How many people (speakers and delegates) attended the event? Please add an approximate number of countries.**

There were 17 participants, including 10 presenters. Ultimately, all were based in Australia (although the Call for Papers did go out internationally and attract interest from Europe).

The speakers gave presentations according to the program at the bottom of this report.

The speakers were selected after an Open Call for Papers distributed through RSA and other scholarly, industry and public networks in 2023. All applicants for participation were accepted, with the addition of two more presenters from Italy (Prof Patrizio Bianchi and A/Prof Sandrine Labory, Univ. of Ferrara). However, our overseas guests eventually declined the offer to participate due to a timing clash with the event.

We organised drinks and a dinner for all participants at a restaurant in central Adelaide, the Star of Siam.

The event was highly successful in the following ways:

The event deepened the network's connections with potential industry partners in Adelaide, especially via the City of Playford, whose local institute, Stretton Centre, hosted the symposium and provided considerable in-kind support. This is an important region for transition studies as it was the former home of General Motors (GM), known as 'Holden' historically in Australia. It produced its vehicles from a local assembly factory in nearby Elizabeth. The Elizabeth plant witnessed the last ever car to roll off the assembly factory in Australia in October 2017. It is

a historical home of industry affected significantly by deindustrialization. It provides an important context for studies of just transitions for workers affected by firm and (in the case) whole industry closures. Other industry connections were made via the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), the main representative union for manufacturing workers in Australia, and the McKell Institute, a national research thinktank, both of which also provided presentations on the day.

**Participants listened to 10 highly stimulated presentations, including:**

- Dr Madigan's opening paper on behalf of the City of Playford, which provided the local and regional contexts
- Dr Dinmore's paper reflected data from a recently published in *Regional Studies* - see Agency and the structural determinants of regional growth: towards a retheorisation.
- Dr Dean from the AMWU provided a union perspective on the history of industrialization and deindustrialization in Australia
- Mr Avery, a PhD candidate in political economy, presented his doctoral research on the connections between the development of local industry and precarious labour conditions
- Dr Beale provided a thinktank perspective on the relationship between active labour market policies and assistance for workers affected by plant closures
- A/Prof Weller, a CI for the research network, offered a theoretical perspective on the auto plant closures in Australia
- A/Prof Sendziuk provided details from oral history interviews with managers and workers from the former GM Holden plant in Adelaide
- Ms Steel, a PhD candidate in human resources, presented her doctoral research on the effects of lead-in time on worker outcomes after redundancy announcements
- Dr Washington brought in the problem of gender inequality and perceptions among local leaders in areas affected by closures
- A/Prof Barnes, finally provided empirical data on workers' participation in programs of labour market assistance and occupational and industry outcomes
- The event concluded with a full discussion of:

- Participation in the forthcoming RSA conference in Florence, Italy (June 2024)
- Publication options arising from the symposium. While most papers were works-in-progress, it was agreed to explore the option of a special section/issue with RSA journal, *Regional Studies Regional Science*, on the significance of whole-of-industry closures for the global just transitions movement.

As mentioned above, a key outcome of the symposium will be a proposed special issue/section of an RSA-linked journal such as *RSRS*. In addition, we promoted and discussed future plans for international events within the network, including events earmarked for the University of Birmingham (UK) in late 2024, the University of Ferrara (Italy) (also in late 2024), and the University of Syracuse (United States) in mid-2025.

We opened the day with an acknowledgement of the generous support of the RSA, which made this event possible. Throughout the event, we encouraged all participants to join the RSA. In allocating funding opportunities for PhD research scholars and non-academic/industry representatives, we required each potential recipient of funding to join the RSA, which they did; specifically, Dr Dean, Mr Avery and Ms Steel joined the RSA, representing 3 new members. We will continue to promote and build RSA membership in line with future events as part of the network. Note that the event was also promoted on LinkedIn.

Tom Barnes is a sociologist of work at Australian Catholic University and a member of the RSA. His research focuses primarily on labour regimes, markets, logistics and manufacturing. His articles have appeared in many journals, including *Regional Studies*.

## **Program**

<b>Symposium agenda (final)</b>	
<b>Date of symposium: Wed 28 February 2024</b>	
<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

Report by Associate Prof Tom Barnes



## **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 microdecisions 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.

***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 nonelite, 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 decisionmakers, 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*.