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Industrial Relations in Australia and the Concept of Fairness

Chris Leggett¹

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to reflect on some unique terminology in Australia’s industrial relations.

Design/methodology/approach – It reports the limited and historical sources of the expression ‘fair dinkum’

Findings – The article finds the origins of ‘fair dinkum’ in both the English Midlands and from Cantonese goldminers in Australia in the 19th century

Research limitations/implications – Future commentaries might examine these sources further to determine which one is ‘fair dinkum’.

Originality/value – The value of the paper is that it adds to the study of the particularity of meanings in the language of industrial relations discourse.

Paper type – Research Paper

Keywords – *Australia, Industrial Relations, Fairness, Language*

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1. Industrial Relations in Australia and the Concept of Fairness

English speakers everywhere share a meaning for ‘fair’ and an understanding of ‘fairness’, but ‘fair’ has some Australian applications that, except perhaps for New Zealanders, are unique, although they may be used by other English speakers to caricature Australians, often to comic effect. One of the expressions used to caricature is ‘fair dinkum’. By Australians, ‘fair dinkum’, is used to emphasize the gaminess of something, as in ‘that’s a fair dinkum Rolex’ or that it complies with accepted standards as in ‘the coffee here is fair dinkum’. It may be used as a proclamation of a fact or truth, for example, ‘I tell you, the rumour about the closure of the plant is ‘fair dinkum’.

For an Australian to use ‘fair dinkum’ outside its social milieu can devalue the expression and discredit its user. For example, the current leader of the Australian Liberal Party, and thereby Coalition prime minister, now refers to coal-fired energy as ‘fair dinkum’ (as opposed to renewable energy sources). His over reliance on the term on a hustings tour bus, instead of endearing him to the electorate, according to the press proved ‘a viral recipe for ridicule’ (*The Guardian*, 5 November 2018).

The origins of ‘fair dinkum’ are disputed but a plausible explanation is that it came from the goldfields of Victoria in the nineteenth century where Chinese workers used the term *ding kum* to confirm a deal that is honest and true. A related explanation is that ‘dinkum’ is a mispronunciation of the Cantonese *din gum* for true gold.

Others cautiously speculate on it being from English dialect, when it referred to the quality of work.

... it seems very possible that it comes from an old English dialect term, which is recorded principally in Joseph Wright’s *English Dialect Dictionary* of 1896-1905. He found several examples of dinkum in various parts of England in the sense of a fair or due share of work. He also encountered fair dinkum in Lincolnshire, used in the same way that people might exclaim fair dos! as a request for fair dealing. But there’s no clue where this word comes from, and dictionaries are cautious because it is not well recorded.

It turns up first in Australian writing in 1888 in *Robbery Under Arms* by Rolf Boldrewood, in which it had the sense of work or exertion: ‘It took us an hour’s hard dinkum to get near the peak’. Early on it could also mean something honest, reliable or genuine, though this is actually first recorded in New Zealand, in 1905. Fair dinkum is recorded from 1890 in the sense of fair play, and soon after in the way that Australians and New Zealanders still use it — of something reliable or genuine. There have been lots of related phrases since, like dinkum oil for an accurate report. (*World Wide Words*, 2018).

While another source unequivocally states that ‘dinkum’ ‘comes from the English Midlands and meant work’ (Bragg, 2003).

The Commonwealth of Australia was founded in 1901 and in response to the industrial conflict that had characterized industrial relations in the former states the federal government in 1904 passed the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act.

The legal regulation of Australia’s industrial relations is now by the Fair Work Act, passed by a Labor government (2007-2013) in 2009 to replace the Work Choices legislation of the previous Liberal-National Coalition government. The Labor government had promoted its bill as ‘fair and balanced’, and as moving ‘forward with fairness’ (Wright and Lansbury, 2016: 103).

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