

'Sheila's work' stigma needs to end

Ben Potter and Patrick Durkin

Politicians and leaders must ditch the myth that making something "you can drop on your foot" is better than "sheila's work" to defuse the angst that fuelled Donald Trump's rise, an economic forum has heard.

Efforts to encourage "angry white men" who'd lost jobs in rust-belt manufacturing to move into services jobs would fail if we didn't challenge the idea that manufacturing was superior to services jobs historically done by women, top economist Saul Eslake said.

The comments came as engine manufacturing ceased at General Motors Holden's Fishermens' Bend plant, another step on the wind down of local car assembly.

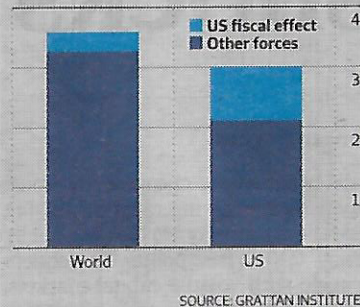
Dr Eslake said it was clear from how both sides of politics in the last election talked about creating "manufacturing jobs", rather than just jobs, that "manufacturing jobs are somehow superior in the eyes in a lot of Americans and Australians to other types of jobs".

He told a Melbourne Economic Forum on the implications of Mr Trump's policies that manufacturing was being hit by "inexorable forces" in the US, where angry rust belt males helped elect Mr Trump president, and Australia.

He said we needed to train former manufacturing workers to do other

Trump effect

The contribution of US fiscal stimulus to projected GDP growth, 2018 (pppts)

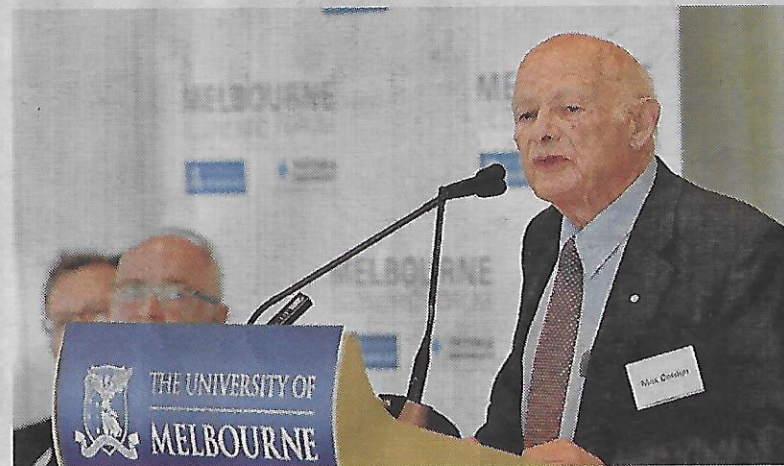


jobs but "it will be much harder to get public buy-in unless we challenge the idea that manufacturing jobs are much more noble than jobs in other spheres".

While manufacturing jobs were being lost, lots of jobs were being created in financial services, health, education, aged care, retail and tourism, but the problem was "our culture tends to stereotype them as women's jobs".

"The sort of bloke in Ohio or Whyalla who has lost a job doing something inherently noble like manufacturing doesn't want to do what he thinks is sheila's work," Dr Eslake said.

He said if we could convince them that services jobs were more than just



Left: Max Corden, of John Hopkins University, at the Melbourne Economic Forum.
Above: Janine Dixon.
PHOTOS: VINCE CALIGIURI

flicking hamburgers and taking in each other's washing but were jobs with inherent rewards and prospects for "blokes as well as women ... we might have a better chance of managing all the communal angst around these transitions ... which we really can't prevent".

Janine Dixon, an economist at Victoria University's Centre of Policy Studies, said Mr Trump's success was thwarting this effort because he had encouraged young job seekers who could do other things to believe "they are entitled to a job just like their father had".

Distinguished economist Max

Corden said the appropriate response to manufacturing's decline wasn't tariffs on imports as proposed by Mr Trump but Swedish-style policies of taxing the rich to improve the skills and job prospects of the poor.

But Productivity Commissioner Stephen King said this was complicated in the US where there were "company towns" in industrial states such as Pennsylvania where the company had left but the former workers hadn't moved on and had remained unemployed.

In some cases, the factories had moved to southern states with lower wages and less labour regulation,

leaving behind "the areas of the angry white men that seem to have elected [Mr] Trump", Dr King said. "You can retrain them all you like to be computer programmers [but] nobody is going to set up computer programming in a small town in Pennsylvania. They will go to India first."

Jim Minifie of the Grattan Institute said Mr Trump's planned fiscal stimulus could boost US and world growth at first but at the cost of wider budget deficits that would blow out US public debt.

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