
Foreword

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Biographical notes: Philip Lawn is Senior Lecturer in Environmental and Ecological Economics at Flinders University. Over the past seven years, Lawn has written a number of papers on ecological economics issues and has recently edited a book entitled *Sustainable Development Indicators in Ecological Economics*. Philip is currently working on environmental macroeconomic models and a comprehensive set of indicators to assess Australia's sustainable development performance.

In December 2004, Australia's official unemployment rate fell to 5.3%. Unemployment rates in a number of other OECD countries also fell to historically low levels. However, the notion that the Australian economy was somewhere near the full employment level was highly debatable. Increasing levels of underemployment and hidden unemployment are at odds with the definition of full employment – namely, a level of aggregate demand within the economy sufficient to eliminate all but frictional unemployment. Moreover, official unemployment measures hide significant regional disparities in unemployment while the burden of unemployment falls unequally on certain groups and age cohorts. Australian youth, in particular, suffer from higher-than-average unemployment rates, and the average duration of unemployment for all workers is increasing.

At the very same time, all nations face increasing pressure from the depletion of natural resources and the degradation of air, land, and water resource assets. Given the potential for increasing economic activity to place greater strain on the natural environment, a major challenge for policymakers is to achieve an economy that delivers both full employment and sustainable environmental outcomes.

With this challenge in mind, a conference entitled 'A Future that works: economics, employment, and the environment' was held from 8–10 December 2004 at the University of Newcastle, Australia. The main aim of the conference was to develop a nexus between labour market and environmental issues and to advance the debate regarding sustainable development.

The three-day conference incorporated the '6th Path to Full Employment Conference and the 11th National Conference on Unemployment'. The conference was hosted by the Centre of Full Employment and Equity (CofFEE), a research organisation at the University of Newcastle and an advocate of full employment strategies, in conjunction with the Australian and New Zealand Society for Ecological Economics (ANZSEE). Day One of the conference concentrated on employment issues, whereas Day Three was predominantly flavoured by environmentally based presentations. Day Two, conversely, involved an overlap between CofFEE and ANZSEE presentations which allowed

delegates to debate the issues, the policies, and the constraints that policymakers face in their attempt to resolve the potential environment-employment dilemma.

The papers included in this special conference issue focus more on the ANZSEE half of the conference. As such, they exhibit a greater emphasis on environmental concerns but, in keeping with the theme of the conference, refer to employment consequences and their potential policy implications. The extent to which the employment question is dealt with varies considerably across the papers. However, I am sure that all readers will agree that they collectively represent a small but valuable contribution in the quest to achieve a sustainable, equitable, and full employment future.