

Clothing trade leaves worker loyalty in rags



**Phillip
O'Neill**

THE Bonds Wear factory at Cessnock will close next year. It will be the last page in the story of textiles and clothing manufacturing in the Hunter, a great industrial story, though one that has been hidden and undervalued.

The textiles and clothing industries were the Hunter's largest employers of women and girls in manufacturing during the 1980s and early 1990s. In 1991, there were 14 textiles and clothing factories in the Hunter employing a total of 3319 people.

Five firms dominated. The largest was the giant fabric manufacturer National Textiles, which ran plants at Kotara and Rutherford. National Textiles employment peaked in 1984 with 1250 workers.

Alongside the National Textiles plant at Rutherford was clothing manufacturer King Gee, which had 135 workers at its peak in 1990.

Across in Kurri Kurri was Depict-Carrington whose payroll rose to 600 in 1990, its workers sewing clothes for Katies and other Coles-Myer discount stores.

Locally owned giant, Rundles, the suitmaker, got to 480 workers in 1985 at its sparkling new premises at Kotara after it shifted from Hunter Street.

And in Cessnock, Bonds Wear busted up to 340 workers in 1989.

Textiles and clothing investments came to the Hunter in a post-war rush. They came for two reasons. First, labour was cheap, especially female labour in a region dominated by men's jobs in coal and steel. Second, the NSW Labor government had an active policy of decentralisation, providing incentives to Sydney firms to go bush.

Bonds Wear, for instance, arrived in Cumberland Street, Cessnock, in 1950 with a bundle of government goodies. Many firms went into former military sites dotted around the Lower Hunter.

Like the other textiles and clothing firms, the output from the Bonds Wear factory at Cessnock was bought by Australians across the nation because consumers had little choice. Australia ran one of the world's most protected economies in the decades after the war and the textiles and



HARD YAKKA: A scene from a Hunter textile factory in the early 1980s . . . output targets were frenetic.

clothing industries received more protection than any other.

From July 18, 1973, though, the world of protection began to be dismantled. This was the day when Labor prime minister Gough Whitlam announced a 25 per cent cut to tariffs across-the-board. An astonishing 34,000 textiles, clothing and footwear jobs were lost across Australia in the next 24 months.

A decade later, the reformist Hawke-Keating Labor government resumed aggressive tariff cuts, while encouraging affected industries to become internationally competitive with generous government assistance packages. Textiles and clothing firms in the Hunter were major recipients of assistance grants and employment in the clothing and textiles industries grew to record levels.

The plan at the time was neat: concentrate the traditional clothing brands into big firms like Pacific Dunlop, which gobbled up brands like Bonds, Berlei, Holeproof, Jockey, Dunlop and Slazenger; and Linter, which grabbed King Gee, Speedo, Stubbies, Formfit, Hilton and Razzamatazz. And then let the big

manufacturers cosy up to the big retailers and secure the best shelf space, while Australian consumers stay loyal to the brands.

As tariffs fell over the next decade, though, imports grew and the big manufacturers faltered. Linter collapsed with its major owner, Abe Goldberg, fleeing the country, leaving Linter struggling with a huge debt burden. Linter was broken up and the Hunter bits closed down.

By 2001 Pacific Dunlop also wanted out. It bundled its clothing brands into a neat package and sold out to private investors. Bonds Wear – the brand and the factory – became a piece of Pacific Brands Pty Ltd. Then, in 2004, loaded with debt, Pacific Brands was floated on the Australian sharemarket, and the private owners walked off with \$1 billion in profits, about five times their initial investment.

Now Pacific Brands is restructuring again as its debt burden cripples the company. Its Australian factories will be shut with production going offshore. Soon the stars in the Bonds ads – Sarah O'Hare, Pat Rafter and Michael Clarke – will be donning

Chinese-made undies. Pacific Brands hopes you will remain loyal to the brand. This is the firm's prime asset.

For the women and men from Cessnock who will lose their jobs, however, loyalty to the brand cannot be assumed so easily. I visited their factory half a dozen times during the 1980s and 1990s as they responded to each new corporate strategy: Just-in-Time, Quick Response, Value Added Management, Total Quality Management, and so on.

I have visited many factories in my lifetime. I have never seen anyone work as hard as the women at Bonds Wear, their daily life bound by frenetic output targets, with time allocations for each sewing operation broken into fractions of minutes, and their wages calculated accordingly.

These women have given their sweat to build the brand. Now they are discarded so the brand and its owners can survive, and probably prosper.

Professor Phillip O'Neill is director of the Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.

Church slow to recognise the gift of women

They should be given more opportunity, writes **Michael Malone**.

YESTERDAY we celebrated International Women's Day. This day, which has been observed for almost 100 years, is an opportunity to connect women around the world: those whose needs are great and those whose gifts and generosity have the potential to answer those needs.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the report on the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia. *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus* was a landmark document. At the initiative of the Australian bishops, it invited, recorded and responded to the concerns of women all over

Australia. There was a special focus on the experiences of indigenous women, including members of the stolen generation and their descendants.

While many steps have been taken to ensure that the church does not discriminate between women and men, there is more to be done.

It is almost a cliché to say that without the contribution of women – single, married, religious sisters, young and not so young, those who have given birth to children and those who have given birth to ideas – the church would not exist.

The Book of Genesis proclaims that humanity was created in the image of God, male and female. St Paul's Letter to the Galatians says there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free person, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (3:28)

The late Pope John Paul II wrote: "Necessary emphasis should be placed on the genius of women, not only by considering great and famous women of the past or present, but also those ordinary women who reveal the gift of their womanhood by placing themselves at the service of others in their everyday lives. For in giving themselves to others each day women fulfil their deepest vocation. Perhaps more than men, women acknowledge the person, because they see persons with their hearts." (*Letter to Women*, 1995).

The Catholic Church is yet to recognise sufficiently their place, their gifts, their contributions. There are far more opportunities for women than ever before, in the church and in the wider community. I value highly the advice, support and wisdom of the women on my

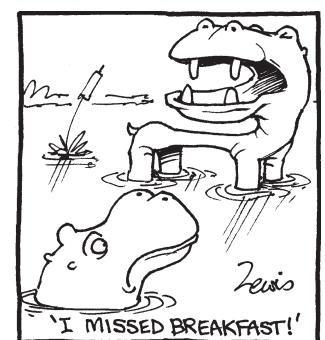
staff and the women of the diocese.

However, structures remain that limit the influence and scope of women. I know that there are women (and men) who have been wounded by the church and who are unable to participate as they wish.

International Women's Day encourages us to reflect honestly on the magnificent part that women play in the contemporary church and in our nation, as well as on less palatable realities. The first step in remedying any injustice or imbalance begins with me.

Michael Malone is Bishop of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle and chairman of the Bishops Commission for Church Ministry, incorporating the Office for the Participation of Women and the Council for Australian Catholic Women.

Topics today



Today's fact

Nearly a quarter of a hippo's weight consists of the food in its stomach.

Today's word

Vertiginous (vur-tij-uh-nuhs): Causing or tending to cause dizziness.

It happened today

From our files – 1916: Merewether Progress Committee have demanded better tram services, telephone bureaus and a police station upgrade at their monthly meeting.

Today in history

1074: Pope Gregory VII declares all married Roman Catholic priests to be excommunicated.

1796: French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte marries Josephine de Beauharnais, widow of a former French officer executed during the revolution.

1864: In the US Civil War, General Ulysses S. Grant is appointed commander-in-chief of the Union armies.

1903: Ten die when Cyclone Leonta hits Townsville, North Queensland.

1951: The Menzies government's Communist Party Dissolution Act is declared invalid by the High Court after challenge by Communist Party and 10 unions.

1976: Forty-two people die in Cavalese in Italy in the world's worst cable car disaster.

1996: George Burns, one of America's best loved and most enduring entertainers, dies less than two months after celebrating his 100th birthday.

Born today

Amerigo Vespucci, Italian explorer for whom America is named (1451-1512); **Alan Ladd**, US actor (1913-1964);



Mickey Spillane, US author (1918-2006); **Lloyd Price**, US singer (1933-); **Yuri Gagarin**, pictured,

Russian cosmonaut, first man in space (1934-1968); **Lucas Neill**, Australian soccer player (1978-).

Odd spot

Roman Catholic bishops in Italy are urging the faithful to go on a high-tech fast for Lent, switching off MP3 players and abstaining from surfing the web or text messaging until Easter. The suggestion gives a modern twist to traditional forms of abstinence in the period Christians set aside for fasting and prayer ahead of Easter.

Today's text

Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. **Matthew 6:34**.