



Decision '07

I'll go if IR laws stiffened: Hockey

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THE federal Workplace Relations Minister, Joe Hockey, made a bold pledge yesterday to resign from the ministry if a re-elected Coalition government toughens its controversial Work Choices laws, as the Labor Party is warning.

"They can run all the scares they want," Mr Hockey said during a morning TV debate with the Opposition industrial relations spokeswoman, Julia Gillard. "But the bottom line is if we are making any substantial changes to our laws, then I will resign."

His promise came after a *Herald/Nielsen* poll found the Coalition's advertising campaign targeting Labor's union links is not resonating with the public.

Mr Hockey's comments also came after the Prime Minister, John Howard, denied plans to further liberalise the labour market, contradicting earlier suggestions from the Treasurer, Peter Costello, and the Finance Minister, Nick Minchin.

But within the Coalition's business constituency, the demand for

radical workplace change grows louder. "As far as the Government and its supporters are concerned, they have only half-reformed the labour market," said Professor Ron McCallum, of Sydney University, a labour law specialist.

"If the Government is re-elected, there would be tremendous pressure to do away with unfair dismissal laws altogether and do something about the fairness test, which is, for many businesses, a bureaucratic nightmare."

The National Farmers Federation, a partner in the Howard Government's 1998 effort to bust the waterfront unions, has called for the abolition of the test. "The NFF is not opposed to the intent of the fairness test," said the organisation's Brett Heffernan. "Our opposition stems from the onerous nature of the red tape the test imposes and the complexity of the process."

The federation's election policy also demands "the government only regulate in respect to a federal minimum wage, with other wages being determined at the individual workplace".

The Master Builders Association, which is running its own

pro-Work Choices advertising, has also joined the corporate chorus urging a weakening of the fairness test. The association has also demanded 13 other changes to toughen the workplace laws, including a federal takeover of state laws protecting independent contractors and the creation of one award covering the entire building industry.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which has co-ordinated \$11 million in pro-government advertising, recently lamented the introduction of the fairness test as "disappointing and unnecessary". In a confidential briefing note to members, it also proposed no limit on the length of the working week and cutting the number of paid sick days from 10 to five each year.

But for Professor McCallum, the ticking bomb in industrial relations is the 2009 deadline for the expiry of "notional agreements preserving state awards".

About 600,000 private-sector workers now employed under state awards will be moved into the Work Choices system in 18 months.