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Remote Work Debate Reveals Disconnect Between Workers and Bureaucracy

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As Australia’s workplace rules face long-overdue review, the push-and-pull over remote work is exposing deeper issues around flexibility, family life, and top-down mandates. For many like Jason Sennitt, being ordered back into the office doesn’t just feel outdated, it’s unworkable.

Jason Sennitt, a 53-year-old customer service employee at Origin Energy, one of the country’s largest energy providers, commutes five hours round-trip from outer Geelong to Melbourne to do an eight-hour shift. He’s a husband, a father to two school-age children,

and a carer for his elderly mother with dementia. Despite handling his duties remotely for years without issue, Sennitt is being told to return to the office three days a week, with the expectation rising to four by next year. He's applied for an exemption, but says the company's "broad brushstroke" policy ignores real-life circumstances.

Origin's stance is not unusual. While it allows employees to request work-from-home (WFH) arrangements up to two days per week, its corporate reasoning emphasizes "connection, collaboration, and wellbeing." What it lacks is acknowledgment of what's working for employees who have adapted to, and in many cases thrived in, remote environments.

This comes as the Fair Work Commission, Australia's national workplace relations tribunal, is reviewing the **Clerks – Private Sector Award**. That award governs conditions for millions of administrative and clerical workers across the country. The process, due to close submissions by August 1st, may set a national precedent on flexible work rights.

At the heart of the debate is whether remote work is a modern necessity or a privilege that can be revoked. The **Australian Services Union (ASU)**, representing many clerical staff like Sennitt, argues the ability to work from home is "not a perk, but an essential condition" for those managing health issues, caregiving duties, or long commutes. In contrast, employer groups like the **Australian Industry Group (AI Group)** warn against being forced to maintain flexibility that doesn't suit all business models.

AI Group's proposal, first reported by *The Australian*, would allow businesses to trade certain worker entitlements, like overtime or breaks, in exchange for offering remote work flexibility. The ASU calls this an attempt to roll back decades of workplace gains. Emeline Gaske, the ASU's National Secretary, accused AI Group of wanting to "drag workplace standards back decades."

Under current award rules, for example, workers are guaranteed a 10-hour break between shifts or earn double time. AI Group contends this may be outdated if a worker is simply moving from their home desk to the couch, rather than commuting. It also raises questions about what constitutes "ordinary hours" in a home.