In search of good employment relations: international experiences of labour management partnership

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Introduction

Ideas of employee participation and voice have a long history as part of the search for good employment relations, and have also attracted extensive interest among human resource management and industrial relations researchers. In practice participation can refer to a wide range of approaches and techniques, ranging from direct employee involvement initiatives such as profit-sharing, quality circles, and communication techniques, to giving workers ownership and control of organisations at the other. (Wilkinson et al 2010, 2014a). In between these two extremes is the pluralist idea of representative participation, where the central assumption is that differences of interest will inevitably arise in organisations, and that effective employee representation is important in attempting to reconcile different interests (Johnstone and Ackers, 2015). Historically, collective employee representation would normally be provided by independent trade unions through collective bargaining and joint regulation of the employment relationship.

However, examination of various indicators – such as union membership, density, and collective bargaining coverage- reveals trade union decline in many nations (Verma et.al, 2002; Waddington, 2014). Some employers may take the view that this is not necessarily a problem but a sign of the times, with most modern organisations recognising the value of good people management, and new HRM techniques offering more sophisticated ways of managing the employment relationship as well as legislation designed to protect workers from unfair treatment (Gollan et.al, 2014). Few industrial relations commentators would consider the above position to be realistic, and the influential concept of ‘frames of reference’ developed by Fox (1966) is useful in understanding why. Industrial relations scholarship has traditionally rejected a unitarist view of the employment relationship which assumes that by default the interest of employers and workers are congruent and naturally cooperative, in favour of a pluralist understanding which recognises an irremovable conflict of interest at the heart of the employment relationship (Heery, 2015). In addition to basic economic and legal dimensions, the employment relationship is also believed to have an important psychological aspect which influences employee motivation and perceptions, and crucially a political dimension, with sometimes divergent interests and power normally tipped in favour of employers (Colling and Terry, 2010). As a result, collective representation of employee interests is considered desirable as a means of redressing this

imbalance, and to protect employees from exploitation and unfair treatment. Classic pluralism viewed strong trade unions and collective bargaining as the best solution to this regulatory challenge. Some industrial unrest and conflict was accepted as normal, and the emphasis was therefore upon the reconciliation of divergent interests meaning relationships between unions and employers may be expected at to be adversarial and antagonistic at times (Ackers, 2014).

However, there has long been interest in developing more constructive and proactive arrangements, where employers and unions work collaboratively in support of the overall success of the organisation. In academic industrial relations, the works of Walton and McKersie *A Behavioural Theory of Labor Negotiations* (1965) in the US and Flanders *The Fawley Productivity Agreements* (1966) in the UK were seminal publications, both suggesting that different kinds of bargaining relationships were possible between unions and employers. The central idea was that in contrast to the distributive agenda associated with the ‘arms-length adversarialism’ of classic pluralism, where employers and unions focus on defending their own distinctive interests, unions and employers can also work together as part of an integrative agenda, forming cooperative ‘productivity coalitions’ to the benefit of all parties (Heery, 2015b). Freeman and Medoff (1984, 165) described this as “management and unions work[ing] together to increase the size of the pie as well as fighting over the size of their slices”.

In some European nations such as Germany, and rooted in notions of ‘economic democracy’ (Wirtschaftdemokratie), the system stresses the importance of stakeholder participation on issues of labour and industrial management (Casey and Gold, 2000). The ideas and language of cooperation and dialogue for mutual gain are well established in the concept of social partnership, itself embedded in European style social democracy and industrial citizenship. (Hyman, and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2010). Social partnership is concerned with encouraging cooperation, consultation and dialogue between the social partners (unions, employers, government agencies and other interest groups) in the making of economic and social policy on both specific issues such as wage fixing, and broader challenges such as retirement provision. As a minimum this provides opportunities for discussion and debate, and at most may lead to consensus regarding appropriate policy responses. The above approach is also enshrined in law and supported by specific institutional mechanisms, mostly notably the dual system of industrial relations which channels the integrative aspects through employee based works councils, and the redistributive aspects through centralised collective bargaining between unions and employers at sector level. This ‘dual system’ arrangement is believed to lead to a close partnership between the two sides of industry (Gold and Artus, 2015).

In other nations, especially the liberal market economies, such approaches have been described as having an “alien ring” (Ferner and Hyman, 1998, xv). Instead, voluntarist traditions mean a range of possible arrangements have been identified. In the context of Britain, for example, Purcell (1981)

outlined four patterns of industrial relations depending on both the degree of trust between the actors and the degree of formalisation of the arrangements. Purcell argued that while cooperation could develop in both formal and informal contexts, it was trust that was a prerequisite for cooperation. These ideas were further developed by Purcell and Sisson (1983), in a subsequent typology which considered the extent to which Unitarism and Pluralism were emphasised. Unitarist employers, with their emphasis on common purpose and shared goals, might favour an authoritarian approach stressing compliance with rules, or a softer paternalistic approach concerned with promoting employee welfare and involving employees to increase levels of commitment. Both approaches, however, are primarily concerned with the direct relationship between employers and individual employees, and the extent to which this helps or hinders enterprise goals.

For Pluralists, however, the inevitability of conflict and political dynamics of the employment relationship mean strong workplace institutions, such as trade unions and collective bargaining, are needed in order to mediate and reconcile tensions in the employment relationship. The particular value of this framework, however, is that it notes how different types of relationships are possible between unions and employers. Employers may be pragmatic and opportunistic with industrial relations viewed as a firefighting activity, and management responding to issues as and when they arise without a guiding strategy or ideology (standard moderns). Alternatively, a more legalistic and 'constitutional' approach may be taken, where the limits on collective bargaining are formalised and codified in a collective agreement, and managers are generally free to make decisions on issues beyond the scope of formal agreements. Finally, there may be an aspiration to go beyond formally prescribed and often distributive issues, and to develop more cooperative and integrative bargaining relationships characterised by high trust, extensive consultation, and commitment to joint problem solving (a sophisticated modern 'consultative approach'). It is this third approach which has many of the hallmarks of the labour management partnerships which form the focus of this book.

The partnership alternative

In broad terms, contemporary debates regarding partnership and labour management cooperation are concerned with developing collaborative relationships between employment relations actors, and usually between trade unions and employers, as part of an attempt to work together in search of mutual gains outcomes (Kochan and Osterman, 1994). The idea of 'us and them' thus shifts from a focus upon 'management versus workers' to a focus on the organisation as a whole united against the competition. In recent years, attempts at developing more collaborative relationships have variously been termed 'workplace partnership', 'enterprise partnership', 'labour management partnership' and 'mutual gains'. However, the terminology of partnership is frequently confusing and we need a more developed definition.

Firstly, partnership is primarily informed by pluralist concerns with the collective dimension of the employment relationship, reconciling the inevitable tensions between different business priorities and improving the overall quality of workplace relations. Reflecting this emphasis, most of debate has occurred in the industrial relations field, though there are clear linkages with broader HRM debates concerning high performance work systems and employee engagement. There is also a general emphasis on improving the nature of the relationships between stakeholders, greater involvement in decision making, and encouraging organisational actors to work together to solve problems and pre-empt conflict. In terms of processes, representative voice is central to all definitions, with partnership typically associated with a highly consultative management style and transparent approach to decision making. Developing constructive dialogue around issues of business concern (e.g. efficiency, productivity) as well as employee priorities (e.g. job security, fair treatment) mean recognising the legitimacy of different points of view, and requires high trust relationships to be effective. Partnership is also normally associated with a range of supporting HRM practices including agreements concerning job security and flexibility. Finally, partnership is primarily concerned with the dynamics of workplace relations at the individual employer or even workplace level (see Johnstone et.al, 2009).

This focus at the employer or workplace level means partnership remains distinct from continental European social partnership (Hyman, 2005). Partnership, as an approach to industrial relations, is also distinct from partnership as form of ownership associated with cooperatives and employee-owned enterprises such as the John Lewis Partnership in the UK. Nevertheless, distinguishing between partnership and non-partnership can be difficult. One approach is to be guided by how organisations themselves describe their approach to industrial relations. Some officially espouse a partnership approach and develop a formal agreement reflecting many of the principles outlined above, though in reality the agreements can be quite vague (Bacon and Storey, 2010) and reveal little about the nature of industrial relations on a day to day basis. Conversely, some organisations are reluctant to use the language of partnership or to sign a formal agreement, but demonstrate many of the characteristics of partnership approaches (Johnstone et.al, 2009; 2011). A further ambiguity is whether partnership requires trade unions or whether it can describe an approach in non-union organisations through an NER body (Cathcart, 2014; Johnstone et.al, 2010). A more inclusive definition suggests we cannot rule out the possibility of both de facto and de jure partnerships, or union and non-union partnerships, without first examining the empirical evidence (Ackers et.al, 2005).

Despite the conceptual ambiguity, partnership approaches to industrial relations have attracted extensive attention in recent decades in countries including the UK, Ireland, the USA, Australia and New Zealand. In the US, this builds upon longstanding debates regarding the potential economic and productivity benefits of union management cooperation as well as concerns with mutual gains and

high performance works systems (Appelbaum and Batt, 1994; Freeman and Medoff, 1984; Hirsch, 2004; Kochan et.al, 1986; Kochan and Osterman, 1994). In the UK partnership has been central to a lively union revitalisation debate, often presented as a choice for unions between ‘moderation and militancy’ (Kelly, 1996). However, it was the election of New Labour in 1997 that put partnership firmly in the British policy limelight. Partnership was popularised in Ireland following a national social partnership programme introduced in 1987, and promoted in the 1990s as part of the ‘Partnership 2000’ agenda which encouraged employers and trade unions to introduce cooperative arrangements at the workplace level (Roche and Teague, 2014; Teague and Donaghey, 2015). In Australia, partnership was promoted by as part of ‘best practice’ through the Australian Best Practice Demonstration Program established by the Labour government in the early 1990s, and also reappeared briefly under the Gillard government in 2010 (Macneil et.al, 2011). Policy interest in partnership has also waxed and waned in the New Zealand, especially in the public sector (MacNeil et.al, 2011).

For partnership advocates, partnership is in the best interest of employers, employees, unions, and governments. For beleaguered trade unions, and especially where state support is lacking, partnership offers unions a way of winning the support of employers, and to reposition themselves as part of the solution to positive employment relations and business success, rather than as a thorn in management’s side (Ackers and Payne, 1998). For employers, partnership appears to offer a more strategic approach to employment relations, as well as the potential of greater workforce cooperation, less conflict, greater employee commitment, increased productivity, and the ability to facilitate organisational change. Employees are also argued to prefer collaborative partnership approaches compared with more adversarial relations, as well as standing to benefit from higher levels of job satisfaction, greater voice, improved work-life balance, less stress and greater autonomy. Finally for governments, partnership offers the promise of enhanced organisational productivity and less industrial relations conflict. (Johnstone, 2015; Stuart and Martinez-Lucio, 2005; Whyman and Petrescu, 2014).

The reality of partnership is less clear cut. The most optimistic assessments come from pluralists who view partnership as a ‘neo-pluralist’ approach which continues to accept a collective tension in the employment relationship, but also stresses the potential for accommodation and compromise through proactive partnership approaches (Ackers, 2014; Johnstone, 2015). Different forms of pluralism are believed to be possible, and for optimists there is an opportunity to shift from legalistic ‘constitutional’ or opportunistic ‘standard modern’ forms of pluralism, towards a more consultative partnership-style pluralism (Purcell and Sisson, 1983). Some IR pluralists are less sanguine, and express concerns regarding the voluntary rather than legally binding nature of arrangements. While partnership is not quite impossible, even ‘good’ employers might be tempted to renege on their promises (Simms, 2015). These concerns are shared in a forceful radical critique, which argues that

the inevitability of workplace conflict and the fundamental inequalities upon which capitalism based simply leaves little potential for constructive or cooperative bargaining processes (Thompson, 2003). For critics cooperation is at best a veneer for incorporation and the reinforcement of inequality, and resistance and militancy are more appropriate strategies (Danford et.al, 2014; Gall, 2008; Kelly, 1996).

The research evidence is also mixed (see Johnstone et.al, 2009; Wilkinson et al 2014b), though again three main perspectives can be identified in the literature. Optimists suggests employees, unions and employers all stand to benefit from partnership (Kochan and Osterman, 1994). Pessimists suggests that workers and unions are likely to gain little if anything from partnership, especially in terms of labour outcomes such as working hours, pay levels or job security (Kelly, 2004). It is also argued that partnership might weaken union influence and constrain the ability to represent and defend the interests of members (Gall, 2008; Upchurch et.al, 2008). Finally, the ‘constrained mutuality’ perspective is more nuanced identifying both gains such as improved consultation, access to senior decision makers, and greater union legitimacy, but also potential risks and challenges such as demonstrating the benefits of partnership to members (Glover et.al, 2014; Johnstone et.al, 2010; Samuel, 2014). They also recognise that the employer normally retains the upper hand as a result of such arrangements (Guest and Peccei, 2001), as well as the right to make the final decisions (Johnstone et.al, 2010). Adherents to this perspective suggest that partnership outcomes are not as black as white as the polarised conceptual debates suggest, and outcomes are thus contingent on a range of factors. Even those who are cautiously optimistic recognise that that partnership is difficult in lightly regulated liberal market economies which encourage a managerial focus on short term financial results, and that perhaps it asking too much of employers and unions to develop and sustain long-term oriented partnership arrangements based on goodwill, without more robust institutional incentives and statutory intervention (Dobbins, 2010; Johnstone, 2015; Samuel and Bacon, 2010; Simms, 2015).

The Varieties of Capitalism debate has been influential in industrial relations research (Hall and Soskice, 2001), but an important weakness is that it fails to fully explain the diversity of practice, or management and union choice within particular institutional contexts and economies (Wilkinson and Wood, 2011; 2014c), and the partnership debate illustrates this incongruence. An international study of airlines, for example, reveals examples of union avoidance, accommodation and partnership. The authors identify multiple approaches to management of the employment relationship both within and between different national contexts. The starkest international comparison is perhaps between the low cost Irish airline Ryanair, known for its vigorous anti-union approach, and the US based low cost carrier Southwest which has developed a partnership with unions as part of a high commitment model in an environment where private sector union density is very low (Bamber et.al, 2009). This suggests a need to avoid becoming locked in to deterministic accounts, to explain diversity where we might

anticipate similarity, and to explore partnerships which have developed in institutional environments believed to be inhospitable to such arrangements (Heery, 2002). Within unionised contexts, why do some employers continue to muddle through with existing relationships based on accommodation, while others attempt to transform relations around a partnership model? Why have Ryanair and Southwest taken such different paths? The evidence suggests that often the catalyst has been organisational crisis, a desire to drive organisational change or to implement wider HRM initiatives, promotion by a new management team, or deteriorating employment relations. Often it is likely to be a particular constellation of the above. Other factors that might support partnership at the workplace level include a quality-driven strategy, enthusiastic management, supportive union actors, high union density and a complementary HR system (Belanger and Edwards, 2007, Dobbins, 2010).

While partnership has attracted an extensive literature, some important limitations of the existing research can be identified (Johnstone et.al, 2009). Firstly, there is a shortage of longitudinal case study research; much of the existing research tends to provide only a snapshot of partnership at a particular point in time. Longitudinal studies are valuable in identifying the rationale and motives, and tracing the complex processes of partnership over time, and as they occur in particular workplace context. This is important if we are to know more about partnership as a process rather than just as the content of agreements or the raw outcomes, useful as these are (Glover et.al, 2014). Secondly, there is a need to consider wider partnership debates internationally in order to make sense of the role of the macro-political and social-political context. Often comparisons are made between liberal market economies like the UK and exemplars of the European Social Model such as Germany. While such analyses between dissimilar contexts and experiences are helpful, there is also value in drawing comparisons between countries with similar economies, traditions and cultures (Strauss, 1998). A key criticism of partnership is that it may work in coordinated market economies such as Sweden and Germany but that financialisation and short-termism simply render partnership problematic in liberal market economies (Simms, 2015; Terry, 2003). On other hand, partnership has attracted policy and employer interest across liberal market economies including the UK, Ireland, US, Australia and New Zealand, and all share institutional similarities including primarily market-based coordination, workplace level bargaining, an emphasis on managerial prerogative, and increasingly marginalised trade unions (Bamber et.al, 2016). It would therefore be useful to compare the experiences of partnership in these countries. Finally, as many workplaces no longer recognise trade unions modern pluralism is characterised by a mix of union, non-union and hybrid arrangements, and research needs to reflect this reality. More research into the non-union partnership is therefore needed (Johnstone, et.al, 2010). This book aims to begin to address some of these limitations.

Structure of the book

The focus of this book is upon the development of workplace partnership across a range of liberal market economies: the UK, Ireland, USA, Australia and New Zealand. The book provides both a critical assessment of the main debates around workplace partnership at a national public policy level, as well as five detailed workplace case studies of partnership in practice. All explore partnership over an extended period of time, and the case selection includes both union and non-union examples. In this collection we bring together conceptual debates, a review of developments in each national institutional context, as well as one in depth workplace case study from each country. Each chapter is written by authorities in that area. We hope by bringing the above issues together in one cohesive collection, the book will be useful to students and lecturers of employment relations, HRM and the sociology of work, as well as to others with an interest in work and employment studies.

Part one: Conceptual Debates

The book opens with *Part One: Conceptual Debates*, which explores the theoretical arguments both in favour and against partnership approaches. The case for and against partnership has divided opinion especially between adherents of pluralist and radical perspectives. For pluralists strong workplace institutions are needed to mediate and reconcile different interests and the key challenge is the regulation of employment and effective representation of competing interests. Trade unions and collective bargaining have normally been assumed to be the natural solution to these problem, but emerging neo-pluralist positions stress the potential – or indeed need - to shift from the ‘arms-length adversarialism’ of classic pluralism towards more proactive partnership approaches in neo-liberal economies (Ackers, 202; 2015; Boxall and Haynes, 1997).

Jimmy Donaghey opens by presenting the pluralist case for partnership. Donaghey suggests that partnership can be viewed as an attempt to develop social democratic type industrial citizenship similar to many continental European models, but within the constraints of the voluntarist employment relations systems of liberal economies and wider influences of globalisation. The chapter acknowledges that partnership may be a weaker form of representation than adversarial collective bargaining, and may not work in all cases. Nevertheless, it is argued that partnership still has some merit, and that in some cases the alternative to partnership is likely to be no representation whatsoever. While many critics highlight the lack of strong institutional and legislative supports as weakness of partnership in voluntarist liberal market economies, Donaghey suggests that such support is unlikely to be forthcoming, and even if it was it would be difficult to implement these approaches in countries such as the UK and Ireland.

In direct contrast, Andy Danford and Mike Richardson outline the radical case against partnership. They argue that partnership represents a form of union incorporation, and advocate a more militant form of unionism, preferring strategies such as organising as an alternative to partnership. They stress the challenging environment for unions across a range of metrics, and suggest that employer

opposition and anti-union sentiments remain a key problem. They also note how a rise in cooperative relations between management and unions has coincided with continuing membership decline, and suggest that this is consistent with broader labour history. Indeed, they suggest that both contemporary and historical examples of partnership and cooperation reveal a long record of failure, and call for more oppositional union strategies and rank and file union organisation that contests the inequities of neo-liberal workplace reform.

Part Two: National Contexts

Having set the conceptual scene, the book moves on to consider the extent to which individual country contexts help or hinder the development of partnership at work. In Part Two, *National Contexts*, we assess the institutional context of five nations where, to varying degrees, partnership debates have taken place but also where the environment might be considered inhospitable to partnership. The selection of countries – the UK, Ireland, US, Australia, and New Zealand – provides an opportunity to compare institutional developments across a range of nations with important variations in legislation, HRM practices and union representation but also many similarities in business, political and socio-cultural institutions (Gollan et.al, 2014). Given this emphasis on ‘most similar’ comparative case design (Strauss, 1998), countries such as Germany are excluded from this particular collection.

Stewart Johnstone opens the debate on national institutions with the search for good employment relations in the context of the UK. He suggests that, depending on our definition, notions of partnership have a long history in Britain, with various policy discussions and experiments with pluralist employee participation throughout the 19th and 20th Century. However, the main partnership debate has its roots in the election of a New Right Conservative government unsympathetic to unions between 1979 and 1997, and the election of the New Labour government in 1997 for whom partnership represented a modern form of pluralism. Despite the enthusiasm evident during the government's first term of office (1997-2001) partnership appeared to lose public policy momentum in the first few years of the new Millennium. For many commentators, the failure to repeal Conservative legislation and the lack of government interest in the EU information and consultation regulations was evidence that the government was not really committed to the pluralist partnership project. While both the public policy mood and state policy have been fickle, employers have been characteristically pragmatic with many of the original partnership agreements appearing to have survived the test of time. Though the language of partnership is now somewhat tarnished, new agreements continue to be signed, and in some cases been absorbed as part of more fashionable ‘employee engagement’ efforts.

Tony Dundon and Tony Dobbins then present evidence from Ireland, and note the promotion of national level social partnership between 1987 and 2009, together with an aim of diffusing workplace partnership at the enterprise level. In contrast to the UK, tripartite bargained consensus at a national level – with governments, employers and unions acting as ‘partners’ – was viewed as a precursor to developing effective workplace partnerships. They argue, however, that the combination of industrial relations voluntarism and neo-liberal market forces mean that collaborative employment relations inevitably remain highly vulnerable in Ireland. As a result, they suggest that the outlook for workplace partnership is bleak given a neo-liberal regime which prioritises the economic goals of capital accumulation above all else, and where the state and employers are increasingly offloading risk to employees in the form of insecure work incompatible with sustainable workplace partnership.

Adrienne Eaton, Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld and Saul Rubenstein then review developments in the United States, and evaluate various public and private policy initiatives, as well as early examples of labour-management partnership. They suggest that the current context for partnership remains unfriendly in almost all ways including: declining union representation; state-level initiatives aimed at undermining unions; job losses; disagreement within unions; a lack of federal or state policy or pressure on more receptive employers from investors and management associations. There is also limited support from state or national governments or other policy stakeholders. Many experiments with partnership have not been sustained, and while there are ‘islands of success’, these are believed to function in spite of the system rather than because of it. They argue that the development of partnership would require, among other things, state and national leaders who openly embrace partnership, joint initiatives by employers, unions seeking to advance partnership at an industry level, and the development of effective forms of employee representation. Overall they conclude that partnership will not flourish in the United States without strong public policy and institutional support, and the development of new representational forms that represent a substantial amount of the workforce.

Cathy Xu, Glenn Patmore and Paul Gollan then present the case of Australia, with a particular focus upon the legislative context and the extent to which it has helped or hindered the spread of workplace partnership. Similar to the UK and Ireland, there have been some debates concerning the possibility of transporting continental European partnership models to Australia where conflictual industrial relations are a significant part of the system. Motivations for this interest are believed to include a challenging environment for Australian unions and workers including intensified competition, restructuring, privatisation, and downsizing. The authors consider the impact of the 2009 Fair Work Act, and the extent to which it mirrors European developments around information and consultation. They suggest that partnership offers the potential to attempt to address tensions around competitiveness, job security and flexibility. However challenges remain including the narrow nature of the FWA model of joint consultation and then need for the attitudinal change of all actors.

Helen Delaney and Nigel Haworth then present our final country level analysis in the context of New Zealand. They identify three broad phases in the development of industrial relations in New Zealand, and note how the arbitration route became the dominant employment relations mechanism. At the same time, however, it is suggested that as well as formal bargaining processes, employer paternalism was also an important characteristic. They identify the period 1984-1997 as a time of neo-liberal reform, with trade union voices marginalised and collective voice eroded as business interests and competitiveness were to take centre stage. Nevertheless, there was also some interest in workplace reform and partnership-type activity, especially by the PSA union which became a driving force for partnership in the public sector. Other developments include the activities of Workplace New Zealand (WPNZ) in the 1990s and discussions around 'modern' trade unionism. Similar to the UK, the Labour led governments of 1998-2008 appeared to offer a more promising political and legislative climate for partnership at work, but support has evaporated since the election of three successive National level governments with little interest in partnership. The authors conclude that context for partnership in New Zealand is not fertile due to limited government and employer interest beyond some exceptional examples, and trade unions not sharing a common view.

Part three: Partnership cases

This leads us to the final section, *Partnership Cases* where we explore workplace level experiments with partnership across each of the five nations. Each case offers a detailed longitudinal analysis of the development of partnership over an extended period of time.

Jonathan Hoskin, Stewart Johnstone and Peter Ackers present a case of partnership in the UK in the context of PowerCo, a large employer in the utility sector. They suggest that while liberal market economies are typically considered to provide an inhospitable environment for the development of meaningful or sustainable partnership, several organisational characteristics provide some support for partnership working. These include the provision of highly skilled and long-term employment in a stable market place, high trade union density, as well as support from the industry regulator and Health and Safety Executive for a partnership approach to industrial relations. Partnership was partly born out of adversarial relations in the 1990s, but it was a major incident at the turn of the century that prompted an effort to change working practices and cultural attitudes. They conclude that though all sides have made an effort to make partnership work at PowerCo, success has been partial, with relations oscillating between cooperative and antagonistic. Partnership remains an aspiration even it has not been fully achieved.

Tony Dundon and Tony Dobbins then present a case from Aughinish Alumina, an alumina refinery in the Republic of Ireland. The case is often considered to represent a 'best practice' or robust model of partnership, and like PowerCo, this has been attributed to the plants relative insulation from external

market forces, as well as management's commitment to balance efficiency with other concerns such as equity and employee voice. Cooperative relations remain in place in the organisation despite competitive pressures. A rare confluence of external and internal conditions are believed to have underpinned the cooperation including: relative insulation from market pressures; continuity in top management and union support; internal institutionalisation of cooperation and continuous process technology. They argue that the case represents a rare example of enduring firm-level pluralist cooperation, in contrast to wider developments in Ireland where voluntary partnerships have often not survived.

Thomas Kochan then provides a case study of the labour management partnership at Kaiser Permanente, a US healthcare organisation, over the period 1997-2013. The partnership is large and complex covering over 100,000 employees, 10 national unions and 26 local unions, and as such is the largest and most comprehensive labour management partnership in American history. As is common with voluntary workplace partnership the arrangement was again born out of crisis. Kochan is optimistic, noting how the labour management partnership has endured for 18 years, and has demonstrated the resilience to survive despite a range of challenges. He also reveals how it has delivered significant evidence of mutual gains, improving both industrial relations and organisational performance.

Dhara Shah, Cathy Xu, Paul Gollan and Adrian Wilkinson present a relatively unusual case study of non-union partnership at the Suncorp Group in Australia. Suncorp is one of a small number of large firms with a relatively formal and established non-union employee representative (NER) structure – the Suncorp Employee Council. SGEC is a unique NER arrangement, representing Suncorp employees through an entity which is different from both the works council and Joint Consultative Committee models but one which has embedded since 1988. The representative arrangement has evolved over the years forming workplace partnership with Suncorp management for employee information sharing and consultation as well as handling employment relations issues through the division of responsibilities between the HR managers and SGEC. In the context of Australia where union density has reached its historical low and non-union workplaces are now dominant, Suncorp offers valuable insights into an enduring labour-management partnership within a non-union organisational setting.

Our final case study, by Helen Delaney and Nigel Haworth, is of one of New Zealand's largest companies. Formed in 2001, Fonterra brought together three competing dairy operations. The partnership has its roots in developments in the 1990s where union and management were interested in working together to deliver a high performance work system in the Whareoa plant, and partnership was to be central to the subsequent Manufacturing Excellence programme. The case demonstrates both benefits of partnership such as improved productivity and performance, union influence and

visibility, as well as improvements in the quality of the work, involvement and upskilling. At the same time, partnership involved a precarious struggle for power and control amongst actors that may at times undermine the ethos of partnership.

In some ways it is hard not to be pessimistic about the prospects for partnership in liberal market economies, and many commentators suggest partnership is unlikely to thrive in the cultural or institutional context of the five countries which form the focus of this volume. Partnership continues to divide opinion, to mean different things to different people, and to be operationalised in different ways. In turn this creates difficulties in setting expectations or agreeing on benchmarks for success. As Donaghey notes in chapter two, the emphasis on consultation is often welcomed by pluralists who view this as an important part of employee voice, and certainly preferable to unilateral management decision making, but criticised by radicals such as Danford and Richardson in chapter three on the grounds that it does little to address the fundamental inequalities in society and may actually reinforce the status quo.

In countries like the UK, Ireland, US, Australia and New Zealand, it is primarily up to employers and unions to do the heavy lifting in terms of initiating and sustaining a partnership model. This might explain why partnership is rare in these economies as it requires skill, ability and motivation to develop and sustain. Yet somewhat against the odds, islands of partnership can survive in particular contexts as many of our cases reveal. Where actors have come together and invested great energy in improving industrial relations it is unsurprising they are keen to make it work. Partnership does appear to provide a valuable model which can work in certain contexts. Partnership also returns attention to the industrial concerns of collective employee representation, at a time when representation is shrinking, trade unions are increasingly marginalised, and the HR profession is concerned with more fashionable issues. As the cases in our collection reveal a different kind of pluralism is possible. This is not to suggest that partnership is easy, universal or an off the shelf solution to all ills; all the chapters reveal that partnership is difficult. But it would be short-sighted and overly deterministic to dismiss partnership as inevitably doomed. With the appropriate support, partnership can seemingly deliver mutual gains and lubricate workplace relations even with limited institutional supports. Its long term reach might be far wider should the enthusiasm and support of unions, employers and governments be forthcoming. The search for good employment relations is unlikely to go away, and it is hoped this collection will stimulate the debate.

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