

TRADE UNIONISM AND HRM: THE INCOMPATIBLES?

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Introduction

Writing in this journal in 1989, George Bain reported upon the transition of the focus of the personnel function in the United Kingdom from 'industrial relations' to 'human resource management' (or HRM). In much the same vein, Keating has suggested that personnel practitioners in Ireland are now faced with a clear choice: between what she calls "the professional personnel route" and "the human resource management approach" (1989:96); and there is evidence that some American multi-nationals have already brought a strong HRM flavour to the management of their Irish operations (McGovern 1989). Indeed, as is so often the case with innovations in management strategy, style and practice, the roots of HRM can be traced to the United States. According to Kochan *et al*, personnel 'pluralism' and the HRM system have, over time, "traded positions as the innovative force in [US] industrial relations" (1986:226).

Difficulties in dealing with HRM remain, however, in that "it still risks meaning all things to all people" (Guest, 1991:169), and many of the implications of its adoption have yet to be thought through (see Storey, 1989). Whether this 'new industrial relations' demands a reorientation of academic approach has also been the subject of heated debate (Dunn 1990; Keenoy 1991). What seems to be widely agreed, however, is that HRM holds dangers for trade unionism. Bain, for example, observes that since HRM is individualistic in focus, "it follows from this approach (at least in its pure form) that unions are unnecessary, or at least marginal" (1989:5). The point has been elaborated by Guest:

"HRM values are unitarist to the extent that they assume no underlying and inevitable differences of interest between management and workers...HRM values are essentially individualistic in that they emphasize the individual-organization linkage in preference to operating through group and representative systems...These values...leave little scope for collective arrangements and assume little need for collective bargaining. HRM therefore poses a considerable challenge to traditional industrial relations and more particularly to trade unionism." (1989:43)

Indeed, the use by employers of some 'union busting' measures which have become associated with HRM also provides one of the popular explanations for the steep decline in the fortunes of organised labour in the US. There is at the same time a clear

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transatlantic consensus that increasing international competitive pressures demand the abandonment of what Kochan and McKersie describe as “traditional industrial relations policies and personnel practices” (1990:2); and the “appeal of HRM” thus lies, in significant part, “in its timeliness” (Guest 1990:379) as a replacement. Whither trade unionism in such a scenario?

The purpose of this article is not to reject the proposal that HRM, as we at present understand it, is essentially anti-union. Rather is it to identify the possible emergence of an HRM-derived approach which is not anti-union, and one which might indeed hold the potential for the more equitable distribution of power between management and workers - itself a long-standing ambition of the trade union movement.

Hard HRM

It is perhaps necessary first of all to dispose of a version of HRM which is unremittingly opposed to trade unionism. What Armstrong (1991), following Storey, defines as ‘hard’ HRM (and which also fits roughly into Guest’s (1990) ‘Radical/Conservative’ category) is ultra-unitarist and hardly more than a coherent version of ‘macho’ or ‘smoking gun’ management. The basic argument is that managing human resources is the same kind of activity as managing any other aspect of a business; employees are, after all, just another factor in the great input/output equation. What this demands is unquestioning acceptance of ‘management’s right to manage’, and the overwhelming emphasis is on ‘improving employee utilisation’. Managerial methods in this case are, in essence, Tayloristic, but they also include - especially for those at supervisory level and above - mechanisms such as target-setting, merit pay, and individually negotiated contracts. Flexibility is a key aspect; this demands the elimination of most traditional (particularly unskilled and semi-skilled) job categories, the use of sub-contractors, the buying-in of short-term skill requirements, and the development of the ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ workforces with which we have become so familiar.

Core workers are of course those whose skills and abilities are vital for success, and upon whom the organisation relies for survival. Their terms and conditions of employment will probably be above the ‘going rates’, in exchange for total loyalty to the management and to its aims and objectives. Peripheral workers, on the other hand, are those who give the organisation most of its ability to respond to transient pressures and activity peaks and troughs. They will generally (though not always) be unskilled, often part-time and, in practice, mainly women. Easily disposable - and replaceable - they can be treated in a minimalist, arms-length fashion; and, reciprocally, little is expected of them by way of loyalty to the organisation.

It follows that hard HRM is opposed to trade unionism, root and branch. Unions set up the alternative focus of employee loyalty which unitarism so abhors; they embody the notion of collective rather than individual work relations; and they limit the exercise of the management prerogative. The union response to hard HRM must, by the same token, be a highly traditional adversarial one, for there seems little scope for compromise.

Soft HRM

'Soft' HRM, by contrast, bears the 'human relations' brand, and sees employees as being *very* different from other resources. People are feeling and thinking and react in different ways to different kinds of treatment. This demands, first, strategic planning in which they are the core consideration and, second, an emphasis on gaining their *commitment* - rather than unthinking compliance. The other significant feature of soft HRM is the obverse of the commitment of the individual to the organisation. The commitment of the organisation to the individual is fulfilled by a high level of investment in training, personal development and career planning, by policies of promotion from within and, so far as possible, by a 'job for life' - after the Japanese model.

Seen as part of an integrated package, the other management methods typically associated with this kind of HRM include: individualised, performance, and profit-related pay; 'single status' on non-pay terms and conditions; employee share ownership; flexible working and multi-skilling; the opening of new information channels to employees - like team briefings and 'cascade' communications; and, increasingly, employee involvement and participation schemes. The reasons why these are viewed as a threat to traditional union rights and prerogatives are clear enough. They appear to undermine collective bargaining; to breach lines of demarcation and upset relativities; to subvert union control over internal labour markets; to erode worker solidarity; and to bypass long-established methods of information transmission via shop stewards. Indeed, in established companies this approach is often accompanied, if not always overtly or even deliberately, by the marginalisation of trade unionism. On 'green field' sites it frequently means union exclusion or, at best, what Norman Willis of the British TUC has called 'beauty contests' for recognition - with 'single union', 'no strike', and 'pendulum arbitration' agreements, usually arrived at in advance of any workers being taken on.

Compatibility through flexibility?

This does mean, however, that there is some scope for flexibility on the question of a trade union presence; and Guest's (1987) contrast between stereotypes of (in effect, soft) HRM and 'traditional' personnel management/industrial relations (PM/IR), shown in Table 1, provides a useful theoretical starting point for an evaluation of the compatibility of soft HRM with trade unionism.

Table 1: Stereotypes of PM/IR & HRM

| | 'Traditional' PM/IR | Human Resource Management |
|---|--|--|
| <i>Time & Planning Perspective</i> | Short-term: reactive ad hoc | Long-term: pro-active strategic |
| <i>Relationship with General Management</i> | Marginal | Integrated |
| <i>Psychological Contract</i> | Compliance | Commitment |
| <i>Control System</i> | External | Self-control |
| <i>Employee Relations Perspective</i> | Pluralist: collective low trust | Unitarist: individual high trust |
| <i>Preferred Structures/ Systems</i> | Mechanistic: centralised defined roles | Organic: devolved flexible roles |
| <i>'Personnel' Role</i> | Specialist/ Professional | Integrated into line management |
| <i>Evaluation Criterion</i> | Cost- Minimisation | Maximum Utilisation |

Source: Based on Guest 1987.

Guest has been criticised for comparing the descriptive in one case with the normative in the other (Legge 1989);¹ and it is certainly true that his contrast is between an almost caricatured version of the features of the PM/IR model and the idealised, super-cooperative, qualities of its HRM counterpart. 'Real' industrial relations are, under most conditions, not nearly so conflict-rooted or lacking in trust as his PM/IR stereotype suggests, and on this basis alone we might anticipate little enough union opposition to at least some of the characteristics of soft HRM which he has listed.

These might include: the adoption of long-term strategic planning (which, as Metcalf (1991) has noted, is being undertaken by some unions themselves); the drawing in of the personnel function from the semi-detached position which it occupies in many

organisations - which permits too many line managers to regard 'people' problems as the task of someone else to resolve; the linked devolution to the line of matters like employee welfare, consultation, discipline and grievance handling, and the consequent development and diffusion of inter-personal skills and sensitivities; and allowing workers to control their own work situation rather than be subject to the 'external' tyrannies of, for example, a piece-rate system, or of close monitoring by a supervisor.

As to measures of effectiveness - the 'evaluation criteria' - it is not clear that the HRM approach portends anything very different in the end. The management quest to minimise costs *and* obtain the best use of available resources offers no new challenge to union negotiators in any case. Even performance related pay, serving the 'maximum utilisation' objective, has been a familiar feature on the bargaining agenda, especially for white collar unions, for many years. Into a more doubtful category we might put the move towards organic organisational structures - not because the elimination of centralised control systems would be a bad thing, but because of the threat to traditional demarcations which the concomitant flexible work roles imply. However, demarcation is no longer the contentious issue it once was. One of the most illuminating findings of research among foreign-owned, unionised companies in Northern Ireland (Cradden 1985) is that they have no difficulty whatever in obtaining union agreement to flexible working.

Not surprisingly, the unitarist employee relations perspective - which appears to lie as much at the centre of soft HRM as of its harder relation - is the characteristic with which unions will find most immediate reason to cavil. Leaving aside the philosophical and ideological implications of this (some of which are dealt with in Legge 1989), a fundamental problem is the assumption that it is actually possible for an employer to sustain an individual relationship with each employee. This ignores the reality that lines of communication will not always be short enough to obviate the need for intermediary structures. It denies the possibility that group interests will need expression as well as individual ones - denies the need, in other words, for collective representation. And it glides over a central issue, which is that there is a *power* relationship in an employment contract, which demands a policing function - and no one has yet devised one which comes nearer to meeting that need than trade unionism. Indeed, even if the expectation of a dedicated HRM management that a generalised harmony and trust will be the norm is borne out, who will support the inevitable aggrieved *individual* who feels that the system has let her or him down?

Associated with the unitarist perspective is the ideal of employee commitment, which Guest (1989) considers likely to present the main challenge to trade unionism.² For apart from the implication that a union loyalty is inconsonant with this, there is also much evidence of the excesses of corporate cultures of commitment, which demand the repression of dissent, and the marginalisation of dissenters (for some startling examples see Harris and Moran 1988: Ch 6). Thus, indeed, does HRM appear "torn between preaching the virtues of individualism *and* collectivism" (Legge 1989:35)! On the other

hand, who is to say that engendering cheerful commitment is not better than accepting glum compliance? It is plainly better that employees have a sense of identity with their organisations: better for them that they enjoy their work, that they know their efforts will be recognised and rewarded, that their opinions are valued, and that they are part of a work community engaged in a worthwhile task; and better for the employer in that if all these requirements are met, employees will work in more efficient, productive and quality conscious ways.

Moreover, it would appear that organisations which have adopted and persisted in an 'employee centred' HRM approach have recognised that the best way to obtain and retain such commitment is to devolve power - to allow employees a role in the decisions which affect their working lives. There is of course nothing very new about this - the British Involvement and Participation Association has been fostering that very idea for over one hundred years! But while the initial emphasis was on the devolution of responsibility to and participation by individuals, time and experience has called forth other initiatives: the introduction (or improvement) of *collective* information, deliberation, reward and responsibility systems: quality circles; team working; autonomous work groups; quality of working life (or QWL) programmes; joint work group/management steering of work-restructuring and technological change; and, of course, profit-related pay and employee share ownership.

The effect of all this has often been to 'empower' workers and to democratise work in ways to which the founding fathers of the industrial radical tradition could only hazily aspire. And what is surely important here is that the employees concerned are not independent free spirits engaged purely in the pursuit of individual self interest. Nor are they mere cyphers from whom nothing but obedience is or can be expected. They are members of teams, work units, departments, occupational groups, and perhaps unions, with all the significant obligations to each other which such membership entails. This has implications both for employers and for unions. Accepting the legitimacy of the plurality of sometimes diverging interests which these collectivities represent would clearly be inconsistent with seeking or expecting either single-minded company-worship or undivided loyalty to a trade union.

A Pluralist HRM?

What then of the possibility of moving towards a version of HRM which is positively pluralist, maybe even radical,³ in its thrust - one which might resolve some of the individual/collective contradictions in the 'soft' model which we have been considering, and more comfortably accommodate trade union organisation? The portents are not unfavourable.

As a recent international review (Gaudier 1988) has confirmed, one of the truly radical things which HRM has done is to bring industrial democracy firmly back on to the agenda - and this, furthermore, at a time when the previous pattern of a coincidence in the rise in interest in worker participation with economic growth and low unemployment

would have dictated otherwise. That it has taken the HRM movement to break that cycle itself demands pause for reappraisal, particularly by trade unions. There are also some special lessons to be drawn from experience in the United States, the native home of HRM. Firstly, US research has shown that the kind of 'dual allegiance' which is the alternative to a purely union or company loyalty, is quite possible "where a *cooperative industrial relations* climate exists" (Guest 1989:44).⁴ Secondly, what Kochan *et al* (1986) have proposed as a way forward for the much enfeebled American trade union movement is, in effect, adjustment to a new pluralism, involving a blending of traditional union representation and the newer *participatory* processes derived from HRM. Thirdly, that prescription relies on evidence of the success of practical examples of just such a coming together.

At bottom, of course, there must remain an understanding that despite widening areas of 'mutuality', there are also inevitable conflicts of interest between management and workers. And such conflicts (given a more positive working climate) will lie mainly in the area of pay and conditions of broad application; so collective bargaining will still be required to resolve them. Beyond that, however, the key to success - and indeed to the analysis of Kochan *et al* - is an acknowledgement of the substantial value, in appropriate circumstances, of a dual allegiance. What this requires of a union is that it identify itself closely with the production, quality and competitive aims of the employer, and that it encourage the growth through participation of a greater sense of commitment on the part of its members to the organisation for which they work. What is required of the management is that it involve the union, as well as individuals and work groups, in all organisational decision-making and, just as important, in their implementation.

Some lessons from unitarist America

What evidence is there, apart from pious aspiration, that a 'dual allegiance' HRM with a strong commitment/flexibility/participation link is feasible?⁵ Since it is possible to report only a few examples here, an obvious focus of interest must be the US auto industry, which started down an HRM-type path with its strong union tradition as a continuing and inevitable feature. The background in the 1970s and 1980s was of the Japanese putting increasing pressure on native American car makers. In face of this the conclusion was that a turnaround was going to rest almost entirely on changing employee attitudes; and that in turn demanded massive attitude change on the part of management and the union hierarchy as well. For it was clear that the industry's tradition of deeply adversarial industrial relations no longer served the interests of anyone.

The union concerned, the United Auto Workers (UAW) was at first divided on the question, but the doubters were eventually persuaded to cooperate. The first significant example of a totally new collaborative approach, incorporating a comprehensive employee involvement (EI) programme, was in the joint Nissan/General Motors (GM) NUMMI plant in California. However, the biggest investment,

and the most radical experiment, has been at the new, green field, Saturn plant in Tennessee. A series of agreements negotiated in advance between GM and the UAW provided for joint decision-making on every aspect of the project. In exchange for concessions on wage flexibility and a reduction in the number of job classifications, the UAW achieved guaranteed employment for the majority of the workforce, and workers' approval as an indispensable pre-requisite to "all decisions and all action", according to a French writer on the project; it represented "an innovative alternative of a style of negotiation based, not on remuneration and job demarcation, but on employment, technology and *power*" (Messine 1987:323).

In the meantime Ford took an earlier EI experiment to its logical conclusion at Sharonville, Ohio, and has now extended it to other plants. A particular feature of the Ford initiative noted by a visiting trade union team (UIMM 1988) was the setting up of voluntary working groups of eight to ten workers, functioning without constant supervision. Each group is responsible for its own production plan, for quality and for a whole range of administrative matters such as holiday arrangements and hours of work. And with the assistance of specialised advisers, the group deals with its own cost analyses, production waste, machine maintenance, and the rotation system by which each worker becomes multi-skilled. Incidentally, the EI achievements at Ford are signalled by a badge on a side window of each new car produced: together with the side-by-side logos of Ford and the UAW, it says "Built with Pride...with Employee Involvement". And so impressed have some Ford parts suppliers been with the benefits that they too have taken it up.

The Budd Company of Philadelphia, which makes - among other things - body pressings for Ford, is one of these. Best witness to the success of this particular venture in union/management cooperation is a former shop steward, and one of the UAW's full-time EI 'facilitators'. His job, while guarding the union interest, is to ensure the passing on of the message to the shop-floor and, together with the management, to ease the process into place. A most effective propagandist for participation, he insists that even without the strong 'labor' tradition at Budd, change would not have been achieved without the endorsement and practical encouragement provided by the UAW, which served to allay most of the inevitable shop floor suspicions.

Back with GM, almost two thirds of its manufacturing operations are now covered by agreed EI programmes, and there is a permanent GM/UAW Human Resource Centre, near Detroit, devoted to research into 'jointness' and to training union and management 'agents of change'. The dedication of the people there to the idea which it is their role to promote is impressive. Indeed, the process of establishing a stronger sense of worker commitment has had effects well beyond engineering a degree of economic recovery. At the GM engine works at Livonia, Michigan, a leading shop steward has asserted that his personal life had been changed as well. In the "old days" he had a very "mechanical attitude" to work; but it came the point where he worked every hour of overtime available "to buy a car and a boat ... which I couldn't use because

I was working so much overtime!". Under the new dispensation, however, he need not "leave his brains at the door" when he came to work, and his opinions and contribution were valued for the first time. The transformation of his home life took place, he claims, as a direct consequence of the new confidence and self-fulfilment which he felt. Now he only does overtime to meet essential orders, and he is enjoying his family to the full "for the very first time".

The evidence of the wider effectiveness of such human resource initiatives is not confined to the former car giants. The 'road to Damascus' testimony of a worker in the Rohm & Hass chemical plant at Bristol, Pennsylvania is typical. He worked in the "pits" of the power house, and decided one day - as much out of frustration as anything else - to 'opt in' to the *optional* EI scheme agreed some time previously by the management and union. He took on the role of catalyst, and spent the "most enjoyable few years of my working life" combining the humanisation of the dismal working system in the power house with changing the horizons and aspirations of himself and his fellow workers. The new influence of ordinary workers has also been manifest in a growing environmental awareness, and a determination to end the pollution of the Delaware River to which their own plant contributed.

The human resource programme in the almost 100% unionised San Francisco MUNI - which runs the city's buses, trams and cable cars - provides an instance in the public sector. The value of change in this case can be demonstrated by what is, on the face of it, a fairly trivial matter. Queried about whether the universally impressive turnout of the uniformed personnel was the result of a rigidly enforced code of dress, the Assistant HR manager was at first surprised that this should be cause for comment. On reflection, however, he suggested that the explanation could only lie in their "culture of quality and cooperation". Just as significant is the MUNI's remarkable punctuality record; and its employees insist that it is the most efficient city transportation system in the US.

It would be unwise to draw any firm or final lessons from just these examples, or even from the many others which Kochan et al examined, since they cover, as yet, only a tiny proportion of US industry. However, what is significant, in the first place, is that they are being carried through with the cooperation of the unions concerned at every level - and in only a few cases has there been any obvious drawing back since the initial steps were taken. Secondly, participation has usually been successful only when it has formed part of the kind of strategic and integrated approach to the utilisation and development of people at work associated with HRM. Thirdly, all have been accompanied by tangible economic benefits - even though the full recovery of the car industry remains in some doubt.

On the other hand, many of these transformations were crisis-driven, and that alone prompts caution. Of particular import, so far as their relevance to British and Irish conditions is concerned, is that they have also arisen in single-union settings where "the challenge to the 'territory' of several competing unions is not an issue". Guest also

wonders if enough time has elapsed to show whether the unions concerned have been “colluding in their own demise” (Guest 1989:54). Almost in response to just such a reservation, however, Kochan and McKersie (1990) have reviewed the HR “experimentation” in the US in the 1980s.

In face of what they regard as the demonstrable economic and indeed social advances derived from the innovations of this period they insist that “management commitment alone is not strong enough to sustain [them]”. These writers are critical, therefore, of unions which have resisted becoming involved, since such initiatives “were most likely to succeed and be sustained over time *where union leaders became active partners*” and “visible champions of employee participation and related practices” (1990:22-23 - emphasis added). Indeed, union weakness in the US is a real “obstacle to diffusion of human resource innovations”. For in a democratic society trade unionism serves not only “to counteract or constrain management actions that are injurious to worker interests”, but also “to both encourage and reinforce management’s positive human resource practices” (1990:18-21).

Conclusions

It is as well to recall at this point the old lesson, drawn from comparative study, on the non-transferability of industrial relations practices and institutions across national boundaries. This does not mean that we cannot learn from the experience of others, however, and the messages in this case fall into two categories. Firstly, at a theoretical level, what is called in question is the continuing value of the pervasive and almost polar distinction which is made between pluralism and unitarism, and of the too rigid dichotomies associated with that: between conflict and cooperation, between compliance and commitment, and, above all, between collectivism and individualism. Related questions are also begged about the assumed ideological underpinnings - social democratic/collectivist in one case, and neo-conservative/individualist in the other.

What can surely be said, however, is that very little modification would produce, if not a ‘pluralist’ HRM, at least a closely related model which is not essentially anti-union.⁶ Indeed, to borrow a metaphor from Marx, HRM could even contain within itself the seeds of the destruction of the unitarist base from which it is derived. For a strategic, integrated HRM approach, in which the logic of the quest for employee commitment is followed to its limit, holds out the possibility of advancing, perhaps permanently, the cause of democracy at work.

At a practical level, we need be less tentative, because the circumstances in Ireland are arguably even more propitious than across the Atlantic for such an advance. In the first place, unlike US labour law, legislation in the Republic and in the UK offers no inhibitions to initiatives which incorporate employee involvement measures.⁷ Secondly, union weakness is not an immediate issue in either jurisdiction in Ireland, and the legitimacy of trade unionism as a project is not under serious question - even in Northern Ireland. Thirdly, there are examples of successful participation experiments

in unionised workplaces in Ireland already (see LRA 1986, and Department of Labour 1989). Any risks for unions involved are not great, therefore, and the cost of any failed experiments would be relatively small.

If managements decide, then, to adopt soft HRM policies which hold the promise greater self-fulfilment and a more democratic workplace, then the least that is necessary is a less cautious and less antagonistic response on the part of many trade union leaders than heretofore. In light of the obvious re-think which is going on in some union quarters already, better still would be to seize the initiative:

“Some trade union aversion to new developments in HRM is understandably produced by such management techniques being used as a weapon to promote an anti-trade union approach but there are also many positive features which now deserve more serious attention. Placing people at the centre of the corporate philosophy is an important development and one which offers new possibilities for the enhancement of participative democracy in any modern society.” (Geraghty 1991:n.p.)

Notes

- 1 This is a point which Guest has accepted (1991:151).
- 2 He has recently rearranged the characteristics of his 1987 stereotypes around the commitment/compliance crux (Guest 1991:152).
- 3 ‘Radical’ is used here in the sense in which such an approach is contrasted - by Fox (1985), for example - with unitarism and pluralism. The basic premise is that real equity requires a redistribution of industrial power, and of power in society at large.
- 4 Though the conditions are not strictly comparable, for a rather different outcome, drawn from British experience, see Guest and Dewe 1991.
- 5 Unless otherwise indicated, the information given in the examples provided below is drawn from direct experience during the IPC/IFI study tour.
- 6 The outline of this might be detected in Guest’s (1990) ‘Pluralist/Innovative’ category, though it is also clear that he does not envisage this going very much further than a more collaborative union/management relationship, and QWL.
- 7 For an explanation of the way in which US labour legislation inhibits EI programmes, see Kochan *et al* 1986.

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