

## Article

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Ouvrage recensé :

Michael POOLE, William BROWN, Jill RUBERY, Keith SISSON, Roger TARLING, Frank WILKINSON : *Industrial Relations in the Future. Trends and Possibilities in Britain over the Next Decade*. Agincourt, Methuen Publications, 1984, 148 pp., ISBN 0-7102-0145-1

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par contre s'interroger sur la raison d'être de l'inclusion des articles 124 à 136 de la **Loi sur les normes du travail** dans ce **Code du travail** annoté. Enfin, l'ouvrage se termine par un index bien fait.

Cet ouvrage constitue en définitive une source documentaire de première importance. Il s'agit d'un apport certain dans l'arsenal des instruments de travail dont disposent maintenant praticiens et théoriciens du droit du travail.

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**Industrial Relations in the Future**, by Michael Poole, William Brown, Jill Rubery, Keith Sisson, Roger Tarling and Frank Wilkinson, Agincourt, Ontario, 1984, 148 pp., ISBN 0-7102-0145-1

This book is the result of 3 studies commissioned by the British Department of Employment in the early 1980's. Michael Poole (from a sociological perspective) William Brown and Keith Sisson (from the perspective of traditional British Industrial Relations) and Jill Rubery, Roger Tarling and Frank Wilkinson (from the vantage point of labour economics) were asked to consider current trends in order to suggest what the next decade might hold in store for British Industrial Relations.

Brown and Sisson were careful to note that they were engaged in a cautious attempt at extrapolation rather than in prediction. They observed that had they written their essay in 1962, «it would have underestimated the rise of the shop steward and would have neglected totally the massive increase in government intervention in collective bargaining in the following decade.»

The basic framework adopted by all three authors was to review environmental developments and to consider their effects on labour and management. The key influences identified as impinging on British labour relations were very similar to those at work across the industrialized world. For example, due largely to government austerity measures by the early 1980's unemployment in Britain was at levels not seen since before World War II. All of the authors expected it to continue at high rates until at least the mid-1980's, and indeed, it has.

The authors also all made reference to the rapid inflation that had so dominated British (and Western) economies during the 1970's. Brown & Sisson felt that substantial inflation would continue while the others were somewhat more ambiguous. In fact, inflation has moderated considerably. All noted the emergence of incomes policies to combat inflation. Brown & Sisson & Rubery *et al.* stressed the confrontational nature of Thatcherite policy and its negative implications for tripartite co-operation in regard to incomes policy but Poole was somewhat more optimistic about the long range prospects for «corporatism». Rubery *et al.* argued that Thatcher's rejection of social contracting in favour of market forces should be considered a form of incomes policy rather than the absence of such a policy as is sometimes suggested.

Another key factor constraining British IR in recent decades has been the enormous increase in government intervention. This trend has greatly weakened the long British tradition of voluntarism and all of the authors felt that it would continue unabated. All thought it likely, for example, that the Thatcher government would introduce legislation restricting union security and regulating internal union government which it has done.

Another trend, discussed most thoroughly by Poole, concerns the shift in economic activity away from the secondary sector (manufacturing) to the tertiary (service) sector. One major consequence of this development. Poole felt, would be an increase in union activity among white collar workers.

Finally, in their essay, Rubery, Tarling and Wilkinson stressed the new milieu of international competitiveness which put pressure on management to reduce labour costs and, in so doing, was likely to affect significantly labour-management relations. Increased government intervention as well as increased competitiveness had resulted in private sector employers giving higher priority to labour issues with two outstanding results: a professionalization of the IR management function and a shift in control of collective bargaining away from employer associations to individual companies. Despite a diminishing role as bargaining agents employers' associations had, however, continued to plan an important role as advisors and lobbyists and were expected to continue to do so. None of the authors considered it to be likely that British employers would take advantage of economic and political developments to flee from unions as employers have done widely in the U.S. Through 1986 this expectation seems to be holding up. Employers were expected to (and have in fact) taken the initiative to introduce schemes designed to achieve greater flexibility and more involvement of workers in shop floor decision making.

All of the authors noted a fall in union density in the early 1980's but they were not too sure about the future of union density. Poole suggested that the negative effect of unemployment might be offset by the counter effects of increasing employment concentration, continued inflation and grievances arising from employer attempts to rationalize production. Rubery, Tarling & Wilkinson noted that unions had been through tough times in the past but had always snapped back stronger than ever. In fact, through 1986 the trend to greater concentration of employment has been reversed and union density has fallen considerably (see William Brown, «The Changing Role of Trade Unions in the Management of Labour», *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, July, 1986).

All of the authors felt that unions in the 1980's would be largely on the defensive attempting to protect jobs and incomes against attempts by employers to increase productivity and competitiveness. Aggressive efforts to achieve new goals were unlikely. The role of shop stewards, who became so influential in the 1960's and 1970's, was now in doubt. Would they become less important because of the reduction in bargaining power resulting from high unemployment or had they become sufficiently institutionalized to survive and prosper in the face of environmental diversity? This question has provoked considerable inquiry and debate in Britain in 1980's (see, for example, Michael Terry, «How Do We Know If Shop Stewards Are Getting Weaker?» *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, July, 1986).

A major point of conflict in the 1980's would be the public sector where, according to Brown and Sisson, «pay policy will be a perennial and central issue, not only because of efforts to limit labour costs and industrial disruption, but also because of the implications for national incomes policies which, in both 1974 and 1979, collapsed through pressure from this source.» In fact, the public sector has been a primary focus of industrial conflict through the mid 1980's. (see Brown, *op. cit.*).

The role and influence of the Trades Union Congress, which increased to previously unknown heights during the social contract era of the 1970's, would be far reduced in the 1980's. Neither Thatcher nor the Confederation of British Industry, according to Brown & Sisson, felt any need systematically to deal with it and, in the early 1980's its chief political ally — the Labour Party — was in disarray. Since then, the Labour Party's prospects have brightened but Thatcher is as intransigent as ever.

Although they were very guarded about the likely impact of all these developments on the IR system *per se*, the implicit consensus which seemed to arise was that British institutions would weather the storm, modified no doubt, but not eclipsed. There would be change but much that was familiar in 1965 would still be recognizable in 1995.

One problem with books about the future is that the future comes so soon. Already (early 1987) these essays, which were written in 1982-83, are somewhat dated. Some of the speculations have already proven to be incorrect; others have come true. Thus, in this review it was necessary to report not only what the authors thought might happen but also what, in fact, has become.

For those interested in a review of contemporary British IR issues, there are more current sources such as the article by Brown cited above. Nevertheless, this book is worth a look not only by IR scholars concerned with Britain but also by those who worry (as I do) about the nature of Industrial Relations as a field of inquiry. Rarely are three essays on an identical general topic from three different perspectives published together where they can be easily compared. From the viewpoint of the Canadian IR scholar the Brown and Sisson approach is likely to be very familiar but those of Poole and Rubery, et al. less so. Whereas in Britain there is a close alliance of different academic traditions in pursuit of knowledge about employment relations, in Canada the traditions tend to be more isolated one from the other. For example, Canadian Sociologists tend to talk to themselves about labour issues at their own meetings and through their own publications but only infrequently do they show up at meetings of the Canadian Industrial Relations Association or publish in journals regularly read by industrial relations scholars. This volume illustrates the value of a closer association of those whose paramount interest is in acquiring knowledge and understanding about labour-management relations.

The essay by Rubery, Tarling and Wilkinson is particularly stimulating because, although they utilize classical economic terminology, the theoretical structure of their argument is very non-conventional. Instead of a neo-classical individualist or a Marxist approach they develop concepts based on a society composed of groups. They note that «labour seeks to maintain or improve the living standards not only of individuals but also of social units, including both the work group and the family. Collective behavior and the greater social consciousness of labour are not compatible with notions of the optimal or efficient allocation of resources as abound in economic theory unless a realistic theory of society is made an integral part of economic theory». The result is an approach closer to economic reality than either of its two competitors.

As a vehicle for provoking thought and discussion this initiative of the British Department of Employment succeeds nicely. In British perspective the recent steps taken by the Canadian Federal Department of Labour to isolate itself from the intellectual community by first ceasing publication of the *Labour Gazette* and then cutting the small University Research Grants budget stand out in sharp and sad contrast.

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