

Workplace Partnership in Australia: Real or Imaginary?ⁱ

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Abstract

Throughout the last 20 years many countries have pursued an agenda seeking more collaborative management-union arrangements or 'partnerships'. The current workplace industrial relations (IR) legislation in Australia suggests a shift towards a new model of workplace interaction that includes more collaboration and partnerships. Former Prime Minister Keating argued that the 1983-1996 Accord was 'a state of mind' rather than an actual reform program seeking a tripartite relationship between unions, government and business. This article assesses the extent to which collaboration and partnership in Australia's modern IR system is a 'new' state of mind or whether it is a realistic roadmap to a new Australian IR landscape. The implications of this agenda for industrial practice and the conduct of industrial relations are considered.

Introduction

Industrial relations featured strongly in the 2007 and 2010 federal elections in Australia. Central to this debate was the Work Choices legislation, a key issue in 2007 and a ghost that haunted the Coalition in 2010 (Atkins 2010). This paper will focus on workplace collaboration and partnership, an issue largely absent from the political debate. Whilst many countries throughout the world have pursued partnership arrangements in recent years, including Britain, Ireland and New Zealand, the suggestions from the then Minister for Workplace Relations, Julia Gillard (2009), might indicate that Australian IR is about to shift towards greater workplace partnership. We contend that rather than representing a substantial shift, this approach is more of about promoting a state of mind following the individualism and unitarist objectives of the Howard years of Government and Work Choices. Former Labour Prime Minister Paul Keating has been quoted as suggesting that the Accord was 'a state of mind' (cited in Kelly 1994, p. 281). This article assesses the extent to which partnership in Australia's modern IR system is a 'new state of mind'. The notion of workplace collaboration is not new and has occurred between unions, workers and business over many decades in Australia. Episodic instances of workplace co operation included Australia Reconstructed (Dabscheck 1989) and award restructuring (Carmichael 1989). While academic definitions of partnership are often based on the idea of co-operation or working together for mutual gains and reciprocity (Martinez-Lucio & Stuart 2002), in Australia partnership is argued to be a new discourse) rather than being based on a new set of practices since the evidence of enduring workplace partnerships in Australia is extremely limited.

The Fair Work Bill passed through parliament in March 2009 and started a process of dismantling the previous Workplace Relations Amendment (Work Choices) Act 2005 (Gollan 2009). The Labor Party's current legislation has been viewed as a substantial shift in industrial relations in Australia (Cooper 2009; Gollan 2009). The ALP maintains that the

WorkChoices legislation was based on ‘conflict. It was based on an illusion, a falsehood that an employer and employee have equal power’ (Gillard 2009a) and was ‘divisive and extreme’ (Gillard 2009b). The new legislation is an attempt to modernise Australia’s industrial relations system while providing what the government calls a workplace relations system that comes ‘back to the middle ground, where it belongs and where Australians want it to be’ (Gillard 2009b). Underpinning WorkChoices was a unitarist approach that workers and employers had common interest and should resolve working arrangements without outside interference from unions and industrial tribunals (Sappey *et al.* 2006, ch.6).

Two of the Fair Work Act’s six main objectives are explicitly relevant to workplace partnership development:

- providing workplace relations laws that are fair to working Australians, are flexible for businesses, promote productivity and economic growth for Australia’s future economic prosperity and take into account Australia’s international labour obligations; and
- achieving productivity and fairness through an emphasis on enterprise-level collective bargaining underpinned by simple good faith bargaining obligations and clear rules governing industrial action (Fair Work Act 2009).

These objectives aim to encourage workplace bargaining (in good faith) and promote productivity growth. We would suggest that these two objectives have been present in Australian workplaces for decades albeit in an oppositional and politically driven fashion at times – that is, while each different party in government might publicly provide statements along these lines, there are very different means to achieving such policy goals depending on the political persuasion of each government. Government, unions and employers endorse the view that greater workplace collaboration is essential for Australia’s economy. However, can the new legislation and a new resolve towards co operative IR result in workplace partnerships?

Here we are referring to partnerships between unions and employers. Other models of partnership such as non union approaches have been canvassed and assessed, especially in the UK (Dietz *et al.* 2006). This paper presents an attempt to understand what the relevant governments, major employer representatives; namely the Business Council of Australia (BCA) and Australian Industry Group (AIG), and major employee representatives; namely the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), seek through collaboration and partnership in the Australian workplace context. Non-union partnerships, while potentially important in the future, are relatively under developed, and are beyond the scope of this paper.

We provide a brief overview of Australian IR over the last two decades as a way to set the context. The nature of workplace partnerships and evidence on their success is reviewed. We then move to consider what partnership and collaboration mean internationally in IR focussing on the United Kingdom and New Zealand. We choose these countries because of the similarities in cultural backgrounds, industrial relations systems, and evidence of a recent shift to partnership models in both countries. We then examine public documents to consider what commonalities and differences there might be within the public rhetoric of the key social partners. Our commentary on the IR environment is not meant to be an exhaustive review of public comment but provides insight into the major parties key messages in the debate. Of course we note that public pronouncements neither make policy nor are they always accurate reflections of internal thinking. Finally, we examine some relevant policy approaches underway in Australia as an attempt to embed the ‘partnership’ model in Australian workplaces.

The IR Context

The Australian system of industrial relations has always been complex with a mix of awards, collective bargaining, arbitration and conciliation and legislated conditions (Bray *et al.* 2009). Based around formal conciliation and arbitration the Australian IR system has been adversarial in nature (Forsyth 2009a) and centralised (Cooper & Ellem 2008). However, the interactions between unions and managers has changed dramatically in recent decades because of a range of factors including declining union density; globalisation and the internationalisation of organisations; an increased focus on internal workplace structures through human resource management (HRM); changed institutional dynamics (for example, the changes the functions of Australian Industrial Relations Commission); and the introduction of enterprise bargaining in early 1990s (Wilkinson *et al.* 2009). All of these issues have been examined extensively but less prominent in the analysis has been discussion of the strength and quality of collaborative relationships at the workplace such as that which occurs on such issues as industry development and training.

Economic crisis (through the balance of payments and stagflation) and extensive industrial conflict provided the Hawke-led government an opportunity to demonstrate a new approach to economic and industrial relations policy (Chapman 1998). Central to this change was 'The Accord'. The Accord was an attempt to deal with problems associated with high unemployment and inflation through stabilising wages and reducing industrial disputes (Lansbury 1984). The Accord changed significantly over its 13 year history with a total of eight different Accords before Coalition election win in 1996 (Macdonald & Burgess 2006). The Accord began the decade long shift away from centralised wage policy towards enterprise bargaining (Macdonald *et al.* 2004). Importantly, this shift occurred with unions playing a central role. While the Accord was centralised and had a central rationale around containing stagflation, there were elements in the later Accord processes, especially award restructuring, that forced unions and managers to examine workplace practices and to develop workplace bargaining towards productivity gains (Macdonald & Burgess 2006). The Government, the BCA, and the ACTU were all advocating that managers and workers (through unions) should 'reach agreement on work arrangements that would most advantage the parties at the workplace level' (Macdonald *et al.* 2001, p. 11). Dabscheck (1989) describes this as the 'golden age of consensus' in Australian IR and there can be seen to be the genesis for the possibility of the development of workplace partnerships. However, these possibilities were quickly dissipated by subsequent legislative developments.

The Workplace Relations Act (WRA) of 1996 and subsequent amendments through to the WorkChoices legislation of 2006 placed significant barriers to collective bargaining and provided significant incentives for individualised bargaining (Cooper & Ellem 2008; Peetz 2006). These reforms proved to be 'both contentious and divisive' (Saville *et al.* 2009, p. 207), and faced strong resistance from the union movement. At the same time they did not receive overwhelming support from employers and employer groups (Teicher *et al.* 2006). The Coalition government dismantled the Labor IR model and replaced with a strong neo-liberal model that attempted to reduce union influence (Teicher *et al.* 2006).

Despite the attempt to individualise IR and marginalise trade unions, elements of co-operation and collaboration at the workplace remained. There was evidence that demonstrates the success of pseudo-partnership models throughout the Accord period (Watts *et al.* 1996; Alexander & Green 1996). There is no reason for us to assume that because the WRA and WorkChoices provided less incentive for this approach, it was not present in some workplaces (c.f. Yarrington *et al.* 2007). Evidence suggests good relationships operating in workplaces – for example, 64 per cent of managers report having good relationships with unions that are

present in their workplace (SWIRS 2007) – however, workplace co-operation is not the same as partnerships. When employees are asked about the relationships with managers, similar figures are uncovered. For example, the most recent *Australia at Work* report found that while there are some underlying tensions in workplaces that are unionised; the vast majority of Australian employees see relationships with managers in positive terms (Van Wanrooy *et al.* 2009). Elements of collaborative are embedded in many workplaces but a formal partnership approach to IR has not evolved. We now consider the issues arising from the partnership literature in the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

The Nature and Success of Partnerships

There is no universally accepted definition of partnership in the workplace context (Guest & Peccei 2001, p. 208; Martinez Lucio & Stuart 2002) with scholars divided about what partnership means as a process (Rittau & Dundon 2010) and practitioners having a tendency to conflate the processes and presumed outcomes of partnership arrangements (Johnstone *et al.* 2009). Partnerships can contain individual and collective representative involvement (Ackers *et al.* 2005; Dundon *et al.* 2005), as well as union and non-union representation (Johnstone *et al.* 2009). In the context of the USA, Kochan *et al.* (2008) suggest that ‘partnerships afford workers and unions strong participation in a broad range of decisions from the top to the bottom of the organisation’ that is, workers and their representatives are active participants in decision-making when compared with ‘being consulted or being informed after the fact’ (p36). It concerns worker involvement in decisions ‘specifically, strategic and workplace level managerial decisions’ not only those concerning terms of employment (normally collective bargaining). Partnership can also be contrasted with most forms of employee involvement which allows participation at the workplace over operational issues and primarily consultative; also in contrast to corporatist structures where union leaders participate in top level decision-making but weak lower level participation (p36-37).

Oxenbridge and Brown (2004) argue that the term partnership has ‘become too diffuse to carry any meaning’ (p389) and suggest that it is reasonable to view partnerships as a ‘positive-sum relationship in which the parties generally seek to avoid confrontational and zero-sum bargaining’ (p389). Similarly, Stuart and Martinez-Lucio (2005) argue that strategic partnership is not just about outcomes, or its potential for trade unions, rather, partnership is a development that represents the emergence of a new approach to employment relations that attempts to reconfigure the form and content of management-union relations. Many definitions are based on the idea of ‘co-operation for mutual gain’ and ‘reciprocity’ (Martinez-Lucio & Stuart 2002). Gall (2004) argues for ‘mutualism’ – where a successful employer is able to benefit all stakeholders involved. Guest and Peccei (2001) also suggest that trust and mutuality are the key components of a genuine partnership agreement. Rhetorically at least, partnership appears to be hinged upon the proposition that, for employers, it can be both economically effective and ethically responsible to co-operate with unions and employees on issues of strategic organisational change (Stuart & Martinez-Lucio 2005; Johnstone *et al.* 2009).

As such, collaborative management and employee relationships in partnership programs continue to be associated with high levels of trust, mutual commitment and good communication, together with the realisation that establishing a partnership does not automatically deliver mutual gains (Stuart & Martinez-Lucio 2005). These capacities require considerable effort, dedication to making the partnership work and attitude changes in both parties to achieve success (Johnstone *et al.* 2004). However, if cooperative practices with management contribute to business advantages at the expense of employee interests, as the

critics of partnership foresee, partnership can be viewed as one-sided, and unfair (Bacon & Blyton 2006).

Kochan *et al.* (2008) point to four sets of factors that help explain how partnerships arise 'environmental pressures; interdependence; legitimacy; and shared vision among top leaders'. Partnerships in the US have a limited life-span, certainly in comparison to collective bargaining relationships. Kochan *et al.* note that the practical challenges have not been adequately researched 'for example, what is required to initiate, govern, and sustain a partnership'. Work by Ackers and Payne (1998) and Marchington *et al.* (2001) suggest that partnership is an artefact of time and place, shaped by institutions as much as employer preferences. However, in practical terms, the explosion of partnerships and similar approaches throughout the world points to a important shift 'somewhat more than symbolism' from adversarial industrial relations to problem-solving outcomes among unions managers and workers. Policy makers and key stakeholders have identified some core principles in partnerships. These include, mutuality, dignity and respect, fairness, competitiveness, flexibility and joint and direct communication and consultation (Rittau & Dundon, 2010).

While Guest and Peccei (2001) are optimistic about the potential for mutual gains under partnerships, they find the most positive gains for employers in increased productivity and better IR and suggest the best gains for employees comes through greater involvement, satisfaction and voice. Balenger and Edwards (2007) conclude that pre-conditions for positive and sustainable partnership outcomes are rare, and that active institutional regulation by the state is required to protect partnerships from market pressures. Martinez-Lucio and Stuart (2004) and Rittau and Dundon (2010) point to the importance of 'champions' when key managers or union representatives shift to different roles, or alternatively leave the organisation altogether the partnership can wither and die.

In summary, the nature and rationale of partnerships remain contested, the pre conditions for successful partnerships are difficult to achieve and there is a need for leadership by peak organisations and government in promoting successful workplace partnerships.

Collaboration and Partnership in the UK and New Zealand

There is a substantial body of research published in the last decade about partnerships in Anglo Saxon economies (Rasmussen *et al.* 2006; Johnstone *et al.* 2009; Bacon & Samuel 2009). The stimulus for the modern partnership model such that we see in New Zealand and the UK can be found in the election of Labour governments sympathetic to the union movement providing a catalyst for policy makers to pay greater attention to the potential link between industrial relations and economic performance (Rasmussen *et al.* 2006), with implementing (or legitimising) workplace change the primary driver of formal partnership agreements (Martinez-Lucio & Stuart 2004).

Stuart and Martinez-Lucio (2005) suggest that partnership is a development that represents the emergence of a new approach to employment relations and will fundamentally reconfigure the relationship between managers and unions. The Trade Union Congress (TUC) in the UK has a definition of partnerships that contains six 'necessary features':

- commitment to the success of the organisation
- recognition of each side's legitimate interests
- commitment to employment security
- a focus in the quality of working life

- transparency
- adding value to the organisation (Rasmussen *et al.* 2006).

In the UK, declining unionism and pressures for organisations to be competitive (Ackers & Payne 1998), together with the EU policy framework of developing cooperative workplace relationships (such as works councils), produced the *partnership alternative* for management, employees and unions (Wilkinson *et al.* 2007). Partnership in Britain relies on a non-statutory approach to partnership agreements, with advice and funding support from the ‘New Labour’ government, something that really provides little incentive for unions or employers to adopt agreements (Bacon & Samuel 2009). It is argued that a non-legislated approach means that although the number of agreements has risen substantially in the last decade, employers are likely to withdraw or seek to change agreements when circumstances change (Kelly 2005; Stuart & Martinez Lucio 2005). Changing circumstances include, for example, economic downturns as with the Global Economic Crisis of 2008/9 (Higgins 2010). It is not unreasonable to suggest that difficult economic times are precisely those times when partnerships have greater relevance.

Nevertheless, most recent evidence suggests that union (and non-union) partnership agreements have been increasing in numbers in the UK (Bacon & Samuel 2009) and these have been subject to considerable and heated debate concerning the positive and negative outcomes for employees (Stuart & Martinez-Luzio 2005). It is suggested that to represent employee interests effectively requires a far more collaborative approach towards management than previously taken by unions (Hyman 2002). Others see partnerships as a form of employee control and as a means of facilitating the acceptance of managerial practices (Kelly 2004).

In New Zealand, with a centralised IR system similar to Australia’s (Lansbury *et al.* 2007), formal partnership was not an obvious model to apply at the workplace (Haworth & Rasmussen 2009). However, in the late 1990s and driven by international experience and economic necessity the Labour Government developed legislation supportive of a partnership approach to industrial relations (Haworth, Rasmussen & Wilson 2009). Certainly, early suggestions were pessimistic about New Zealand sustaining a partnership model, given the dominance of small workplaces (with only 22 percent of New Zealand organisations employing more than 100 persons, Boxall 2003) and a low trade union density working against the likelihood of partnership development and success.

Part of the government’s approach to address low levels of productivity in New Zealand was to develop a state-sponsored partnership programme. In 2005 the New Zealand’s Department of Labour formed a semi-autonomous unit, ‘Partnership Resource Centre’ (PRC Website 2010). There is little academic scrutiny placed on the success or otherwise of the PRC and the Centre’s own publications provide a mixed report. While changing the culture of management and union interactions has failed in some cases, other cases presented by the centre indicate that when employers and unions engage in a partnership to resolve areas of concern, for example reducing turnover or absenteeism, they can have significant success.

In both countries third party organisations have had a key role in developing and brokering partnerships (e.g. TUC 2010). It seems that for effective workplace partnerships to develop there is a need for independent third parties to assist in developing the process.

Current Political Views in Australia on Workplace Partnership

A new era of employment relations was promised by the 2007 Labor Government based on reversing the unpopular WorkChoices legislation. The new legislation was to bring the double benefit of ensuring productivity gains and ensuring fairness (Rudd & Gillard 2007). The following quotes by the then Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard capture the collaborative approach in workplaces.

Australians should now move beyond a focus on law changes to a new focus on cultural change in the workplace. We need to build partnerships between management and workers and their unions that operate for the benefit of all. Change of this sort is slower to take root than rapid structural reform (Gillard 2009a).

Certainly in Australia, there is substantial goodwill on the part of employer and employee organisations to work together to improve the quality of workplaces (Gillard 2009a).

The Government will continue to work with unions and the business community to truly embed values of fairness, collaboration, innovation and creativity in our workplaces (Gillard 2009a).

...This means focussing on more building better relationships and partnerships between management and workers and their respective representatives that really operate for the benefit of all (Gillard 2009c).

There is no doubt some sensitivity for the ALP around the area of ‘pandering’ to ‘vested interests’ of the unions given the historical relationship of the ALP being the political arm of the labour movement. Gillard states:

The new system isn’t about making life easy or tough for unions. It’s about ensuring people’s democratic rights don’t end when they enter the factory gate or the office door or the shop in which they work (Gillard 2009c).

The Labor government was clearly seeking greater levels of positive engagement between employers (and their representatives) and employees and unions. Good Faith Bargaining is a central tenet of the reinvigorated collective bargaining regime in Australia (Forsyth 2009b). The government also sees the role of government and in particular, Fair Work Australia (FWA) as essential ingredients for the success of this ‘new state of mind’.

The Business Council of Australia has been equally positive when discussing Australia’s future IR system centred around collaboration and partnership. The BCA had released two papers of a series under the ‘Embedding Workplace Collaboration’ banner which are designed to explore ‘more collaborative approaches to workplace relations’ (BCA 2009, p. 1). One paper focussed on the ‘preventing disputes’, the other paper focussed on ‘good faith bargaining’ provisions of the Act. The following quote is taken from the first publication:

The BCA has long argued for greater workplace collaboration. BCA research published in the early 1990s highlight particular structural and institutional characteristics of the Australian industrial relations system that promoted disputation and adversarial workplace relationships. As a consequence, the prevailing management culture was not focused sufficiently on productivity and performance improvement (BCA 2009, p. 1).

The BCA argument continues stating the FWA assumptions of collaboration, constructing dialogue and good faith bargaining and argues:

...at a time of system disruption and attendant uncertainty – and with many others not committed to the ideal of constructive relations – there is a real risk of a return to strongly adversarial and/or centralised approaches. Such a development would threaten the capacity to link productivity and rewards at the enterprise level (BCA 2009, p. 2).

The BCA documents reiterate the importance of ‘flexible and market-focus workplace relations system’; ‘constructive relationships between management and employees that respect differences and build upon common interests’ (2009, p. 1) and change from any past adversarial relations. The BCA, arguably the most influential employer association in the country and consequently, is well placed to deliver a clear message about collaboration and partnership in their publications. There is little doubt the BCA sees some benefit to their members through more collaboration in the workplace.

The peak union body (ACTU) and leading employer association Australia Industry Group (AIG), however, are decidedly silent on notions of partnership and increased collaboration. Rather, they both have a traditional view of the implications of the legislation in terms of realising constituent objectives. The ACTU focus appears to be on the FWA and how its constituent members might best develop strategies under the new regulations. The ACTU Congress, 2009 states that: ‘The new Act represents a substantial, albeit, imperfect, translation of the 2006 ACTU congress policy into legislation’ (ACTU 2009). This congress report reiterates the priority for unions is to ‘grow unions, protect jobs, and advance workers’ interests’ (ACTU 2009, p.5). Furthermore, ‘Unions will also be encouraged to test the new bargaining rules to provide the most supportive environment of successful agreement-making’ including test cases to determine ‘the obligation to refrain from unfair or capricious behaviour designed to undermine freedom of association and collective bargaining’ (ACTU 2009, p. 6). In comparison, AIG shows some concern that their constituency face greater hostility from unions seeking to test the scope of new laws. On that basis, AIG continue to ‘monitor developments closely and to pursue legislative amendments if problems become apparent’ while continuing the positive spin with statements like ‘It is vital that Australia maintain a fair and productive workplace relations system which enables Australian employers to remain flexible and globally competitive’ (AIG 2009, p. 22).

While the language of partnership and collaboration has been adopted by some unions and employer associations, workplace level relationships are not likely to change immediately. However, there is some evidence which tentatively suggests that there may be a ‘new state of mind’ within industry. In the financial sector, the ANZ, Westpac and the Commonwealth Banks stopped negotiating collective agreements prior to the WorkChoices legislation, however all three banks have agreed to begin negotiating collective agreements with unions under the Fair Work Act (Workplace Express 1 April 2009). In addition, Australia’s major TelCom employers, Telstra and Optus appear to have initiated more collaborative relationships with their unions (Workplace Express 12 June 2009; 23 July 2009). While this might indicate a change in approaches for some organisations, largely in response to legislative change, it is significant for the Commonwealth Bank – an active pursuance of individualised agreements (AWAs) under the previous government (Workplace Express 1 April 2009) and Optus which had been expanding their employees covered by non-union agreements since 1994 (Workplace Express 23 July 2009). It is not clear if this represents a new state of mind or simply a pragmatic approach to the new regulatory framework. Entering into negotiations remains a long way removed from partnership arrangements, however, the new legislation is forcing unions and employers to constructively engage over workplace issues.

Regardless of single employer, union or sectoral differences, evidence suggests that employees and managers perceive workplace relationships to be quite positive. We suggest that when the leadership of the respective groups – government, employer representatives, and unions are outwardly presenting a ‘new state of mind’, there remains hope for real changes to occur in those pockets where collaboration and partnerships are not well developed. However, it is not clear how this will be achieved and how long it will take. The law is a blunt instrument and exhortation from peak bodies in itself is not likely to produce change. However, there are encouraging signs of success with two policy experiments in Australia which seek to encourage partnership approaches in Australian workplaces with the support of state government funding.

Discussion and Conclusion

Typically, unions, governments and businesses in Australia have not pursued formal partnership agreements like those found in the UK over the last decade or more. However, the Accord is a clear example of policy developed between the major actors with a goal of increasing collaboration at a workplace level, especially in the process of award restructuring (Dabscheck 1989). After more than a decade of a Coalition government with an IR agenda shifting towards individual agreements, an ALP government was returned to power with a more collaborative, and collective agenda. The 2010 election outcome will see a continuation of the push towards increased collaboration at the workplace with Fair Work reforms to continue. Even if the Coalition had won the election the current system would have remained in place according to Liberal leader Tony Abbot (Abbot 2010).

The language and discourse of partnership and collaboration has been adopted but there are two crucial issues to be resolved. One relates to meaning. There is a need to clarify the meaning and expectations of partnership so that judgements can be made about the outcomes of this approach. Definitions such as ‘mutuality’ and ‘reciprocity’ have not been well developed in IR circles, and are simply too vague to carry much meaning, similar to Oxenbridge and Brown’s (2004) view of partnership. While these terms suggest a relationship between two parties, and the notion of an exchange where each party gains something, this reveals very little about the quality of the employment relationship. ‘Co-operative employment relations’ is also ambiguous, as a co-operative relationship to one person could be perceived as co-option by another (Dietz 2004). A more useful definition would include identifiable practices (such as employee and especially representative participation) with specific processes, such as early consultation and a ‘joint problem solving approach’ to decision making. Relationships based on trust, mutual legitimacy, and commitment to business success are also central (Johnstone *et al.* 2009).

Guest and Peccei (2001, p. 207) describe partnership as ‘an idea with which almost anyone can agree, without having any clear idea what they are agreeing about.’ The Gillard perspective seems close to notions of industrial democracy with workers taking places on boards but this is unlikely to be what the Government wants. It is clear employers are after something rather different: a workforce which is co-operative and engaged but not joint regulation. The role of unions is to pursue the best interests of their members, and growing their membership. It is unlikely that each party pursuing their goals will lead to a collaborative partnership approach to industrial relations. In the UK Ackers *et al.* (2004) argue that the partnerships approach is going ahead with or without unions and Oxenbridge and Brown (2004) suggest that the only real future for unionised employment in Britain is in greater collaboration. So can Australia’s version of partnership exist without unions? This seems to have been a road closed by virtue of the key actors perspectives but it does mean the

partnership model is then an option for a relatively small number of workplaces and leaves a huge gap for others.

Our second concern relates to ‘how’ collaboration and partnerships will occur. Collaboration occurs in most organisations throughout the country every day. Partnership seems to be seen as something more than collaborative relationships. It is important to understand how the formality of partnerships develops in the Australian context. Should partnerships become more formalised, then we need to understand over what matters the parties are working together. Time will tell us the success of the good faith bargaining provisions in leading to real changes in how parties work together. While various bodies have an agenda for partnership working, there is no road map to achieve the relationships and level of partnering and it is not clear how the bodies intend to move the key stakeholders (including their constituent members) along the routes they wish. Partnerships and collaboration are a new part of the industrial relations landscape but unless operationalised at the workplace rather than a ‘new state of mind’, a new reality, will remain at the level of simply the rhetoric of a new government. Blueprints for collaboration and partnership frameworks have been introduced in other parts of the world but we remain to be convinced that partnerships will evolve in Australia.

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ⁱ This paper has been peer reviewed by two anonymous referees