

The Search for Industrial Democracy in British Public Services

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The debate about how workers employed in organisations should have some say in the making of those decisions most affecting their daily working lives is a long and controversial one. Beginning in critiques of the private sector, and extended later to the public services, the debate polarises around two schools of thought. The first focuses on issues of *control* in organisations and the other on *participation* within them. Some early theorists wishing to democratise organisations, especially private businesses, supported workers' control, by arguing for policies to replace the capitalist, for profit, industrial system by a new industrial order. In this new industrial order, industries and organisations were to be controlled, partly or wholly, by associations of workers or their trade unions, rather than by a managerial elite. Proponents of workers' control have normally been opposed to the notion of an all-embracing role of the state, common to Marxist and other forms of socialism, and envisaged new forms of industrial organisation as the basis of a new society. This paper traces the development of ideas and practices in forms of industrial democracy in the public services and provides a tentative framework for analysing the contemporary situation in public services today.

From demands for workers' control to the emergence of Whitleyism

Some theories and programmes of workers' control have been revolutionary in character. In mainland Europe, syndicalist doctrines emerged first in France at the end of the nineteenth century, in reaction to the capitalist system of production. They held that workers' emancipation could be achieved only by revolutionary industrial action, through the general strike, and this model had some impact in France through the agency of the General Federation of Trade Unions. In Britain, Tom Mann became the principal advocate of British syndicalism after 1910. In his view, industries should be controlled by those engaged in them, within a society where parliaments and governments would disappear. Syndicalism in Britain was supported particularly among railway workers and in *The Miners' Next Step* (Cook 1912).

From about 1913, syndicalism declined in importance and another theory of workers' control, guild socialism, emerged in Britain. This was particularly associated with the ideas of G.D.H.Cole (1917, 1920, 1923). Guild socialists rejected the concept of the general strike as a means of achieving workers' control. They preferred peaceful 'encroaching' control through the 'collective contract'. This was a plan under which unions would enter into collective contracts with employers to produce a required output, for an agreed price, and would themselves organise their 'shops' and provide the necessary supervision and discipline of workers. It was envisaged that extension of the guilds would include all classes of workers, 'by hand or by brain', who would take over businesses on an industry-by-industry basis, including at this time the small public sector, with the state protecting the interests of the public and consumers.

Some evidence of Guild Socialism was found in coal mining, building and the post office. But by 1922, because of post-war depression and the problems of large-scale

industrial organisation and planning, little evidence of these experiments was left (Clegg 1960, Pribicevic 1959).

With the demise of workers' control movements, the participatory approach to advancing workers' rights became the dominant approach in western democracies. Loosely described as 'industrial democracy', Clegg (1960: 3) described this approach to giving workers some control over the conditions of their working lives, as 'any theory or scheme as long as it is based on a genuine concern for rights of workers in industry, particularly their right to share in the control of industrial decisions.' For the Webbs in their seminal study, *Industrial Democracy* (1902: 150), trade unions were the prime agents of industrial democracy, since they had 'from the beginning of the eighteenth century down to the present day [enforced] their Regulations by three distinct instruments or levers, which we distinguish as the Method of Mutual Insurance, the method of Collective Bargaining and the Method of Legal Enactment.' Of these three methods, collective bargaining and legal enactment were to become the prime instruments for advancing industrial democracy. But, the Webbs added (1902: 823), it follows from this analysis that 'Trade Unionism is not merely an incident of the present phase of capitalist industry, but has a permanent function to fulfil in the democratic state.' Moreover, they went on to claim, 'political democracy will inevitably result in industrial democracy ... [though] democracy is still the Great Unknown '(ibid: 842- 850).

Historically, industrial democracy has had two aims. The first centres on the desire to break up concentrations of industrial power, as a safeguard against organisational self-interest and arbitrary managerial action. This was seen as requiring the break up of capitalist society and an increase in organisational accountability. It was to be achieved by either governmental action (such as through public ownership), or the encouragement of opposition to authoritarian tendencies of management, or the wider involvement of workers in decision-making, or simply as the development of techniques to bring the two sides of industry together. This can be described as the 'hard' model of industrial democracy. The second aim of industrial democracy was to increase social as well as material satisfaction in industrial society. This emphasised the importance of the workplace as a unit of social organisation, the need to encourage personal development and job satisfaction at work and the need to achieve a proper balance between industry and community. This can be described as the 'soft' model of industrial democracy.

The main processes of industrial democracy in the English-speaking world have focused on the hard model. These processes have been collective bargaining and joint consultation. Collective bargaining between employers and unions provides a more equal balance in determining the individual wage-work bargain and how work is organised, while joint consultation allows management to take workers' views into account in making business decisions but retains their right to take the final decision. As the Webbs (1902: 217) pointed out: 'where there is no combination of any kind, the strategic weakness of the individual wage-earner ... forces him [*sic*] to accept the lowest possible terms. When ... workmen combine the balance is redressed.' In mainland Europe, dual systems of industrial democracy became the norm. Externally, collective bargaining determined terms and conditions of employment of workers and, internally, works councils, established in law, gave workers co-determination rights with management on certain matters such as working hours, welfare, disclosure of

information, consultation on redundancies, short-time working, overtime, dismissal and other subjects.

If the origins of industrial democracy lay in pre-Welfare State societies, with their relatively small public sectors, and the rejection and failure of plans for workers' control, its extension in public services in Britain was furthered by the emergence of 'Whitleyism' after the end of the First World War. Indeed, Whitleyism has been regarded as the most important single formative influence on the shape of British industrial relations between the first and second world wars (Charles 1973). Its influence continued, post-1945, especially in the public services.

The Whitley Committee on relations between employers and employed was set up in October 1916, under the chairmanship of the Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons, in the light of labour militancy and some vociferous demands for workers' control during the first world war. Its terms of reference were to make suggestions 'for securing a permanent improvement in the relations between employers and workmen' and to recommend means for 'improving conditions in the future' (Ministry of Reconstruction 1918: 3). It issued five reports between 1917 and 1918. Its most important contribution to the structure of industrial relations was its advocacy of systems of national joint councils consisting of employer and union representatives, which were to be reflected in linked machinery at district and local levels. The central purpose of the interim report was to advance 'joint co-operation' in industry between employers and organised labour. It went on to recommend that these joint bodies should meet frequently to enable wages, conditions of employment, efficiency and methods of settling differences between the parties to be resolved. It also considered that working people should have greater opportunity for participating in the discussion and adjustment of all those aspects of their employment conditions of most concern to them.

The Committee believed that this triple form of organisation should operate on common principles, which would enable the greatest measure of agreed action to be secured among them. These triple-level joint bodies were to be both agencies of harmony and efficiency within each industry and means of preventing friction and misunderstanding between employers and labour within enterprises.

The third, Supplementary Report on works committees was also based on the assumption that improved relations between employers and working people could be best achieved by giving the latter a greater say in the consideration of all those issues most directly affecting their working lives. The Committee saw the purpose of works committees as establishing and maintaining a system of co-operation in all workshop matters, except those regarding wages and hours of works. It considered that national or district collective agreements could better regulate these. The Committee did not lay down a definitive constitution for works committees but recommended that they should meet not less than once a fortnight. It strongly condemned the idea that works committees might be used to oppose the growth of trade unionism within workplaces by anti-union employers (Ministry of Reconstruction 1917).

In the event, whilst Whitley's recommendations were directed at the private sector, it was in public services that Whitleyism penetrated most deeply. This was because parts of the private sector such as engineering, cotton and coal were well organised

and already had established collective bargaining machinery but the public sector did not. So in the interwar years, and in post-war Britain up until the late 1970s, Whitley structures were gradually introduced, and then extended, into the civil service, local government, the utilities such as electricity, gas and water, the post office, the railways, school teaching and the National Health Service. These took diverse forms and some sectors, such as electricity, set up parallel systems of joint consultation at all three levels, although the Whitley Committee had made no such distinctions between bargaining and consultative arrangements. Suffice to say that Whitleyism in its variety of forms was the distinguishing feature of public service industrial relations in Britain for some six decades after publication of the Whitley reports. It was at the time the major institutional means for furthering industrial democracy in public services, especially after attempts at establishing worker directors in parts of the public sector were deemed to have failed (Brannon *et al* 1976).

What challenged public-service Whitleyism during the next two decades was the New Public Management that was introduced into the sector by successive Conservative administrations from 1979 till 1997. Under these administrations, the public utilities were privatised, some public services were broken up into agencies, anti-trade union legislation was passed, the freedom to take lawful industrial action was narrowed and managers in the public services gained a new confidence in their 'right to manage'. Traditional, paternalist approaches to personnel management were superseded by new, performance driven styles of people management that drew upon private-sector people management practices. These tended to weaken trade union power and influence, challenged accepted Whitley practices and strengthened individualism in the workplace (Farnham and Horton 1996). As a government white paper put it (Employment Department 1992: 1): 'There is new recognition of the role and importance of the individual employee. Traditional patterns of industrial relations, based on collective bargaining and collective agreements seem increasingly inappropriate and are in decline.' It went on to state that there was 'a growing trend to individually negotiated packages which reflect the individual's personal skills, experience, efforts and performance.'

New patterns of industrial democracy or reassertion of managerial control?

New patterns of employer-initiated information and communication began to appear in the private sector in the 1970s. In large part, they were a response to the need for management to gain the commitment of their staff, raise productivity and quality of work and overcome resistance to change in an increasingly uncertain and volatile market environment. They were also in response to weakened trade unions. Companies increasingly saw people as a key resource and source of competitive advantage in the market place. It was assumed that committed and motivated staff were more productive and loyal than uncommitted ones, as well as being a major source of personal knowledge, skills and competencies. These approaches were central to both 'hard' and 'soft' models of human resources management (HRM) (Storey 1989) and were introduced by managers in the belief that what has variously been described as employee involvement, participation, information and communication were the key to gaining employee commitment. Such employee involvement practices have been strongly promoted by the Confederation of British Industry since 1979 and found their way into the public sector during the 1980s, as the private sector became the model for New Public Management. These new patterns of

soft industrial democracy, or what some would call reassertion of managerial control, have taken a variety of forms. We classify this range of methods and techniques under the umbrella of soft industrial democracy and classify them as 'direct one-way communication' and 'direct two-way communication'. Some also overlap with the harder versions of industrial democracy- namely 'indirect representative consultation' and 'indirect representative participation'.

Direct one-way communication

Management now increasingly provide employees with information on a range of issues affecting their organisation and employee interests within it. Decisions about how much information, when and how to provide it have traditionally been under the control of management. The trend is for more information to be made available on a more regular basis and in a variety of formats. Downward communication practices used by managers include regular newsletters, personalised letters, communication by email and intranet, notice boards, handbooks, reports and house journals. According to the latest Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS) (Culley *et al* 1999), confirmed by White *et al* (2003), these forms of direct one-way communication are widely practiced within the public sector and are increasing in use. They are designed to make employees feel part of the organisation, aware of what and why things are happening and to elicit positive commitment to their organisations' mission statements, aims and objectives.

Direct two-way communication

Other communication practices facilitate the flow of information from employees to management. These inter-active methods of communication enable two-way communication to take place between employees and management. 'Used effectively these communication practices enable genuine feedback to be generated between management and workforce and trust and openness to be reinforced between them' (Farnham 2000: 193). The major forms of direct two-way communication mechanisms include staff attitude surveys, staff meetings, problem solving groups, quality circles, health and safety committees, staff appraisals and financial involvement.

Attitude surveys, for example, are widely used in the public services. They enable management to discover the perceptions, opinions and views of employees on any range of issues. They may be used to assess the effects of organisational change and management policies or to identify matters of collective concern amongst staff.

Meetings of staff are designed both to convey information and explanations of organisational problems and management responses. But they also enable the views and evaluation of staff to be relayed to management. Staff meetings, away days, seminars and conferences are common practices found throughout public services today.

The only statutory requirement that has stimulated direct two-way communication is the obligation for organisations to appoint health and safety committees. These are the most common committees found in both the private and public sectors. Problem solving groups and quality circles are discretionary. They meet on a regular basis to identify and solve problems arising in the work situation. They may relate to issues of quality, performance or productivity. Membership may be mandated, appointed or

elected but often it is voluntary, as with quality circles. Such practices not only lead to problem solving but also involve staff in the decision making process and engender more trust and openness between management and workers.

The introduction of performance management and Total Quality Management, with their emphasis on targets, competencies, continuous improvement and customer care have necessitated more participative styles of management and strategies for raising staff performance and motivating staff commitment to quality and customer care. Staff appraisals, staff development, training and performance related pay (PRP) have all been designed by management to achieve those objectives.

In the private sector financial involvement takes a number of forms including profit sharing, share ownership, gain sharing as well as PRP (Farnham 2000:196-201). In public services, however, it tends to be limited to PRP. PRP became government policy in the 1990s and was uniformly introduced throughout all levels of the civil service. In the NHS and local government, it was largely restricted to managerial grades although some manual workers, working on contracts, received performance bonuses. There is limited evidence to assess how effective PRP is in increasing commitment and co-operation within organisations but some indicators are that it can be demotivating (Pilbeam 1999). Some public agencies are, therefore, abandoning it or replacing individual PRP with group based systems.

Evidence of practices in two-way (and one-way) communication and information flows does not necessarily mean that employees have actually influenced management decisions. The timing of the information flow, the opportunity to discuss the information and ability to influence decisions based on the information supplied are the key to whether these practices challenge managerial prerogative or are simply means of raising employee commitment and legitimising management decisions (Salamon 2000).

Indirect representative consultation

The forms of communication identified so far tend to be management-driven. They have been described as 'low level participation and soft on power' (Farnham 2000: 207). As soft forms of industrial democracy move from the individual or workgroups to collective representation, normally by trade unions, the balance of power between employer and employees begins to change. Joint consultation has been one of the mainstays of industrial democracy in the British public services since the introduction of Whitleyism. In the last WERS survey 81 per cent of public sector organisations had joint consultative committees (JCCs) compared to only 42 per cent in the private sector (Cully 1998).

Joint consultation involves staff representatives and representatives of employers meeting to discuss matters of common interest. It provide a forum where management and staff representatives can freely exchange views on matters such as training, welfare, health and safety or flexible working, where information is exchanged and views and requests are expressed. Unlike collective bargaining, joint consultation is not power based. Although management may take account of staff or union views, it retains the authority and the right to take the final decisions.

There are a number of roles that JCCs can perform (Marchington 1989). They may be seen as an alternative to joint negotiation or as an adjunct to it. JCCs can be used to prevent or resist the establishment of independent trade unions, to act as a substitute for collective bargaining or, as in the public sector in the UK, as complementing collective bargaining. In the latter case, joint consultation provides a problem-solving forum for management and staff to discuss and find agreed solutions to common problems which are outside the accepted scope of collective bargaining.

In practice indirect representative consultation sometimes blurs into collective bargaining and the boundaries between joint consultation and collective bargaining become indistinct. There appears to be an inverse relationship between trade union power and consultation. When union power is strong, unions are able to make any matters of common concern the basis for negotiation and distributive bargaining. In this situation JCCs are either sidestepped or they become the forum for integrative bargaining. It is significant that during the 1960s and 1970s when trade unions were at their strongest in the UK there was very little emphasis on joint consultation. In contrast JCCs came more to the fore during the 1990s, when trade union power had declined and unemployment was relatively high.

Some JCCs are generic and cover any or all aspects of common concern. Others, however, are specific covering issues such as health and safety, best value, diversity or the strategic plan for the organisation. In the public services, JCCs still tend to be composed of trade union representatives, although in some public organisations they may be drawn from the whole staff. Within the British Whitley structure, JCCs can be found at all levels national, regional and local but workplace JCCs are in the majority.

Indirect representative participation

Forms of indirect representative participation have increased in recent years. The most widespread form is collective bargaining. This involves autonomous employers and independent trade unions jointly agreeing the terms and conditions of employment and other matters affecting work practices. Collective bargaining has been described as 'a power relationship, based on a management policy of union incorporation in the enterprise' (Farnham 2000: 7). The outcomes, resulting from negotiations, are collective agreements. In the UK these agreements are voluntary and not legally enforceable. The nature of collective bargaining tends to be adversarial as the parties have conflicting interests and see it as a 'win-lose' situation. The ultimate resource available to unions is the threat to strike or withdraw their labour. That resource is not available, however, to some public workers, such as police officers, who are denied the right to strike.

The 1990s has seen the introduction of many change programmes in both the private and the public sectors. Management has had to resort to a range of new practices to overcome staff resistance and enlist their positive support to change. New organisational cultures have been introduced along with new structures, work processes and technologies. Flexibility, business re-engineering, competency management and the learning organisation are all ideas that have permeated management thinking in both the private and public sectors. Changes in organisational structures and processes have impacted upon employment patterns, styles of management, training and development and employee rewards. Trust between employers and employees has sometimes broken down and new expectations have

taken its place. This has required extensive programmes of communication, training and involvement of staff and new approaches to personnel and what are increasingly called HR (human resources) issues.

One response to the dynamics organisational change has been the 'partnership movement'. Partnerships, sometimes called partnership forums, between employers and unions have emerged in both the private and public sectors, as management recognises the need to carry unions and staff with them in the change process and unions seek to extend their influence beyond traditional areas of collective bargaining and regain the ground lost during the 1980s and early 1990s. The major difference between partnerships and other forms of consultation and negotiation is that they are based upon a respect for the legitimate interests of the separate parties and recognition of their common interests. The idea is that there can be a 'win-win' situation, if the approach is one of joint problem solving and an open and inclusionary style of management. However, the motives of employers and unions vary.

In the private sector, changes in product and labour markets and the need to achieve competitive advantage have focused the attention of employers on employment relations and HR issues. By involving trade unions and worker representatives within their decision-making processes, employers hope to avoid confrontation and smooth the process of organisational change. They see partnerships as a way of gaining the commitment of staff, as well as benefiting from their knowledge and skills.

The significant fall in union membership, the growing protection for workers provided by the new floor of legal rights and individualised approaches to managing people described above have all led British trade unions to recognise the need for a 'new unionism'. This is rooted in the concept of 'social partnership', which means working together in the workplace to achieve common goals with managements. The Trades Union Congress (1999) has identified six principles of partnership and has encouraged unions to enter into partnership agreements by providing advice and training for union officials:

- shared commitment to the success of the organisation
- recognition of the legitimate roles of employer and union in the employment relationship
- commitment by the employer to employment security for all workers and a commitment by workers to engage positively in the process of change
- a focus on quality of working life, particularly investment in training of workers
- openness on both sides and willingness of employers to discuss plans for the future
- shared understanding that partnership is delivering improvements for all parties.

For many trade unions, partnerships are viewed as a positive strategy for survival. In an increasingly flexible, fragmented, fast changing service dominated economy and a competitive, performance-oriented public sector, they have to demonstrate their ability to protect and further their members' interests. By demonstrating that they can do this, they can re-establish the legitimacy of trade unions and recruit new members. Partnership is seen as the only strategy open to trade unions in the contemporary

economic and social context which offers them real opportunities to remake their own project of 'industrial democracy' (Ackers and Payne 1998).

Support for partnerships has also come from the Labour Party and the Blair government, with its commitment to a 'third way' social democracy. In the preface to the government White Paper *Fairness at Work* (Department of Trade and Industry 1998), the Prime Minister endorsed partnership as a way of establishing, on the one hand, the right of employees to have an independent voice separate from their employer but, on the other hand, emphasising the mutual gain to be achieved. The subsequent DTI document *Working for the Future* (Department of Trade and Industry 1999) stated that partnership was a means to create a better organisation of work, facilitate better change management based upon high skills, trust and quality, work together to develop solutions based on consensus and prevent unreasonable demands being made on workers. Government sees partnerships as a move away from adversarialism to a more consensual approach to employment relations that is more likely to achieve economic prosperity and better government. Government has declined, however, to legislate to make partnerships compulsory but it announced the creation of a £5 million Partnership Fund for promoting the partnership initiative. To date around 70 projects are receiving support.

Partnerships are currently scattered throughout the private and public sectors. Evidence suggests that in those organisations where trade unions are well established, and there is a history of pluralistic employment relations, partnerships are more likely to take hold. In those organisations with low union membership, the move to partnership is less strong. Although the TUC supports partnerships views amongst trade unions and union members are more divided.

Some unions support partnership as a means of strengthening their position and regaining membership. Others are sceptical of the longer-term effects of partnership and see it as a 'Trojan horse'. Martinez Lucio and Stuart (2001) record the views of trade unionists that see partnership agreements as weakening and undermining trade unions and leading ultimately to alternatives to collective bargaining. Partnerships are also seen as a ploy by management to enlist support for organisational change, new management practices and workplace reform and to use trade unions to legitimise them. In effect, this argument claims, unions are capitulating and subordinating trade union ideology to the needs of capital (Kelly 2001). As trade unions become associated with organisational change strategies which may lead to redundancies, work intensification and less job security they will be seen as co-opted and so lose membership, paving the way for eventual de-recognition. For these observers, these new forms of HR practice do not demonstrate new patterns of industrial democracy but reassertion of managerial control in the workplace.

Not all partnerships are the same, as each is individually negotiated. They may include both direct and indirect forms of communication, consultation and participation, which are seen as complementary. Partnership schemes can and do sit alongside systems of consultation and negotiation. In the UK, partnerships normally follow the guidelines set down by the Involvement and Participation Association (1992, 1999) and emphasise mutuality and cooperation. There is some limited empirical research on the workings of partnerships that claim to identify some positive outcomes (Marks *et al* 1989, Guest and Peccei 2001, Involvement and

Participation Association 1997,1998, 2001. TUC 2002, Oxenbridge 2002, Munro 2002).

In the UK, a national partnership agreement has been signed by the Cabinet Office and Council of Civil Service Unions and seven departmental and agency partnerships had been agreed by 2002. There is also strong commitment to partnership throughout the NHS, where work began on developing a partnership approach during the 1990s (Industrial Relations Services 1998). It was given further impetus by the report of the Taskforce on Staff Involvement in 1999 (Department of Health 1999). The move to partnership in the NHS is being driven from the top by the government, which confirmed that partnership was to become the norm (Department of Health 2000). In 2001 a Social Partnership Forum was set up and each NHS Trust is required to initiate partnership agreements by 2005.

There are fewer examples of partnership agreements in local government but government's 'best value' policy assumes a partnership approach and all local authorities in England and Wales are covered by it. The Employers Organisation is supporting partnership and so is the main union in local government, UNISON.

The growing partnership movement is shifting the extent of industrial democracy in the UK closer to the European system of works councils and German *Mitbestimmung* or codetermination. In Germany, there are interrelated structures combining collective bargaining between employers' associations and trade unions at sector or industry level, with legally based participation within the workplace through Works Councils and employee directors. The former determine terms and conditions of employment and the latter the regulation of work. In this system, power is shared and consensus and joint decision-making is encouraged at all levels.

Most European countries provide for works councils by law, although not all organisations comply. They are intended to be mainly consultative bodies that may parallel negotiating bodies. They have certain rights to receive information, to be consulted, to give advice and in some cases to jointly regulate the organisation. Although they do not normally negotiate on issues covered by collective bargaining they may become involved if collective bargaining is decentralised and decisions are taken at the workplace or lower level where works councils assume both roles. In Sweden, however, works councils have become redundant, since union bargaining rights have been extended beyond terms and conditions to all social and personnel matters within organisations.

Towards a typology of industrial democracy in the public services

We offer a tentative typology of industrial democracy in Figure 1. The spectrum from left to right identifies the full range of practices found today in both public and private organisations. The vertical axis indicates the level of decision-making and the horizontal axis the communication, consultation and participatory practices. Those practices found towards the left of the spectrum we describe as 'soft' forms of industrial democracy. They represent the more recent forms of communication and consultation, associated with HRM and New Public Management. They tend to be management-led, involve information, communication and degrees of involvement and are confined mainly to the micro level of organisations. A positive view is that

these practices give employees an opportunity to influence decisions, have some control over their work and meet some of their psychological needs for belonging, responsibility and empowerment at work. A more negative view is that employees are being seduced into supporting organisational change, are more disposed towards management and that these employee involvement strategies are designed to subvert trade unions and their collective representational role.

A movement along the spectrum towards the 'hard' end is also a movement from individual to group and then collective forms of participation associated mainly, although not exclusively, with trade unions. Forms of consultation *via* JCCs are not new, although their importance and influence tend to wax and wane depending on labour market conditions. The relative power of trade unions to determine bargaining rights and bargaining range is the key to the balance between consultation and collective bargaining. Recent trends towards politically driven 'partnerships' and management led communication practices are both responses to market changes and changes in political ideology (White 2001). The perceived benefits of direct and indirect communication in motivating and ensuring committed staff and of partnership agreements are in acknowledging both the diverse and common interests of employers and employees generally but particularly during organisational change. As we near the right hand side of the spectrum, we find those practices more common on the continent and rooted in the rights of workers to participate fully in the decision-making processes in economic organisations. These social partnership models are the closest to hard forms of industrial democracy.

Traditional systems of employment relations and HR in the UK public services tended to be confined to the central range of the spectrum namely joint consultation and collective bargaining and failed to involve individual workers to any extent in the general running of their organisations. This system, however, was paternalistic and accompanied by a tradition of the model employer where job security, good working conditions and fair remuneration were the norm (Farnham and Horton 1996).

Significant changes in types of communication and participation have occurred in public services since the 1980s (Corby and White 1999). The WERS survey confirmed the wide range of practices found, as does the most recent survey by White *et al* (2003). Although some evidence of partnerships pre-dates the election of the Blair government in 1997, the major thrust has come since then.

In the UK context, the aim of the Blair government to reinstate trade unions and reverse the trends of exclusion during the Conservative administrations (1979-97) has been cautiously assessed (Gennard 2002), especially in the light of the contradictions inherent in its rhetoric and its policies. It espouses partnership but fails to legislate; it encourages employee involvement but is resisting introduction of the European Directive on information and consultation. It claims its 'third way' is a new approach to social democracy but rejects co-determination. Full industrial democracy, like political democracy, is likely to be rooted in legal rights to participate in the government of organisations and accepted procedures for ensuring that those rights are upheld. The British system, including public services, remains one primarily based on voluntary collectivism but there is evidence of a wider spectrum of modes of employee communication and participation. The test of how real the apparent move to more soft forms of industrial democracy is can only be measured by the extent to

which employees and their unions or representative bodies can actually influence or take decisions within all levels of organisations, including the public services.

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