

Industrial Relations: Past and Future. What Next for the International Industrial Relations Association?

Panel Discussion
Manchester, UK, 6 September 2007

Summary Report

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the IIRA, a special panel discussion was organized on the subject of: IIRA: Past and Future – What Next for the IIRA? The panel brought together distinguished members of the IIRA, including current and past members of the bureau, to review some of the history, and consider the future orientation of the association. Dr. Giuseppe Casale opened the panel, welcoming the panellists and raising a number of questions to guide the discussion. These questions addressed issues related to broadening the sphere of the IIRA, orienting its research focus to adequately reflect new trends and changes in the world of work, and increasing the relevance of the association in developing countries.

Prof. Roger Blanpain offered an overview of the history of the association, reflecting the tensions between the eastern and western blocks. On the subject of changing the focus of the association, Prof. Anil Verma argued that the association was unique in its focus on the concept of pluralism, and that this approach was not shared by many of those who the association was seeking to attract. He made a number of proposals for increasing the participation of the membership, through improvements in the conferences and publications, and a deliberate focus on succession planning and the promotion of young people within the IIRA.

Prof. Tayo Fashoyin suggested that the present structure of the association would be able to effectively address any challenges it currently faced. While he recognized the need to reform the internal processes of the association, such as the study groups, he believed that the IIRA should continue to address a broad spectrum of industrial relations, labour market and human resource management issues. He stressed the need to focus more attention on those issues relevant to developing countries. Prof. Janice Bellace also reflected on the broadening scope of the subject matter addressed by the association, to include most areas of work and employment relations. She proposed that the name of the association be changed to reflect this reality, and to attract potential members who were not familiar with the work of the IIRA.

Prof. Manfred Weiss agreed with the need to consider broadening the scope of work undertaken by the IIRA as there was no standard paradigm for industrial relations as a conceptual framework. He suggested that, in the face of fragmentation of disciplines in many countries, the IIRA help national associations and countries restructure and study the field in the future, with a particular focus on promoting multi- or inter-disciplinary approaches. Prof. Russell Lansbury reflected on the need to better address diversity both in the workforce issues addressed by the association, and within the governance structure of the organization itself. Regional meetings provided opportunities to tap into the growing interest in industrial relations, particularly in newly industrializing areas of the world.

During the ensuing discussion, the problem of monolingualism was raised by Prof. Richard Hyman, who argued that the IIRA was missing out on some important work as a result. Both Prof. Weiss and Prof. Blanpain agreed with this analysis, and while they recognized the considerable resource implications of providing translation and interpretation services, they believed that it still needed to be addressed.

Ms. Connie Nolan proposed a greater balance between quantitative and qualitative research, and an increasing use of an ethnographic approach. Prof. Brendan MacPartlin proposed that methodology could represent an important unifying factor for the study of industrial relations. Reflecting on the history outlined by Prof. Blanpain, Prof. Hoyt Wheeler observed the extent to which labour markets and industrial relations had changed, which required a systematic examination of the need to change the IIRA

Prof. Blanpain believed that both the topics and methods were appropriate, but that the name of the association needed to be changed to reflect the new realities of and to attract members from all fields of employment relations. He proposed that the association consider amending the name to: International Society for Employment Relations. Prof. Verma agreed that a change in the name could help convey the increased scope of the association, though he advised that the deliberations be clear on the impact of any such change. The comparative advantage of the association, based on its interdisciplinary approach and close links to world of policy making would need to continue. He proposed a number of areas for improving the functioning of the organization through its participative structures.

Prof. Fashoyin recognized that the name could keep some potential members from joining, and that the association needed to reach out to new areas of work including the informal economy. While open to considering a change in the name to better express the objectives of the association, Prof. Bellace suggested that the association continue its focus on industrial relations in those countries where manufacturing is growing and industrial relations issues remain relevant. Prof. Weiss warned against “academic prostitution”, recommending that the association adapt its concept of work to the current challenges. While supportive of the change in methodological orientation from a predominantly quantitative focus to more qualitative in-depth research, he suggested that any name change should avoid marginalizing collective relations in favour of individual relations. Prof. Lansbury agreed with the need to change the name of the association, proposing that the new name reflect the reality of how the world of work is changing by including reference to “employment relations” and “work” in the title.

Dr. Joseph Catanzarati reported that the name of the association had turned away potential members in Australia, and suggested that the association promote a greater role for practitioner involvement, linking academic work with practical outcomes. Prof. Mike Terry noted the difficulty of finding a term that will be attractive to many groups in different languages and different countries, where industrial relations as a term had little currency. Rather than seeking a simple solution for such a complex problem, with a term that has developed meaning over a century, he proposed that national associations adopt whatever names they deemed appropriate, and then affiliate to the association.

Recognizing the advantage of the association’s interdisciplinary approach, and the difficulties faced in progressing through academic careers focusing on interdisciplinary work, Dr. Peter Auer proposed a broad term such as the World of Work Society. Prof. Ron Kelly called attention to the fact that an International Employment Relations Association already existed, and proposed a merger of the two associations due to their similar goals. He reflected on the different definitions of industrial relations, which could encompass all forms of employment relations, and could have different connotation for the different parties involved.

Dr. Casale in his final statement thanked all the participants in the panel and suggested to submit a formal proposal on the new name of the association to the Executive Committee of the IIRA on the occasion of the 15th IIRA World Congress in Sydney in 2009.