INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AND THE "PRODUCTIVITY MIRACLE" IN BRITISH MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY IN THE 1980s

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

I. Labour Productivity: 1980s compared with 1970s  
II. Causes of More Effective Use of Labour

1. Formalisation of workplace industrial relations
2. Shocks
3. Product market competition
4. Union power
5. Pay policy
6. Floor of rights
7. Summary and qualification

III. The 1990s

Tables and Figures

References
INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AND THE "PRODUCTIVITY MIRACLE"
IN BRITISH MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY IN THE 1980s
Executive Summary

Great Britain experienced an amazing turnaround in its labour productivity performance in manufacturing industry during the 1980s. In the 1960s and 1970s Great Britain was bottom of the league table of productivity growth for the largest of OECD countries. By contrast, it was league champion in the 1980s. This improvement in productivity performance was largely a consequence of management using labour more efficiently. There is no strong evidence of improvements in the quality of the inputs themselves.

Six main explanations have been advanced to account for the greater efficiency in the use of labour in manufacturing. The interaction of three of these explanation - shocks, strengthened competition and the legislative onslaught against collectivism - holds the key to British productivity improvements. First, firms and industries experiencing the biggest employment shocks in the early 1980s had the highest subsequent productivity growth. Second, greater competition in the product market caused significant changes in working practices. Such changes are particularly noticeable in the public corporations and in sectors like national newspaper production and distribution and in commercial TV where, previously, cosy cartels existed between management and unions to boost both pay and profit at the expense of the consumer.

Third, union power - already weakened indirectly via the shocks and the keener competition - was further undermined by the direct legislative attack. The successsive tranches of industrial relations legislation have undermined collectivism and promoted individualism. The firm and the union are now responsible for their own industrial relations; individual union members have a voice via secret ballot for union leaders and prior to industrial action; and individuals can exit from the closed shop and industrial action. This legislation has attacked the very roots of union power - the strike threat and the closed shop. It is not surprising, therefore, that labour productivity accelerated fastest in heavily unionised
workplaces and industries.

The remaining 3 explanations have probably had a less direct impact on labour productivity but certainly influence the environment in which industrial relations are conducted. The trend towards greater formalisation of workplace industrial relations, which started in the 1970s, continued throughout the 1980s. This may have facilitated the very substantial amount of negotiation about labour productivity that now occurs during pay bargaining each year. Next, pay policy has been eschewed during the 1980s. By contrast, pay policies specifically outlawed bargaining over pay and productivity for more than a third of the 1970s. Finally, the floor of individual employment rights has been significantly lowered during the 1980s.

It is unlikely that the productivity performance of the 1980s in British manufacturing industry can be fully sustained throughout the 1990s. First, there is no real evidence of improvements in the quality of human and physical capital. Second, once the inefficiencies in labour use have been squeezed out, the industrial relations system itself must adapt if rapid productivity growth is to endure. In particular it is necessary to move from an adversarial system to a more cooperative workplace system - to emphasise the size of the pie rather than the battle over the slices. There is little evidence that the British industrial relations system has evolved in the desired direction in recent years.

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that the thrust of the paper is analytical, not prescriptive. The only prescriptive element concerns the case for the evolution of workplace cooperation. The remainder analyses the causes of the productivity turnaround. It is for others to prescribe. In particular, productivity is important but it is not the holy grail. The very real improvement was achieved at the expense of higher unemployment, more accidents at work and a reduction in fairness, so clear trade-offs are involved. Further, in Australia it is plausible that the apparent success of the cooperative macroeconomic Accord in lowering nominal and real pay and generating jobs more than outweighs any productivity gains that might be achieved by greater decentralisation of the industrial relations system.
I. LABOUR PRODUCTIVITY: 1980s COMPARED WITH 1970s

Great Britain has experienced a productivity "miracle" in its manufacturing industry in the 1980s. Table 1 shows the league table of labour productivity growth among the largest 7 OECD countries. Great Britain was bottom in the 1960s, still bottom and performing relatively - even worse in the 1970s, yet top by a mile in the 1980s.

Three of the four explanations advanced for this turnaround are clearly refuted. First, there was no batting-average effect. The plants and lines that closed in the recession of the early 1980s did not have low labour productivity, so composition effects do not account for the boost in labour productivity (Oulton 1987). Second, Haskel and Kay (1990) show that the capital:labour ratio did not grow more rapidly in the 1980s than the 1970s. Likewise, third, they confirm that the quality of the inputs did not improve, comparatively, in the 1980s. For example, spending on research and development and on human capital remained low.

If labour has not switched to more productive plants, firms and industries and if the quality and quality of human and physical capital has not accelerated during the 1980s, only one explanation remains for the spectacular rise in labour productivity. Labour is being used more efficiently. There are two strands to this. People are working harder. The index of effort calculated by work study engineers at Leicester Polytechnic (Figure 1) stood at a higher level in the 1980s than in the 1970s - there has been an "intensification" of labour. In addition, work is organized better now. Surveys by Cross (1988) and Morris and Wood (1988) emphasize reduced demarcations, changed work patterns and greater use of scientific management techniques like more controlled payments systems and just-in-time inventory control.
II. CAUSES OF MORE EFFECTIVE USE OF LABOUR

Six explanations have been advanced to account for the more effective use of labour in the 1980s than previously. They are: the continued formalisation of workplace industrial relations; the shocks of the early 1980s; greater product market competition; the direct attack on union power via, for example, industrial relations legislation; the abandonment of pay policy; and the reining back of the “floor of individual rights” in the field of employment protection. There is probably something in all these explanations, though it is almost certainly the interaction of three of them - the shock, more competition in the product market and the attack on union power - that holds the key.

1. Formalisation of workplace industrial relations

The report of the Donovan Commission (1968) into the British industrial relations system (corresponding to the Hancock Report nearly two decades later in Australia) asserted a strong link between the formalisation of workplace industrial relations and labour productivity. It argued that workplace industrial relations were fragmented and informal and that better management of labour would only happen if industrial relations procedures in factories and offices were formalised. However, it did not recommend anything - industrial democracy on the one hand or a reduction in union immunities on the other for example - which would alter the environment in which such formalisation took place.

Greater formalisation has certainly occurred. Personnel specialists have increased, there are more single employer bargains, the ratio of shop stewards to members has risen and the shop stewards have better facilities, and scientific management techniques are used extensively. But these modifications to workplace procedures took place in both the 1970s and the 1980s. Formalisation is a trend and therefore cannot explain the divergent productivity experience of the 1970s and 1980s. However, the greater for formalisation of the 1970s may have laid the groundwork for productivity improvements in the 1980s once the environment in which workplace industrial relations were conducted was itself changed.
2. Shock

Productivity growth has not been uniform among plants, firms and industries in the 1980s. Around a dozen studies (summarised in Metcalf 1990a) have analysed the differential productivity growth and show, uniformly, the bigger the employment/unemployment shock 1980-81 the faster the subsequent acceleration in productivity growth.

Such shock effects might reflect the elimination of resistant workers via composition effects and greater compliance among surviving employees. Further, from the management side, the prospect of bankruptcy provided the incentive to control labour costs and may have led to a belief that the time was ripe to confront organized labour. Elsewhere (Metcalf 1989) I called this the "fear factor". British personnel specialists and union negotiators stand condemned because the fear of job losses and bankruptcy was apparently required before they troubled to use labour resources more effectively.

3. Product market competition

Competition in product markets was strengthened in many different ways during the 1980s. Exchange controls were abandoned early on. And state subsidies to lame duck, monopolistic, highly unionised firms with predominantly male workforces in coal, steel, cars, shipbuilding and aerospace - which had reached record levels in the late 1970s - were simply axed.

Privatisation has probably played a part too. The productivity record of the state corporations, all of which had either closed shops or high union density, improved markedly around the time that privatisation started in 1983 (see table 2). However, the productivity boost happened in corporations which have not been privatised like coal and rail, as well as in those that are now in the private sector like steel and gas. Haskel and Kay (1990) suggest that the common feature engendered by the privatisation programme is improved management in all of the corporations listed in table 2. It is likely that management winning long, bitter strikes over work practices in steel (1980) rail (1981) and coal (1984/5) played a
part too.

It is also possible to point to instances where cosy cartels between management and unions to boost their own profits and pay at the expense of the consumer have been shattered almost overnight, leading to amazing adjustments in work practices. Proposals to auction, rather than to allocate by committee, the franchises to operate commercial TV networks undermined the monopoly position of the TV companies and unions. Imminent competition from the channel tunnel breached the cross channel ferry duopoly leading to changed work patterns among seamen. And new technology permitted new entry into national newspaper production, causing changes in working practices and contracts among craft workers, general workers and journalists. In each of these three cases the unions - all of which previously operated closed shops - were vanquished in the bitter industrial disputes which accompanied the ending of the old regime.

4. Union power

Union power has undoubtedly been undermined by the employment shocks of the early 1980s and strengthened product market competition. But, in addition, it has been attacked head on by changes in labour law. I have analysed the philosophy behind the legislation and its impact on industrial relations and economic factors elsewhere (Metcalfe 1990b). In a nutshell, the legislation of the 1980s has undermined collectivism and promoted individualism.

First, firms and unions must now take individual responsibility for their own industrial relations. It is up to management whether or not to recognize unions, the definition of a trade dispute has been severely restricted and unions now have a legal personality. It is now possible for management or a disaffected member to gain an injunction against union action and the union can be fined and have its assets sequestrated if it disobeys the injunction.

Second, individuals now have a voice. Secret ballots must be held prior to industrial action, for the election of union executives and in order for a union to engage in political activity.
Third, individuals can exit from the closed shop. There is now complete freedom of individual choice concerning whether or not to belong to a trade union. Further, individual employees can exit from industrial action. Even if the union gains a majority for action in a properly conducted, secret, workplace ballot the individual can work normally and it is illegal for the union to discipline him or her.

Union power rests on the strike threat and the closed shop. These have both been undermined by the legislative onslaught against the union movement. Therefore one test of the effectiveness of the legislation is clear. Did labour productivity accelerate fastest in highly unionised workplaces and industries in the 1980s than it did in less- or non-unionised organizations and sectors? The evidence is summarised in Metcalf (1990a). The weight of the evidence certainly shows, other things equal, a bigger productivity boost in more highly unionised sectors. Further, productivity growth was even greater in industries where collective bargaining is conducted at workplace level rather than nationally (Oulton 1990).

Multi-unionism is suggested by some commentators (eg Bean and Symons 1989, Oulton 1989) as having serious consequences for labour productivity. For example Bean and Symons state that the craft nature of British unions has led to a multiplication of bargaining units within firms. Bargaining in isolation a union can perceive overmanning as in its interests because it does not bear the costs of any corresponding inefficiencies. Although multi-unionism has not been reduced much during the 1980s these commentators state that it is possible that the reduction in union power has moderated such inefficiencies - in the jargon it has moved the bargain closer to the cooperative solution - and caused labour productivity to rise.

5. Pay policy

Various forms of pay policy were in operation for around half the decade during the 1970s. For most of such periods, linking pay increases to company and plant performance was outlawed by the terms of the pay policy. By contrast, the Thatcher administration eschewed pay policy in the 1980s. The Confederation of British Industry notes that one
third of all the pay settlements it monitors - covering most of manufacturing - involved productivity enhancing concessions during the 1980s. It is plausible that pay policy successfully ratcheted down inflation (particularly between 1976 and 1978) but, it seems, with adverse productivity consequences.

6. **Floor of rights**

In a brave experiment to buy union cooperation on the macroeconomic front in the mid and late 1970s, the then-government not only extended union immunities and state handouts to industries in chronic decline, but also strengthened employment protection and minimum wage provisions. For example, an individual came under the umbrella of unfair dismissal provisions after only six months employment rather than needing two years tenure. And minimum wage provision were extended to permit comparability claims in the private sector. This extension of the floor of individual rights may well be desirable (that is a matter of debate). But with hindsight, to superimpose it on an adversarial workplace industrial relations system where bargaining about pay and company performance was off the agenda, seems unlikely to have enhanced labour productivity.

7. **Summary and qualification**

The staggering turnaround in the productivity performance of British manufacturing industry in the 1980s is probably mainly due to the interaction of fear, greater competition and industrial relations legislation. The formalisation of industrial relations procedures at workplace level and the positive encouragement of bargaining over work practices and patterns also probably played a useful background part.

Those who believe in supply side economic policies have, very reasonably, scored the more effective use of labour and consequent improvement in productivity performance as a success. But there is another side to the picture, which should also be emphasised. Three examples will suffice.

First, unemployment doubled to top 3 million in the early 1980s. Next, the downward trend in workplace accidents - which had been going on for two decades - went into reverse
(Nichols 1990) consequent, possibly, on the intensification of work. Finally, efficiency has been achieved at the expense of equity. The distribution of pay is more unequal now than at any time in the last century. In the last decade the distribution of weekly male manual pay has spread out substantially:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of median</th>
<th>1979</th>
<th>1989</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lowest decile</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower quartile</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper quartile</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest decile</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So the boost in labour productivity, while very welcome, has not been achieved painlessly. Now we must ponder the future. Can the productivity growth rate achieved in the 1980s be sustained?

III. THE 1990s

The spectacular improvement in labour productivity growth in Britain compared with other countries in the 1980s was mainly achieved by squeezing out inefficiency in the way labour is used. Once labour is used effectively, alternative mechanisms are required if the productivity growth of the 1980s is to be fully sustained. There is, alas, little ground for optimism. Equally, the productivity performance in manufacturing is unlikely to deteriorate back to the standards of the 1970s.

Haskel and Kay (1990) have demonstrated that there is little or no sign that the quality of British inputs is accelerating. Spending on human capital and on research and development remain low by international standards.

Therefore it is to our industrial relations system that we must look. Given the greater competition in both the labour market and the product market, what is now required is a move away from an adversarial system of workplace industrial relations towards one based on cooperation between labour and capital. The size of the pie, rather than the battle over the
slices, must become the focus. This issue is analysed more fully, using game theory, in Metcalf (1989).

There is not much sign that such cooperative industrial relations evolved very far in the 1980s (see table 3). On the corporate side human resources management (HRM) remains piecemeal. There have been sporadic attempts at quality circles, employee involvement and the like but those who study HRM carefully (Guest 1988) are scathing about the lack of strategic integration between the overall objectives of the firm and the HRM objectives. One area where progress has been made is the spread of profit sharing and employee share ownership schemes in the 1980s, partly encouraged by tax incentives. However, they still only account for a tiny fraction of the total wage bill.

Union structures and goals matter too. We have already noted that there has been only a very modest reduction in multi-unionism, although the reduction in union power might have attenuated any adverse effects such multi-unionism has on labour productivity. There may be a little less envy in the system now. In particular there are some hints that unions and their members have become less anxious about the shares going to pay and profits and worry more about their real pay compared with what it could be with a bigger cake.

The last set of factors required for cooperation refer to the industrial relations system itself - the nature of the game. First, greater cooperation can be achieved via improved enforcement mechanisms. Although, collective agreements generally remain legally unenforceable, it is possible that the growth of so-called single union, strike free agreements incorporating final offer arbitration provide an alternative mechanism. However, even observers sympathetic to such developments (Bassett 1986) calculate that the number of workers covered by such agreements is small.

Second, if one or both parties become less myopic - i.e. the future becomes valued more highly relative to the present - cooperation is likely to evolve. There is no strong trend towards collective agreements lasting beyond one year. However, the prospect of bankruptcy must have caused some change in priorities. Further Denny and Nickell (1989)
note a substantial relative improvement in the investment rate in unionised sectors around the mid 1980s.

Third, if the costs of non-cooperation rise this will tend to boost cooperation. It is possible that the withdrawal of state subsidies to loss making firms had just such an impact in some sectors of manufacturing in the 1980s. The small, but growing, trend towards de-recognition of unions for collective bargaining is a further possible cost of non-cooperation.

Finally, cooperation is more likely if the process of collective bargaining becomes more durable so there is more scope for mutual benefit. It is possible that the survivors of the early 1980s recession emerged with less entrenched positions.

It would seem that the industrial relations system in the 1980s has been marked by management power coupled with generally compliant unions. There is little sign that real cooperation between labour and capital has emerged. To adapt the words of ex-President Nixon: for much of the 1980s management had its workforce by the balls but made no attempt to capture hearts and minds as well. That is surely not a formula for enduring success in industrial relations in the last decade of the second millennium. Unless cooperation evolves it is unlikely that the spectacular productivity growth in manufacturing in Great Britain in the 1980s can be fully sustained.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>5.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major 7 average</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: HM Treasury, *Autumn Economic Statement (Red Book)*
Table 8, 15 November 1989.
Table 2
Total factor productivity in UK public sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average Annual Percentage Changes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1979-88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Airports Authority</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Coal*</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Gas</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Rail</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Steel</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Telecom</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity supply</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Office</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* adjusted for effects of 1984/85 Coal Strike

Source: Haskel and Kay (1990)
### Table 3
Evolution of cooperation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Extent of change in 1980s compared with 1970s</th>
<th>Likely contribution to cooperation in 1980s and the boost in labour productivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corporate culture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Human resource management</td>
<td>little</td>
<td>little or none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Profit sharing</td>
<td>up</td>
<td>modest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union structure and goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Multi-unionism</td>
<td>little or none</td>
<td>some, indirectly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Goals</td>
<td>less envy?</td>
<td>modest?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of bargaining process</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Single union deals</td>
<td>up a little</td>
<td>modest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Future of present</td>
<td>up a little?</td>
<td>modest?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Costs of non-cooperation</td>
<td>up in places</td>
<td>some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Enduring bargaining</td>
<td>up a little</td>
<td>modest?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The effort index or index of percentage utilisation of labour, PUL, refers to manufacturing in Great Britain. A PUL is a unit of human effort often termed a work unit. It records changing intensity of human effort, muscle and mind, per hour. It measures the varying intensity with which an on-the-premises operative hour is worked. The index is based on work done at Leicester Polytechnic by Alan Bennet and Sydney Smith-Gavine.
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213 Chapman, B.J. and Tai-Tee Chia, Financing Higher Education: Private Rates of Return and Externalities in the Context of the Tertiary Tax

214 Pitchford, J.D., (Two papers) Does Australia Really Have a Current Account Problem? (a shortened version of this paper is published in Policy Centre for Independent Studies, Winter, 1989) and A Sceptical View of Australia’s Current Account and Debt Problem, now published in Australian Economic Review, 2nd Quarter 1989.
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224 Paper 1: Freebairn, J., Some Results From the ORANI-P Model

Paper 2: Hughes, Barry, Twin Deficits in the IMP Model. With a Comment by John Perkins, NIEIR.

225 Parsell, Bruce F., Alan A. Powell and Peter J. Wilcoxen, The Effects of Fiscal Restraint on the Australian Economy as Projected by the Murphy and MSQ2 Models: A Comparison. With a Comment by Chris W. Murphy, ANU, and a Note by Warwick McKibbin and Graham Elliott, Reserve Bank of Australia.

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