The representation gap and the future of worker representation

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ABSTRACT

The Representation Gap was one of the finest achievements of Brian Towers’s academic life. In this important book he described the extent of the representation gap in Britain and the United States and examined attempts to close the gap through public policy, the revitalisation of trade unions and the development of new institutions of worker representation. On the sad occasion of Brian’s death, this article returns to the main themes of the book and examines how academic analysis and developments in the real world of industrial relations have progressed since its publication.

INTRODUCTION

One of the main achievements of Brian Towers’s academic life was his book, The Representation Gap (1997). This traced, and regretted, the decline of trade union organisation, examined the options in public policy for reviving unions, and assessed two institutions that might serve to re-build worker representation, statutory works councils and labour–management partnership. The book was noticeable for developing a comparison between Britain and the USA at a time when it was more common for UK researchers to use continental Europe as a point of reference. It was also noticeable for its focus on practical policy making, developed from an explicitly pluralist frame of reference. The book wore its heart on its sleeve and insisted that recreating effective institutions of worker representation must be a priority for those who desire a more just settlement at work.

The purpose of what follows is to return to the themes of The Representation Gap and explore how they have played out in the intervening years, both in the real world of industrial relations and in academic commentary and research. To this end, four issues are addressed. First, is the question of the representation gap itself, how it is conceived and measured and whether it has widened or narrowed since the mid-1990s. Second, is the attempt to close the gap by what has come to be known as union revitalisation or renewal (e.g. Fairbrother and Yates, 2003). Third, is changing public policy and its effectiveness or otherwise in promoting worker representation. Fourth and last, is the question of non-union forms of worker representation, including statutory works councils but also employer-sponsored participation and worker
representation through single-issue and other civil society organisations. A critical issue here is the degree to which these alternative institutions complement or substitute for trade unions (Heery et al., 2004). For reasons of space, these four issues are explored with specific regard to Britain, though where possible parallel or divergent developments in the USA are noted in the spirit of the original book.

**REPRESENTATION GAP**

The concept of a representation gap is associated primarily with the work of Richard Freeman and colleagues (Freeman and Rogers, 1999). It is defined as the percentage of workers who desire union representation but who currently do not have access, primarily because they are located in workplaces without trade union recognition (Freeman et al., 2007: 4). The main thing to note about this definition is that its central component is the notion of ‘preference’: workers are conceived of as the consumers of representative institutions who may express a ‘taste’ for union representation, representation through some other institution or for no representation whatsoever. Estimates using this definition suggest there is unmet demand for trade unionism amongst British worker-consumers but that this is of a modest scale. Bryson and Freeman (2007: 89) estimate that 10 per cent of workers in non-union workplaces desire union representation, measured in terms of an expressed preference to join a union plus a belief that a union would make the workplace better.

Another feature of this work is that it has identified a preference amongst workers for non-union representation, either to sit alongside unions or to function independently of them. According to Bryson and Freeman’s (2007: 88–90) survey data, 59 per cent of non-members in union-free workplaces desire collective representation with the favourite option being for a works council only (34 per cent), the next a combination of works council and union (21 per cent) and the least a union on its own (4 per cent). The data also indicate that workers want a particular form of unionism, one that adopts a cooperative orientation to management: 71 per cent of union members and 73 per cent of non-members ‘preferred [an] organization that worked with management to [an] organization that made defending workers its main function’ (Bryson and Freeman, 2007: 92). This is *prima facie* evidence in favour of one of the institutions investigated in *The Representation Gap*, labour–management partnership.

One problem with estimating the representation gap in this way arises from the ‘adaptive’ quality of preferences (Fredman, 2008: 14–15). Expressed preferences may reflect habituation to existing arrangements, social constraints that limit options and inadequate information about alternatives. Indeed, this is acknowledged by Bryson and Freeman (2007: 90) who note that trade unionism is an ‘experience good’, ‘something that workers are most likely to value having experienced it’. What this implies is that estimates of the union representation gap based solely on the survey responses of those without experience of the institution can be problematic.

An alternative is to be guided by a conception of workers’ interests rather than their preferences when estimating the representation gap and this is precisely what Brian Towers did in his book. Towers (1997: 2) measures the representation gap in terms of the proportion of workers who ‘have access to the independent representation of their individual and collective interests’ and suggests that it encompasses five-sixths of American workers and two-thirds of British. The claim here is that workers have an interest in independent representation because it is a means of protecting and
improving their terms and conditions of employment, regardless of the preferences or tastes that a given sample of workers may express at any one point in time.

One can go further and claim that workers have an interest not just in access to independent representation but to joint regulation of the employment relationship through collective bargaining. Where decisions on pay and other aspects of the employment relationship are bargained, then the capacity of workers to shape the conditions under which their labour is bought and consumed is institutionalised in a system of workplace governance. Arguably, therefore, the representation gap should be measured by the proportion of workers who are excluded from coverage by collective bargaining (see also Adams, 1995: 64–67). On this standard, derived from a conception of workers’ interests not preferences, the representation gap is both much wider and growing.

In Britain, according to the Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) 22 per cent of UK workplaces were covered by collective bargaining in 2004, a reduction of 8 per cent from the figure recorded in 1998 just after The Representation Gap was published. Recent decline is confined largely to the private sector, where bargaining coverage fell from 17 to 11 per cent of establishments between these two points in time. The WERS series, moreover, indicates that these latest figures are consistent with a long-term trend that has been under way since the mid-1980s (Kersley et al., 2006: 181–182). If the capacity to regulate terms and conditions of employment through an independent institution is the hallmark of effective representation, then this is becoming less and less a feature of British industrial relations. The representation gap is wide and getting wider.

UNION REVITALISATION

If there is a wide representation gap in British industry then one way in which it might be closed is through the revival of trade unionism. This issue featured in Brian Towers’s book, most extensively through a review of labour–management partnership agreements, though also through a briefer consideration of new developments in trade union organising. In the period since he wrote, the question of union revitalisation has become a major preoccupation of academic industrial relations on a global scale. The analysis and evaluation of attempts by unions to reverse their decline has proceeded apace, even as unions in most countries have continued to lose membership and influence (e.g. Fairbrother and Yates, 2003; Frege and Kelly, 2004; Phelan, 2007; Turner et al., 2003).

A feature of this work is that the priorities of The Representation Gap have been reversed. Interest in labour–management partnership has receded in Britain, reflecting diminished union commitment to this strategy (Charlwood, 2004: 385–388). In its place there has been something of an explosion of studies of union organising, a good proportion of which has appeared in the Industrial Relations Journal (e.g. Findlay and McKinlay, 2003; Gall, 2007; Heery and Simms, 2008; Simms, 2007). This trend has also followed patterns in union policy, as the incipient organising initiatives described by Towers in the 1990s have borne fruit and more unions have adopted formal organising policies. There is a critical current in the academic literature and a questioning of the depth of leadership commitment to organising (Carter, 2000) but it is undeniable that policies of this type have moved closer to the top of the union agenda in both Britain and the USA in recent years.
Interest in union organising is also a manifestation of what can be described as a form of neo-syndicalism that is visible both in unions themselves and in academic commentary. The basis for this position is usually a characterisation of the political and economic order as neoliberal. In a neoliberal political economy, it is argued, the space for independent trade unionism is continually narrowed as the state seeks to release market forces from inhibiting regulation and employers, under more intense competition, renege on earlier settlements with organised labour. As Crouch (1986) noted long ago, the dominant policy of elites towards trade unionism under neoliberalism is one of ‘exclusion’. The logical response for trade unionism that follows from this analysis is to rediscover its social movement origins (Robinson, 2002) and rebuild its capacity to mobilise workers against employers and state through renewed organising and associated initiatives. Denied the support of government and employers, it is argued, unions must renew their internal strength if they are to guarantee their future.

This analysis has proven very influential within the union revitalisation literature over the past decade. Its influence can be seen in the turning away from the labour movements of northern Europe, with their tradition of social partnership, as models for British trade unionism. In their stead, commentators have looked towards developments in Australia and the USA, where organising has become a priority, and to the social movement unionism of South Africa and Latin America, where unions have mobilised against oppressive regimes. It can be seen in the interest in organising and the organising model, with its stress not just on recruiting workers into unions but on building activism and workplace organisation. It can be seen also in the theme of coalition-building and the potential for unions to supplement their own internal strength through alliances with other excluded forces in civil society (Turner and Cornfield, 2007). Finally, at a conceptual level it can be seen, in the interest in mobilisation theory and the application to trade unions of concepts developed to explain the mobilising capacity of other, more dynamic social movements (Kelly, 2005).

This neo-syndicalist current in the academic literature has reflected developments in union strategy. In the USA, in particular, the disappointments of the Clinton years and the anti-unionism of the Bush presidency reinforced the emphasis on internally generated union renewal. Critical episodes included the SEIU’s Justice for Janitors campaign, the founding of the Organizing Institute by the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO), the election of John Sweeney to the presidency of the confederation on an organising ticket and the formation of the Change to Win breakaway, at least partially on the basis of a desire to switch funds from political campaigning to organising (Fletcher and Gapasin, 2008). The neo-syndicalist turn has been less apparent in UK unions, reflecting the limited but still genuine opportunities for influence at state level under New Labour, at nation level in Scotland and Wales, and at supra-state level in Europe. Nevertheless, there have been echoes of American developments, including attempts to reproduce the janitors’ campaign under SEIU tutelage in London, the founding and subsequent expansion of the Organising Academy by the TUC and the election of union leaders hostile to New Labour and to partnership with employers and receptive to a strategy based on organising and industrial militancy (Charlwood, 2004).

Neo-syndicalism has provided the dominant, progressive narrative for the trade union movement in the decade and more since Brian Towers was writing. At its heart is a prescription that unions must heal themselves by developing new sources of...
power—membership, organisation, coalition—to protect workers’ interests in a bleak context. In the current crisis of neoliberalism, however, it can be questioned whether this orientation, while necessary, is sufficient. This is particularly true in the USA, where Barack Obama is seemingly intent on using the crisis to forge a new social and economic settlement. A component of this wider reform is the Employee Free Choice Act with its aim of tilting the balance in the employment relationship back towards organised labour. How this reform will play out remains to be seen. But in a period of flux, with allies in power and widespread conviction that markets should be re-regulated and business subordinated to social purpose, the time is surely right for unions to be engaged fully in the political process. Union revitalisation in the longer term will depend in Britain, as well as in the USA, on the post-crisis settlement and seeking to shape this through political action should be a priority for unions in both countries.

PUBLIC POLICY

At the heart of The Representation Gap was a review of public policy on worker representation in Britain and the United States. Towers reviewed developments in policy in both countries and assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the main options for reform, which were then under consideration. His book was part of an applied tradition of policy-oriented writing in industrial relations. It was also informed by a pluralist normative position and committed to finding a policy recipe that could balance the interests of stakeholders; secure both ‘democracy and efficiency’.

The Representation Gap was published at the start of the New Labour government and in the intervening period there has been considerable legislative activity dealing with worker representation. At the risk of simplification, this has followed three broad avenues of reform. First, the government, under pressure from unions, instituted a statutory recognition procedure through the Employment Relations Act 1999. This introduced a British version of American certification law, under which unions had to be recognised by employers as bargaining agents on pay, hours and holidays if they could demonstrate majority support amongst the workers who constituted a bargaining unit. Second, the government has transposed European legislation requiring employers to inform and consult with worker representatives. This has taken two main forms: there is scope for employees to require their employer to establish a European Works Council in multinational enterprises with substantial employment in two or more European countries, and similar provisions have been extended to smaller, UK-based enterprises through the Information and Consultation of Employees (ICE) Regulations 2004 (Davies and Freedland, 2007). Third, New Labour has provided direct support for union representation through a number of grant-funding and sub-contracting arrangements, including the Union Modernisation Fund, the Partnership Fund and, especially, unionlearn, the union-administered programme that facilitates worker access to education and training (McIlroy, 2008). The latter has been supplemented by statutory support for the activities of Union Learning Representatives, who are entitled to time off work to undertake their activities and receive training under the Employment Act 2002.

Much of this policy has been subject to evaluation by academic research (e.g. Gall, 2006a; Hoque and Bacon, 2008). For reasons of space, it is not possible to review this work or to assess in detail how public policy has impacted on the representation
gap. Instead, a more limited objective is pursued below. This is to identify the main positions that have been adopted by commentators in assessing New Labour’s programme. These are characterised, respectively, by an emphasis on the effectiveness of the law in promoting worker representation, a stress on the limits of the law and an argument that legal intervention has been not just ineffectual but positively dangerous to independent worker voice. In short, the aim is to map the debate that has developed over New Labour’s policy of collective labour law.

Brian Towers, writing in 1997, was cautiously optimistic about the effects of New Labour’s policy. Other writers, from a range of perspectives and considering different aspects of policy, have shared this view. In particular, it has been argued that the introduction of the statutory recognition procedure has allowed unions to establish collective bargaining at places that otherwise would have remained union-free. Particularly in the first years of the procedure there was a surge of recognition and in specific industries, such as provincial newspapers, unions have been able to reverse previous employer policies of derecognition (Gall, 2004; 2006b). Writers who have drawn attention to these positive effects of recognition law have noted that it has operated through three separate mechanisms: it has provided unions with a direct means of compelling employers to concede recognition, given them indirect leverage to secure voluntary agreements ‘under the shadow of the law’ and served, to a degree, to relegitimate unions thus making employer opposition more difficult. Those making positive claims about public policy have also argued that it has generated effects beyond its ostensible purpose; that unions have used policy to rebuild systems of worker representation even when this was not its immediate aim. The best example of this argument is the claim that the union learning scheme has provided a means of renewing workplace organisation and helped consolidate union membership (Wallis et al., 2005).

Even those reporting positive consequences for worker representation have offered only qualified support for New Labour’s policy. The weaknesses of specific provisions, such as the recognition procedure, have been noted, as has a general tendency to concede excessive influence to business during the framing of law and opt for relatively weak forms of regulation (Gall, 2003: 13–14). It has also been noted that policy has had variable effects and that the impact of law has been context-dependent. Realising the potential of law has been contingent upon union strategy, employer response and the structural context in which unions have sought recognition, established works councils or developed union learning.

The second position that has been adopted in the debate over worker representation has stressed the limits to the law. This follows a long tradition in industrial relations analysis, which has tended to play down the role of law in shaping the behaviour of employers, workers and trade unions (Weekes et al., 1975). The essential point that is argued is that employment law is reflective rather than constitutive of underlying power relations within the economy. Accordingly, reforms that are seemingly designed to strengthen worker representation may have little or no effect if other, more significant forces are operating against them. Hoque and Bacon’s (2008) assessment of the impact of Union Learning Representatives on training provision, for example, indicates that this has been modest and attributes this to the loss of union bargaining power over time.

A very similar argument has been advanced by Brown and colleagues with regard to union recognition (Brown and Nash, 2008; Brown et al., 2001). They demonstrate that, notwithstanding some union success in winning recognition, union density and
the incidence of collective bargaining has continued to fall in Britain, particularly in the private sector. Brown and his co-authors also argue that the nature of bargaining has continued to change during the period of the new law, with declining influence of unions over pay and a narrowing of the bargaining agenda. The ineffectiveness of the law in closing the union representation gap they attribute to the effects of product markets, the growing competitiveness of which has eroded the capacity of unions to extract economic rents while simultaneously stiffening employer attachment to the managerial prerogative. Brown and Nash (2008), moreover, note that the use of formal joint consultation has declined alongside collective bargaining and suggest that product market pressure may also afford an inhospitable context for the new ICE regulations.

The third position in the debate over public policy claims that it is actively harmful to the cause of worker representation. There is a long-standing critique of statutory forms of worker participation on the grounds that they can substitute for more effective representation through trade unions (Kelly, 1996). This point of view has not been prominent in discussion of recent works council legislation, much of which identifies a potential for unions to work with and through statutory arrangements (e.g. Welch, 2006). For the other two strands of New Labour’s policy, however, union recognition and union learning, there have been arguments that they can rebound against trade unionism.

The case against the union learning scheme has been made most forcefully by McIlroy (2008). His position is a classic statement of the incorporation of trade union leadership at the cost of effective union representation. In accepting the role as sub-contractor within the government’s vocational education and training policy, he suggests, the TUC has entered into three types of unsatisfactory exchange. It has assumed responsibility for implementing government policy when it is largely excluded from policy formulation, which remains dominated by business interests. It has acceded to a relationship with employers with regard to workplace learning that is based on consultation rather than collective bargaining. And it has prioritised the recruitment and development of Union Learning Representatives and, in so doing, has incurred opportunity costs as it has failed sufficiently to prioritise organising. McIlroy’s argument exhibits the neo-syndicalism described above. It sees the union learning scheme as an attempt to alter the character of the trade union movement by rendering it dependent on the neoliberal state, when what is required is robust independence.

The argument against the statutory recognition procedure is rather different and, in this case, emphasises the impact of law on employer behaviour rather than on unions. A key author is Adams (1999) who has argued that American certification law has engendered employer militancy and the introduction of broadly equivalent law in Britain threatens to do the same. Certification of a union as a bargaining agent through a test of majority support, Adams argues, inevitably leads to a contest between employer and union. This, in turn, leads to the continual refinement of tactics on either side, including union-busting by employers and corporate campaigns by trade unions. A Red Queen effect is thereby generated, in which unions have to invest more and more to maintain the same level of organisation in the economy and, indeed, may fail to reach this target as the greater resources of employers allows them to out-compete their union opponent. The statutory recognition procedure introduced by New Labour therefore is likely to work against unions as it encourages employer counter-mobilisation.
In summary, three broad interpretations of public policy on worker representation have developed since the publication of *The Representation Gap*. Respectively, these claim that public policy has been effective, albeit to a limited degree, that it has been ineffective because more fundamental causes are working to nullify its influence and that it has been counter-productive, working against independent worker representation by incorporating unions or incentivising employer militancy. What is interesting about these lines of division is that they do not reflect the dominant pluralist and radical perspectives in British Industrial Relations (IR) scholarship. Pluralists and radicals fall both sides of the policy evaluation fence, albeit on the basis of different types of assessment and argument. Essentially this is because the three positions identified are theoretical rather than normative. They offer distinct and separate responses to the same theoretical question: what is the relationship between state policy and the labour movement? Their answers are theoretical, even though often not couched as such and can be expressed in abstract terms: that the actions of states are supportive of labour movements; that the future of labour movements is determined by markets, not states; and that states seek to emasculate effective labour movements requiring the latter to cultivate alternative sources of strength. Industrial relations is often characterised as an atheoretical field, concerned with practical problem solving and in many ways *The Representation Gap* conformed to this image. But even the most descriptive and prescriptive texts have their embedded theory and this can be seen in the unfolding debate over public policy.

**NON-UNION REPRESENTATION**

Another theme broached by Towers was that of non-union representation and its capacity to bridge the representation gap. His focus was on statutory works councils and the likelihood of their successful import into Britain and the USA. Towers (1997: 209–219) endorsed works councils, and provided a positive assessment of their effects in Germany where they were an established element of the industrial relations system. He notes though that a key to their success was the integration with union-based representation and claimed that this was the critical issue in any attempted transposition: works councils must fit with and not undermine trade union-based participation if they were to help rebuild worker representation.

As we have seen, since Towers was writing, Britain has introduced two sets of works council legislation. There has also been an explosion of academic work on non-union voice. Some of this work has focused on statutory participation (Hall and Terry, 2004) but much of it has looked at other non-union institutions. There has been a great deal of research into employer-sponsored worker participation, encompassing both employee involvement schemes and representative systems based on company councils or forums (Bryson, 2004; Dundon and Rollinson, 2004). There has also been research on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based campaigns that originate in the wider civil society but engage with workplace issues. Work of this kind is particularly notable in the USA, where there have been studies of living wage campaigns and labour centres (Fine, 2006; Luce, 2004) but there has also been an echo in Britain, including research on the London campaign for a living wage and the activities of Citizens’ Advice (Abbott, 2004; Holgate and Wills, 2007; Pollert, 2009). There is now a more variegated system of worker representation in Britain, the USA and other advanced economies, and the changing focus of IR research reflects this.
Research on non-union representation has embraced a multitude of issues but perhaps two questions have been pivotal. One concerns the relationship of non-union forms to union-based representation and the literature contains rival ‘replacement’ and ‘complementarity’ theses, which claim that non-union forms substitute for and reinforce trade unionism respectively (Heery et al., 2004). Perhaps the dominant perspective at present emphasises scope for mutual reinforcement. Boxall et al. (2007), for instance, in their survey of worker voice across the Anglophone economies, note that there is ‘growing complementarity between union and non-union voice systems’, while others have claimed that workers (and employers) benefit most from a combination of union and non-union representation (Charlwood and Terry, 2007: 335). A similar argument can be seen in the literature on union–community coalitions, which stresses the benefits to workers that can flow from union cooperation with civil society organisations (Turner and Cornfield, 2007).

However, not all work on non-union forms identifies scope for positive integration. The difficulty in creating effective coalitions is a pronounced feature of the literature on union relations with community organisations (Fine, 2007), while a persistent theme in the research on employer-sponsored participation is its effectiveness in blocking unionisation (Purcell and Georgiadis, 2007: 189–192). Given the divergent pattern of research findings it may be that there is no essential relationship between union-based worker representation and other forms. Rather, complementarity and replacement are both possible, depending on contingent circumstances and the strategies of unions and other actors themselves.

The other question focuses on comparison with unions and asks if non-union forms are as effective as trade unions in representing workers’ interests. Here also there are competing positions. With regard to employer-sponsored representation the dominant view until recently was that this was relatively ineffective. Company councils and other forms of non-union indirect voice were regarded as lacking in independence, ineffectual and prone to early demise (Terry, 1999). More recent work, however, tends to be positive in its assessment, identifying benefits for employees in direct employee involvement, indirect representation and a combination of the two (Bryson, 2004; Purcell and Georgiadis, 2007). With regard to NGOs and community organisations, the primary assessment in the literature is positive. These organisations are presented as discharging an effective representative role in areas of the economy untouched by trade unionism (Abbott, 2004; Fine, 2006), while Living Wage and other campaigns are reported to have a redistributive effect in low-wage labour markets (Luce, 2007). In this case, the critical literature is more recent. Freeman (2005) has expressed scepticism about what he describes as non-worker organisations on democratic grounds—in many cases they are not directly representative of working people—and in terms of their economic effect, which he claims is marginal to the broad span of the US economy. Pollert (2007) has also expressed scepticism of advocacy organisations, like Citizens’ Advice. While not decrying the work performed by NGOs of this type, she notes that what vulnerable workers really need is trade unionism.

What we have seen since Brian Towers was writing is an increasing preoccupation with non-union representation. This has spilled beyond the concern with statutory works councils, seen in The Representation Gap, to encompass a broader set of institutions, some of which—NGOs and community organisations—fell more or less completely beyond the purview of IR until recently. As this work has accumulated, it has inevitably given rise to debate and lines of contention have appeared. Researchers differ on the relationship of non-union forms to unions and their comparative
Both issues are central to the future of worker representation in Britain and the USA and, for this reason, will continue to divide opinion.

CONCLUSION

The Representation Gap was an ambitious book, ranging broadly across the field of IR. For its author it represented a taking stock at the end of a long career of arguing, researching, advising and teaching about industrial relations. As we have seen, the book posed four main questions, all of which continue to prompt inquiry and debate. First, it asked about the representation gap and the degree to which workers are currently denied a significant voice at work. Brian Towers’s response was that a majority of workers are denied an effective voice but his answer raised the secondary issue of what standard might be used in making a judgement of this kind. The main choices seemingly are to use a measure of worker preferences or of interests. Towers opted for the latter but others have chosen the former and it is likely that the contest between these different standards will continue; assessing the representation gap in terms of what workers say they want and what others claim they need.

The other three questions flowed from Towers’s answer to the first. If there is a representation gap then how can it be filled: through revitalised unions, public policy or new institutions of worker voice? Towers himself was receptive to a partnership agenda and rebuilding unions on the basis of a fresh accommodation with employers. The main current in the union revitalisation literature since, however, has been marked by a neo-syndicalism, viewed as a rational response to the neoliberal project. It remains to be seen whether the crisis of neoliberalism will generate a fresh turn in the debate over unions and in union strategy, focused on a new labour politics.

Towers was also reasonably optimistic at the onset of a new phase of Labour Government and looked to New Labour for progress in closing the representation gap. Most in Britain now feel sorely disappointed but the debate over government policy that has accompanied New Labour’s rise and seemingly inevitable fall arguably has relevance for other countries, where left-of-centre governments have achieved power. In Rudd’s Australia and Obama’s USA, it will be interesting to see if the same division is apparent in analysis and commentary, with one current stressing the effectiveness of public policy, another emphasising its limits and a third pointing to its perverse effects.

Towers’s answer to his final question about non-union representation was also positive and he believed that an amalgam of trade union and statutory forms of representation could work effectively in Britain. Since he was writing, other non-union forms have come to the fore and attracted scholarly attention. Whatever the institution, however, debate over non-union representation returns continually to two essential issues: their relationship to trade unions and their relative effectiveness.

The matter of their effectiveness brings us back once more to the standards that might be used to assess institutions of worker representation. Even if one shares with Towers a belief that assessment should be grounded in a conception of interests then it remains to be decided which interest or set of interests should be included in such a standard. Workers have multiple interests that are both qualitative and quantitative, individual and collective, opposed to and compatible with those of employers (Hyman, 1997). The category of ‘worker’ is itself increasingly contested, moreover, and it is necessary to consider interests grounded in gender, ethnicity and other identities (Healy et al., 2006). Reflecting this complexity, any standard that is
developed will itself be complex. Nevertheless, this is surely a fruitful line of inquiry for future work on representation: developing a standard that can be used to evaluate the multiple institutions that now co-exist.

Returning to *The Representation Gap* on the sad occasion of Brian Towers’s death, what is striking is its prescience. In many respects the book is quite traditional. It was written from within the applied, policy-oriented tradition of IR scholarship and eschewed both formal theorising and the growing vogue for statistical analysis. What it did do, however, was identify key themes in IR scholarship and anticipate the future direction of research and commentary. In the years since the book appeared, the question of the representation gap has loomed ever larger and scholars have focused on the set of issues identified by Brian—union revitalisation, non-union representation and the effectiveness of public policy. *The Representation Gap* was very well-received and widely cited when it first appeared. It continues to be relevant and is a fitting memorial to its author.

**References**


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