Inside the Unions:
A comparative analysis of policy-making in Australian and British telecommunication and printing unions

Presentation to BUIRA

Dr Ed Blissett

June 2015

Inside the Unions

- At the heart of my research there are two central questions:

- How, and why, do unions' adopt specific policies?

- What factors explain the different behaviour of similar unions, when faced with comparable policy choices?

Inside the Unions

- These questions led to a series of further subsidiary questions being posed to assist in answering the central questions these included:
- Who makes policy?
- How is policy formed?
- How is policy implemented?
- What are the internal and external influences on policy makers?
- How successful were the policies the unions adopted?

Inside the Unions

The genesis for the research stretches back to the 1980's.

My personal experience in 3 major British unions did not tally with the various major theories of policy making, which include:

- Oligarchical control (Webbs, 1920 and Michels, 1913)

- Institutional contextualism (Bain, 1970; Clegg, 1976)

Inside the Unions

- State contextualism (Howell, 2005)
- Rank and Filism (Fairbrother, 2000; Bramble, 1995, 2008)
- Political Factionalism (Lipset et al's, 1956; Edelstein and Warner, 1975).
- Strategic Choice (Boxall and Hayes 1997; Heery and Kelly, 1988, 1994; Heery, 1990, 2000, 2003; Kelly, 1988, 1990)

The failure of these theories to wholly explain the reality of union policy making, which I had experienced and observed, motivated my research and led to the research hypothesis.

Inside the Unions

The research hypothesis:

That union policy making is significantly affected by *micro-political* factors, such as personal friendships, loyalties and enmities.

In order to test the hypothesis and answer the research questions a qualitative, interview rich, comparative, 17 year study of the Australian and British telecommunication and printing unions was undertaken.

Inside the Unions

Methodology

- The reasons why Britain and Australia were chosen as the comparator countries
- The grounds for selecting the telecommunication and printing unions.
- The rationale for adopting a qualitative, interview rich, longitudinal study.
- The focus on three key policy areas - recruitment, amalgamations and efforts to control the labour process.
- Time period of the main body of the research 1980-1997

Inside the Unions

Main Body of Research:

Print Unions – Labour Process

- Focus on defending impressive historic levels of control over Labour process – particularly in powerful newspaper chapels

- Major disputes - Britain = Messenger Newspapers; News International. Australia = Fairfax

- Tactics used by both nations print unions to defend their influence

- The relative levels of success (or failure) in resisting employer efforts to wrest greater influence over the labour process.

1987-87 News International Dispute

Inside the Unions

- **Main Body of the Research:**
- **Telecom' Unions – Labour Process**
- Growth of influence over labour process in 1970's – Redfern disputes and POEU 9 day fortnight strikes.
- Union response to the threat of privatisation and deregulation – Australia
- Union response to privatisation and deregulation – Britain (Mercury interconnection dispute)
- National and local strategies for dealing with employer efforts to gain greater control of the labour process.

Inside the Unions

Look, you need to remember that the NSW Right effectively controlled the ALP parliamentary caucus. Richo* was the numbers man, and he was generally pretty close to us. We were able to convince him to put the hard word on Keating, that if he kept on he could lose factional support for his plans to kick Hawke out of office.

(*Graham Richardson, ALP Federal Minister (1983-1988) and leading member of the NSW Right faction.)

Inside the unions

"In the 1970s the NUM were the most powerful union in this country. When they took strike action they bought industry to a standstill. Well we now have great industrial strength; we can stop the banks, the stock exchange, the multi-national's and even the Government. We are the electronic miners of the twentieth Century. Whereas the NUM could stop industry, we can stop capitalism."

Inside the Unions

Main Body of the Research:

- **Print Unions – Amalgamations**

- Historic occupational antipathy between craft and non craft unions = barrier to industrial unionism in Britain.

- Industrial unionism in Australia with the exception of Victoria – union run by craftsmen

- Negotiations over mergers dominated by politics and personality – not economics and industrial logic.

- Change of key leaders at local and national levels equated to swings in relations between both nations printing unions.

Inside the Unions

"Look, Cahill and some of the other State Secretaries knew that if we merged with the Metals, then they were as good as finished. Cahill knew that Cooke and McCarthy were mates with the Metals leadership and that none of them had any time for him. I believe that John [Cahill] thought that his future was much better served by a merger with a smaller union like the Journos. He had a better relationship with them and I think he felt he could be Federal Secretary of a merged Union."

Inside the unions

"They were very different people, with different views and attitudes. Whereas Joe and Bill were similar people who were both from the newspapers and would be able to sort out their differences, Tony and Brenda were very different. It wasn't about politics or even their industrial approach, it was just they were always uncomfortable in each others company and they never trusted each other. This placed placed a distance between them, a distance that never existed between Joe and Bill. It was a distance that proved to be disastrous in the Wapping dispute"

Inside the Unions

Main Body of the Research:

- **Telecom' Unions – Amalgamations**

- Reverse of print unions – Australian unions separated along occupational lines until the 1990s. British telecommunication engineers had a single union, the POEU.

- Negotiations once again dominated by politics and personality as opposed to economics and industrial logic

- POEU merger with CPSA P&T section and ATEA merger with ATPOA also displayed parallel, witting or unwitting, sexism in the telecom' engineering unions leaderships attitudes.

Inside the unions

Look it was never really about factions or politics. I didn't trust the linies, because they were led by no good, deceitful bastards.

There's no doubt the ATEA thought of us as a pack of Sheilas who knew nothing about negotiating. They were convinced that if they could just get us to merge then we'd be happy to give away the autonomy the merger deal gave us. Well they were mistaken!

Inside the Unions

Main Body of the Research:

- **Print Unions – Recruitment**
- British and Australian print unions gained high levels of membership density through the highly successful application of the pre-entry closed shop.
- Applied by the 1960s and 1970s to non craft areas of both nations print industries.
- Legal prohibitions and fundamental changes to the nature of the industry undermined the pre-entry closed shop
- Print union FTO's and lay officers, in both Australia and Britain who lacked experience in organising workers who were not compelled to join the union, struggled to recruit in new areas of the industry.

Inside the Unions

"Look, in my branch, I had an officer who was only elected [as an Organising Officer] because his chapel wanted shot of him and they had the numbers to get him up. He was less use to me than a one legged man in an arse kicking contest. He'd do anything to avoid the hard yards in recruiting. All he was interested in was his pay check and blowing through every day. The only time you'd see him after five in the arvo was if there was glue on the carpet."

Inside the Unions

Main Body of the Research:

- **Telecom' Unions – Recruitment**

- Increased industrial strength in the 1960's and 1970's led to the establishment of post entry closed shops.

- Telecom employment, pre-deregulation, in Australia and Britain was concentrated in the national carriers (BT and TA)

- Post deregulation, which the unions opposed, there were policy disagreements over organising in the new competitors to TA and BT.

- Both nations telecom unions struggled to organise workers, in new areas of the industry who were not compelled to join the union.

Inside the Unions

- **Key Findings:**
- Whilst union policy-making is influenced by the institutional and political contexts they operate within, unions enjoy the scope to make a series of strategic choices that manifestly affect their success as organisations.
- That the policy choices unions make are the result of complex interactions between different formal and informal layers of a union's democratic structure.

Inside the Unions

- **Key Findings:**
- That policy makers decisions are influenced by a rich mixture of occupational, geographical, ideological and micro-political factors as well as external political and institutional considerations
- **That union policy making is significantly affected by micro-political factors, such as personal friendships, loyalties and enmities.**