

Introduction to the special issue

Despite their historical similarities, in the early 1990s employment relations in Australia and New Zealand appeared to be headed in different directions. While employment relations reform in Australia took place within the traditional institutions of arbitration and was guided by corporatist style agreement between the Labour government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions, the Employment Contracts Act 1991 signalled a radical reordering of employment relations in New Zealand. This marked divergence produced a lively and interesting comparative literature, sparked by a research workshop held at the University of Sydney in 1991. This literature, which focussed on the institutional sources of divergence between the two countries, anticipated what was to become the dominant approach to globalisation in the comparative employment relations literature.

This special issue revisits the Australia-New Zealand comparison in light of significant changes that have taken place in the two countries during the last decade. The articles are edited and refereed versions of some of the papers presented at a research workshop held at the University of Sydney in February 2005 which focussed on recent developments in employment relations in the two countries and was attended by many of the academics who attended the original workshop, as well as a new generation of scholars from the two countries.

The articles in this special issue provide insight into the similarities and differences which have developed in key aspects of employment relations in the two countries since the early 1990s. The paper by Brosnan and Campbell focuses on labour market outcomes and provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between economic and institutional context in shaping these outcomes. Ramia explores the connections between social welfare and labour market reform in the two countries. The two papers by Cooper and May and by Briggs focus on recent trends in the two labour markets: Cooper and May discuss union trends and issues while Briggs overviews the changing patterns of industrial conflict. Taken together, the articles in the special issue provide empirical support for Barry and Wailes's view that the Australia New Zealand comparison reveals some of the limitations of the institutionalist arguments that have dominated contemporary employment relations scholarship. This suggests that the Australia New Zealand comparison remains just as fruitful a ground for comparative research and theoretical development as it was in the early 1990s.

The editors would like to acknowledge the generous financial support provided by the School of Business at the University of Sydney for the workshop from which these papers are drawn.

Michael Barry, John Burgess, Erling Rasmussen and Nick Wailes
November 2005