

Still the Exception? Australian Employment Relations in Comparative Perspective

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Introduction

During his long and distinguished career, Russell Lansbury has made a number of important contributions to the study of Australian and international employment relations. Arguably one of his most important contributions has been to make the distinctive and complex features of Australian employment relations more understandable to an international audience. In doing so, he has countered the often-implicit tendency of industrial relations scholars to treat Australia as an exception. I argue that by rejecting *exceptionalism* and seeking to make Australian employment relations more amenable to international comparison, Lansbury and the generation of scholars that followed his example have contributed to our understanding of how Australia compares. Now, more than 40 years since Russell's first article on Australian industrial relations appeared in the *International Labour Review*, and in the wake of more than three decades of significant change in how the relationships between employers and employees are governed in Australia, it seems an appropriate time to assess how Australian employment relations ought to be compared with those in other countries.

This chapter is organised in three sections. The first briefly sketches what I call the *exceptionalist* view of Australian industrial relations and discusses the implications of this exceptionalism. The second section provides a short commentary on Lansbury's contribution to the international understanding of Australian employment relations and comparative analysis more generally. The final section illustrates some examples of contemporary approaches to the comparison of Australia's employment relations.

The exceptionalist view and its consequences

As is well known, in the late 19th and early 20th century, Australia developed a distinctive and complex form of labour market regulation known

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Conclusion

While I have not done the painstaking number crunching to verify it, my suspicion is that relative to its size, and with the possible exception of Sweden (another of Russell's favourite subjects), Australia is the most over-represented country in comparative employment relations scholarship. Australian data figure strongly in multi-country comparative studies, and international journals regularly publish articles that draw exclusively or mainly on Australian evidence. In my view this comparative interest has less to do with the exceptional nature of the Australian case than with the attempts by scholars such as Russell Lansbury to present the Australian case in a fashion that makes it more amenable to comparison.

Shafer (1999: 446) pointed out that by treating your country as an exception you are effectively arguing that 'understanding other nations will not help in understanding it; understanding it will only mislead in understanding them'. While earlier analysis of union activity and the role of the state in Australia led scholars to adopt an exceptionalist view of Australian industrial relations, the two recent articles that I discussed in the previous section illustrate that Australian scholars working in these areas not only benefit from drawing on international and comparative experience, they can also use distinctive features of the Australian case to contribute to greater international understanding of key issues in employment relations.

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