ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The fallible manager: The critique of management within pluralist industrial relations

Edmund Heery Professor Emeritus in Employment Relations

Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

Correspondence
Edmund Heery, Professor Emeritus in Employment Relations, Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK.
Email: Heery@Cardiff.ac.uk

Abstract

This article uses the work of Willy Brown, John Purcell, Linda Dickens, and Keith Sisson to identify the critique of management within pluralist industrial relations. The notion of the 'fallible manager' captures the essence of this critique. Within the pluralist tradition, fallible managers are identified as the source of industrial relations problems and are also deemed incapable of reversing the harms they cause in the absence of supportive state intervention. While managers are deemed fallible in the pluralist tradition, however, management typically is not regarded as illegitimate and in a reformed institutional context is capable of managing for the common good, to generate 'shared value.'

1 | INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to identify the critique of management within the pluralist tradition of industrial relations. Central to this critique is a tendency to regard management as fallible, in three senses. First, management are often perceived as the source of industrial relations problems, generating effects that are harmful to employees, to the performance of the businesses they manage, at least in the longer term, and to the national economy and wider society. Second, management tends to be seen as incapable of reversing the harm it causes unless it is guided, regulated, or incentivized by the state and its agents. The solutions to

industrial relations problems, in the British pluralist tradition, are typically identified as external to the employing enterprise and its managerial agents. Indeed, the essential purpose of the critique of management is to justify support for interventionist public policy. Third, while management is viewed as fallible it is not regarded as illegitimate. The critique of management within pluralism falls short of the charge that management is essentially oppressive found in versions of critical management studies and labour process theory (Hanlon, 2016). The purpose of reforms proposed by pluralists is to help managers manage better, to become less fallible, not to undermine their structural position in the economy.

To develop this argument, four notable contributions to the pluralist canon are examined, all of which exemplify the assumption of management fallibility. The first, from the 1970s, is Willy Brown's work on piecework bargaining, which identified management error as a source of 'disorderly' workplace industrial relations (Brown, 1972, 1973). The second, developed from the 1980s to the 1990s, is John Purcell's work on 'management style,' which identifies a persistent problem of non-strategic, reactive approaches to human resource management amongst UK firms (Purcell, 1987; Purcell & Ahlstrand, 1994; Purcell & Sisson, 1983). The third is Linda Dickens' critique of the business case for equal opportunities, set out in a series of publications from the 1990s to the early 2000s, which argues that sex and other forms of discrimination at work often originate in management action (Dickens, 1994a, 1999, 2006). The final contribution brings us to the present day and is found in Keith Sisson's reflections on 'employment relations matters,' an attempt to reboot the pluralist tradition for a changing world of work. Central to this attempt is a call for wide-ranging reform of UK industrial relations and a portrayal of management as agents of an unsustainable, financialized form of capitalism (Sisson, 2009, 2016, 2020). Across these four contributions, spread over a fifty-year period, one can observe the evolution of pluralist industrial relations, both in terms of the nature of problems that are identified and in proposed policy solutions; but common to all is a belief in management fallibility.

In reviewing the four contributions a common set of issues are addressed. Each review commences by specifying the industrial relations problems identified by the authors before examining the actions, policies, and forms of organization within management that generate these problems. In each case also, contextual factors, such as the structure of markets and institutions, that the authors identify as sources of management fallibility are identified. The reviews conclude by reaching beyond management to consider two other industrial relations actors. The first of these are trade unions and the reviews consider whether the four authors identify a shared union responsibility with management for industrial relations problems or whether union pressure is one of the factors that can correct management fallibility. The other actor is the state, and the reviews examine the shifting recommendations for public policy that can be seen across the four contributions.

2 | MANAGEMENT AS A SOURCE OF WORKPLACE 'DISORDER'

Brown's study of piecework bargaining formed part of a wave of research into Britain's industrial relations problems at the core of which was the Royal Commission on Trade Union and Employers' Associations, chaired by Lord Donovan (Kaufman, 2004: 381-5). According to Edwards, the study was 'directly linked to the issues of the time, namely strikes, wage inflation, and images of chaotic workplace bargaining driven by self-confident shop stewards'

(Edwards, 2012: 317). The intellectual context from which Brown's research on piecework emerged was marked by what has come to be known as 'declinism,' a conviction that Britain was experiencing significant economic decline relative to other, developed western economies (Edgerton, 2019: 389-94). The labour problem was perceived widely by academic commentators and policymakers of the time to be a major cause of such decline, with the system of industrial relations seen as a drag on economic performance, urgently in need of reform.

The specific labour problems with which Brown was concerned—though he did not explicitly designate them as such—were twofold. The first was wage drift, the increase of pay beyond rates set in national and workplace collective bargaining through the process of piecework bargaining between individual workers and their supervisors and rate-fixers described in the book. Brown demonstrates that wage drift was a major source of earnings growth for workers in the engineering factories he studied and was unrelated to trends in productivity. The second problem was the progressive growth of informal rules governing such bargaining. Brown refers to the process of 'C&P drift' (1973: 105), understood as the emergence of an increasingly luxuriant tangle of custom and practice rules governing pay setting and work organization, which progressively hedged in management prerogative and afforded workers substantial control of their immediate work situation. Brown explored these processes through a series of case studies of engineering factories, which operated piecework systems, relying upon interviews, observation, and the collection of administrative data. He describes these factories as providing 'hot house' conditions for the growth of wage drift and informal bargaining but suggests that similar, though less supercharged developments were apparent in much of British industry at the same time.

The primary immediate cause of both wage and C&P drift identified by Brown were management 'errors of commission and errors of omission' (1973:98). Errors of commission, Brown notes, typically take the form of concessions made to workers that set precedents which crystallise as customary rules. Errors of omission, in contrast, 'permit customs to become established through negligence or ignorance' (1973:99); for example, when senior managers are unaware of concessions to workers made by supervisors and fail to take action to reverse them. The latter example also illustrates another source of drift identified by Brown, the rudimentary management information and control systems that existed in many UK firms. Brown identifies poor vertical integration within management, which afforded wide scope for supervisors to negotiate with and make concessions to workers on piecework, and poor horizontal integration between line management and specialists such as work-study engineers. Errors that gave rise to C&P and wage drift, therefore, were seen to emerge from a broader context of poorly integrated management structures.

While fallible managers were identified as the immediate cause of industrial relations problems, Brown also notes that conditions external to the firms he studied allowed weak management to flourish without incurring major penalty. He particularly stressed the part played by uncompetitive product markets in enabling the hot house piecework bargaining he described: many of the businesses he researched were experiencing buoyant demand and operated in sheltered domestic markets. This emphasis on the explanatory role of product markets in shaping workplace industrial relations was a feature of Brown's work throughout his career (Brown, 2008). Ultimately, it was the disappearance of these benign market conditions that put paid to the indulgent management and frenetic bargaining that Brown described in his classic study.

While Brown pointed insistently at management error as the source of industrial relations problems, he was equally insistent in absolving trade unions. He reports that trade union

representatives were often opposed to piecework, sometimes reined in attempts by individual workers to negotiate soft rates and tended to act as the guardians rather than as the creators of custom and practice rules. Brown presents workplace trade unionism as a rather conservative force, a bringer of order to a highly fragmented, sometimes chaotic pattern of industrial relations. His judgement is akin to that of the Donovan Commission that shop stewards were more likely to function as lubricants than irritants (McCarthy, 1966). Brown concedes that workplace trade unionism does not always play this order-conferring role but when it fails to do so he again points the finger at management. He argues that if the latter supports union representation and invests in developing a strong bargaining relationship then unions can contribute to an effective system of workplace governance, but without this investment the constructive role of unions will be attenuated. In Brown's view, as for many other pluralist commentators, union character and behaviour are largely determined by the actions of management (Bain, 1970).

Piecework Bargaining was not a prescriptive book and Brown outlines no programme of reform for resolving the problems of wage drift and C&P drift that he describes. The argument in the book, however, is broadly congruent with the recommendations of the Donovan Commission that there should be a reform and formalization of workplace industrial relations to import greater order and diminish adverse effects on wage inflation and productivity growth (Clegg, 1979: 315-9). A key element of this reform in several industries was the replacement of traditional payment systems, which afforded scope for the kind of piecework bargaining described by Brown, with variants of measured daywork (Edwards & Heery, 1989: 28-34).

While *Piecework Bargaining* was not prescriptive, Brown was involved in industrial relations policy work before he published the study. His first appointment was as an economic assistant to Hugh Clegg at the National Board for Prices and Incomes (NBPI), where he carried out case studies of wage bargaining at workplace level (Ackers, 2023). The NBPI exemplified the approach to public policymaking favoured by industrial relations pluralists. It had statutory authority to investigate industrial relations problems, but Clegg characterized much of its work as 'consultancy,' relying on research evidence, expertise, and persuasion to convince employers and trade unions to act in accordance with its recommendations (Clegg, 1979: 358-63). Following the abolition of the NBPI in 1970, other state agencies pursued the same broad course. The short-lived Commission on Industrial Relations (CIR) was established at the behest of Donovan to promote the voluntary reform of collective bargaining, typically by discharging a statutory power to investigate and propose remedies to cases of poor industrial relations, deemed by government to be detrimental to the national interest (Purcell, 1981: xiii). Following its abolition in turn in 1974, these functions were transferred to the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), an organization with which Brown had a long association.

The pluralist solution to labour problems arising from management fallibility when *Piecework Bargaining* was published therefore was broadly voluntarist. At its heart were agencies like those just described, which had powers to investigate, recommend and issue advice and codes of practice but whose powers of compulsion were limited. State intervention was central to this programme of voluntarist reform, but it was a form of intervention that rested primarily on specialist agencies designed to support employers rather than on courts and legally enforceable obligations (Howell, 2005). Management fallibility, for pluralists at this time, was to be corrected through state intervention but it was not, in the main, to be legislated against.

3 | NON-STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Like Brown, Purcell began his career in the policy world at the CIR. Subsequently, he became a theorist and researcher of management, helping to forge a bridge between the pluralist tradition within industrial relations and the expanding field of HRM. The theoretical concept with which Purcell is perhaps most closely identified is that of 'management style,' which he explored and developed in a series of publications from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. Originating in an attempt by Fox to identify 'patterns of management-employee relations' (Fox, 1974: 297), the concept of management style sought to specify the broad principles that underpinned approaches to workforce management and to capture variation in such approaches (Purcell, 1987). The main way in which the concept has been elaborated by Purcell and by others is by forming typologies of management style (Marchington & Parker, 1990: 77-84). In many respects the concept of management style is analogous to that of strategy within the field of HRM and in his later work Purcell has relied primarily on the latter, producing a definitive, multi-edition guide to HR strategy (Boxall & Purcell, 2022).

The industrial relations problem identified by Purcell was the limited adoption of 'sophisticated' management styles by British employers. In his final iteration of what he termed the 'management style matrix', Purcell identified two such styles: the 'sophisticated human relations' and 'sophisticated consultative' styles (Purcell & Ahlstrand, 1994: 178). These styles share a 'high individualism,' in which employees are regarded as a valued resource and there is investment in skills, underpinned by long-term employment. HRM in firms with sophisticated styles, according to Purcell and Ahlstrand, is likely to display an 'emphasis on teams and teamwork, competencies, appraisal and reward, empowerment, training, and development' (1994: 181). The two sophisticated styes differ on the dimension of 'collectivism.' Sophisticated human relations firms are non-union—Purcell and Ahlstrand give the example of Hewlett Packard—while sophisticated consultative firms either recognize trade unions or provide for workforce representation through an in-house company council. The tenor of management-employee relations in these sophisticated consultative businesses is cooperative—Purcell and Ahlstrand give the example of Nissan with its single-union agreement—and they can be differentiated from more conventional unionised businesses, labelled 'bargained constitutional,' which are characterized by an adversarial relationship (Purcell & Ahlstrand, 1994: 196-7).

There is a strong normative commitment to sophisticated management styles in Purcell's work. He notes that less sophisticated, more traditional approaches to workforce management in both unionised and non-union segments of the economy might not deliver levels of performance required in the more competitive globalized economy that had emerged since Brown's study of piecework bargaining. His book with Bruce Ahlstrand, *Human Resource Management in the Multi-Divisional Company*, was published when interest in Japanese management and its seeming ability to secure high levels of performance was at its height, and when advocates of human resource management were claiming that it could yield lasting competitive advantage. The trajectory Purcell wished to see at this time was an upward movement, away from the 'bargained constitutional' and other traditional styles towards more sophisticated approaches, but he observes that '[r]emarkably few organizations seriously consider questions of management styles and the most effective way to manage their employees,' and that, 'it is always possible to do nothing or to be reactive.' (Purcell & Ahlstrand, 1994: 215). This observation echoed that of earlier findings from the Company Level Industrial Relations Survey of the mid-1980s. Summarizing these results, Purcell concluded

that, 'both the difficulty in establishing the existence of identifiable styles or approaches and the general weight of evidence would seem to confirm that most UK owned enterprises remain pragmatic or opportunistic in their approach' (Purcell, 1988: 120; see also Purcell, 1987).

Purcell identified a range of actions by fallible managers that contributed to the lack of uptake of sophisticated management styles. He notes that managers often fail to articulate guiding principles for HRM and that when they do, they often take the form of pious bromides, which are rarely communicated effectively to employees and are not correlated with practice. He also notes the predominance of a reactive, fire-fighting approach to workforce management, which in turn leads to inconsistency in policy over time and across the different branches of multi-divisional firms. Finally, he notes that in many companies the personnel function has limited authority and where it is relatively powerful often serves as a buffer, resolving industrial relations problems, while exercising limited influence over wider management strategy (Purcell, 1988).

As we have seen, Purcell believed that the challenge from Japan and other overseas competitors had the potential to push British firms towards the embrace of more sophisticated management styles. But he also noted other contextual factors that imposed a brake on this development. One such factor was ownership and Purcell states that the absence of a sophisticated management style is particularly a feature of UK-owned enterprises. Foreign-owned businesses, like Hewlett Packard and Nissan, were more likely to articulate their broad approach to management, ensure consistency across branches of the enterprise and establish a large corporate HR function (Purcell, 1988). Purcell is one of a long line of commentators that have identified the distinctive failures of British management. Another factor was the growth strategy of the firm. Sophisticated management styles, Purcell notes, were more likely to be found in enterprises that had grown organically through re-investment in the core business. In enterprises that had grown through merger and acquisition, encouraged by the active market for corporate control in Britain, in contrast, less consistent, more reactive approaches to management tended to predominate. These growth strategies, in turn, were reflected in different enterprise structures. Sophisticated management styles, Purcell observes, tend to be found in integrated businesses operating in the service sector. They were less apparent in M-form businesses, in which constituent divisions were guided through financial plans and systems of reporting and operational management, including HRM, were conceived of as a 'downstream' activity, devolved to managers below corporate level (Purcell & Ahlstrand, 1994).

While Purcell identified a different set of contextual factors underpinning management fallibility to Brown, he shared the latter's concern to absolve trade unions of joint responsibility for industrial relations problems. He pointed out that a developmental approach to HRM was fully compatible with union representation, citing sophisticated consultative businesses as examples. In his work on management style, Purcell anticipated the later vogue for labour-management partnership and expressed a similar desire to refashion management-union relations around high performance work systems (Purcell & Ahlstrand, 1994: 208). He also observed that businesses seeking to end their relationship with unions often did so not to adopt a sophisticated human relations style but to move towards a 'traditional' style. He characterized this shift as follows:

> A new tough regime is introduced often triggered by a change in ownership, competitive tendering, or acquisition. Union recognition is withdrawn, and cost minimization policies reinforced, with employees working under worse conditions (Purcell & Ahlstrand, 1994: 2010).

For Purcell, it was managers, not unions, who bore the primary responsibility for the failure to develop sophisticated approaches to workforce management.

Of the four authors under consideration, Purcell stands most squarely in the field of HRM, and he retained a belief that voluntary action by managers could help resolve industrial relations problems. He argued that his management style matrix could be used as a 'strategic tool' by managers, both to identify their existing style and guide transition to one of the more sophisticated styles (Purcell & Ahlstrand, 1994: 214-5). Like the other authors, though, Purcell also believed in a need for state intervention. In the early 1990s he was hopeful that the implementation of European works council legislation would 'force companies towards the sophisticated consultative style' (Purcell & Ahlstrand, 1994: 208) and, while he later expressed scepticism about the value of the UK's existing information and consultation regulations (Hall et al., 2013), continued to argue that stronger works council legislation could contribute substantially to the reform of British industrial relations (Hall & Purcell, 2012). Purcell also followed Brown in advocating more voluntarist forms of state intervention. He maintained a career-long association with ACAS and was strongly supportive of its advisory services (Kessler & Purcell, 1993). At the end of his working life, through ACAS, Purcell became an advocate of employee engagement, an ostensibly business-led movement to raise UK productivity but one which had been instigated in classic voluntarist fashion by Gordon Brown's Labour Government (Purcell, 2014).

4 | LIMITATIONS OF THE 'BUSINESS CASE'

The third contributor to the pluralist critique of management is Linda Dickens, who wrote a series of essays in the 1990s and early 2000s attacking the 'business case' for equal opportunities. 'In recent years,' Dickens notes in one of these essays, 'the promotion of equality action appears to have rested primarily on one strategy—getting employers to see that equality is in the interests of business, the so-called business case for equality' (1999: 9). This case encompassed a variety of claims: business could solve labour supply problems by increasing women's pay, targeting recruitment at women and minorities, and providing flexible employment. It could also secure performance benefits: eliminating discrimination could directly enhance workforce commitment and motivation and allow businesses to secure gains in product markets by recruiting a workforce representative of and attuned to the preferences of their customer-base (1994a: 10–11). In this set of arguments management are not presented as fallible; rather they are effective agents of enlightened self-interest. Neither are they the cause of industrial relations problems; rather they propose solutions that cater to the needs of both employers and employees.

Dickens' critique of the business case formed part of a growing focus on questions of gender and equality within academic industrial relations and contrasts notably in this regard with the gender-blind analysis offered by Brown (Edwards, 2012; see also Wacjman, 2000). Her essays also formed part of a sceptical response to human resource management on the part of industrial relations pluralists, with its core unitary claim that new approaches to management simultaneously raised performance while providing beneficial employment for workers (cf. Sisson, 1993). Indeed, one of the final essays in Dickens' sequence offered a more general critique of HRM, arguing that many of the core propositions found in prescriptive models of HRM, 'perpetuate rather than challenge gender inequality' (2006: 23).

The industrial relations problem identified by Dickens was continuing discrimination and inequality in the labour market, despite the claims of the business case. In some of her essays the focus is solely on women and sex discrimination, while in others the net is cast wider, and the focus also includes race and disability discrimination (cf. Dickens, 1994a, 1994b). Regarding sex inequality, Dickens points to persistent horizontal segregation, corralling women in female-dominated low-paid industries, and equally persistent vertical segregation, with women less likely to occupy higher paid managerial and professional occupational positions (1992: 106-7; Dickens, 2005: 182). She also points to persistent inequality of pay, including women's lower access to fringe benefits, and to the poor quality of female-dominated part-time employment, where the wage penalty for working women is particularly severe (1992: 107-8; 1994a: 6; 2006: 27-8). A final point stressed by Dickens is that ethnic minority women often incurred a double penalty, experiencing particularly acute labour market disadvantage (1994b: 258-9). Through-out her sequence of essays Dickens took pains to stress that progress had been made in reducing sex-based and other forms of inequality in the labour market. She acknowledged the part played by voluntary action by enlightened employers in helping to produce these trends (1992: 134; 1994a: 11). The overall pattern, however, was one of continuing inequality, to which reliance on employer-led action was deemed insufficient.

Fallible managers contributed to reproducing this pattern of inequality in two main ways. On the one hand, they adopted policies to counter inequality that were ineffective or limited in their effects, while on the other they failed to adopt policies, either because there were other available solutions to the labour market and other business problems they faced or because continuing discrimination was cost effective. These actions bear more than a passing resemblance to the errors of commission and omission noted by Brown. Dickens identifies a variety of flawed responses to inequality favoured by managers. These include: 1) a stated intention to act as an 'equal opportunities employer' without significant evidence of practical follow-through; 2) targeting policies at women managers rather than the greater number of women in low-waged and part-time employment; 3) emphasizing formal equality within recruitment and other procedures, while neglecting the issue of equality of outcomes and the positive action policies that might influence it; 4) seeking to adapt women and minorities to the male and majority standard of continuous, full-time employment, rather than accepting a diversity of employment forms and contracts (Dickens, 1992: 113-5; 1994a: 14-15; 1994b: 256, 273; 1999: 10). Dickens also identifies a variety of errors of omission. She notes that managers can respond to labour shortages by raising the pay of male workers rather than by shifting recruitment towards women and minorities (1994a: 11-12). Moreover, managers may balk at the immediate cost of equality measures when benefits may only be attained in the medium-term, may remain committed to discriminatory practices because they reduce business costs, may themselves be prejudiced, emotionally or ideologically opposed to equality action, and may be pressured by male workers, in some cases supported by trade unions, to water down antidiscrimination measures (Dickens, 1994b: 269-73, 283-4; 1999: 10-11; 2006: 28). All these anti-equality actions are more likely in situations where line managers are afforded wide discretion and Dickens follows Purcell in pointing to the weakness of the HR function - and of equality specialists in particular - as a condition for management fallibility (1994b: 279-80).

Dickens also follows Purcell in identifying the predominance of financial control in UK employing organizations as a factor underpinning management fallibility. In a study with Trevor Colling of British Gas, Dickens shows how an ambitious policy to promote gender equality was abandoned as the organization was exposed to more intense competition and responded by implementing a far-reaching organizational reform (Colling & Dickens, 1998).

The latter comprised divisionalization, breaking the previously integrated company into four separate divisions, decentralization, with responsibility for operational management devolved to divisions, strengthening the position of line managers viz-viz other functions, including HR, and implementing a financially driven system of internal control. Summarizing the effects of these changes, Colling and Dickens note that the 'equality agenda sank quickly under the weight of these new market imperatives' (1998: 397). As part of the change, the company's corporate level Equal Opportunities Directorate, established in 1991, lost influence, was reduced in size, and finally disbanded.

The equality policy developed and then largely abandoned at British Gas, was negotiated with trade unions and Colling and Dickens use the case to highlight the potential of 'equality bargaining' to 'amplify, extend, and underpin the business case for equality' (1998: 405). Nevertheless, Dickens is much less likely than Brown and Purcell to absolve unions from joint responsibility for the industrial relations problems she identifies. In earlier work with Colling, she revealed the limited take-up of equality bargaining by UK unions and detailed cases of unions opposing equality initiatives and conspiring with employers to neuter the effects of equality legislation (Colling & Dickens, 1989). For Dickens, and for other commentators at the same time, union behaviour often compounded the results of management fallibility (cf. Cunnison & Stageman, 1995). By the early 2000s, Colling and Dickens (2001) had partially revised this judgement, noting the increasingly active engagement of many unions with an equality agenda. This change, they attributed primarily to the progressive feminization of the union movement, as women formed a larger percentage of union members, leaders, and activists (Dickens, 2000). In Dickens' pluralism, therefore, there is partial but not full absolution of trade unions.

Another feature of Dickens' pluralism is a strong conviction that legislation must be used to promote equality at work. Central to her prescription for dealing with the management fallibility has been the strengthening of equality law. The recommendations she has advanced, several of which have subsequently been incorporated in law, include: 1) broadening the scope of equality legislation beyond race and sex to encompass disability and other forms of discrimination; 2) strengthening individual rights; for example by increasing levels of financial compensation when discrimination is experienced; 3) empowering courts to order remedial action that extends beyond individual complainants, including the revision of discriminatory pay structures and HR policies; 4) imposing positive duties on employers to promote equality at work and permitting stronger forms of positive action; 5) simplifying complaints procedures and expanding the scope for agencies to initiate cases against employers; and 6) providing legal entitlements for individuals to assume work patterns and develop careers that differ from the traditional male model of continuous, full-time involvement (Dickens, 1992: 115–8; 1994b: 265, 286–7; 2007: 471–85). In her later work Dickens has focused particularly on the enforcement of employment rights and has supported proactive enforcement through a single, comprehensive agency; a British version of the kind of labour inspectorate seen in other countries (Dickens, 2012: 215-8). In Dickens' version of the pluralist argument there is a decisive switch to reliance on legal reform as a primary response to management fallibility.

While Dickens has been an advocate of stronger workplace equality law, she has also, in classic pluralist fashion, drawn attention to the limits of the law and argued that legislative reform needs to be accompanied by other types of policy intervention (1992: 136). One type of intervention she recommends is policy beyond the confines of employment relations narrowly defined. Greater provision of public childcare, for instance, would 'reduce the potential for employers to exploit women as a low-paid flexible workforce' (Dickens, 1994a: 15). However,

Dickens has also advocated public policy within the field of employment relations to reinforce the effects of legislative reform. In an article published in 1999, 'Beyond the Business Case,' she argued that that what was required was a 'three-pronged approach to equality action' (Dickens, 1999: 9).

The first prong she identifies is voluntary action by employers, grounded in the business case. Dickens argues, however, that action of this kind will be more frequent and more effective when equality legislation has been strengthened (1999: 15; 2007: 487). Legislation and voluntary action can be mutually reinforcing, she notes, because the passage of law raises the salience and legitimacy of equality policy, strengthens the hand of those within organizations that are supportive of voluntary action, and can shape the cost–benefit analysis that underpins business decision-making, rendering the costs of discrimination and inaction—the sins of omission listed above—greater and more apparent. A great weakness of the business case, in Dickens' eyes, is that it is variable and contingent, applicable to some companies but not to others (1994a: 12–14). A stronger legal framework, she argues can serve to widen its relevance, encouraging a greater proportion of employers to launch meaningful voluntary initiatives. In the business case literature, it is often assumed that legal and voluntary action on equality are alternatives, and that legislation should at best fulfil a residual function in the labour market, while primary reliance is placed on employer self-interest. Dickens argues the reverse: that a strong legislative platform is required to support and encourage effective voluntary action (Dickens, 2007: 487).

Voluntary action and legislation are the first two prongs in Dickens' preferred approach; what she calls 'social regulation,' action through unions and collective bargaining, is the third. Notwithstanding her refusal to absolve unions of responsibility, Dickens has been adamant that effective public policy to promote equality must encompass support for trade unions (Dickens, 1999: 14–16). She contends that unions can reinforce voluntary initiatives by employers; for example, by pressing for equality policies introduced for those in senior positions to be extended to other employees or to sustain equality commitments when cost pressures threaten to derail them. She also claims that unions can reinforce legislation, performing a positive mediating role by ensuring legal standards are adhered to and by initiating legal action in situations where they are not (Dickens, 1999: 15; see also Dickens, 1989: 170–1). Writing in the 1990s under the Conservatives, Dickens argued that measures to advance equality were undermined by the wider policy of restricting unions (1992: 113). A decade later, when Labour had returned to power, she advocated specific measures to allow unions to pursue an equality agenda: restoring their right to challenge discriminatory pay structures and collective agreements through the courts, including a right to negotiate on equality in the statutory recognition procedure, and conferring legal status on union equality representatives (2007: 481–2, 484).

For Dickens, correcting problems generated through management fallibility required a combination of measures: an ambitious programme of legislation reinforced through employer policies and collective bargaining. 'What is suggested is not three separate poles but a tripod where the three strategies are complementary and mutually reinforcing,' she wrote at the end of 'Beyond the Business Case,' 'Responsibility for promoting equality at the workplace should be shared rather than leaving employers to bear the sole responsibility. Such a tripod is likely to provide a sounder basis for supporting equality action than balancing on a single pole' (1999: 15).

5 | EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS MATTERS

In the 2000s, towards the end of a long career, Keith Sisson produced three extended essays under the joint title of Employment Relations Matters. One of these essays delimited the object of study of industrial relations and defined the field as being 'about the governance of the employment relationship in its totality, along with its economic, political, and social implications' (Sisson, 2008: 45). Another reviewed the 'institutional turn' across the social sciences and called on industrial relations researchers to draw upon and contribute to this wider analysis of institutions; an appeal for the more deliberate use of social theory to enrich the field (Sisson, 2007). The third essay, 'Why Employment Relations Matter,' mounts an empirical defence of the field by reviewing evidence on how the nature of the employment relationship, and its surrounding complex of governance institutions, influences a broad range of economic and social indicators. This review is comparative, and Sissons takes pains to identify both the poor quality of much employment in the UK and inferior economic and social effects compared with other developed economies. His is another contribution to industrial relations 'declinism.' The essay ends with prescription, proposing a series of institutional reforms with the potential to reverse the UK's relative decline (Sisson, 2009).

In the years since the publication of the three essays, Sisson has continued to offer prescriptions for reform. These have included an extended review of the report of the Welsh Government's Fair Work Commission—which was chaired by Linda Dickens—whose recommendations, he says, could usefully be implemented across the UK (Sisson, 2019). Other contributions have called for a UK jobs strategy and have formulated proposals 'to build back better' in the wake of Brexit and the COVID pandemic (Sisson, 2016, 2020, 2021). These publications add an impressive coda to a long and distinguished career: the industrial relations equivalent of a classic late album. They are also relentlessly future-oriented and constitute an attempt to reinvigorate the pluralist tradition for the twenty-first century.

A distinguishing feature of Sisson's work is the broad range of social and economic problems that he identifies, which are caused at least in part by poor industrial relations. In the manner of Brown and Purcell these problems encompass failings of business performance. Indeed, like Brown, Sisson focuses on the perverse effects of payment-by-results though in his case these effects emerge from a 'bonus culture,' which incentivizes executives to sweat assets and generate short-term shareholder value at the expense of longer-term growth (2009: 22–3). In the manner of Dickens, Sisson also identifies industrial relations problems for workers and points to the UK's enduring and relatively large gender pay-gap, continuing evidence of vertical occupational segregation for women and minorities, and the growth of flexible forms of employment which disrupt family life (2009: 40–3). As the latter example indicates, another feature of Sisson's work is a concern to link features of the employment system to a wide set of social problems beyond the confines of the workplace. This concern can be seen particularly in the later essays in the sequence. He attributes the vote for Brexit in postindustrial towns to the spread of poor-quality employment and stagnant or declining incomes (2016: 1) and he also attributes the country's poor response to the COVID pandemic to elements of the employment regime. Thus, he notes that lean staffing had reduced the resilience of health and other public services before the outbreak, that reliance on agency work and inadequate sick pay helped spread the virus in social care and other settings, and that the failings of the government's track-and-trace system arose from outsourcing the service to providers dependent on low-wage, poorly qualified labour (2021: 20).

The full range of industrial relations problems identified by Sisson can be seen in 'Why Employment Relations Matters' where he compares the UK with other developed economies. He notes that compared with other European countries, such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, the UK displays the following features: 1) the prevalence of low-pay and in-work poverty, coupled with high income inequality; 2) a pattern of working time characterized by a high rate of long-hours working coupled with extensive reliance on part-time work, the latter continuing to show the disadvantageous features identified by Dickens; 3) reliance on forms of work organization that either assume a 'traditional' or 'lean' form and limited adoption of a 'learning' model, which prioritizes skills, discretion, and team-working; 4) a good record on occupational safety but a poor record of occupational health, with strong evidence of working practices that adversely affect mental health; 5) a mixed record on skill development with an especially low level of training provided by employers; 6) a low rating on the ILO's economic security index; and 7) a similarly low score on the OECD's indicator of social capital which measures levels of societal trust. While all items on this list embody problems for workers, Sisson claims that they also adversely affect economic performance. Writing well before the impact of Brexit, Sisson argued that the UK suffers from a lack of competitiveness and performs poorly in export markets relative to other developed countries with higher employment standards (2009: 44–45). He characterizes the UK economy as exhibiting a 'chronic problem of low pay, low skill and low productivity' (2019: 564).

Sisson's account of industrial relations problems is less centred on the role of managers than those of Brown, Purcell, or Dickens, but management fallibility forms part of the explanation that he advances. As we have seen, he references the 'management of managers' and the baleful effect of 'bonus culture' in reinforcing many of the problems identified above, not least of which has been stretching the income distribution upwards through excessive executive remuneration. Elsewhere he comments on the lack of training of UK managers relative to those in other developed economies, an observation that echoes that of Purcell on the under-performance of UK-owned companies (1993: 207). The main thrust of Sisson's critique, however, focuses on the strategies adopted by managers, two of which are the primary focus of attention. The first of these are strategies of work design, which Sisson argues have tended to reduce skill requirements, afford limited scope for discretion and personal development, and rely upon close supervision (2009: 38). The recent spread of 'digital Taylorism' to manage remote workers, he identifies as the latest iteration of this tendency (2020: 4). The second are strategies of 'externalization,' reversing the trend towards direct employment through much of the twentieth century and replacing it with outsourcing and reliance on various forms of contingent labour (2021: 20). Sisson notes recent growth in 'zero hours, casual and agency working, voucher-based work, platform-work, and self-employment,' and observes that such forms are often, 'characterised by insecurity, irregular and unpredictable working hours—meaning unstable earnings and difficulties in planning responsibilities outside work—and little (if any) protection against the employer' (2021: 15–16). Both these strategic choices, Sisson argues, have served to generate and reinforce the industrial relations problems he has catalogued.

Sisson, like other pluralist writers, also draws attention to the organization of managers. He notes that British management hierarchies tend to be longer and more top-heavy than those in equivalent countries, with a higher percentage of senior managers. This feature of British management organization, he suggests, forms a piece with the dominant approaches to work design with their emphasis on supervision and direct control (2009: 37). Sisson also comments on the primacy of the finance function within UK management, echoing the observations of

both Purcell and Dickens. He remarks upon the 'premium on 'financial engineering' as the core organizational competence, the domination over other functions and numbers driven as opposed to issue driven planning' (2009: 36). This feature of management organization is an essential component of the wider 'financialization' of UK business.

It is the financialized nature of British capitalism that Sisson identifies as the main contextual factor underpinning management fallibility. He notes a set of reinforcing features of the UK system of corporate finance and governance, which foster the management characteristics and strategies described above. These features include: 1) a privileged position for shareholders and a preoccupation with shareholder value as the central driver of business decision-making; 2) a high degree of arms-length, institutional share ownership by investment trusts, pension funds and hedge funds, with a consequent focus on short-term profitability; 3) an active market for corporate control, which reinforces the pressure for short-term profitability and encourages expansion through merger and acquisition rather than by internal, organic growth; and 4) the constant reconfiguring of corporations through outsourcing, off-shoring and restructuring, which often function as defence mechanisms in the face of the external threat of takeover (2009: 36). Sisson first drew attention to the institutional features of British capitalism—which 'push British managers towards short-termism in their approach' and limit the take-up of sophisticated forms of HRM—thirty years ago (1993: 207). In the intervening period this form of institutional explanation has become common, not just within pluralist industrial relations but in other fields as well. Thompson's (2003) well-known 'disconnected capitalism' thesis is a notable contribution to labour process theory and shares many of the substantive claims made by Sisson.

The other main contextual factor identified by Sisson he describes as 'institutional gaps', absences within the system of employment relations itself which allow relatively free rein for the exercise of management fallibility. Several of these gaps are identified. The first is at the centre, where there is the absence of a single ministry with overall responsibility for work and employment, an indicator of the low priority accorded to the labour market by UK government, and which results in the fragmentation of policy as responsibility for different issues is spread across a broad subset of ministerial departments (2016: 6–7). The second gap is to be found in the realm of employment law. Sisson notes the growth of legal regulation of the employment relationship in the UK but notes also that the country still has one of the 'weakest frameworks' and lies at the bottom of the OECD ranking of employment protection legislation, along with the United States (2009: 35). Sisson echoes Dickens in pointing to the weak enforcement of employment law in the UK and draws attention to the failure of government to enact legislation to protect new forms of contingent labour despite repeated commitments to do so (2021: 6). The third gap concerns employee voice. The latter is poorly institutionalized within the UK, Sisson observes, with an absence of social partnership arrangements beyond health and safety and the minimum wage, a low-level of trade union membership, and the weak transposition of European directives on information and consultation through the ICE Regulations (2009: 35). The weakness of employee voice is compounded, according to Sisson, by the structure of collective bargaining, which in the private sector is largely devolved to enterprise level, meaning that there is an absence of coordination mechanisms and means to extend the terms of collective agreements across industries (2009: 35). One result of this absence is that 'it is difficult for individual companies to withstand competitive pressures for cost minimization' (2009: 33). Finally, Sisson comments on the absence of collective organization amongst employers, an institutional feature that both reflects and compounds the decentralization of

collective bargaining, and which means also that the UK lacks authoritative employer-led bodies for diffusing innovations in training and work organization (2020: 6).

Sisson alleges that the failure of the ICE Regulations to furnish the UK with an effective system of works councils was 'due to an unholy alliance of the CBI and TUC' putting pressure on the Blair Government (2016: 7). In the main, however, he absolves trade unions of joint responsibility for the country's industrial relations problems. Indeed, he has portrayed unions as an important countervailing force, mitigating some of the outcomes of management fallibility. At the time that he first noted the limiting effects of the system of corporate governance, for example, he also observed that 'fragments of HRM' were most likely to be encountered in unionized companies (1993: 206). As we will see, Sisson identifies an important continuing role for trade unions in British industrial relations and among his prescriptions are several which seek to bolster the union position. What is absent from his work, however, is any suggestion that this revival will be generated by trade unions themselves. For Sisson, as for other pluralists, an uptick in union fortunes is largely dependent on state policy.

Sisson is adamant throughout his series of essays that the corrective to management fallibility must be an active programme of state intervention. Thus, in his review of the report of the Welsh Fair Work Commission he notes approvingly that, 'the emphasis is put fairly and squarely on an active role for government, not just in championing fair work, but also ensuring it becomes firmly embedded in policy and practice' (2019: 568). In his essay proposing a UK jobs strategy, he declares a hope that he has convinced people, 'of the importance of an active role for government in shaping what happens…it's the rules that governments make (or don't make) that are critical in shaping the world of work' (2016: 30). Reflecting this commitment to an active state, Sisson is equally adamant that correcting management fallibility cannot be entrusted to managers themselves. Writing of job design, he observes that, 'it will be very difficult for individual companies to shift from 'traditional' and 'lean' forms of work organization on their own', and expresses the belief that, 'there needs to be a combination of institutional carrots and sticks to encourage them to do so' (2009: 48).

One thrust of active state intervention prescribed by Sisson is the closing of the institutional gaps he had earlier identified in the UK's system of employment governance. The precise recommendations vary from essay to essay, but the main elements comprise the following: 1) Establishing a Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment to provide strategic direction and ensure unified operational responsibility for labour market policy. Integral to this new Ministry would be a tripartite social partnership body, bringing together representatives of employers and trade unions to advise upon and support government initiatives (2020: 8–12); 2) Strengthening the framework of employment protection by establishing a new and fully resourced enforcement agency (2020: 12–14) and creating new rights for employees and new duties for employers to reflect the changing world of work. Among the latter that are proposed are a 'right to disconnect' and other protections for remote workers, ending the ambiguous employment status of gig workers, and imposing a requirement on large employers to eliminate labour abuses from their supply chains, reinforced by joint liability with the direct employer in cases that come before the courts (2021: 19–21; 2016: 18; 2020: 15–19). 3) Reviving the state's traditional role as a model employer by returning outsourced jobs to direct employment and using the purchasing, funding, and influencing powers of public authorities to encourage other employers to upgrade their employment practices (2009: 52). Sisson endorses the concept of social licensing, developed by the Foundational Economy movement, which holds, 'that businesses benefiting from national and local government contracts delivering life's necessities should be required to fulfil a number of social obligations in return' (2020: 18). 4) Strengthening

employee voice, partly by restoring the principle of social partnership to state policy making and partly by introducing positive changes to collective labour law. Prime amongst the latter are proposed changes to the regulations on information and consultation at work: requiring employers to establish ICE machinery, bestowing rights of representation on recognized trade unions, and establishing greater financial and other supports to worker representatives. Sisson also proposes that employees be given representation on remuneration committees setting executive pay (2016: 20). 5) Creating new industry-level institutions to compensate for the collapse of multi-employer bargaining. Among Sisson's recommendations in this regard is the creation of 'sector forums,' representative bodies of employers and employees that could formulate industry standards, develop joint strategies for raising skills, productivity and pay, and act as channels for the diffusion of good employment practice. ACAS, he suggests could usefully support forums of this kind, perhaps issuing statutory codes of practice to underpin employment standards in particular industries (2009: 51). 6) To further support the development of multi-employer institutions of this type, Sisson has recommended state action to develop collective organization amongst employers. Amongst his recommendations is the launch of a Workplace Innovation Programme to diffuse new approaches to job design, to be delivered in partnership with local Chambers of Commerce, membership of which, he suggests, should be made compulsory as it is in Germany (2016: 23).

The other main thrust of state intervention advocated by Sisson is the overhaul of the UK's system of corporate governance. Again, precise recommendations vary from essay to essay but underpinning the whole is a conviction that reform must address the wider institutional context in which the employment relationship is situated. Sisson calls for: 1) revision of the Companies Act to diminish the priority accorded to shareholder value and oblige businesses to have regard to 'shared value;' 2) inclusion of worker and consumer representatives on company boards; 3) changes to regulations on mergers and acquisitions to strengthen protections afforded to employees and permit government to block hostile takeovers deemed contrary to the national interest; 3) tighter regulation of the activities of hedge funds and private equity and of some of the practices in which they engage such as 'short-selling' and leveraged buyouts; 4) changes to the reporting requirements on companies to require fuller disclosure of HR metrics and to enable investors and others to benchmark companies in terms of their performance as employers (2009: 50–1; 2016: 28–9). Sisson's list of recommendations for closing the institutional gaps that allow fallible managers to cause harm, constitutes a multiform programme for the reform of employment governance. His list of proposals for changing corporate governance seek to wrap that reform in a wider reset of the institutional form of British capitalism.

6 | DISCUSSION

In the account of pluralism set out above, two main themes have emerged. On the one hand, there has been a focus on the causes and effects of fallible management, while on the other there has been discussion of the different policy solutions advanced to correct fallible behaviour. To conclude, these themes are explored more fully. In what follows, there is an attempt to identify the distinctive features of the account of management developed in the pluralist tradition, both through a comparison with the adjacent fields of HRM and critical IR and by reflecting on the nature of the causal arguments that underpin the pluralist position. There is also reflection on how pluralist solutions have changed over the fifty years that have

been reviewed, which encompasses evolution both in the IR problems pluralists identify and in the types of policy levers they believe should be used to address them.

The view of pluralist writers that management is the originator of many industrial relations problems, is shared with other traditions. In the field of HRM, for instance, management failure is often identified as the cause of workplace problems, such as employee disengagement, low commitment, and poor performance (e.g. Pfeffer, 1998). In critical studies, management is presented as the agent of oppressive and exploitative systems of work organization and as the architect of both intrusive attempts to manipulate worker subjectivity and strategies that make working lives precarious (Hanlon, 2016; Moore et al., 2024; Willmott, 1993). Despite this common, diagnostic starting point, however, differences between pluralism and the other traditions are readily apparent.

The main difference between pluralists and HRM is that writers in the latter tradition often assume that managers themselves can best correct failures and that market forces will ultimately select for optimal management practice, in the manner of the 'business case' arguments outlined above. Pluralists do not share this confidence in the self-correcting powers of management. Management fallibility for Brown, Purcell, Dickens, and Sisson, emerges from the institutional context in which they are located, whether that be the sheltered product markets identified by Brown, the multidivisional firm analysed by Purcell, the weak framework of equality legislation described by Dickens, or the financially driven form of capitalism analysed by Sisson. It follows from this institutional explanation of management fallibility that the prescription for correcting the latter must focus on institutional reform, driven by the state. Trusting to the benign imperative of the market or to management educators and consultants, or to employer-led reforms of the labour market will not be sufficient.

The main differences between pluralists and the critical tradition are twofold. The first arises from competing assessments of the potential of the trade union movement. As has been noted, pluralists have sought to absolve unions of joint responsibility for the problems generated by fallible managers and identify an important role for unions in correcting management failures in the day-to-day conduct of industrial relations. But unions tend to be regarded as secondary institutions by pluralists, whose character and behaviour are shaped by employers and by state policy and, excepting Dickens' concern with the feminization of unions, rather scant attention is paid to the internal dynamics of unions or to their putative renewal. For pluralists, unions can make an expanded, positive contribution in a reformed IR system, but they have limited capacity to drive that reform of their own accord.

In the critical tradition, in contrast, a very different set of assumptions operates. Worker resistance to management, both within the workplace and through wider counter-movements, is identified as a primary motor-force, driving change within the employment relationship. For this reason, there is a preoccupation with the question of union revitalization and an enormous volume of critical research has accumulated which describes and evaluates attempts at union renewal (e.g. Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013). This preoccupation is often combined with a deep scepticism towards the kind of legal and other reforms favoured by pluralists and an espousal of far-left politics (Upchurch et al., 2014). The first key difference between the pluralist and critical traditions, therefore, concerns the solutions they identify to IR problems, which rely upon state-led reform for one and the revitalization of the labour movement for the other.

The second key difference relates to the level at which they pitch their explanations of management action. Pluralists favour meso-level explanations, which locate causal powers in the structure of the national economy and its system of institutional governance. Thus, it

has been noted that they have sometimes espoused 'declinism,' arguing that the specific, institutional features of British capitalism endow it with an exceptional capacity to generate IR problems. In the critical tradition, in contrast, explanations tend to be pitched at a more fundamental level. For labour process and other critical writers, the nature of management is determined at the level of the mode of production or is shaped by the latest broad phase of capitalist development, usually labelled neo-liberalism (e.g. Dundon et al., 2020). It is because of this attachment to systemic, not meso-level, explanation that critical writers usually do not share the pluralist belief that management behaviour is pliable; that fallible managers can act for the common good if the national institutions in which they are embedded undergo reform.

There are other, distinctive features of the pluralist account of management which sit alongside the preference for institutional, meso-level explanations. One is a tendency to regard managers as rational and dispassionate actors, whose fallibility emerges from the structure of market and institutional incentives to which they must respond. There is an affinity between this underlying conception of management action and the 'rational choice' institutionalism, identified by Sisson in his review of institutional theory. In this tradition, Sisson notes, 'the logic of action is...one of instrumentality' and he quotes Scharpf to the effect that, 'institutional rules are understood as external constraints and incentives structuring the purposeful choices of self-interested actors' (2007: 12). Reflecting this affinity there is little concern with the ideology or identities of managers in the pluralist tradition. To be sure, Dickens' notes that principled or prejudiced managers can make a difference, mitigating or exacerbating the discriminatory institutional logic with which they are faced. In the main though, pluralist writers have not favoured actor-centred explanations of management behaviour that accord priority to subjectivity and identity. They typically offer a structural account of management, in which rational actors respond to market and institutional incentives and whose behaviour can be reformed, not so much by changing managers themselves, as by recalibrating the incentive structure to which they are exposed.

Where there is acknowledgement of micro-level factors in the pluralist account, it takes the form of a focus on the structure and composition of management within the firm. All four of the writers examined above argue that management fallibility is exacerbated by failures of management organization or because line managers or finance specialists have too much power. There is recognition that management is not a unitary entity but is composed of different groups that acquire competing interests by virtue of their occupational specialism or hierarchical position. For Brown, the problem of wage drift is exacerbated because front-line supervisors have an interest in striking deals with pieceworkers to avoid restriction of output, while for Purcell and Dickens finance-driven, divisional managers have little incentive to invest in sophisticated management styles or equality and diversity. It follows from this analysis that an element of IR reform should encompass attempts to reorganize management, changing the composition of management teams to empower employment specialists and instituting stronger coordination of management activity both within and between firms. The authors we have examined do make recommendations of this kind though it should be noted that these are not pivotal and that the primary focus of policy recommendation remains the system of institutional governance.

While a perception of managers as fallible is common to all the authors reviewed above, the problems that managers cause, and the institutional reforms recommended for their solution, have changed over time. Regarding the nature of industrial relations problems, three broad

shifts are discernible. At the start of the sequence, Brown was preoccupied with a problem *of* labour, with shopfloor workers generating inflation and inhibiting productivity growth through piecework bargaining. By the time of Dickens and Sisson, however, preoccupation has switched towards problems *for* labour; whether these be the poor quality of part-time jobs designed by managers, noted by Dickens, or the chronic insecurity produced by strategies of externalization noted by Sisson. A second change can be seen in the replacement of the gender-blind analysis of worker interests offered by Brown with the recognition of gender and minority interests seen most notably in the work of Dickens but also echoed by Sisson. By the end of the sequence, analysis of the distinctive, problematic features of women's employment and recognition of the additional labour market disadvantage experienced by ethnic and other minorities has become integral to the pluralist tradition. The final shift can be seen most clearly in Sisson's contribution, with the broad set of industrial relations problems that are identified. For the first three authors there tends to be a focus on problems that are both generated and experienced in the workplace: wage-drift for Brown, non-strategic HRM for Purcell, and unequal pay and vertical and horizontal gender segregation for Dickens. Sisson records problems of this kind but he also identifies a link between management fallibility at work and wider societal problems, apparent beyond the workplace. Thus, he notes that a lack of control at work generates poor mental health, precarity damages family life and relationships, inequality corrodes social integration and trust, and poor-quality employment helps fuel populism. Sisson's mantra of 'employment relations matters' encompasses issues that matter to people outside their workaday selves.

There is equally noticeable progression in the types of prescription pluralist writers offer in response to management fallibility. At Brown's time the main emphasis was on voluntary reform, with the state making use of specialist agencies to research, advise and formulate codes of practice for managers. In the time since, prescription of this type has been overlain by other recommended solutions, but it is important to note that state-led voluntary reform has been a feature of the pluralist policy offer throughout the entire fifty-year period. Thus, in Sisson's essays a role is identified for ACAS in supporting proposed sector forums and in formulating the Workplace Innovation Programme. The most notable shift in the period after Brown, has been the willingness of pluralists to recommend legal solutions to industrial relations problems. Indeed, this is a shift in which Brown himself participated, becoming a notable advocate of the statutory minimum wage (Ackers, 2023). In Dickens' and in Sisson's essays recommendations to strengthen employment law occupy centre-stage and include conferring new rights and protections on employees, imposing new obligations on employers, and strengthening enforcement procedures to make law more effective. The drift towards legislating against management fallibility, however, is not the only trend that is discernible. Purcell, Dickens, and Sisson all recommend changes to collective labour law and are united in wishing to see an expanded role for worker representation in tackling industrial relations problems. In their work, the pluralist perception of the limits of the law and its need to be supplemented by worker voice and collective bargaining, lives on. The final notable prescription is most fully expressed in Sisson's work but is also implied by that of Purcell and Dickens. This involves seeking to change industrial relations by legislating for a wider reform of corporate governance. Management fallibility, in this view, is traceable to the institutional form of Britain's uniquely financialized from of capitalism. For contemporary pluralists, such fallibility can only be addressed in a meaningful and sustained way through a reform of these institutions.

7 | CONCLUSION

This article has used the work of four prominent scholars—Willy Brown, John Purcell, Linda Dickens, and Keith Sisson—to identify the critique of management within pluralist industrial relations. Central to this critique is the notion of the fallible manager. Fallible management is identified as the source of industrial relations problems and is deemed incapable of reversing the harm it inflicts on employees, the economy, and wider society without supportive state intervention. Management is not regarded as illegitimate in the pluralist tradition, however, and is recognized as a necessary function within the system of industrial relations: like death and taxes it is inescapable. In a reformed institutional context, moreover, management can foster the common good, generating 'shared value.'

To secure less fallible management, pluralists have recommended increasingly radical, far-reaching reforms that encompass strengthening labour law, increasing the capacity of trade unions and works councils to hold management to account, and reconstructing corporate governance. How much purchase this programme will have over the real world of policy remains to be seen. Pluralist industrial relations specialists today do not possess the degree of influence over policy makers that they enjoyed when Brown was writing at the start of the sequence, and it is notable that the seemingly favourable contexts for labour market reform in the wake of both Brexit and COVID have failed to reverse this situation. Sisson's ambitious schedule of recommendations remains a blueprint. A change of government will provide a fresh opportunity, but a paradox of the pluralist tradition is that its commitment to radical reform has grown as its distance from power has widened.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The author declares no conflict of interest.

ORCID
Edmund Heery http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3914-7635

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