

Comment

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When it was put to me that I should set forward my comments on "Industrial relations: a framework for review" (the Green Paper in 2 volumes published by the Government to stimulate constructive discussion on the future structure of the machinery of industrial relations in New Zealand) I found myself in something of a quandary. Both volumes, and more particularly volume 2, bring together a great deal of information with which people should be familiar before they attempt to discuss the subject. But the Green Paper also poses a large number of propositions on which it invites agreement or disagreement.

This is where my major difficulty arises. In each case, to what sort of situation is the proposition to be related:

- (a) To some past situation to which we will revert;
- (b) to an existing situation which will continue, or;
- (c) to a future situation which will be changed in one way or another for better or for worse?

Given that (c) is the thrust of the matter, it is at once evident that I cannot usefully comment on the propositions in the absence of guidelines as to the pre-requisite influences which are expected or planned to achieve the changed situation, and how they are expected to change it. Are the parties going to become friendly and trustful or are they going to arm themselves with shotguns? It is of no use asking me if I agree or disagree with a certain proposal to regulate the relationship between them unless it is first indicated to me what that relationship will be, and therefore how it will be achieved.

Good relationships are not created out of regulatory provisions and procedures; nor are relationships improved by multiplying such provisions and procedures. In fact, the better the relationship the less the need for regulation. (If there was any positive correlation between the volume of regulations and good relationships we should by now have reached a millennium in industrial relations in New Zealand.) Facilities and procedures have to match the relationships and not vice-versa. What is required in the way of facilities and procedures, and restrictions and penalties, depends on the quality of the relationship between the parties. The higher the quality, the less regulation is needed. The regulatory provisions required where the parties concerned are badly informed, insufficiently trained, hostile towards each other, unable to share ideas, plans, problems and information, and unable to trust each other, are entirely different from those required in the reverse situation.

It becomes clear, therefore, that the propositions in the Green Paper must stand or fall not on the detail of the contents of the Paper, but on what measures are proposed to change the relationships between the parties. We therefore need a paper ahead of the present Green Paper setting out propositions in such pre-requisite fields as training, access to information, expertise in collating and interpreting information, shared problem-solving and planning techniques, adequate communication, and so on. These things, not regulatory measures, are the basics for improved relationships and require attention first. It is not the framework that is of prime importance; rather it is the people within the framework. If they continue to misunderstand and mistrust, to snap and snarl at each other, no framework, however meticulously put together, will contain them or harmonise them.

There is therefore a rather insuperable difficulty in trying to comment usefully on the propositions in the Green Paper in the absence of that vital pre-requisite paper setting out

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guidance on proposed measures to change or improve present relationships. Thus agreement or disagreement with propositions requires prior study of the factors influencing the relationship between the parties, of measures to be brought to bear on those factors, and of the reasonably expected changes which should ensue. It would be more realistic and more fruitful to delay discussion of the Green Paper until an essential pre-requisite paper on measures to improve the relationships between employers, workers, and unions has been assembled, published, and discussed. It could even happen that, if such measures were properly hammered out and effectively introduced a large proportion of the propositions in the Green Paper would become irrelevant; but without that pre-requisite, who knows?