

## **Different rooms, different voices: Double-breasting, multi-channel representation and the managerial agenda**

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### *Abstract*

*Double-breasting has been identified as where companies run union voice and non-union voice mechanisms across different plants. While research has focused on the incidence of such arrangements, there is a dearth of evidence into the dynamics of it. This article seeks to complement existing research by examining the contours of double-breasting in a case study organisation. The findings suggest more research is necessary into the dynamics of double-breasting in terms of how voice in sites affects each other and the extent to which running different regimes affects the managerial agenda.*

**Keywords:** employee voice; double-breasting; union representation; non-union representation

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## Introduction

Voice is a term that has long vintage in the human resource management literature. In recent decades, this literature has grown increasingly sophisticated, as research draws attention to the variety of co-existing and overlapping voice schemes that pertain across organisations. In many quarters, scholarship has become steadily appreciative of the shifting dynamics from a predominantly traditional, union-based system of representation to a multi-channel system of representation that includes a substantial section of non-union representation (Gospel and Willman, 2003; Dundon *et al*, 2004; Gollan, 2006; Upchurch *et al.*, 2006). An emerging line of inquiry has been attempts to map organisations which run union and non-union representation at different locations. This phenomenon, known as ‘double-breasting’, has its antecedents in the work of those studying employment relations in the US construction industry of the 1970s and 1980s (Lipsky and Farber, 1976). However, more recent studies suggest the growing relevance of the phenomenon as a contemporary employer approach to HRM and industrial relations (Lavelle, 2008; Gunnigle *et al.*, 2009).

Despite the growing interest, studies in this area have been principally confined to charting broad-based macro-related trends; that is, identifying the *incidence* of double-breasting rather than what has actually occurred within them (Verma and Kochan, 1985; Beaumont and Harris, 1992). Consequently while the occurrence of double-breasting is interesting in its own right, almost no analysis has been conducted on the implications of this practice for various industrial relations actors. This article adds to knowledge by presenting evidence from an in-depth qualitative case study of double-breasting in a British multinational operating in Ireland. In particular, this article focuses on the organisational dynamics of running parallel union and non-union representation on different sites, the

managerial motivations for such a strategy, and how double-breasting 'unfolds' in practice. Thus, this article focuses on three research questions. First what were the employer motivations for adopting double-breasting practices? Secondly, how did the practice of double-breasting unfold in the case study organisation? Thirdly, to what extent does spillover occur between the structures, processes and outcomes in the union and non-union structures?

The first section of the article presents an overview of the relevant literature on multi-channel representation and double-breasting. The next section outlines the research strategy employed. The third section outlines the detail of the case study. The final section concludes by raising the significance of the findings in relation to existing knowledge on double-breasting arrangements in organisations.

### **Multi-channels of voice and double-breasting**

Historically, the 'single channel of representation', as exercised through the vehicle of trade unionism, has been the principal concern of industrial relations research. However, developments in workplace voice have led scholars to focus on the emerging interplay between non-union and union representation arrangements (Bryson and Gomez, 2005). These developments have been shaped by reduced trade union membership density (Kersley *et al.*, 2005), increased influence of European directives on employee information and consultation arrangements (Hall *et al.*, 2009; Whittal *et al.*, 2007) and a greater desire by employers to increase workplace productivity through new high-performance initiatives (Boxall and Macky, 2009). Particularly, this research has analysed how dual union and non-union employee representation channels impact and influence managerial decisions and their effectiveness in addressing employee interests (Terry, 1999; Gollan, 2005; Dundon and Gollan, 2007). A number of pertinent considerations have arisen from studies in this area, for

example, the effectiveness of non-union and union voice channels; whether non-union channels act as a complement to or substitute for union representation; and the interplay of non-union and union voice channels (Dundon *et al.*, 2005).

Conceptually, emphasis has been laid on the complexity of managerial motives for opening up non-union voice channels and the multiversity of purposes such channels can serve. Whereas radical theorists traditionally collapsed all employee participation schemes under the umbrella of management seeking to quell employee resistance (Ramsay, 1977), researchers have highlighted how such regimes could often be introduced for diffuse motives; indeed such motives could often conflict with each other (Marchington *et al.*, 2001). Furthermore the literature has increasingly advanced that all direct, non-union based representation could not be simply treated under the one heading. Rather, different methods employed in different contexts could diverge greatly in terms of substantive content and in what they delivered for workers (Marchington *et al.*, 1993; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2007).

Empirically, research has tended to examine multi-channel representation in two contexts. First, those companies who operate non-union based channels alongside union representation and secondly those firms who operate non-union channels as a substitute for union representation. With regard to parallel systems, Gollan (2007) has highlighted the complementarities and contradictions of non-union and union based representation running concurrently in the same organisation. Gollan has argued that non-union voice can complement union representation, but that union-based representation provides a more robust system of representation. This resonates with Kaufman and Taras (2000), who propose that non-union voice regimes can often be ‘toothless dogs’ unless they operate in a climate where union representation is stronger where there is at least a valid union threat. Indeed both

authors propose that whilst non-union voice regimes are unlikely to alleviate the representation gap, unions can, given their 'insider' status, colonise such regimes which in turn gives rise to more positive outcomes for employees than a single channel of representation.

Whilst companies opting for non-union voice arrangements may do so because they are perceived to be less disruptive to managerial prerogatives (Kim and Kim, 2004), other studies have evinced alternative rationales for 'making' voice (Willman *et al.*, 2006). These include a desire to increase the flow of information and communication to staff and to promote a more harmonious and consensual workplace culture (Dundon *et al.*, 2006). Gollan (2010) identifies additional influences including, for example, that such arrangements can act as a safety valve in the absence of an active union presence; non-union voice may help facilitate the process of organisational change by enabling management to highlight issues of concern early, thus reducing the potential for disruption come implementation; non-union voice may be introduced in the hope that it will increase organisational performance by providing a forum whereby employees can input new ideas; and finally, non-union voice arrangements may be used as alternative for a negotiation of sorts in situations where there is little active union or collective bargaining. In aggregate, the complexity and unevenness of multi-channel voice mechanisms has indicated the importance of micro-level studies to understand the interaction between various participation and voice regimes across organizations and the underlying rationales in shifting between different channels of representation.

***Double-breasting and multi-channel systems of voice***

One area of research on multi-channel representation that remains relatively undeveloped is what has been labelled *double-breasting*. Most studies have examined multi-channel arrangements as ‘bundles’ in the one firm; however the practice of double-breasting has hitherto been marginal to such analysis. Double-breasting or ‘dual-shop arrangements’ can trace its lineage to the United States, and the construction and building industry in particular (Lipsky and Farber, 1976). Traditionally American construction firms have operated both unionised and non-unionised operations across various plants, often with the explicit intention of circumventing the ‘union-mark up’ and thus securing competitive advantage through the flexible deployment of non-unionised, and often casual, labour (Northrup, 1995; Allen, 1995). In the period since the 1980s, this practice has steadily expanded beyond the construction sector and indeed, the country-of-origin. A number of studies can now point to its prevalence in the manufacturing and transportation industries of the United States (Verma and Kochan, 1985), whilst its presence has also been identified in Canada (Rose, 1986), Australia (Bamber *et al.*, 2009), the United Kingdom (Beaumont and Harris, 1992) and Ireland (Gunnigle *et al.*, 2009). Indeed the latter authors argue that in Ireland, “a substantial and increasing number of MNCs are engaging in double breasting” (Gunnigle *et al.*, 2009: 67). In aggregate, the focus of this literature has chiefly revolved around considering the extent to which multi-establishment employers might concurrently operate facilities on both a unionised and non-unionised basis, and the propensity for unionised firms to constitute ‘greenfield’ sites on a union-free footing.

Thus, research on double-breasting has been concerned with identifying the incidence of such systems rather than what has actually occurred within them. Apart from quantitative data about spread and trajectory, only partial evidence exists on why double-breasting occurs

in the first instance and how it unfolds within the organisational context. For instance, Gunnigle *et al.* (2009) outline how management offer three rationales for double-breasting: a 'union-free' subsidiary was alleged to be attractive to corporate headquarters and conducive to future investment; that going the route of non-unionism was easily achieved in an institutional context of voluntarism; and that there is ultimately less demand for unionisation amongst younger, educated workers employed in such sites.

Related to the study of employer motives is the literature's tendency to reduce double-breasting to a managerial "strategic ploy" for circumventing trade unions (Gunnigle *et al.*, 2009:67). In accord with emerging understandings on multi-channel voice regimes, care needs to be taken to avoid simply collapsing incidences of double-breasting into union-avoidance and more detailed research is needed to investigate motivations for embarking on such a course. Double-breasting, like non-unionism, may simply be an unintentional organisational outcome, rather than based upon a firm managerial intent (Guest and Hoque, 1994). From the available evidence on managerial re-location strategies (c.f. Whitaker, 1986), it is clear that industrial relations frequently plays the role of a second or third-order concern amongst directors' decision-making on these matters (Boxall and Purcell, 2008). That double-breasting may serve a multiplicity of ends is implied by Gunnigle *et al.* (2009: 62) where they note that its existence may not be exclusively attributable to "particularly negative experiences of trade unions, but to other reasons that may be either operational or strategic in nature". Indeed added to this might be the contribution of institutional context. As observed by Patmore (2010) different national systems of industrial relations, and their associated historical, jurisdictional and cultural legacies may influence management approaches to voice down path-dependent routes consistent with existing institutional parameters. In the context of an Anglo-Saxon type voluntarism, for example, the evolution of double-breasted regimes

may simply accord with wider institutional patterns of limited regulation in employment relations and declining trade union voice more generally. Thus the potential contribution of alternative influences, apart from an aspiration to be 'union-free' merits further attention.

Furthermore, while the increasing occurrence of double-breasting is an interesting phenomenon itself, little analysis has been carried out on what the implications of double breasting have been for other industrial relations actors, hitherto silent in the existing macro-based surveys. The various responses of other organisational stakeholders, notably employees and trade unions, evidently necessitates closer scrutiny so as to consider how double-breasting 'plays out' in practice. Thus, the existence of double-breasting raises a number of significant research questions on which this article seeks to shed some light.

### **Research Methodology**

To address the research questions, a qualitative case study approach was adopted. In general, qualitative case research is viewed as a relevant approach where little work has been done in a particular area (Yin, 2008). In addition, a strength of qualitative case studies are sensitivity to context, which is germane for reflecting upon workplace representation arrangements that are invariably shaped by specific organisational circumstances. This article presents one detailed, case study subject, referred to throughout the paper as *BritCo<sup>i</sup>*. The case study is part of a wider study examining the comparative effects of the EU's Information and Consultation Directive in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in cross-border organisations. Due to the relatively large number of organisations which operate on both sides of the Irish border, the project seeks to examine the effect of the Directive as set against the regulatory and institutional differences in the two jurisdictions. In addition, due to



geographic proximity and close economic ties, the potential for ‘spillover effects’ between different regimes is an important aspect of the study.

BritCo, is a UK former public utility privatised under the Thatcher Government of the 1980s. The company still dominates its market in the UK, whilst also operating in more than 170 countries worldwide. In the 1990s, BritCo entered the market of the Republic of Ireland through a joint venture with an Irish semi-state company. In 2000, BritCo acquired not only 100% of the venture, but also a non-union private-sector, Irish-owned firm- *IndyCo* - and its various subsidiary companies. *IndyCo*, an entrepreneurial-owned firm founded in the early nineties, emanated from a partially de-regulated market in the Republic of Ireland. As a non-union company, the employment relations culture in *IndyCo* reflected the classic attributes of the ‘enterprise culture’, with strong emphasis placed upon the absence of formal hierarchy and *esprit de corp* (Legge, 2004).

As a study of double-breasting, the presented case is particularly relevant. As part of a rationalisation of structures, BritCo began integrating *IndyCo*’s business services of retail, wholesale and networks alongside its Northern Ireland subsidiary into one combined unit on the island of Ireland; formally known as BritCo Ireland. In effect, this made BritCo Ireland the sector’s second largest company in the Republic behind the incumbent semi-state body, *IrishCo*, which still commands a near 75% monopoly on the Irish market. However, whilst operational practices were pooled together, a distinction remained with regard terms and conditions of employment and in relation to trade union recognition. In company operations in Northern Ireland, where approximately 1,000 staff are employed, management maintained a long-standing collective bargaining relationship with two unions, representing operative and managerial grades respectively. The company in the North is strongly unionised, with

over 90% of the workforce in membership. In the Republic, where 2,000 workers are now employed, management preserved the previous non-union status of the acquired operations. However, whilst BritCo has maintained non-unionism in its IndyCo acquisition, a more recent acquisition, *Friendly Group*, is a partially unionised IT services firm employing around 130 staff. Within Friendly Group, around 25 engineers are members of an Irish General union and the pre-existing collective bargaining agreement has been maintained by BritCo. The company therefore displays a number of pertinent examples of the double-breasting phenomenon across its operations.

The field research had access to all levels of the firm, from top management down. Furthermore, the study incorporated a longitudinal component, allowing the case to be examined over a reasonably lengthy two-year period, starting in 2007 and finishing in 2009. This involved repeat visits and follow-up discussions. Thus in some cases interviews with HR respondents were conducted in 2007 and then followed up in 2009. The bulk of interviews were conducted in 2009. An assortment of primary and secondary data collection methods was used. The findings are based largely on semi-structured interviews (lasting between one and three hours) with all levels of management, union officials, non-union representatives, shop stewards, as well as shorter interviews (up to one hour) with samples of employees. This amounted to 26 interviews (6 with managers, 3 with union officials, 4 non-union representatives, and 13 employees from various operational levels of the company). Themes addressed in the interviews varied according to respondents, although within such variation for each group of respondents specific core issues were asked to ensure consistency. Principally interviews conducted with managerial respondents focused on the motives for double-breasting and their perceptions of the organisational dynamics and interplay of running parallel systems. Interviews undertaken with union officials addressed the nature of

their relationship with the company, their evaluation of existing voice regimes, their perceptions of double-breasting as union avoidance and their responses to management double-breasting. In interviewing non-union employee representatives, the research sought to uncover the perceptions of those affected by the dynamics of double-breasting and to understand the level of unevenness as it affected workers. Respondents were purposively selected by the research team where it was felt they represented the key respondent on the matter at hand.

*Table 1 Interview Participants*

<i>Interviews at Brit Co Ireland (Corporate Level)</i>	<i>Interviews at BritCo Ireland in Northern Ireland</i>	<i>Interviews at BritCo Ireland in the Republic of Ireland</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chief Executive Director</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Human Resource Manager</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Human Resource Manager</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Human Resource Director</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Operative Union Representative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sector Union Organiser</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managerial Union Representative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plant Director (Dublin South Facility)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engineer Line Manager</li> </ul>	4 Non-Union Representatives: 2 from ‘Vocal’ Forum and 2 from Southern Works Committee Forum)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6 Employees: 3 engineers, 3 call-centre staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7 Employees: 1 Sales, 3 Call Centre, 3 Engineers</li> </ul>

Secondary methods, consisting of extensive internal (company/union) and external archival and documentary material, were also deployed. These included documentation on the constitution of Brit Co. non-union voice body in the Republic (which set out the remit of the forum with regard information provision and consultation), trade union public

communiqués in the Republic in relation to the recognition campaign, minutes from union-management meetings in Northern Ireland and minutes from Brit Co. non-union forum in the Republic.

The data derived from these various sources were analysed as follows: Raw data was organised into conceptual categories or “units of meaning” (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 56) which could then be used to analyse the data. The first stage was essentially ‘open coding’, where particular conceptual categories were located to particular paragraphs of data sheets and assigned initial labels. The second stage was ‘axial coding’ where concepts were further broken down, if possible, into more specific sub-categories of response, which was subsequently followed by a cross-comparison of transcripts. The final stage was ‘selective coding’, where previous codes were analysed across the transcripts and combined into pieces of evidence presented in the findings chapters. This incorporated analytic comparisons of methods of agreement and methods of difference. The former focused attention on what was common across the transcripts, whilst the latter focused on transcript responses which lacked common features and outcomes.

### **Double-breasting in action: The impetus for double-breasting**

Prior to the late 1990s, BritCo’s activity on the island of Ireland was confined to Northern Ireland. Its roots in this part of the country stemmed from a historical background as the state monopoly in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Although the company was privatised in the 1980s, a legacy of its state monopoly past is still evident in the strong trade union presence and detailed company-union agreements in the company. Two trade unions are recognised: *Managerial Union*, representing managerial grades and *Operative Union*, representing operational-level employees, principally engineers but also some clerical

employees in the call centre functions. Notably the arrangements with unions in Northern Ireland operate as a subset of BritCo UK industrial relations practices. Collective bargaining and the determination of terms and conditions for Northern Ireland are primarily conducted at the UK group level; that is at corporate headquarters in London. This places constraints on the ability of unions to bargain at local level in Northern Ireland, where their role is more consultative, albeit with some limited scope for negotiation on the application of particular policies and practices affecting membership. This is best characterised by the two stand alone voice structures operating in Northern Ireland. The first, a bi-monthly meeting between the Human Resource department and the recognised unions which operate as routine problem-solving exercises revolving around particular sick absence cases, disciplinary issues and/or particular employee grievances. The second - rejuvenated under the arrival of a new all-Ireland CEO - is a bi-yearly joint consultative committee (JCC) which outlines corporate targets for the year ahead, budgetary measures and relevant details for different lines of business. Notably, the JCC tends to be highly controlled by management and is intended to be principally a platform upon which management inform unions on forthcoming or possible company developments. The JCC agenda is entirely controlled by management and there is no opportunity for unions to add to it.

Notably when speaking about Northern Irish arrangements, senior management accept that unions will continue to be recognised and no evident desire for de-recognition appears to exist, with management pragmatically accepting that this would be unworkable in light of the widespread opposition it would engender. Yet management stress that they are in a process of “redefining” the trade union role in the company. This has been most evident in the senior management endeavours to integrate employment relations practices much more closely with other elements of corporate strategy to ensure greater customer responsiveness and match the

degree of labour flexibility achieved by many of the company's non-union competitors. Thus unions interviewed at BritCo in Northern Ireland are conscious of a progressive drive by the company to alter agreements on working practices and working hours to provide for greater management control over the deployment of employees and the re-scheduling of their activities, as has occurred in relation to engineers shift attendance.

### ***Enter double-breasting: Non-unionised arrangements in Republic of Ireland***

As noted above in Section 3, BritCo entered the market of the Republic of Ireland through a joint venture with an Irish semi-state company. In 2000, BritCo acquired not only 100% of the venture, but also a non-union private-sector, Irish-owned firm- IndyCo - and its various subsidiary companies. As part of a rationalisation of structures, BritCo integrated IndyCo's business services alongside its Northern Ireland subsidiary into one combined unit on the island of Ireland - BritCo Ireland. Yet in contrast to practices in Northern Ireland, BritCo's employment relations framework in the Republic has been distinctively marked by its predominant non-unionism, a result of acquiring an existing IndyCo and maintaining its union-free status. In part, this is consistent with international corporate strategy, but also has an opportunistic edge. A feature of BritCo employment relations practice outside of the UK tends to be to avoid recognising trade unions, unless required by law or where there is an existing union recognition agreement in a newly acquired operation. Indeed this latter proviso came into play when the organisation acquired Friendly Group in 2005. However, the extent to which this disrupted established relations in the rest of the Republic was minimal, due to the quasi-autonomous nature of this operation. As such the only voice channel operating within the Republic was an Information and Consultation Forum set up in 2005 to meet the requirements of the Employee (Information and Consultation) Regulations. As a vehicle for employee voice, this forum was acknowledged by management to be largely ineffective, with

no coherent system of appointing employee representatives and with discussion being kept to a minimum. Meetings became so infrequent that the forum had effectively become defunct by the middle of 2006. Indeed employees and employee representatives interviewed had not even heard of this forum.

### **Double-breasting in action: The micro-level impact on employees**

The acquisition of the non-union IndyCo and the subsequent integration and combination of that operation's retail, wholesale and networks services with the activities of the Northern Ireland subsidiary generated a number of industrial relations difficulties in the two BritCo facilities in the Republic – Central Offices and Dublin South. The merger period threw up a number of employee grievances, as old organisational practices in the Republic were largely re-tailored to fit new organisational requirements on the island of Ireland as a whole. In addition to the organisational transfer of some teams and departments to Northern Ireland, changes in the company car policy, which resulted in many engineers losing their car privileges also fed into a general climate of dissatisfaction with the merger process. In this case, engineers who previously had company cars lost them, or had to change their cars for company vans, or went from a fully expensed company car to an allowance. A further grievance amongst staff across the Republic was that BritCo management proved unwilling to disclose the relevant salary ranges to employees in the company.

### ***Double-breasting as a source of employee grievance***

More significantly from the point of view of unpacking the micro-political implications of double-breasting, employee awareness of the double-breasting practice itself appears to have been conducive to inspiring a general sense of injustice revolving around the lack of union recognition rights in the Republic in comparison to their co-workers in Northern Ireland. This

appears to have generated a wide-held belief amongst BritCo employees in the Republic, that Northern Irish staff experienced superior terms and conditions of employment because of the arrangement. This emerged in a context where the issue of unionisation had previously been non-existent in IndyCo. However, with the awareness of the double-breasted arrangement, a prominent view took hold amongst company employees that Northern Ireland staff generally 'have it better than we do'. One particular point of complaint for staff was the issue of the vastly different way in which redundancy was treated on either side of the border. The merger period, and the lengthy process of organisational change it initiated, sparked some disquiet on this matter, with a general perception amongst staff that existing redundancy terms were low, not just by industry standards, but also in comparison to practice in Northern Ireland. This was chiefly nurtured by the existence of a policy of "no-compulsory redundancy" in UK operations, a feature of BritCo employment practice which did not exist in the Republic.

As interviews at BritCo in the Republic found, perceptions were further shaped by idiosyncratic experiences the staff from the Republic received from interacting with co-workers from Northern Ireland at work, wherein discussions around the formers' capacity to raise issues with management were found to compare unfavourably with the latters'. Comparisons too were frequently found to be made between the rather fixed and rigid work schedule adhered to by engineers in the North -wherein they did not work beyond their prescribed shift hours- to the flexible, and often longer, hours worked by engineers in the Republic.

### ***Double-breasting as a source of union mobilisation***

With these kinds of factors in mind, an impetus for union recognition, organised by the *Sectoral Union*, emanated from within the engineering grades at BritCo Ireland in the Dublin



South plant. Whilst membership density did not constitute a majority of BritCo employees, there were a number of areas within BritCo where support for the union grew strongly, notably in the Dublin South facility but also amongst call centre service employees in Central Offices. However, efforts by the union to have members' concerns addressed at local level with management proved fruitless. As outlined by the CEO of BritCo Ireland, management opposition to union recognition is shaped by two factors. The first, was outlined above in that it is BritCo policy not to recognise trade unions outside of the UK, unless required to by law or where the company has acquired an existing unionised facility. The management rationale here is that recognition negatively affects the company's capacity to flexibly operate on a competitive cost basis. The second reason for non-recognition by BritCo Ireland is that they are opposed to that particular Sectoral Union on the basis that:

The union is biased towards IrishCo, our major competitor because most of its members are members of the IrishCo's employee share ownership plan which owns 30% of the company. The General Secretary of the union said recently after IrishCo had announced some very disappointing results that it was the regulators fault because there was too much competition in the sector and that it was destroying jobs. So, if you want an example of bias, there you go.

(CEO, BritCo Ireland)

The union began to execute, in early 2007, a highly public campaign in an attempt to pressurise the company into dialogue. Billboard advertisements around Dublin city centre were rented, as well as a number of ad-mobiles, all highlighting alleged discriminatory effects of the double-breasted arrangements between the North and South:

BritCo is being run on an 'all-island' basis, and therefore should treat its staff in the Republic no less favourably than staff in Northern Ireland...It seems under the BritCo business model they will treat all of their customers the same but discriminate against you if you work for them in the Republic of Ireland. We now have the ridiculous situation that if you are one inch on one side of the border BritCo will recognise your right to be represented by a Union but if you are an inch on the other side of the border it will discriminate against you.

(President, Sectoral Union)

### **Double-breasting in action: The micro-level impact on management**

The fact that double-breasted arrangements served as a rallying cry for workers and the union organising campaign in the Republic seems, in part, to have prompted a response by management. As the organising campaign began to develop momentum in BritCo the hitherto inoperative non-union 'Information and Consultation forum' was re-vamped and widely promoted by management. The new forum was re-labelled '*BritCo Vocal*' and promoted vigorously by management as the union organising campaign gathered momentum in early 2007.

Whereas no coherent electoral system existed for the previous forum, under *BritCo Vocal* employee representatives were chosen through election, with typically one rep per 100 employees. The electoral constituencies were designed to allow for each business areas to have one representative, although the engineering and call centre section of the business were allowed to elect three representatives as there were over 300 people employed in each of those sections. Employees could either self-nominate, or be sponsored by colleagues. Where more than one representative came forward, an election would take place. Whereas the

previous forum was little more than a presentation by the former CEO on the financial performance of the company, *BritCo Vocal* meetings tended to be more expansive affairs, beginning with the HR Director outlining current developments in the company, followed by a financial and market update by the CEO, with the remainder of the meeting set aside for employee representatives to raise pertinent issues and discuss matters of concern.

Although the initial agenda driving the reinvigoration of the largely moribund forum into the more developed *Vocal* might appear to have been to undermine employee support for unionisation, it would be simplistic to treat this as the exclusive managerial rationale. As was also the case in Northern Ireland, the arrival of the new CEO, appears to have been pertinent in re-configuring information and communication practices in the company. Since his incumbency, numerous initiatives have been adopted or revitalised in an effort to improve general awareness amongst employees of the company's strategic direction. The *Vocal* forum was very much part of this process and was widely seen by senior management and the HR department as part of a wider package of employee relations reform within the company in order to foster employee commitment.

### **Double-breasting in action: The Vocal Forum**

One of the first matters raised by *Vocal* employee representatives was the widespread concern over potential redundancy payments on offer at BritCo Ireland in comparison to Northern Ireland. Through the forum, management explained that the terms presented in the company handbook had simply been replicated from the IndyCo era. Terms were low, it was advanced, because as a relatively young company IndyCo staff would typically not have held long service. Management conceded that the handbook should be re-written by HR in consultation with the employee representatives on the forum. Furthermore employee

representatives were given a month to review the final handbook through holding meetings with their constituencies on any pertinent issues which arose from the review process. The outcome from the review initiative was that aspects of the Northern Irish redundancy program were introduced into the Republic; principally the practice of a redundancy pool wherein employees at risk of redundancy are given eight weeks to secure a new position and/or project in the company. Representatives and employees interviewed across BritCo Ireland in the Republic for the most part expressed satisfaction with the manner in which this issue was addressed through *Vocal* and the subsequent outcome.

Yet, *Vocal* was found to be less satisfactory when employee representatives sought some solution to the non-disclosure of salary scales. Through the forum, management outlined to staff their unwillingness to a change of practice on this matter, claiming that widespread disclosure of sensitive information might be passed onto its competitors. In an effort to address employee concern over the issues however, management offered to post a confidential sheet to individual employees, outlining their particular roll code, job family and the associated benchmarked pay range. Employees would then individually receive a letter annually updating them on it. This however proved to be largely unsatisfactory to staff who regarded Brit Co.'s secrecy on the matter to be, as one employee representative put it, "very much cloak and dagger" and lacking in transparency. Notably however, this was not an issue confined to the Republic of Ireland, the same practice exists in Northern Ireland, and interviewees there have similarly expressed dissatisfaction with the matter.

The outcome in relation to how redundancy was addressed through the non-union forum in the Republic is pointed in other ways. Employee representatives on the *Vocal* forum have felt that once management attempted to redress underlying issues prompting union

demand at the company, the range and scope of issues appearing at forum meetings and employees capacity to have influence in determining policy substantially narrowed. Attempts at raising other substantive issues have been claimed by *Vocal* representatives to be either written off the agenda or glossed over by management in meetings. This led to two employees dropping out of the forum. Analogous to this has been that initial promises of robust involvement in policy making matters became steadily confined to the management of facilities type issues and, progressively, the forum took on a character of being simply a vessel for the downward communication of information from senior management. Training for the role has been described as superficial and ad-hoc, with many representatives claiming that they have not received sufficient advice on how to handle issues grievances from their relevant constituents. From the perspective of employees at BritCo in the Republic, this has led to a number of the representatives being identified as weak and unable to effectively advance employee concerns.

### **Double-breasting in action: The Southern Works Committee**

Indeed it was the failure of *Vocal* to deliver for the employee constituency of Dublin South that led to the emergence of a new forum tailored made specifically for that region. Within BritCo's operation in the Republic, there are significant 'cultural' differences between Dublin South and City Offices, in many respects attributable to a straightforward white-collar/blue-collar divide. Within the company, Dublin South held a reputation for having a high degree of workforce adversarialism and poor management-employee relations.

Persistent attempts by representatives from this facility to raise constituents' concerns over company car-policy changes and other matters at *Vocal*, led to the meetings becoming increasingly fractious and Dublin-South dominated. In response, management endeavoured to

curtail the prevalence of Dublin-South specific issues by creating *Southern Works Committee (SWC)* for the facility as a whole. Specifically it was hoped that the SWC would address one of the main sources of contention amongst staff in Dublin South – the changes to policy on company cars. When the new car policy was disseminated by line management at Dublin South, it was often the case that management at the site themselves were unclear about how the proposed changes were to be rolled out. This led to a number of scenarios arising whose operational implications had not been anticipated at senior management level.

As with *Vocal*, representatives were elected from each relevant constituency. A rotating representative from *Vocal* also sat on the forum as did three senior managers. The forum agreed to meet once a month, although in practice it met somewhat less than that. As such, the forum did not directly allow engineers at Dublin South to negotiate any changes to the car policy, but mainly provided a platform whereby employee concerns could be aired. Car policy changes were introduced, albeit with senior management, at their own discretion, providing ‘sweeteners’ to allow the process to run smoothly for example by increasing engineers’ car allowances. Rather the SWC dealt with numerous facilitates management and employee grievance type issues. As with *Vocal*, the final form of the SWC proved to be a disappointment to many of the forum representatives. Again, a perception existed amongst representatives that they would have a voice in shaping policy issues in Dublin South, yet much to their disenchantment, the kinds of issues that became a feature of forum meetings were those like grievances over car parking spaces and the lack of adequate smoking shelter facilities. However, in the one instance where an issue of more weighty import was raised before the forum – on employee performance management - it appears that a number of the SWC representatives lacked confidence in handling such a sensitive issue.

Prior to 2007, employees in Dublin South were not subject to any performance appraisal. Subsequent to its introduction, a number of staff began to find that they were being subject to quite negative management appraisals. A perception emerged amongst staff at Dublin South that the process was exclusively of a punitive character and a means by which to 'manage' poor performing individuals out of the company (a policy to which management admit). Consequently, SWC reps received formal complaints from constituent employees that performance appraisals were not being managed fairly by particular line managers. Yet, a widespread concern amongst a number of SWC representatives was their lack of adequate training in handling matters of such gravity given their potential impact on individuals' careers. This significantly curtailed their capacity and willingness to handle constituents' concerns on the issue. Rather than give employees advice, for which SWC representatives felt they had not been trained, they would simply show employees the relevant human resource information on the company website and indicate to them the relevant steps to follow before bringing a grievance.

Within two years of the SWC being introduced, activity began to steadily fall off, despite the continuing concern over performance management. Such has been the level of fall-off in activity that the forum was wound up by management. Management tended to describe the wide-up as a consequence of the fact that there are no widespread collective issues of concern at the plant since the resolution of grievances over the car policy change. However SWC representatives portray a different picture. Over time, a number of representatives began to absent themselves from meetings, primarily as a result of losing interest in handling 'tea and toilet roll' issues. A number of representatives were also of the view that the role was too much of an irritant on their own work time. More importantly however is that the workload being advanced to SWC representatives effectively declined, as

employees stopped bringing grievances to representatives to air. From interviews conducted, this appears to be because a number of SWC representatives were promoted into line management positions. As has happened with *Vocal*, these representatives were consequently seen by their constituents as being 'too close' to management. Indeed, forum representatives on both *Vocal* and SWC often stated that they went forward for the role because it offered an opportunity to display their competence to senior management and thus facilitate their advancement up the company ranks. In some cases, it appears that individual representatives had in fact been actively encouraged by their line manager to take the role for these same reasons. HR management, by mid-2009, admitted that employees at Dublin South and in sections of the City Offices had become reticent about bringing issues before these individuals. Rather it was reported that employees appear to be bringing issues to one *Vocal* representative in particular, a union member, who was perceived as more willing to pursue an 'independent' line. Similarly, Sectoral Union reported that the number of individual disciplinary and/or grievance cases they were asked to participate in by employees has steadily increased over late 2008 and throughout 2009 and advance that this is evidence of growing support for the union role in organisational affairs. Indeed from interviews with staff, the existing voice arrangements (*Vocal* and the SWC) seem to have been unable to dissipate a certain demand amongst employees for unionisation. Interviews with staff suggest that the issue of recognition has remained the touchstone by which engineering and call centre workers measure management's commitment to a genuinely participative workplace culture:

Some employees see it as management paying lip service, because we have no union, we have no power...there is a whole culture amongst employees that we should be unionised, particularly in Dublin South, which is the extreme, but also in City Offices.



(Employee Representative, BritCo)

There is a certain percentage of staff who think it's not fair, that the North have a union and who definitely want a union, no matter what.

(Call centre employee, BritCo)

## **Discussion**

As outlined earlier, this article seeks to explore three overlapping research questions: First what were the employer motivations for adopting double-breasting practices?; Secondly, how did the practice of double-breasting unfold in the case study organisation?; Thirdly, to what extent does spillover occur between the structures, processes and outcomes in the union and non-union structures? The findings presented above offer a more nuanced dynamic to double-breasting than much of the current literature indicates.

With respect to employer motivations and how the doublebreasted arrangement emerged, the existing research into double-breasting is often premised upon an assumption that the underpinning managerial agenda is a desire to circumvent union recognition in some plants and reduce their influence in the company overall (Beaumont and Harris, 1992; Gunnigle *et al.*, 2009). In the case presented in this paper however, double-breasting appears to have emanated from circumstances that, initially, had little to do with curtailing trade union influence and is supportive of the non-voice literature which specifies greater heterogeneity in management motives (Dundon and Gollan, 2007)The company subject to the BritCo acquisition was non-union and the issue of unionisation in this firm simply did not feature as a concern on the managerial agenda or indeed it seems amongst IndyCo employees at the time. It was only in subsequent years, when the less benign consequences of the merger reverberated amongst sections of BritCo staff in the Republic that the union question

sufficiently intruded upon management's thinking on industrial relations matters in the company. Evidently, there was no worked out strategic ploy in the initial phases of double-breasting to curtail trade unionism.

This impromptu approach is perhaps best captured by the way in which management pushed through the various structures it deployed in parallel to ensure that existing arrangements were maintained. First, an information and consultation forum established to fulfil the requirements of the Information and Consultation Directive. Although seemingly destined to wither on the vine, this was subsequently re-vamped to fire-fight the union organising campaign. However it must be stressed that the forum also featured as part of a broader human resource strategy to create a harmonious and consensual workplace culture through the enhanced provision of information and communication. This resonates with case study research from the UK by Bonner and Gollan (2005) and Waitling and Snook (2003) which indicates that for a large majority of non-union firms the main aim of non-union voice forums is to increase the flow of information and communication. Notably a further ad-hoc arrangement was then established –the SWC- to prevent the second forum being undermined by combative engineers from the Dublin South facility. In this case, the impetus behind the SWC was essentially a fire-fighting mechanism to prevent the fractiousness of the engineers spilling over into the integrative aspirations of *Vocal*. Ultimately, in Friendly Group, continuity with a recognised union was retained and the bargaining relationship there still operates in a autonomous framework. As Willman *et al.* (2003: 4) have argued elsewhere, the 'switching costs' to a non-union arrangement were deemed too high in this instance. As such, the motivation behind the design and content of the various forums was tailor-made to adapt to particular contingencies in each circumstance. For the most part, no clear or coherent

approach was adopted: the various voice forums were frequently shaped by a bricolage of reactive, rather than proactive considerations.

Nonetheless, the strategic adoption of double-breasting as a form of union avoidance is not insignificant. BritCo executives acknowledged that it is corporate policy to avoid recognising trade unions internationally; a policy premised a belief that union recognition would curtail the company's capacity to operate on a cost basis and compete on price and flexibility. Although the company is highly pragmatic in the execution of this policy, readily adapting and shelving such intentions where it is expedient to do so the company is unlikely to extend recognition where it is aware that its stance cannot be seriously challenged. Even when faced with a sustained and highly-public organising campaign by Sectoral Union, management were prepared to maintain a firm grip on their union-free status, conscious that the Irish institutional context of voluntarism (Dobbins and Gunnigle, 2009) would be incapable of dislodging them from that position (c.f. Gunnigle *et al.* 2009: 65).

In terms of how the double-breasted arrangements unfolded within the organisation a manifold picture emerges. Studies on double-breasting largely imply a zero-sum conception at work, i.e. one facility is unionised, the other is not (Gunnigle *et al.*, 2009). Other than the institutional absence or presence of a recognised trade union, this tells little about the character of managerial intent towards trade unionism within the company as a whole. While the unions were recognised in Northern Ireland and operated under the sponsorship of extremely high density, their role was in large measure confined to a consultative role. Whilst perhaps not going as far as to comply with Charlwood's (2006) image of "hollow shell" unionism, union influence at the company in Northern Ireland is under pressure. Indeed the

two forums used for union involvement in Northern Ireland varied little from the processes that occurred under the *Vocal* Forum in the Republic. However there were of course crucial differences – the union holds far greater institutional resources in reserve, having recourse to detailed collectively negotiated agreements at corporate level, whilst union representatives were independently trained and tend to retain far more support from their constituents than representatives of the non-union forums in the Republic do. This is particularly pertinent because the antecedents for the latter, non-union arrangements, may be readily explicable by the scenario existing in the unionised one. For example in the BritcCo case, the opposition to extending trade union recognition in the Republic can largely trace its roots back to how corporate headquarters are now re-configuring their relationship with trade unions in its home of origin. Thus, unions in BritcCo in the UK are being progressively subjected to managerial agenda which attempts to roll back union influence to the diluted realms of information and consultation. In advancing conceptualisations of double-breasting, it is worth appreciating that the unionised arrangement in the older facility might itself be subject to a process of ‘hollowing-out’. Simple contrasts between the union and non-union arrangements, often extrapolated from different contexts, are likely to tell little about the substantive form and character of the double-breasting phenomena itself (Dundon *et al.*, 2005).

A more nuanced picture emerges on the potential spillover between the unionised and non-unionised arrangements. The presence of the unionised arrangement in Northern Ireland prompted two instances of the presence of a “ghost at the table”. First, although *Vocal* and the SWC notably lack the independence and resources that the unions can muster in the North, Sectoral Union has managed to act as something of a ghost at the consultative table (c.f. for similar points Kaufman and Taras, 1999; Lipset and Meltz, 2000; Verma, 2000). For management, this had a paradoxical effect. In seeking to retain its union-free status and

preserve a freer hand for the managerial prerogative in the Republic, management had to go to great lengths to have different industrial relations approaches on each side of the border, as well as create a separate forum in Dublin South for those who were viewed as the most disconcerted about the non-union status of *Vocal*. Secondly, comparisons with the unionised arrangement in the North, even if this system has its own limitations, appears to have framed amongst employees a sense of collective injustice, which in turn was subsequently utilised by the union in its campaign. While the union recognition campaign ultimately failed, the inferior terms and conditions were used to lever improvements in a number of areas, most notably in the area of redundancy policy. Ultimately the differences in treatment of the various groups acted as an internal constraint on the ability of management to determine the agenda.

## **Conclusion**

Double-breasting appears to signify a substantive departure from established patterns of representation in previously entirely unionised firms. However, short of identifying patterns on the emergence of such arrangements, little is known of the organisational dynamics involved in the operation of double-breasted arrangements. In unpacking how double-breasting unfolded in the case of BritCo, the paper finds that the creation of the arrangement and its subsequent management is reminiscent of Lindblom's (1959) concept of *incrementalism*. Rather than exhibiting any grand strategic design, double-breasting in this case was a case of management 'muddling through', relying upon many small, often unplanned, changes instead of a few, extensively planned, giant leaps forward. This was a voice regime which was shaped by a wide variety of competing demand's emanating from inherited legacies, company ideology, competitive pressures, worker demands and micro-

organisational politics. Management 'strategy' in so far as it existed evinced a mix of ideological preference, pragmatic adaptation and opportunism. This point is significant and suggests for more examination of how double-breasting originates and is subsequently maintained in companies is a significant area for further enquiry.

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<sup>i</sup> The companies and unions referred to in this article are all given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity