

Amanda Tattersall, *Power in Coalition – strategies for strong unions and social change*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2010, xii + 209pp (pbk)

Power in Coalition represents a significant contribution to social action research within the field of industrial relations, and labour studies in particular. It is not just a strong piece of scholarship aimed at tackling a 'real' and pressing problem but one written by a politically active and engaged researcher, and which is explicitly aimed at union and community activists. Previous studies of union to non-union coalition building have not had the strength of being written about at such length and in such a strongly conceptualised and theorised way. *Power in Coalition* is a fascinating and impressive but alas not always totally convincing book.

The comparative research was based on three studies of carefully chosen long-term coalitions in Australia (public education), Canada (public healthcare) and the United States (living wage). It sought to identify 'best practice' in terms of the why, how, when and where of coalitions being built. Key to the robustness of the research was prolonged immersion in and contact with the campaigns so that choices, dynamics and tensions could be observed and explained. Tattersall rightly starts from recognising that coalition building by unions is not new *per se* but the current context merits re-examination and re-application of the strategy. She is at pains to stress the need to develop longer term coalitions which build capacity and are reciprocal ones (rather than the short-term, instrumental and one-side affairs that tend to have characterised union practice in recent times).

After clarifying our understanding of what is meant by 'community' and 'community unionism', the concepts of common concern, organisational relationships and scale provide the framework by which to dissect the three coalitions and then identify the goals of winning specified outcomes, shaping the political climate, sustaining relationships and increasing member organisations' capacity. For each of the three key concepts, measures are developed and then used to study each coalition. For the activist-orientated reader, these are all helpfully summarised through simple schemas. Best practice is identified as comprising the principles of 'less is more', where depth of member organisation participation is better than breadth of the number of member organisations enrolled; the fusion of self-interest with social interest; strategically timed interventions; individuals matter and can be pivotal; and local 'broker' organisations give local presence.

One of the areas where Tattersall particularly adds to our understanding is in regard of the geography of political economy through the investigation of scale and space. Scale pertains to the multiple levels at which coalitions are required to operate and organise if to be successful while space refers to the different types of polity in the three countries. *Power in Coalition* methodically outlines how the inter-relationship of the former can be either constructive or destructive and how the latter open up or close off opportunities to act. Elsewhere, Tattersall's analysis is sufficiently developed to recognise that strengths can also paradoxically be weaknesses.

Yet in the nuanced sophisticated analysis, there is a sense that *Power in Coalition* is just a bit too quick to throw the 'baby out with bath water'. The 'baby' is workplace unionism. There is no denying the seriousness of the situation here in most advanced economies and that remedial action needs to be taken but whether this also means that so much singular effort should be focussed upon coalition building as *Power in Coalition* implies and extols is open to some doubt. Recognising that there is no necessary Chinese Wall between coalition building and union organising, it is still the case that there are not synonymous and synergies may be limited. And, because a key and essential power resource of unions is presence and organisation at the points of production, distribution and exchange, attention is still required here for the practice of collective bargaining, political exchange and coalition building. If the issue of whether union decline – and the role of workplace unionism within

it - is secular or not had been touched upon, it would have become clearer whether coalition building is best viewed as a contemporary or historical strategy.

But the analysis also raises other questions in the reader's mind. If matched pairs of broadly successful and unsuccessful coalitions had been studied, the foundation of the study may have been further strengthened. And, in Australia, the union campaign over workers' rights was successful in ejecting the Howard government and ditching WorkChoices but far less so in compelling the Rudd government to reverse and re-introduce them through FairWork. Something similar could be said about the union campaign to eject the Tories and gain 'Fairness at work' under 'new' Labour. Both would have made illuminating cross reference points for influencing wider and grander public policy and law. Another question concerns how the insights can be applied to the private sector, where there is very little or far less state leverage to be exercised. Examples would be over the decline in manufacturing or developing green jobs.

More widely some more attention to understand which and why certain unions are more open to such productive coalitions would have been welcomed as would have been how unions internally manage issues of ownership, participation and democracy vis-a-vis coalition involvement. This may have given an opportunity to consider more fully whether there is any sense in which unions can be considered to be special partners in coalitions given their nature. Finally, and given the subtitle, some rumination on the broader issues of how coalitions relate to wider and more permanent social changes would have been useful. As the founder and director of the Sydney Alliance, Tattersall will no doubt be seeking to implement the collective wisdom of her findings and analysis. It would make for an interesting next book to see how she and it fare as judged by her schema and the critical reception to this important book.

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