

*April 2005*

## Workers and employees are different species

Extended news coverage of the MG Rover factory closure was dominating the radio stations as I drove home from a seminar in Cambridge last week. There was something ironic that the seminar had been covering issues associated with sustainability.

The remote idea that there was anything sustainable about MG Rover's operations at Longbridge was destroyed by the announcement that the Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation had no interest in buying the company out of administration.

The rest of the radio coverage was absorbed in interviews with political leaders who had dropped their pre-arranged programmes so that they could converge on the Midlands and join the chorus of sympathy for the 5,000 workers who had lost their jobs. Every interview and every announcement referred to the "workers".

Looking through all the human resources press releases that had been dumped in the e-mail box in my absence I could find no mention of workers. But there were plenty references to employees. It is as if there is some innate recognition that "employees" and "workers" are separate species that have fluctuated in their paths since evolving from a common ancestor.

Indeed there is a tacit acceptance of some difference in my dictionary. A worker, it says, is a person who works. Well that's straightforward enough. But it feels the need to add: "especially a manual or industrial employee." In future editions this reference may well be framed in the past tense. Even where people continue to work manually, the traditional role of the worker as a labourer is surely coming to an end.

This concept relied on an image of a boiler-suited hired hand, usually a man, independent in spirit and most often unionised. Today there is the employee, emerging as an altogether different breed, somewhat more domesticated, usually house-trained and eminently replaceable. The employee has become representative of the workplace just as the worker has declined in the direction of evolutionary oblivion.

The most telling contrasts in the radio news coverage were those of the listening public reacting to the responses of politicians and journalists. The tone of many e-mails and text messages was unsympathetic, welcoming the Longbridge workers to a much more competitive and unforgiving jobs market than the one they were leaving behind.

The responses seemed unduly harsh. There is never a good time to find yourself out of work. But at least the MG Rover workforce will benefit from a £150m aid package assembled by the Government. This kind of support is not available to the 3,200 people who are to lose their jobs at Index, the catalogue shopping chain to be sold off by Littlewoods, the private retail group. But the Index people are employees, not workers.

Underpinning this broader reaction was an understanding that MG Rover had failed because we, the buying public, were no longer sufficiently interested in its cars. Any investigation in to the behaviour of its owners is a separate matter but many must be

wondering if this is yet another example of what Sir Edward Heath called the “unacceptable face of capitalism”.

A more acceptable face could be discerned in the Prince of Wales’ Business & The Environment Programme run by the University of Cambridge Programme for Industry. The Cambridge seminar was focussing on wider issues of sustainability that challenged the most optimistic of executives among the 40 or so businesses, public sector and voluntary sector organisations attending.

How can you think of a sustainable workforce or a sustainable society when your very business proposition appears unsustainable within long term resourcing trends? The question can seem intractable for those of us reared within a system that promotes and feeds the desires of the consumer when the concept of sustainability insists that we preserve the viability of the planet for future generations.

The most frightening consensus was that, however it responds in the short term, humanity is heading for some building catastrophe of its own making. Will it be over-population, continuing global warming, increasingly scarce resources, growing militancy in disaffected societies, a deadly viral pandemic or a combination of all of these factors? We might take our pick. Yet in our day to day lives we continue to focus on our immediate concerns in the family and the workplace, assuming, Like Mr Micawber, that something will turn up or that we are powerless to change things on our own.

In the gardens of Madingley Hall that hosted the seminar, there is engraved a quote from Edmund Burke, saying: “No Man can make a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little.”

But what, as individual employees, can we do about any of these pressing issues, other than throw some money in to the charity box and wear assorted plastic wrist bands to advertise our sympathies? One executive spoke of the hypocrisy inherent in his choice to drive a petrol-thirsty car when he professed to share some concern for the environment.

Others belonged to energy producing companies that continue to invest heavily in the finding and extraction of oil and gas. Some represented the airline industry that burns masses of fuel in daily flights and some came from the finance sector that has enormous potential to influence investment policies.

These were successful and, comparatively quite powerful people yet when asked what they could do to help the poorest person in the world, you could have heard a pin drop. That poorest person represented the 14 or 15 million people surviving in corrugated iron shacks and cardboard boxes in the slums of Mumbai or the millions more in Africa, South America and the rest of the Indian sub continent.

The biggest case for optimism was in the attitudes of the delegates. I heard not one cynical comment, not one voice of dissent against the need to address change and quickly. But how many of us would undergo some personal transformation so that, in the words of Ghandi, we could “be the change we want to see”?

Mother Teresa of Calcutta explained her own approach to change like this: “We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But if that drop was not in the ocean, I think the ocean would be less because of that missing drop. I do not agree with the big way of doing things.”

The international institutions, governments and large companies do possess the wherewithal to make a difference but too often they lack leadership, tied to the limitations of expediency and the persistent tendency to associate growth with expansion and unbridled consumerism. The big differences may need to come from the willingness of individuals to channel more energy a little less down the path of acquisitiveness and somewhat more in the direction of those bigger threats that stand in the way of our children's future.

In the meantime perhaps the four executives who have profited so handsomely from the break up of MG Rover may begin to work out how they may put something back in to society to remove the damaging impression that capitalism is a selfish system.

© Richard Donkin