

*Industrial Relations in the South Pacific*

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As this book notes, industrial relations is an area of study that has long been neglected in the South Pacific region. This text aims to begin to rectify this gap by giving an overview of industrial relations in seven Pacific Island Countries: Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji Islands. The chapters are organised by country. Each chapter is primarily descriptive and provides a brief country context, an overview of legislation in the general area of labour law, a brief discussion of union activity in the country and a case study or case studies. Within this discussion the public and private sectors, which are frequently governed by different institutions and pieces of legislation, are separated out. The chapters have been thoughtfully laid out in a fairly standardised manner, allowing comparison of themes across countries.

The content and organisation of the book is interesting because the authors explicitly state that it ‘is not a comparative study in industrial relations.’ (at p 1) However, the authors clearly envisage that the book could be used to develop such a comparative analysis and, in the introductory chapter, suggest some potential themes and emerging issues that readers could look for across the individual chapters.

The book is not intended to provide in depth analysis of industrial relations, but instead aims to provide a more descriptive ‘baseline study for expanding applied research...’ (i). The authors are very clear about this intention, so readers should not be surprised or disappointed by the lack of analysis. However, despite the largely descriptive focus the book does approach issues critically. In particular the concluding chapter, which presents a number of questions for future research, successfully highlights the critical themes. This explicitly limited focus prevents that danger of making poorly reasoned or supported claims, which makes a refreshing change from the more commonly found labour market policy documents that abound with poorly supported recommendations.

For a lawyer one of the books strengths is that it identifies the applicable legislation in the field of employment law and industrial relations in each country. However, the level of detail provided can, sometimes, be frustrating. At times unnecessary detail is provided, such as stating how the Public Service Act 1977 (Samoa) defines Commission and Officer (at pp 11 – 12). Usually, however, more analysis or detail about the operation of a particular Act and its interpretation in court would be of interest. This comment is not a criticism of the book though, as the authors did not set out to write a law textbook, and, given the largely uncharted territory in which they are writing could not fairly have been expected to provide more detail without changing the book into a quite different undertaking altogether.

The book also provides information about some significant Bills that are or have been proposed, such as the Terms and Conditions of Employment Bill (Tonga) and the Industrial Relations Bill (Samoa). This is another interesting area for a lawyer, as there have been a number of Bills or proposals for legislative change that have been floating around for a number of years, and it is hard to either get information about their content or determine their status. This is also a problem for the authors who, when discussing Samoa's Industrial Relations Bill state that '[a]s of December 1999 the writer is unsure of the current status of the Bill. If further facts are ascertained they will be incorporated. If not there is a research task for others.' (at p 31)

It is this approach that ultimately makes the book successful. The authors are not pretending to present a comprehensive or exhaustive study of industrial relations in the South Pacific. Instead they are aiming to share introductory information and, hopefully, stimulate more research in this fascinating area by raising questions. In this goal they succeed. The book is accessible to students of law, sociology and industrial relations and provides them with a basic grounding in the practice of industrial relations in the seven jurisdictions discussed. This information is not otherwise easily accessible so, as a teacher this book has great value. Any reader with an interest in this area will also be presented with a number of questions and themes, and will want to research further to provide greater depth to the information contained in the book. It will therefore, I believe, assist in developing the field of industrial relations in the South Pacific as more researchers are attracted to this field of study.

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