

Take-Aways on Employee Ownership from the Other Side of the Pond

By Mary Ann Beyster

At the end of February, I began an international tour in Scotland and England to show our new documentary film, “We the Owners: Employees Expanding the American Dream.” <http://www.wetheowners.com/>

Each screening was followed by panel discussions with me, an executive from an employee/worker-owned enterprise, a professor, or a nonprofit/state leader in the field. Here are five take-aways from my 15-day tour covering eight cities and 10 film screenings from the Highlands of Scotland to London.



Mary Ann Beyster (second from left) at the University of Edinburgh meets with audience and panel members. Event was organized by the Co-operative Education Trust Scotland.

1. Ownership and empowerment translates

I am at the University of Stirling, the first international screening. It’s the opening of the film, the subtitle has come across in big letters, “the American Dream,” with an image of the American flag, and Professor Joseph Blasi has discussed the desire for ownership and independence by the founders of the American Revolution (against the British Empire). Have I just offended everyone in the room - 80 people?

After the screening David Erdal (author of *Beyond the Corporation*, former managing director of employee-owned Baxi Partnership and Tullis Russell); Sarah Deas, director of Co-operative Development Scotland (CDS); and I head to the front of the room to field questions after the screening. The questions begin to flow about the practical aspects of workplaces with freedom, opportunity, independence and representation, fairness, and risk. Aside from certain American terms, no apologies or translations of concepts are necessary. In addition, the basic principles and practices cross borders, even though aspects of our legal framework and history in employee ownership and cooperatives are different.

2. May all forms of employee ownership bloom

After touring four cities, I had met people from a wide range of enterprises: employee owned, worker cooperatives, community owned, community collectives, mutuals, vendor funded and owned, and more. In Scotland, the CDS provides education on a range of ownership/governance forms so that business owners can adopt what is right for their enterprises. CDS, funded by the government agency, Scottish Enterprise, sees these businesses as being an integral part of supporting small business, job quality, and economic growth. Hugh Donnelly of Co-operative Education Trust Scotland, another one of my hosts, also has an education mission and works with students in elementary schools up to universities.

Within Scotland, the physical size of South Carolina, regions likely will have a natural inclination toward certain forms over others driven by several factors such as culture of community, industry, access to capital, and availability of professional services. So too, we should promote a variety of formats of worker ownership across the U.S. and within our own states.

3. “Collaborative” has a nice ring to it

After the screening in St. Andrews, several professors described how they are integrating broad-based ownership forms into their business and sustainability courses as part of a “social enterprise.” They have a class called “Collaborative Enterprises” to delve into the range of ownership and participative practices. It reminds me of a recent article by Frank Shipper of Salisbury University in Maryland and several colleagues entitled, “Collaboration That Goes Beyond Cooperation: It’s Not Just ‘If’ But ‘How’ Sharing Occurs that Makes the Difference.”

4. Ownership is a part of the solution

During my short tour, people were not shy about discussing the pain of the recent financial collapse, the aggravation of seeing the continued excessively high salaries and bonuses of British bankers, and the uncertainty of what is next. Many seemed quite eloquent in describing an economy based on businesses with engaged and empowered owners who are stewards for the values and the value creation of the organization, its employees, the community, and the country. Government officials say this as well.

The point was made more than once that even a conventional corporation depends on people cooperating voluntarily to make it work – without that cooperation it would fail. Only with employee ownership is this commitment properly recognized and reinforced.

5. Not mainstream, but on the map

No one involved in employee ownership seems satisfied with not being mainstream. Why do they have to explain to bankers what an employee-owned company is and how it works? Even with its long history of cooperatives, there is much to do to educate people. At the last screening in London, Erdal and Peter Stocks, the managing partner of Baxi Partnership, engaged this audience on how these models should be the dominant corporate model in the UK. Stocks, a businessman with a 30-year career leading business acquisitions and organic growth of technical businesses, laid out the motivations for using broad-based ownership as part of building sustainable enterprises. Like Erdal and Stocks, there’s a growing number of employee-ownership ambassadors.

In reflecting on my trip, I found that the different nation citizens are looking to implement the worker-owned idea, they are open to many formats, they want collaborative company cultures, and they think the idea is a solution to the excesses of the financial system. Taking this idea and its adoption mainstream is a common desire and challenge. We have much to learn from each other, and collaborations seem a natural course for growth.

About the Author



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Mary Ann Beyster, president, Foundation for Enterprise Development and executive producer, “We The Owners.” (Photo taken at Urquhart Castle, Scottish Highlands.)