‘Here Comes the Boss’: a series of four radio programmes by Patrick Wright and John Goudie.

Programme 2. KEEP TALKING

Tx. BBC Radio 4, 1 August 1997

Patrick Wright
I can see nothing but car parks and superstores; there's a huge Sainsbury's to my right, and beyond that an enormous red brick warehouse which is a Chinese supermarket of sorts - and there's nothing here to indicate anything particular except for the name of the road that winds its way through this collection of retail outlets. It's called Glacier Way, and must be named after the Glacier Metal Factory that stood here until not that long ago.

People were visiting this place from afar, half a century ago. They came to study and experiment. It was designed to prove that a factory could be efficient and profitable and yet escape all the inertia and deadlock of the British class structure and the mess that was called industrial relations. Indeed 48 years ago, the BBC brought their microphones here to record a programme called 'Progress report - a weekly survey of Britain's production effort'.

Archive
"Industry wants something more than an uneasy peace. It wants to get rid of the grievances and grumbles that cause strikes. It wants to remove suspicion and hostility to new ideas. In a word, it wants cooperation between both sides".

"A firm that has a reputation for good labour relations is the Glacier engineering company of Wembley, London. One of our reporters, Tom Walden, went there to see if he could find out how the bosses and the workers have made a team”.

"I soon found out that relations between management and workers are pretty well organised. I had to get the Works Council’s permission to go round the plant and talk to the men and women in the factory, and I discovered too that relations hadn't always been good. This is what Haddy Rendal, an inspector told me"

"10 or 12 years ago, this was a lousy firm to work for. In those days the foreman cracked the whip and if your face didn't fit you'd had it. As time went on, things began to improve; foremen were chosen from the chaps on the floor and it made a big difference. Nowadays our relations with the managers are pretty good. It pays them to see that they are and it pays us too - we get more in wages and they get more in profit".

Patrick Wright
The man behind this experiment in industrial relations was Wilfred Brown, managing director of the Glacier Metal Company. He painted a confident and harmonious picture of his factory for the BBC.

Lord Wilfred Brown
"I know that managers, supervisors and work people are happier than they were eight years ago. It's obvious that most people are working harder - you can see it - or you can get a line
Patrick Wright
It sounds almost too good to be true - the boss wandering around the factory merrily chatting to the workers about taboo subjects. Run a factory like that nowadays and the shareholders would surely be at your throat within a week! Wilfred Brown died in 1985, but he left a strong impression on those who worked with him. John Collyear joined Glacier as an engineer in the early 1950s, and rose to the very top. He remembers Brown as a powerful presence around the factory.

Sir John Collyear
"Extremely articulate, very persuasive, and could be very dominating, and many would say he didn't follow a lot of his ideas when it came to his own management. But he was a person one respected extremely well".

Patrick Wright
During that period, I mean it does look like a different era to us now because after all these were factories, this was a particular system of production, we had masses of people doing various things; the bosses on one side, the workers on the other, in other words there is a kind of social class division at the heart of the enterprise. ["Yes"] Was Glacier trying to overcome that?

"Yes I think it was, I mean Wilfred Brown was very much a socialist at heart, I mean he had been a friend of Richard Acland, who you may not have heard of but formed the Commonwealth Party, and he tried to get elected to Parliament, and finished up of course leaving Glacier and becoming a minister in the Wilson government".

Patrick Wright
So we're talking about a Labour boss here
"Yes, yes, yes, I think so".

Patrick Wright
Wilfred Brown may have listed golf as his recreation in 'Who's Who', but he was and exceptional figure, something of an oddball even in his own time. It was the constituency of Westminster St. George's that he contested in the 1945 election. Proscribed by the Labour Party and denounced as 'fascist' by the Communist Party, the Common Wealth Movement had been set up by Richard Acland, a dissenting Christian socialist, to campaign for Common Ownership. Brown was defeated in safe Conservative seat, but he continued his campaign inside the Glacier metal factory.

Lord Wilfred Brown
"I'm completely convinced of the necessity of encouraging everybody to accept the maximum amount of personal responsibility, and allowing them to have a say in every problem in which they can help".

Patrick Wright
Giving the workers a say in everything. This goes far beyond the tokenistic kind of participation practiced by more cautious managers who confine their 'consultation' to matters
they've already decided upon. The Glacier experiment demanded unusually high levels of trust and responsibility, and its own kind of enlightened bureaucracy too. Indeed, Brown set up a kind of works parliament.

Sir John Collyear
"Well, there was a well defined representative system. That was a process whereby people elected other people to represent them in committees and in negotiations with management, which had its pinnacle at the works council, which consisted of one management member, usually one member from the senior staff in a representative capacity, from the middle staff and from the junior staff. I think there three from the middle staff, five from the junior staff and seven from the hourly rated the works committee. This met as a body once a month, after hours, and it was open house, people could come and sit around and listen as a gallery. This worked by unanimous agreement which was the thing that stuck in the throats of most people who were seeking to emulate it".

Patrick Wright
*Now explain what unanimous agreement means.*
"It means that no change in policy could be agreed without all the members of the works council agreeing. Any one had the veto."

Patrick Wright
*So this is a works council that has real decision making power. ["Yes"] It's not merely a consultative body.*
"No, that's quite so. And for example, if any one section of that works council wished to change something like for example in the appointments procedure which required all vacancies to be advertised internally. Then he would put forward a proposition, and if he got agreement, fine, if he didn't get agreement from everybody, then it didn't change".

Patrick Wright
*Now to how far into the policy making in the company did this extend? I mean presumably it didn't go all the way into what sorts of bearings are we going to invest are product development resources in, and things of this sort?*  
"Well strictly speaking there was no subject that was barred".

Patrick Wright
Cynics have long been inclined to dismiss joint consultative schemes for being preoccupied with trivia - 'teas and toilets' as the phrase goes. But, in principal at least, Brown was prepared to involve the workers in decisions of real importance. This placed enormous pressure on those involved in negotiating Glacier's famous unanimous agreements. Bill Morton was the secretary of the works committee for 26 years. He's now in his 80s, but you can still sense the toughness he brought to this difficult job. He remembers being elected, and nearly resigning on the spot when he found himself sandwiched between Brown and his managers, and the already unionised workforce.

Bill Moreton
"If I don't do what he wants me to do, Wilfred Brown, he's gonna sack me, and if I don't do what that works committee instruct me to do, they're gonna bloody well sack me. I'm not gonna be in that position. So I said call the bleedin' union officials in and we'll find out where I stand".

Patrick Wright
Morton's independence was established, and Glacier soon found itself at the centre of
international attention. In recent years British companies have been going to Japan to learn how to get the best out of their workers, but the boot was on the other foot in those days. The British council used to ship in observers from the Far East to learn how it was done, from Bill Morton.

**Bill Moreton**
"The British Council used to send a lot of foreigners to London factories to be interviewed by me, and I used to say to the Japanese in particular because they introduced the system in their country."

**Patrick Wright**
*Into Japan?*
"Yes, and they say, now look, always speak to the person doing the job, not the person who thinks he knows what's being done. I said, now if you talk to the people, I said, who's doing the job he will tell you, I said, and the lowest person, the labourer who's got a pride in his job, and I said you must talk to them. Don't talk you know to the bloke there, I said, you know. Wilfred Brown doesn't know what the people are doing on the shop floor. So I said, I consult them. Find out what their problems are, I said, and that's, I said, to the Japanese, that's the only way that you will get people to cooperate".

**Patrick Wright**
Wilfred Brown extended his search for improvement far beyond the works council and its subcommittees. He abolished a ritual that had come to epitomize the inhumanity of the factory system of the 50s and 60s - 'clocking on'.

**FILM CLIP: 'I'm All Right Jack'.**

**Sir John Collyear** "Well, the idea of people having to clock on and clock off, before starting or finishing a shift, he regarded as being, setting a style of behaviour which took away the job of the manager if people didn't come on time"

**Patrick Wright**
*And so it was a form of distrust.*
"so the idea of knocking them pay for coming late wasn't acceptable. They had to be there on time or have an acceptable reason, and managers were expected to be out there before time, and if people came in late and they did it persistently they would discipline them. And you came in on time regularly or you didn't work there - that was his theory".

**Patrick Wright**
And Wilfred Brown wrote an eloquent defence of his decision to abolish clocking on in one of his books, 'Beyond Piecework':

**Lord Wilfred Brown**
"If you have to take one of your children to hospital in the early hours of the morning, and if inspite of that misfortune you try as a matter of pride to be in time for work, then what would be your state of mind if you are fined 15 minutes pay because you are 5 minutes late? Contrast this with the position which arises after the abolition of clocking. You report your family misfortune to your manager and congratulates you on being only 5 minutes late. We all have heard the oft repeated case of the craftsman who has worked for the company for 30
years, he clocks in every morning but his daughter of 18 who joins the office staff is trusted
to be in on time without such a disciplinary procedure. He is certainly entitled to ask why he
is treated as a less responsible person than his daughter."

**Patrick Wright**
The Glacier project inspired a lot of literature - most famously a book called 'The Changing
Culture of a Factory', published in 1951 and written by Elliott Jaques. Jaques was then
associated with the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, known for its psychologically
and therapeutically informed approach to industrial behaviour. Brought into Glacier to help
with Brown's idealistic transformation of the company, Jaques and his team observed and
noted events in great detail. John Collyear remembers Jaques fondly.

**Sir John Collyear**
"Extremely competent and very, very charming, very good at listening to what people said
and then playing it back to them in a way that enabled them to see what they were thinking in
a new light".

**Patrick Wright**
*So almost like a trainer?*

"Yes except that he would never take a view. It was his job not to take a view but to help
people see their views in different views".

**Patrick Wright**
*So he comes out of a sort of therapeutic model?*

"Yes, that's right, yes. If there was a major problem and people wanted him to do it, he
wouldn't do anything unless they wanted him to. You couldn't say, go and see Elliott Jaques,
you could say if you would like to go and see him".

**Patrick Wright**
Elliott Jaques wasn't a consultant of the parachuting kind, who drops in for two days and then
rushes on to the next lucrative assignment. For years he was something of a fixture at Glacier.
He's still working too - though mainly now on the other side of the Atlantic. I tracked him
down in Toronto, and found the memory of the Glacier metal company still fresh in his mind.

**Elliott Jaques**
"There was an arrangement between the Tavistock Institute, myself representing it, and the
Glacier Metal Company because of Wilfred's interests at that time in so-called industrial
democracy and in group decision making."

**Patrick Wright**
*Now how did people at Glacier see you, I mean take the ordinary worker, when you come in
from the Tavistock, I mean, there must have been a fair amount of curiosity and speculation?*

"And, and, deep, deep, suspicion. And we spent the first month just having wide spread
discussions through the company and gradually we worked through things. I got to the point,
one point in one of the departments where a strike was being discussed, things were very
heated. I was working independently with the management group of that department with the
trade union gang, and in the meetings between the trade unions and management. And the
trust that developed became very very strong, I think Bill Morton would confirm that".
Patrick Wright
Bill Morton can confirm the strength of the negotiating process. However arduous it was to arrive at, once an agreement was reached, both sides had to stick with it. They may not have liked it. They may have called Bill Morton all kinds of names - but it does seem to have worked nonetheless.

Bill Moreton
"We never failed. It never failed. It never even got to the final one because I said look you're going to make a decision, you know, be it a compromise, I said."

Patrick Wright
So did you have many strikes?
"Didn't have any - not while I was in charge."

Patrick Wright
None at all. And did you have trade unionists saying aaww this representative structure was a way of buying off...
"Oh yes, and we told them as far as we're concerned you have an agreement. That's why they called me a bastard because I said look, that's the constitution. I mean I lived at Barnes at the time and we had night shifts, and they were kicking over the ??? and they walked out, and they phoned me up, 2 o'clock in the bloody morning, and they said 'Oh, we're on strike', I said that's all right then, you be there when I get there, so I'll see you 10 o'clock. I said I'm not going to do sod all, mate, I said there's a constitution you've got to adhere to, I said, and you've broken it. You haven't done the first thing have you. That's it. And I get back to bloody work and I said to them, lets talk over the problem that you've got, and they accepted it. Whether they'd accept it from anybody but me I don't know, but one or two said, 'look you get away with bloody murder'".

Patrick Wright
Bill Morton was never in the pocket of his idealistic boss, and he remains highly sceptical about some of Wilfred Brown's antics. He can remember one occasion when Brown summoned the workforce. He stood there in his overcoat saying that, in order to boost productivity at the end of the financial year, he wanted them to work on Saturdays, unpaid.

Bill Moreton
"I said I'm not going to work for nothing, and I'm not going to recommend you do, what you do do is please your bloody self. I say, he was a bloody con man."

Patrick Wright
And they did still work for nothing?
"Yeah, they worked for nothing! Three Saturdays I think they worked. And old Wilf you see, I said yeah, con man I said innit. I mean I dealt with him, I knew what a bastard he was. I said you've had more out of me than you have out of him, you know, you think he's you know, the messiah!"

Sir John Collyear
"Wilfred was an evangelist, par excellence. I think he, in many ways, was his own worst enemy by being so enthusiastic and so evangelistic. I remember at one time, the works committee approached Wilfred Brown to recruit a tool maker, a chap called George Bridges who'd been the national industrial organiser of the Communist Party. He couldn't get a job
anywhere. Wilfred agreed, much to the consternation to some other management and he was taken on under the agreement he would not participate in representative activities. After a number of years he was released from this, and he became one of the greatest advocates of the system, and a strong supporter of it, and had argued many times for following the procedures in the system. Because there were people we recruited from time to time who'd come in, and I remember George Bridges saying we had to be careful of this chap, you're taking him on but he's a trouble maker. And take him on by all means but let us deal with him - and it worked."

Patrick Wright
Tell me about the dining rooms. I always think that they're a good barometer of a company, I mean how many levels of strata are reflected in different canteens.

"Yes, well it's an interesting point because the theory was that anybody could eat anywhere, but in practice they didn't. And there was a senior staff dining room and then a staff dining room, and a canteen for the hourly rated, but anybody could go anywhere - theoretically, but it didn't happen.

Patrick Wright
The Glacier Metal Company survived these experiments, even though the old factory is now a supermarket car park. Wilfred Brown ended up in the Labour Party. Made a life peer in 1964, he worked for Harold Wilson's government as a Minister for Trade. There, his evangelism extended to 'Buy British' campaigns and pushing for better industrial design. In the 1970s Lord Brown was still trying to improve Britain's industrial relations - he even made a short propaganda film to support one of his proposed reforms:

FILM CLIP: Wilfred Brown's film

Patrick Wright
In our privatised world, the thought of a gargantuan state-controlled regulatory system like that evokes a lost age, and that's to put it politely. With hindsight, Elliott Jaques argues that Wilfred Brown's most important contribution to industrial relations is not actually to be found in Glacier's experiment with industrial democracy and unanimous agreement. Instead it lies in Brown's ability to design and analyse systems with an intellectual rigor far removed from the slogans and flashy antics of today's grossly overpaid management consultants.

Elliot Jacques
"The field is absolutely intellectually fallow in my judgment and unable to take a grip on what the hell managerial systems are really about and to take a rigorous systematic approach to their understanding."

Patrick Wright
But the field is maybe empty in one sense, but it's completely packed with management consultancy companies, so what are they doing?

"Making a fortune. What Wilfred got going. He was just untiring in his concern, to help develop decent employment systems because he was aware of their extraordinary importance in society".

Patrick Wright
In the 80s we were used to a kind of management that was very much traveling on the right of the political spectrum, that was about knocking organisations into lean and hungry and fit
animals full of rapacious qualities. But with Wilfred Brown management is not a right-wing thing, is it?

"No, it's a human thing, it's not a right nor left. It's management. These are employment systems, they've got nothing to do Labour or Conservatives or anything. They have their own properties, and what he understood was that they became the dominant institution in modern economically developed societies. In the UK 92% of these figures are very important to me, who work for a living, work for a wage or salary now in an employment hierarchy, only just passed by the United States a few years ago where they've now got up to 93%. Wilfred was quite aware of these things- society is totally unaware, still. The consultants and the gurus and so on continue to play around with these fantasy fads; empowerment and self-managed teams, and now it's competency theory and God knows what. Re-engineering- it goes on and on. I think it's the same issue as why the natural hadn't developed until the 17th century, modern natural sciences, and the answer is that they hadn't, and they were deeply ensconced in alchemy. I think the major point we're talking about now, and Wilfred was deeply aware of this, was the need for a scientifically based approach, and that we've not achieved. The field consultancy and gurus and so on is very much like alchemy; no concepts, no rigorous definition and just waffle and fiddling around, OK?"

Patrick Wright
Many have taken a less enthusiastic view of Wilfred Brown and his experiments. Detractors are inclined to dismiss him as a utopian or eccentric, and to mutter that the Glacier metal company was more an institute for social research than a proper bearings factory. John Collyear would disagree, but he understands why such criticisms arose.

Sir John Collyear
"Well, I must say that that is perhaps an extreme view but the bias of Wilfred Brown seemed to be more towards the perfection of his industrial relations and management ideas than in the establishment of the company as a principal manufacturer across the world. I think that's some what a distorted view."

Patrick Wright
Were these ideas taken up in industry at large?
"By and large, no. There were one or two companies that did, but I think they were put off by the unanimous voting, the veto, which took a big act of faith to introduce".

Patrick Wright
You're an engineer, ["Yes"] you must have some sympathy with the man who comes in and says, "my God, let's cut through all this and just get on with the job!"
"Yes, I mean one always says that at time to time, I'm sure you do in you're job. It's one of these things that you know what has to be done and you want to get on with doing it, but you've got to reckon that you need to take people along with you, and in the long run this pays off. The Japanese are excellent at this and I've seen at our Japanese partners, on other subjects when we're talking about new technology, they'll take ages for it to be iterated backwards and forwards amongst the management, right down to the shop floor and back and so on. It takes months to happen, and then they'll turn around and say 'yes' or 'hi' and then it happens with amazing speed because everybody's committed to it."

Patrick Wright
But the Japanese re-export it in a sense Suddenly in the late 80s people started talking about quality circles, and actually in a funny way I get the sense that what they were, quality circles became the Japanese miracle solution, ["Yes, that's right."] we were all interested in them in
the mid or late 80s, but actually very similar to what you had been doing 20 or 30 years previously.
"Yes, but you notice that the Japanese plants, the foreman of the section manager we would call them, probably gets his 20 or 30 people around him, it's the beginning of the shift and says, 'well look now, this is what we have to do today - we've got a problem in this area, so I'm really going to have to give attention to that, and I really want to get on with doing it this way', and they would understand and they'd get on with it. Now, that is rare in the old style British own manufacturing companies. It works here because we look at the success of the implants - it's nothing to do with the idea, it's the management reluctance. There is more restrictive practices in middle management than anywhere else in industry."

Patrick Wright
There's not much metal work in Alperton nowadays, but the memory of Wilfred Brown's experiment with human nature hasn't vanished quite as completely as the old Glacier metal factory. Odd flashes of interest still arise here and there - 'Aer Rianta', the public company that runs Ireland's three main airports has recently been learning from the Glacier story. But the 1980s belonged to a different kind of manager. Next week I'll investigate an unlikely encounter between thrusting American consultants and wary British local authorities.

End.