CIVIL JUSTICE SYSTEMS

A Comparative Examination of Multi-Party Actions

The Case of Environmental Mass Harm

Joanne Blennerhassett

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A COMPARATIVE EXAMINATION OF MULTI-PARTY ACTIONS

This monograph addresses the phenomenon of mass harm and how it may be resolved through collective redress. It examines particularly how such redress may be achieved through mechanisms such as multi-party actions (MPAs). In order to do this an analytical framework is created against which to evaluate various multi-party procedures. This is illustrated through the experience of a selection of common law jurisdictions in dealing with mass harm, namely that of England and Wales, Canada, Australia and the United States, as well as that of EU collective redress. It examines multi-party action laws benchmarked against the objectives identified in the analytical framework. The phenomenon of environmental mass harm in particular is explored as a case study, as it illustrates some of the difficulties that may arise in mass harm litigation. Also, this work explores where the best solutions for mass harm redress may lie in the future—perhaps in collective actions or through alternatives such as regulation and alternative dispute resolution or a combination of these. Finally, the experience of mass harm litigation in Ireland is examined, as currently this jurisdiction does not have an effective mechanism for dealing with mass harm.

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To my family, my Doctors of Love.

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FOREWORD

The perennial question of how to deliver collective redress is complex and multifarious. It is one that continues to vex policymakers and lawyers. The reality of the way in which modern life operates has led to an increase in 'massification' on many levels, such as mass production and mass consumption. Unfortunately the occurrence of mass harm is also increasingly evident in our time.

We are familiar with the broad spectrum of types of harm that may occur, ranging from mass injuries caused by defective products or environmental exposure to toxic chemicals, to mass financial losses resulting, inter alia, from violations of consumer law or competition law. In almost every part of the world, unfortunately, such harm may occur and the need for redress becomes a key question. Where do the solutions to providing collective redress to mass harm lie? The answer may be found in an array of approaches such as through regulation or dispute resolution. The appropriate response varies and it is clear that there is no 'one size fits all' answer to the phenomenon of mass harm. The issue of access to justice for those who suffer mass harm is a concomitant question. In appropriate circumstances, where legal proceedings result, groups of victims may wish to aggregate their legal proceedings in order to try to surmount some of the obstacles that they may face in pursuing a legal action individually. One of the procedural mechanisms that has evolved as a response is that of the multi-party action (MPA).

The author, Dr Blennerhassett, as an expert in tort law and dispute resolution, examines the issues surrounding mass harm, collective redress and MPAs in a broad and practical way to address these questions. She has scrutinised the experience of a selection of common law jurisdictions and analyses how they have dealt with MPAs and alternative tools in the pursuit of collective redress. The US, as a forerunner in multi-party actions, teaches broad lessons and evidences many of the positives and perceived ills of mass litigation. England and Wales have adopted a much more conservative approach to such litigation. Dr Blennerhassett's expertise in EU law helps the reader to engage with EU policy and EU Member State experience in addressing the challenges of mass harm, as many Member States have faced similar difficulties in responding to such harm. She appraises whether and to what extent MPAs may improve access to justice and empower those harmed with a route to collective redress. Dr Blennerhassett has created an excellent analytical framework of MPA objectives and uses these as benchmarks to assess how and whether MPAs may assist in the pursuit of collective redress. This is a unique and valuable contribution to scholarship in the field of dispute resolution. As an environmental law specialist, Dr Blennerhassett invokes the phenomenon of environmental mass harm as a case study to illustrate some of the challenges and complexities that mass harm litigation can present.

Having a background and training as a practitioner, Dr Blennerhassett recognises the need to explore the very real challenges facing those dealing with mass harm and she was strongly motivated by the practical law reform aspect of this research. The results of this

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work are both informative and compelling. It is clear from her research that jurisdictions without some form of procedural mechanism are impeding access to justice for those who have suffered mass harm.

Dr Blennerhassett concludes that MPAs are not the panacea to mass harm litigation. Instead, they only form part of a suite of solutions that may enable access to justice and collective redress. She advocates a holisitic approach to such redress, highlighting the use of regulatory solutions and alternative dispute resolution techniques as complementary tools in this range of solutions. It is clear that MPAs have a crucial role as management mechanisms for dealing with cases of mass harm. While MPA methods may vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, their objective does not. The methods invoked reflect the realities of the different legal systems. The question of which MPA mechanism may best suit each jurisdiction is a policy decision based on these realities. All of the jurisdictions examined are endeavouring to achieve the same output of managing collective redress, the overriding need being that of procedural justice. This conclusion is supported by the author's analytical framework which clarifies that the fundamental reason for the need for MPAs is to enable the efficient management of mass harm litigation so as to maximise just outcomes; that they are an invaluable procedural tool to assist in 'managing the unmanageable'.

Ireland is an example of a jurisdiction that has clearly experienced many large instances of mass harm, often resulting in costly, unmanageable, inefficient litigation or compensation tribunals. A few examples include: the army deafness cases against the State; the blood contamination caused by Hepatitis C; the pyrite construction damage that resulted in the longest-running case in the history of the High Court. Despite a clear procedural need for managing mass harm redress, Ireland still does not have an effective MPA procedure. Moreover, MPAs appear to be actively discouraged. Instead, the courts invoke a confusing array of alternative methods where MPAs might have played a more obvious role. In 2005, the Irish Law Reform Commission (LRC) recommended the introduction of an MPA procedure as an additional procedural mechanism to assist with mass harm litigation for use in cases where there is a clear need. Despite this recommendation, more than 10 years later there has still been no change. Dr Blennerhassett raises a number of critical questions in this work that need to be urgently addressed and resolved. These questions include: why a jurisdiction such as Ireland, despite having experienced many cases of mass harm and litigation, remains reluctant to introduce MPAs? Why has it not yet taken steps to adopt a procedural mechanism that will enhance access to justice for those who need it? More than 10 years after the Law Reform Commission recommendations, why have these questions not been resolved?

One may speculate that there are policy reasons behind this stagnation as there seems to be an almost de facto prohibition on such a mechanism. Perhaps it is because the State is likely to be a regular defendant in cases of mass tort and personal injury litigation. It is also likely that a fear exists of opening the cliched floodgates of litigation if such a procedure were to be introduced without adequate controls. The LRC, however, recommended the introduction of a procedure designed to minimize such risk. Due the lack of appropriate mechanism, those with cases that would be suited to MPA must pursue them in another way. It is evident that great injustices and inefficiencies would result from these improvisations. Claims that the introduction of an MPA procedure would encourage a 'compensation culture' are erroneous, because, in suitable cases, MPAs can assist the efficient management of such cases. While MPAs are not a metaphorical silver bullet that will resolve all the

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challenges of delivering effective collective redress, they are a necessary procedural mechanism that ought to be in the legal armoury of any jurisdiction in order to assist in providing access to procedural justice. Dr Blennerhassett offers a keen insight into the nature and necessity of MPAs as a response to the modern phenomenon of mass harm. She explores why Ireland, in particular, not only requires but also deserves this legal mechanism in order to protect its people from those who have caused mass harm. This book will provide invaluable guidance to judges, lawyers, academics and policymakers who inevitably face the modern challenge of managing mass harm litigation.

Peter Sutherland SC

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CONTENTS

Foreword vii
Acknowledgements xvii
Author Biography xix

Part I: Collective Redress, Mass Harm, Multi-party Actions and Environmental Mass Harm

1. Introduction 3
   1. Background 3
   2. Aims, Original Contribution, Anticipatory Findings 4
   3. Approach 6
   4. Structure 9
      A. Part I 9
      B. Part II 10

2. Collective Redress and Mass Harm 11
   1. Overview 11
   2. Terminology 12
      A. Mass Harm 12
      B. Collective Redress 12
      C. Multi-party Actions 13
      D. Mass Torts 14
   3. Typology and Sectoral Coverage of MPA Collective Redress 16
      A. Class Actions (also Known as Collective or Representative Actions) 17
      B. Joinder or Aggregate (also Known as Group) Litigation Procedures 20
      C. Examples of MPA Sectors 21
         i. Consumer Law Collective Redress 21
         ii. Competition Law Collective Redress 23
         iii. Collective Redress for Environmental Harm 23
         iv. EU Approach to Collective Redress 23
   4. The History and Background of Mass Torts 25
   5. Legal Responses to Mass Harm: Private Law (Tort Law) versus Public Law and Regulation 28
   6. Context in which Collective Redress Arises 32

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7. Outline of Common Law MPA Procedures 33
A. United States 33
i. Consolidation 33
ii. Class Actions 34
B. Canada 37
C. Australia 40
i. Joinder, Test Cases and Consolidation 42
ii. Representative Proceedings 42
D. England and Wales 45
i. Consolidation, Joinder and Test Cases 46
ii. Representative Actions 46
iii. Group Litigation Orders 47
E. Ireland 49
i. Representative Actions 51
ii. Joinder 51
iii. Consolidation 51
iv. Test Cases 52
F. European Union 52
8. Summary 56

3. Objectives of MPAs 58
1. Overview 58
2. Expert Studies 59
A. Access to Justice Study by Lord Woolf MR 59
B. Irish Law Reform Commission Report on Multi-party Litigation 2005 60
C. Civil Justice Council Report 63
D. Mulheron Global Comparative Study 64
E. European Commission Analysis 64
3. MPA Objectives—Analytical Framework 67
A. Access to Justice 69
B. Judicial and Procedural Economy 76
C. Fairness 80
D. Predictability 85
E. Deterrence 86
F. Compensation 88
4. Management Role of MPAs 91
5. Summary 97

4. Environmental Mass Harm and Collective Redress 98
1. Overview 98
2. Regulatory Role—Environmental Law Enforcement Through Tort Law 100
A. Tensions between Tort Law and Regulation 101
B. EU Perspective of Enforcement—a Different Approach 102
C. England and Wales—Perspective on Enforcement 103
D. Regulation and Adjudication 106

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3. Distinctive Features of Environmental Mass Harm and Responses 107
A. Toxic Torts 107
B. Causation and Evidential Complexity 110
C. Legal Costs 112
D. Latency 113
E. Environmental Justice Issues 116
F. Other Issues that May Arise in Mass Environmental Harm Litigation 119
i. Jurisdiction 119
ii. Corporate Veil 120
4. Novel Remedies for Environmental Mass Harm 121
A. Interim Measures—such as Medical Monitoring (Emergence in the US) 121
B. Acute versus Chronic Environmental Harm and Novel Remedies 123
C. Equitable Relief and Problems with Legal Restitution 123
5. Solutions that MPAs May Offer for Environmental Mass Harm 125

Part II: Comparative Law Experience of Selected Common Law Jurisdictions and Europe

5. US Collective Redress 131
1. US Litigation Landscape 131
A. US Federal and State Court System 131
B. Important Features of US Litigation 132
2. US MPA Procedures 133
A. Joinder 133
B. Consolidation 134
C. Multidistrict Litigation (MDL) Transfer of Distinct but Related Claims into a Single Action 134
D. US Bankruptcy Proceedings for Corporate Reorganisation (Chapter 11) 135
E. Attorney 'Inventories' of Clients Controlled by a Single Lawyer 135
F. Representative Litigation by Associations 135
G. Representative Litigation by Public Officials 136
H. Class Actions 136
3. The US Federal Class Action Regime 136
4. Rule 23 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure (with 2003 Amendments) 139
A. Rule 23(a) Prerequisites to a Class Action 139
B. Rule 23(b) Class Actions Maintainable 140
5. Evaluation of US Class Actions against MPA Objectives 142
A. Access to Justice 143
B. Judicial and Procedural Economy 144
C. Fairness 147
D. Predictability 150
E. Deterrence 151
F. Compensation 152

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6. Concluding Observations on US Mass Harm Litigation 152
7. Future Developments in the US 154
8. US Class Actions and Environmental Mass Harm 156

6. Canadian MPA Experience 159
1. Canadian Litigation Landscape 159
A. Overview 159
B. Evolution of MPA Landscape 160
2. MPA Litigation 161
3. Evaluation of Canadian Class Action Experience Against MPA Objectives 168
A. Access to Justice 168
B. Judicial and Procedural Economy 169
C. Fairness 170
D. Predictability 171
E. Deterrence 171
F. Compensation 171
4. Environmental Mass Harm Litigation 172
5. Summary 173

7. Australian MPA Experience 174
1. Australian Litigation Landscape 174
2. Evolution of MPA Landscape 174
3. MPA Overview 177
A. The Quasi-Class Action Regime in the State of South Australia 177
B. Traditional Representative Actions 178
C. Representative Proceedings 178
D. Joinder, Test Cases and Consolidation 179
4. The Representative Proceedings Regime 180
A. Background 180
B. The Regime 182
5. Litigation Funding 186
6. Evaluation of Australian Representative Proceedings against MPA Objectives 187
A. Access to Justice 187
B. Judicial and Procedural Economy 187
C. Fairness 188
D. Predictability 189
E. Deterrence 189
F. Compensation 189
7. Environmental Mass Harm in Australia and Summary 190

8. Collective Redress in England and Wales 191
1. Litigation Landscape 191
2. Existing MPA Procedures 192
A. Public Representative Procedures 192

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B. Representative Actions, Consolidation, Joinder and Group Litigation Orders (GLOs) 195
i. Representative Actions 196
ii. Group Litigation Orders (GLOs) 199
3. Evolution of MPA Landscape 202
4. Funding Regime and Recent Changes 207
5. GLOs and MPA Objectives 209
A. Access to Justice 209
B. Judicial and Procedural Economy 210
C. Fairness 211
D. Predictability 212
E. Deterrence 213
F. Compensation 213
6. Combined Case Study of Environmental Mass Harm 213
A. Group Litigation Using a GLO in *The Corby Group Litigation Case* 216
i. Facts 216
ii. Outcome 217
iii. Commentary 218
B. Case Management—*The Buncefield Oil Disaster* 219
i. Facts 219
ii. Outcome 220
iii. Commentary 221
7. GLOs Compared with Case Management 223
8. Environmental Mass Harm Litigation in England and Wales Summary 225
A. Access to Justice 226
B. Judicial and Procedural Economy 227
C. Fairness 228
D. Predictability 229
E. Deterrence 229
F. Compensation 229

9. EU Collective Redress 232
1. Litigation Landscape 232
2. Evolution of European Collective Redress Policy 233
A. Consumer Law Collective Redress 233
B. Competition Law Collective Redress 237
3. EU Experience of Collective Redress and ADR in Member States 239
4. EU Commission's Collective Redress Policy Proposals 2013 245
A. The Communication 247
B. The Recommendation 248
C. Proposed Directive on Competition Damages 250
5. Safeguards 251
6. Environment 252
7. Conclusions on European Collective Redress Outlook 253

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10. Collective Redress for Mass Harm in Ireland 255
1. Litigation Landscape 255
2. The Irish Approach: No MPAs 256
A. Overview of Current Irish Mechanisms for Dealing with Mass Harm 257
i. Public Actions 257
ii. Organisation Actions 257
iii. Litigation Avoidance 258
iv. EU Initiatives 259
v. Private Actions 259
vi. Other Discrete Areas 260
B. Cases Exemplifying the Problems of Mass Harm Litigation in Ireland 261
i. Social Welfare Equality Cases 261
ii. Army Deafness Claims 261
iii. Pyrite Construction Dispute 262
3. Particular Difficulties with Multi-party Litigation in Ireland 262
A. Legal Aid 263
B. Insurance 264
C. Costs Follow the Event 264
D. Conditional Fee Arrangements (CFAs) 264
E. Advertising and the Irish Legal Profession 264
4. Irish Law Reform Commission Report on Multi-party Litigation 2005—A Closer Look 265
5. Evaluation of Irish Mass Harm Mechanisms and MPA Objectives 266
A. Access to Justice 267
B. Judicial and Procedural Economy 269
C. Fairness 269
D. Predictability, Deterrence and Compensation 270
6. Environmental Enforcement in Ireland 270
7. What May Lie Ahead 270
A. Developments in England and Wales 270
B. Aarhus and Human Rights 271
C. EU Initiatives 272
8. Conclusions 272

11. Conclusion 274

Appendix: Federal Rules of Civil Procedure 2016 Edition 283

Bibliography 287
Index 299

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