The Stakeholder Principle, Corporate Governance and Theory – Evidence from the Field and the Path Onward

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Evidence from the Field and the Path Onward

[It makes a great difference in my attitude towards my job as an executive officer of the General Electric Company whether I am a trustee of the institution or an attorney for the investor. If I am a trustee, who are the beneficiaries of the trust? To whom do I owe my obligations?]

~Owen D. Young (1929)

I. Introduction

The stakeholder principle has gained increased recognition in corporate governance in the recent times. It is understood, by and large, as a refinement of the more limited conception of business corporations as vehicles whose function is to promote the economic interests of their shareholders. The stakeholder idea has always been present in corporate law. Its scheme of creditor protection, which is one of the foundational principles, is proof of this fact. The stakeholder vision articulated in the recent times is, however, more expansive and proactive. It covers a large number of non-shareholder groups – employees, suppliers, communities and so on – and seeks to promote active corporate engagement in protecting the interests of these groups and promoting their welfare.

This article provides an overview of the development of the stakeholder idea, and presents the results from a survey of the American, British and Canadian corporations included in the Fortune 500 Global Corporations (2009) for their adoption of the stakeholder principle. The survey finds near-unanimous acceptance of the stakeholder vision. 97 percent of the US, UK, and Canadian companies included in the survey acknowledge the stakeholder principle in some form. The trend of adoption of the stakeholder model is unmistakable, and this has significant implications for corporate theory. The article also examines how the emerging ideas about stakeholders and the recognition of their interests in law can fit into corporate theory. For doing so, it applies the tools of


2 It is, of course, tempting to raise a skeptical eyebrow, and question how far the companies are indulging in fashionable rhetoric, and their seriousness about the idea. I discuss this dimension later in the article.
a nascent school of legal theory – namely, new legal realism. The article argues for a clear articulation of the conceptual underpinning of business corporations and resolving some inconsistencies in the current framework.

The article is divided into five parts. Part II provides an overview of the development of stakeholder idea in corporate governance. Next, Part III presents the results of a survey of US, UK, and Canadian business corporations included in the Fortune 500 Global Corporations (2009). The results affirm the strengthening of the stakeholder principle, and are the foundation for the proposals made in the article for a statement of corporate theory. Part IV traces the development of corporate theory and its relationship with the stakeholder vision. Referring to the ambiguities and inconsistencies in the structure of corporate law, theory and governance, Part IV argues for a deliberated statement of the character and objectives of business corporations – one that reflects the experience gained and is attuned to the needs of the present and the future. Finally, Part V concludes with a tentative list of the features that can be considered for inclusion in corporate theory for the 21st century and beyond.

II. Shareholder Primacy and the Stakeholder Principle – An Overview

The stakeholder principle has its roots in corporate law and the principle of shareholder primacy. This part provides a brief outline of the shareholder primacy principle, and the emergence and growth of the stakeholder idea. It has three sections. Section (A) outlines shareholder primacy, which is followed, in Section (B), with an account of the concern in law for non-shareholder groups. Lastly, Section (C) provides an overview of the stakeholder regimes that now exist in Britain, America and Canada.

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3 Shareholder primacy is usually presented as the central principle of Anglo-American corporate law. See e.g. Henry Hansmann and Reinier Kraakman, "The End of History for Corporate Law" (2001) 89 Georgetown L. J. 439.
A. Shareholder Primacy – The Governing Rule?

The shareholder primacy rule was developed in the US and UK in different circumstances. The differences between the two jurisdictions are significant. This section reviews the origin of the shareholder primacy principle and its implications in the US and UK.

1. United States

The stakeholder debate has its origin in the preeminent position usually accorded to the shareholders. Traditionally in the common law countries, shareholders are understood as the owners of companies. This is more explicit in British company law where the statutes conventionally term the shareholders as “members” and describe companies as shareholders in the collective. Indeed, they regularly refer to the body of shareholders as the “company.” This reflects the underlying notion of identity between the shareholders and the companies. The position is not equally clear or explicit in North American corporate law, but there can be little doubt about the “ownership-like” status of corporate shareholders in the US and Canada. Shareholders have the right to elect and remove directors who control the corporations. Shareholders are also “residual claimants,” as economic theory stresses. These features establish the preeminence of shareholders in the corporate framework.

Similar to the law of trusts and agency, corporate law equates the directors of companies with trustees and agents. It places company directors under fiduciary duties because they are supposed to act for others, rather than in their own interests. Consistent with the proprietary idea associated

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4 The debate launched by Owen Young in 1929, supra note 1, was in this idiom. Young, who was a lawyer by training, accurately reflected the legal notions about directors’ duties as they had developed by then.
6 Companies Act 2006, Section 16(2).
7 See e.g. ibid., Section 77 about change of company name by a special resolution of the shareholders.
9 Stephen M. Bainbridge pointed out that statutes vest most of the corporate powers, operational and policymaking, in the directors, and has used this feature of corporate law to develop his theory about director primacy. “Director Primacy: The Means and Ends of Corporate Governance” (2003) Nw. U. L. Rev. 547. The interpretation of Bainbridge, while factually correct, would not detract from the position of the shareholders outlined here. The near-absolute powers the directors now enjoy are the product of a process of legal development, which is outside the scope of this article. Significantly, Bainbridge has argued in favour of the application of directors’ powers for shareholder wealth maximization.
with shareholders, US corporate law has treated directors as custodians of the property of the shareholders, since late 19th century.\textsuperscript{10} The idea found forceful expression in the famous passages in \textit{Dodge v. Ford Motor Co.} (1919),\textsuperscript{11} extracted below.

A business corporation is organized and carried on primarily for the profit of the stockholders. The powers of the directors are to be employed for that end. The discretion of directors is to be exercised in the choice of means to attain that end and does not extend to a change in the end itself, to the reduction of profits or to the non-distribution of profits among stockholders in order to devote them to other purposes.

There is committed to the discretion of directors, a discretion to be exercised in good faith, the infinite details of business, including the wages which shall be paid to employees, the number of hours they shall work, the conditions under which labor shall be carried on, and the prices for which products shall be offered to the public. It is said by appellants that the motives of the board members are not material and will not be inquired into by the court so long as their acts are within their lawful powers. As we have pointed out, and the proposition does not require argument to sustain it, it is not within the lawful powers of a board of directors to shape and conduct the affairs of a corporation for the merely incidental benefit of shareholders and for the primary purpose of benefiting others, and no one will contend that if the avowed purpose of the defendant directors was to sacrifice the interests of shareholders it would not be the duty of the courts to interfere.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} This was when when most states had enacted general incorporation statutes. Till this happened, the tendency in the US was to view corporations as institutions created by the state. General incorporation encouraged the idea that shareholders entered into a contract, pooled their capital, and elected the directors as their agents to run the companies. See generally, Morton J. Horwitz, “\textit{Santa Clara} Revisited: The Development of Corporate Theory” (1986) 88 W. Va. L. Rev. 173.


\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. online version at 8.
These observations dealt with only one aspect of the case, but the tendency is to present them as the statement of the central principle of corporate law.\textsuperscript{13} They are cited as the statement of the shareholder primacy rule that places managements under a duty to strive for shareholder wealth maximization. This is, however, an incomplete interpretation of \textit{Dodge v. Ford Motor Co.}\textsuperscript{14}

The \textit{Dodge} case was what one would term an oppression action in UK company law. In an oppression action, a minority shareholder who is helpless against the group in control of the company can seek relief against acts that are oppressive towards the minorities. Henry Ford, the majority shareholder in control of the corporation, refused to distribute the retained earnings through dividends and spurned the minority shareholders when they approached him for a discussion. In the action brought by the minority shareholders, Ford presented his defense in terms of public benefit and use of the retained earnings for promoting the public good. It is a different matter that Ford planned to use the funds for backward integration by erecting a smelter which would bring down the costs and improve the competitiveness of Ford cars.

In the factual situation outlined, the court ordered Ford to distribute half the retained earnings as dividend to the shareholders. While doing so, the court also upheld the plans for erecting the smelter, applying what is now called the business judgment rule. Equally important, the court also endorsed corporate philanthropy. In the US, an element of public interest has generally been considered implicit in the grant of incorporation by legislatures. Grant of incorporation involves the exercise of public power, and it must advance the public good in some respect.\textsuperscript{15} Therefore

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corporations can legitimately incur welfare expenditure. By 1919 when *Dodge* was decided, courts in the US had already upheld the powers of business corporations to:

- Incur expenditure to improve employees’ health (*People Metropolitan Life Insurance Co. v. Hotchkiss*)
- Provide housing to employees (*Steinway v. Steinway & Sons*)
- Set up hospital facilities in the town of business (*Corning Glass Works v. Lucas*)

Referring to the law on corporate philanthropy, the court observed in *Dodge*:

> These cases, after all, like all others in which the subject is treated, turn finally upon the point, the question, whether it appears that the directors were not acting for the best interests of the corporation. We do not draw in question, nor do counsel for the plaintiffs do so, the validity of the general proposition stated by counsel nor the soundness of the opinions delivered in the cases cited. The case presented here is not like any of them. The difference between an incidental humanitarian expenditure of corporate funds for the benefit of the employee[s], like the building of a hospital for their use and the employment of agencies for the betterment of their condition, and a general purpose and plan to benefit mankind at the expense of others, is obvious. *There should be no confusion (of which there is evidence) of the duties which Mr. Ford conceives that he and the stockholders owe to the*

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16 Corporate philanthropy came under attack from the 1960s. The much-cited newspaper article of Milton Friedman, “The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase Profits” was an attack on the application of corporate resources by managers for public or charitable purposes (*The New York Times Magazine*, September 13, 1970, available online: [http://www.colorado.edu/studentgroups/libertarians/issues/friedman-soc-resp-business.html](http://www.colorado.edu/studentgroups/libertarians/issues/friedman-soc-resp-business.html), accessed September 13, 2011. In the framework of Friedman, managers were the agents of shareholders and they had no business to use shareholders’ wealth for social or beneficial purposes.

18 17 Misc. 43, 40 N.Y. Supp. 718 (1896).
general public and the duties which in law he and his co-directors owe to protesting, minority stockholders.\textsuperscript{20} (Emphasis mine)

After making this clarification, the court pronounced its much-quoted \textit{dictum} that a “business corporation is organized and carried on primarily for the profit of the stockholders.” If we also consider the preamble, it is obvious that we cannot interpret \textit{Dodge} as merely laying down the profit maximization or shareholder primacy rule. It does not preclude or corporate philanthropy, if it is incidental to the business of the corporation and does not supplant the business or commercial considerations. An interesting question is whether the “incidental” expenditure on philanthropy must have a business connection.\textsuperscript{21}

2. United Kingdom

In the UK, the law on corporate philanthropy developed along different lines, conditioned by the prevailing political economy. The corporate form of enterprise in Britain did not carry the strong political and social overtones it did in the US, which adopted democracy and equality among its founding principles. Companies were understood essentially as economic vehicles in Britain, and the heated debates about corporate power that pulsed in America had less relevance on the other side of the Atlantic where the political and power structures were relatively ancient and entrenched.

Public interest was, thus, not a major factor or consideration in the grant of incorporation in UK. As a result, ideas about corporate charity or spending money for general welfare had less resonance in the British environment. On the other hand, the principal-agent relationship between shareholders and directors was always strongly etched in the consciousness. As a result, there was an emphasis on protecting the shareholders and curbing the freedom of the directors to deal with

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Su\textsuperscript{a}ro} note 11, online version, at 7-8.

\textsuperscript{21} The discussion later in this article will show that it need not have such a connection to the business or potential for conferring a benefit on the corporation. This is explicitly codified in the \textit{Model Business Corporations Act} (2005), §3.02.
corporate resources. Hutton v. West Cork Railway (1883) presented an early example of this habit of thought. The court had to deal with an extra-contractual payment to the employees of a company in liquidation. Terming the payment “charity,” the court held:

Charity has no business to sit at boards of directors qua charity. There is, however, a kind of charitable dealing which is for the interest of those who practise it, and to that extent and in that garb (I admit not a very philanthropic garb) charity may sit at the board, but for no other purpose.

Money which is not theirs but the company’s, if they are spending it for the purposes which are reasonably incidental to the carrying on of the business of the company. That is the general doctrine. Bona fides cannot be the sole test, otherwise you might have a lunatic conducting the affairs of the company, and paying away its money with both hands in a manner perfectly bona fide yet perfectly irrational... It is for the directors to judge, provided it is a matter which is reasonably incidental to the carrying on of the business of the company... The law does not say that there are to be no cakes and ale, but there are to be no cakes and ale except such as are required for the benefit of the company.

Directors could spend money on charity, but it had to benefit the company. Despite the difference in social and political climate in the UK and US, the standard laid down in Hutton v. West Cork Railway roughly corresponded to the one in American corporate law, which permitted philanthropy that was “incidental.” But the UK standard was more explicit that incidental welfare expenditure had to be for the primary purpose of earning profits for shareholders’ benefit.

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22 Adam Smith appears to have been the first to warn about abusive practices by company directors and the consequent injury to the interests of the investor-shareholders. An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1787) (New York: The Modern Library, 1937) at 700. However, complaints about companies go back further. See generally A.B. Du Bois, The English Business Company after the Bubble Act, 1720-1800 (New York: Commonwealth Fund, 1938).
23 (1883) 23 Ch. D. 654 at 673.
24 Ibid.
Cases such as *Dodge v. Ford Motor Co.* and *Hutton v. West Cork Railway* reflected the contemporary notions about business corporations. They affirmed the proprietary position of shareholders and established the fiduciary duties that directors owed shareholders. The limitations on directors’ powers to engage in beneficial acts were reiterated in Britain in *Parke v. Daily News Ltd* (1962), which is discussed a little later.\(^{25}\) These older UK cases reflected the contractarian foundations of companies in the UK and the absence of the institutional vision that defines the stakeholder principle.

**B. Stakeholder Concerns – Emergence and Development**

Since early on, corporate law did not confine its concerns to shareholders. This is evident from creditor protection, which is a longstanding and foundational principle of the law of corporations. In the US, historically, corporations were created by legislative charters.\(^{26}\) Till late 19\(^{th}\) century, the institutional idea was dominant in the US and corporations were considered distinct legal entities. They were not to be confused with their shareholders.\(^{27}\) Therefore, there could be no question of shareholders being liable for corporate debts. This left the creditors in a vulnerable position. The characteristic differences between creditors and shareholders, who both had financial involvement in the corporations, were clearly understood.

Firstly, shareholders contributed risk capital to the corporations and their investment was, by definition, exposed to business risks. The case was different with creditors – both lenders and persons who sold goods or services to the corporations on credit. Creditors, unlike shareholders, did not explicitly assume risk in dealing with corporations. Secondly, despite their financial involvement with the corporations, creditors had no say in the constitution of corporate control – namely, the

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\(^{26}\) This is unlike the position in England, which had a large number of unincorporated companies created by private arrangements in the common law. *Joint Stock Companies Act 1844* (7 & 8 Vict., c. 110 & 111 (U.K.) was meant to regulate such large unincorporated associations by requiring them to register their constituent documents and placing them under a number of obligations such as providing financial reports and audit of accounts.

\(^{27}\) See e.g. *Bank of Augusta v. Earle*, 38 U.S. (13 Pet.) 519 (1839).
election of directors or in any other aspect of corporate governance. In this sense, creditors were disenfranchised and were at a disadvantage.\textsuperscript{28}

Sensitivity to the vulnerable position of the creditors led to the development of the Trust Fund Doctrine in the US early in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{29} The doctrine treated the capital stock of corporations as funds held in trust for the creditors, and its development is evidence of stakeholder concerns in the nascent law of business corporations. The Trust Fund Doctrine, which treated corporate capital as static and fixed in character, was found to be ineffective in dealing with the issue of erosion of capital through losses.\textsuperscript{30} It has been replaced by the more wholesome solvency test.

Employees, another important constituency in business corporations, also received attention in corporate law. Several American statutes in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century made the directors of corporations personally liable for the wages payable to employees.\textsuperscript{31} This continued into the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, with states such as New York imposing personal liability on directors for workers’ wages.\textsuperscript{32}

In the UK, shareholders did not enjoy the protection of limited liability until 1855. It was, therefore, unnecessary at the time to develop special protections for the creditors of companies. Shareholders were personally liable for companies’ debts, and use of the corporate form made no difference to the position. UK granted the protection of limited liability to shareholders through the \textit{Limited Liability Act 1855}.\textsuperscript{33} This made protection for the creditors a pressing issue because shareholders were no longer personally liable for companies’ debts. A set of rules, known as the Capital Maintenance rules, were developed in the UK to safeguard the interests of creditors. Capital Maintenance rules, similar in principle to the American Trust Fund Doctrine, compelled shareholders

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Shareholder immunity to corporate debt was the general rule, although some early charters made shareholders and/or directors personally liable for the liabilities of corporations. See Joseph Davis, \textit{supra} note 15, Vol. II at 69 and 105-106.
\item \textsuperscript{30} For complaints about the efficacy of the Trust Fund Doctrine, see Edwin S. Hunt, “The Trust Fund Theory and Some Substitutes for It” (1902) 12 Yale L. J. 63.
\item \textsuperscript{31} See J.W. Hurst, \textit{supra} note 15 at 27.
\item \textsuperscript{32} See e.g. David Millon’s discussion of the New York corporations statute in “Theories of the Corporation” [1990] Duke L. J. 201.
\item \textsuperscript{33} 18 & 19 Vict., c. 133.
\end{itemize}
to pay in the agreed amount of risk capital and protected the corporate resources from the reach of the shareholders. The intention was to preserve the resources for the benefit of creditors.  

Capital maintenance rules in Britain included the requirement of court approval for reduction of capital. This principle was also extended to companies purchasing their own shares. The rule that dividends could only be paid to shareholders out of profits was another instrument that protected the interests of the creditors. Courts were generally strict in interpreting companies’ bylaws to promote the principle of creditor protection. In Davison v. Gilles, the court had to deal with a provision in the bylaws that enabled the payment of dividends from reserves, and observed that “you do not get a reserve fund until you have paid your current expenses.”

With respect to company employees, the law in UK developed on a path different from the US. It was more formalistic. Welfare considerations were not prominent in the UK framework. As pointed out earlier, courts struck down gratuitous payments to the employees of companies in liquidation. Interestingly in Parke v. Daily News (1962), the directors of the company conceded that their “prime duty must be to the shareholders,” yet argued that “boards of directors must take into consideration their duties to employees in these days” (emphasis mine). But the court answered, rather legalistically:

[B]ut no authority to support that proposition as a proposition of law was cited to me; I know of none and in my judgment such is not the law.

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36 MacDougall v. Jersey Imperial Hotel Co. (1864), 2 H. & M. 528 appears to be earliest authority on this subject.
37 (1879), 16 Ch.D. 347n.
38 Cited in Ardern & Aitken, supra note 34 at 44.
40 Ibid.
The Parke decision, however, set in motion a process of change. In 1980, almost two decades after the case was decided, amendments were made to the Companies Act to enable terminal payments to employees. The opportunity was also utilized to expand the general scope of directors’ duties and introduce the regulatory stakeholder principle in a preliminary form. The amendment placed directors under a duty to consider the “interests of the employees in general” as well as the shareholders.

To be fair, efforts to improve the position of employees of companies in liquidation had begun in UK even earlier. Companies Act 1948, enacted by a Labor government in post-World War II Britain was more proactive in espousing employee interests. Subject to some limitations, it bracketed the wages payable to employees and companies’ contributions towards their pension and health benefits with the tax arrears due to the government, and employees were given preferential rights in winding up proceedings. Dues to employees had statutory equal ranking with the secured debts of companies in liquidation. This improved the position of the employees who would have otherwise joined the ranks of unsecured creditors and been more vulnerable.

The law on corporate philanthropy, as already pointed out, has traditionally been more liberal in North America. The power of corporations to spend money on general welfare was recognized in the 19th century. In A.P. Smith Mfg. Co. v. Barlow (1954), the court upheld a donation made to Princeton University by a New Jersey corporation. The statute of New Jersey expressly permitted such donations, but the court dismissed the challenge to the donation without referring to the statutory provision. Significantly, the court did not also interpret the contribution in terms of its potential benefit for the corporation, which would have indirectly affirmed the principle of shareholder primacy. The court ruled that “modern conditions require that corporations

41 Companies Act 1980, Section 74(1).
42 Ibid. Section 46(1).
43 Companies Act 1948, Section 319.
acknowledge and discharge social as well as private responsibilities.”46 This decision endorsed the stakeholder vision as an independent value. It need not necessarily be justified in terms of its potential to generate benefits for a corporation or its shareholders.

The broad conception of corporations in American law is a historical fact. The view that the corporate goal is limited to earning profits for the benefit of a select group – namely, shareholders is not the entire truth. Statutory provisions on corporate charity and the decision in A.P. Smith affirm this principle. The liberal approach towards corporate philanthropy continues in America.47 The principles of governance developed by American Law Institute (ALI) empower corporations to “devote a reasonable amount of resources to public welfare, humanitarian, educational, and philanthropic purposes,” even when “corporate profit and shareholder gain are not thereby enhanced.”48 This travels beyond simple agency or trust paradigms and accepts the idea that corporate resources can be utilized, within limits, for generally beneficial purposes even when no business advantage results from the expenditure. Similarly, the Model Business Corporations Act authorizes a corporation to “to make donations for the public welfare or for charitable, scientific, or educational purposes,” if such donations are not prohibited under the constitutions of individual corporations.49 The issue is not tied to any benefits to the corporation, either actual or potential.

An important contribution to stakeholder theory has come from Margaret Blair and Lynn Stout, who articulated their team production model of business corporations.50 Blair and Stout conceived directors as “mediating hierarchs” who are under a duty to promote equity in the distribution of the corporate surplus among different constituencies.

46 A.P. Smith, supra note 44 at 586.
47 Courts have also upheld charitable actions applying the business judgment rule. See e.g. Shlensky v. Wrigley, 237 N.E.2d. 777 (Ill. App. Ct. 1968) and Ella M. Kelly & Wyndham, Inc. v. Bell, 266 A.2d 878 (Del. 1970).
48 American Law Institute, Principles of Corporate Governance: Analysis and Recommendations, §2.01. For an interesting discussion on the background of the development of the principles, see Douglas Branson, “Corporate Governance ‘Reform’ and the New Corporate Social Responsibility” (2001) 65 U. Pitt. L. Rev. 605. There is a risk that this approach of social activism by companies can potentially weaken responsible governance, which is an essential part of the stakeholder principle. It is as much about earning profits in a legitimate manner as it is about how the profits are utilized. It is not sufficient for corporations to make donations, but equally they must practice responsible governance.
49 American Bar Association, Model Business Corporations Act (2005), §3.02.
To the north in Canada, the *Canada Corporations Act*,\(^1\) enacted in 1965, expressly authorized corporate charity. This is evidence of convergence in US and Canadian law on the subject. The *Canada Corporations Act* permitted contributions for the welfare of employees or former employees and for “any public, general or useful object.”\(^2\) There is no comparable provision in the current federal statute – the *Canada Business Corporations Act (CBCA)*,\(^3\) which has adopted a different course. The *CBCA* posits rough parity among shareholders and non-shareholder groups in business corporations and extends the statutory remedies – namely derivative actions and oppression actions to non-shareholder groups also. The stakeholder principle received judicial recognition in Canada in 1972 in *Teck Corp. v. Millar*.\(^4\) The Supreme Court of Canada recently affirmed the principle in *People’s Department Store v. Wise*\(^5\) (2004) and *BCE Inc. v. 1976 Debenture-holders*\(^6\) (2008).

A contribution to the stakeholder idea in Canada came from the Saucier Committee (2001), which was set up by the Toronto Stock Exchange and other agencies to develop guidelines for corporate governance. Affirming the emerging vision, the Saucier report contains several references to stakeholders and treats corporate accountability as something owed to a broad spectrum of stakeholder groups – not just the shareholders.\(^7\)

C. The Stakeholder Regime and Its Variants

A broad stakeholder regime, traveling beyond the limited creditor protection principle, now exists in all the three jurisdictions – namely, US, UK, and Canada. There are two major variants in the legislative approach. US and UK have a directors’ duty-based version while Canada has adopted a remedy-based regime. A third approach, involving board representation to non-shareholder groups,

\(^{1}\) S.C. 1964-65, c. 52.  
\(^{2}\) Ibid., section 14.  
\(^{3}\) R.S.C. 1985, c. C-44.  
\(^{4}\) (1972), 33 D.L.R. (3d) 288.  
was considered in the UK and Canada, but dropped. This section examines the prevailing stakeholder models.

1. The Directors’ Duty Model – UK and US

Owen Young, the chairman of General Electric Company, was among the earliest to articulate the stakeholder vision. Viewing the matter from the lens of directors’ duties, Young argued in 1929 that their duties must not be restricted to serving the shareholders.58 This approach takes the principle of central command in business corporations, or the vesting of substantial corporate powers in the directors, as a given. Starting from here, the effort is to promote a broader vision for the directors in performing their functions and greater accountability in the exercise of their powers. Young’s approach was endorsed by scholars such as E. Merrick Dodd59 and Adolf Berle.60 In this version, statutes authorize directors to consider non-shareholder interests. By permitting a wider range of considerations, the statutes partially modify the common law which is understood to limit directors’ loyalty to shareholders and constrain them from applying other considerations. The directors’ duty model has been adopted in Britain and America since the 1980s.

Stakeholder provisions were introduced in several American states during the takeover battles of the 1980s, which led to widespread changes of corporate control, plant closings and mass layoffs. Quite often, the takeovers were justified in terms of their benefit for the shareholders from potential cost savings and increase in share prices. The shareholder primacy rule, which apparently conferred legitimacy on these practices, was considered a factor in the takeover phenomenon. In response to the complaints against plant closings and consequent disruption in the lives of the

58 Young, supra note 1, delivered his seminal speech in 1929, ten years after the famous decision in Dodge v. Ford Motor Co. Quite possibly, Young was influenced by the idea underlying the oft-quoted passage in the judgment which appeared to define directors’ duties in strict terms – namely, profit maximization for shareholders’ benefit.
59 Ibid.
60 Initially, Adolf Berle was opposed to the idea of broadening the scope of directors’ powers and loyalty. His opposition was on the ground of practicability rather than principle. However, sometime later Berle veered around to the view of Merrick Dodd and expressed support for broad-basing the duties of corporate directors. See Harwell Wells, supra note 45.
affected employees and communities, it was argued that directors’ hands were tied by the shareholder primacy rule.

In this background, amendments were made to the corporate statutes in a number of states to empower directors to consider a wide range of interests. The new schema, incidentally, operated in favor of corporate managements, as it improved their ability to protect themselves against hostile takeover bids. Corporate managements, which lobbied for stakeholder legislation, had mixed motives for doing so – one being to protect their position.

By 1991, 28 states had included stakeholder concerns in their corporate statutes, in different forms. The stakeholder provision in the Georgia statute, extracted below, is representative:

A provision that, in discharging the duties of their respective positions and in determining what is believed to be in the best interests of the corporation, the board of directors, committees of the board of directors, and individual directors, in addition to considering the effects of any action on the corporation or its shareholders, may consider the interests of the employees, customers, suppliers, and creditors of the corporation and its subsidiaries, the communities in which offices or other establishments of the corporation are located, and all other factors such directors consider pertinent; however, that any such provision shall be deemed solely to grant discretionary authority to the directors and shall not be deemed to provide any constituency any right to be considered.

61 “Takeover” is not a legal term or concept in America, but the label is widely used to refer to the process of change of corporate control. Change can be accomplished in two ways – namely, mergers and tender offers for purchase of shares in the stock market. Corporate law on mergers is clear; they would require the approval of the directors. But the picture is unclear with respect to tender offers for purchase of shares in the market, as a means of unseating current directors and acquiring control – especially when the current directors are not willing to leave. Such “hostile” takeovers would be messy and more expensive for the persons interested in taking over, as they would have to “defeat” the incumbent management. On the ambiguity in the law about takeovers and the role of directors, see Troy A. Paredes, “The Firm and the Nature of Control: Toward a Theory of Takeover Law” (2004) 29 J. Corp. L. 103.


63 For the extracts from the statutes, see (1992) 21 Stetson L. Rev. 279.

64 Georgia Code Ann. §14-2-202(b)(5).
Although the provisions in all the states were inspired by similar ideas and sprang from similar considerations, they are not identical in their scope and operation. The regimes in the states have variations. Very few states have made the stakeholder regime mandatory and applicable to all acts of the directors. In most states, it is optional and merely enables the directors to apply non-shareholder considerations. Directors are not under any duty to consider stakeholder interests. In many states, the stakeholder rule applies only to decisions that affect corporate control or the “independence” of a corporation. In most jurisdictions, the statutes make a reference to employees and community interests and some of them also permit the directors to consider other “pertinent” factors.

The stakeholder versions adopted in the American jurisdictions exhibit considerable variety in nature and scope. The following table identifies the different elements, numbering 11, in the stakeholder regime and assigns weights relative to their significance.

**Table 1**

**Stakeholder Regime and Its Components**

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<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  Mandatory consideration of non-shareholder interests by the directors</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  Scope - whether provisions apply only to change of control, or as an ongoing principle of management?</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  Reference to short-term and long-term interests</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  Employee interests</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  Customer interests</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6  Creditor interests</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7  Supplier interests</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8  Community and societal interests</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9  Any other “pertinent” factors</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Affirmation of equality of shareholder interests and other interests</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Explicit protection to directors for considering non-shareholder interests</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The weight assigned to each factor or element is based on relative significance. Mandatory duty to consider non-shareholder interests has a score of 9 (or a quarter of the total), if the regime is applicable only to takeovers and changes in management or control. If, however, the duty is applicable on an ongoing basis, it better reflects the institutional vision of the stakeholder principle and this gets a score of 18 which is half the total score of 36. Reference to each individual group is assigned 1 point. An ideal stakeholder regime must satisfy at least Criteria #1 to #9 in Table 1. The remaining two criteria are formal in nature. #10 is merely an affirmation of the principle of the preceding ones, and #11 would be more relevant in a litigation setting when the directors are charged with breach of their fiduciary duties. Omitting these last two criteria, which carry a weight of 2 between them, an ideal regime that fulfills all the remaining criteria must achieve a score of 34. No state reaches this level.

Mandatory application of the stakeholder regime would be crucial in determining the scores of individual states, as it carries one half of the total marks. Among the 28 states that have adopted a regulatory stakeholder regime, only 4 – Arizona, Connecticut, Idaho and New Mexico – place directors under a compulsory duty to consider non-shareholder interests. In all the other states, the regime is voluntary. Even among the 4 states that have chosen mandatory regimes, Connecticut’s provisions apply only to change of corporate control and not any other issue. This leaves a net balance of three states (Arizona, Idaho and New Mexico) that have stable non-discretionary stakeholder regimes which require the consideration of all interests in the ongoing governance of business corporations.

Reflecting the origin of the stakeholder rule in the takeover battles, many states restrict stakeholder considerations to the limited issue of change of control or retaining corporate independence. Even in this narrow sphere, there is no obligation for the directors to consider non-shareholder interests; the directors can elect whether to consider their interests. Mandatory application and scope are vital in determining the efficacy of the stakeholder regime, and the weights assigned to each of them reflect their relative significance.
The stakeholder regime in the states can be measured by applying the criteria identified in Table 1 above, on a scale of 36. An analysis of the 28 states which have adopted the regime reveals significant divergence in the scores of individual states, despite the commonality of theme – namely, protecting the interests of non-shareholder constituencies in business corporations. The scores are presented in the following graphs.

**Stakeholder Score – Assessing State Statutes on a Scale of 36**

**Chart 1**

*Arizona to Minnesota*
As noted 4 states have mandatory stakeholder regimes. Among the remaining 24 states where the principle is voluntary, directors in 17 states can consider the interests of non-shareholder constituencies in all decisions. This is a more expansive approach, although its efficacy is weakened by the fact that the regime is optional. Tennessee has a rather unique scheme of provisions. Its regime is not affirmative in content; it neither requires directors to consider stakeholder interests, nor facilitate or enable them to do so. Rather, Tennessee merely protects the directors if they have also considered non-shareholder interests in making decisions.

Admittedly, the stakeholder regime introduced in the US in the 1980s has its limitations. To begin with, it is not mandatory in most jurisdictions. It is episodic in approach and confines itself, in several jurisdictions, to takeovers and changes of control. It does not apply to ongoing governance. The statutory regime neither discards shareholder primacy, nor does it entitle non-shareholder groups to bring actions against corporations. Yet the principle marks the entry of an institutional vision of business corporations in the organizing statutes. The amendments are also significant as indicators of the concerns that animated the discourse on business corporations. They gave
statutory shape to the problems and issues that were prominent in boardrooms in determining corporate policy and strategy.

In a limited number of cases, courts have examined directors’ defensive actions against takeovers – devised specifically with reference to the stakeholder statutes and the considerations they recognize. In general, courts have been willing to apply the stakeholder statutes to validate the acts of incumbent directors. In *Baron v. Strawbridge & Clothier*, the court upheld the reclassification of stock by the directors in defending a tender offer. In *Amanda Acquisition Corp. v. Universal Foods Corp.*, the refusal of the directors to redeem poison pill rights was affirmed. Use of poison pills by the directors as a defence against hostile takeover was also upheld in *Georgia-Pacific Corp. v. Great Northern Nekaposa Corp.* Similarly, a “white knight” defense to takeovers was accepted in *Keyser v. Commonwealth National Financial Corp.*

The reported cases on constituency statutes were all about corporate control and protecting the incumbent managements. Significantly, there are no reports of conflicts among the stakeholder groups *inter se* and the handling of the conflict by the directors or the courts. These would be equally, if not more, relevant in the ongoing governance of business corporations. Stakeholder governance is essentially about the ongoing consideration that all corporate constituencies must receive in decisions and policies.

The stakeholder principle has received substantial acceptance in corporate governance.

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65 See the discussion by Eric W. Orts, supra note 62 at 32-35.
67 708 F. Supp. 984 (E.D. Wis.), aff’d on other grounds, 877 F.2d (7th Cir.), cert. denied, 493 U.S. 955 (1989).
68 727 F. Supp. 31 (D. Me. 1989). The term “poison pills” refers to the right of the directors to issue shares in specified circumstances – usually takeover bids that pose a threat to the management.
69 675 F. Supp. 238 (M.D. Pa. 1987). A “white knight” is a friendly outsider that helps a management in defending itself against a hostile takeover bid.
70 Stakeholder disputes have been considered by the Canadian courts in the recent years (*People’s, supra note 55, BCE Inc., supra note 56, and Air Canada Pilots Association v. ACE, [2007] O.J. No. 89 (Sup. Ct.) (QL), 2007 CanLII 337, available online: http://www.canlii.ca/en/on/onsc/doc/2007/2007canlii337/2007canlii337.pdf, accessed September 13, 2011. In all the three cases, the court in effect ruled in favour of the shareholders.*
71 For the application of stakeholder interests, Stephen M. Bainbridge, “Interpreting Non-shareholder Constituency Statutes” (1992) 19 Pepp. L. Rev. 971, made a distinction between “operational decisions” (e.g. plant closings) and “structural decisions” (e.g. takeovers) (at 100.-1004).
Recommendations recognize that the “long-term profitability of the corporation generally depends on meeting the fair expectations of [stakeholder] groups” and endorse that a “corporation’s business may be conducted accordingly.”

Pointing out that the constituency statutes impose a higher standard of care on the directors, Eric Orts interpreted their enactment as signalling a “foray toward broader corporate law reform in the United States.”

Delaware, which boasts the largest number of public corporations, has not included the stakeholder principle in its statute. However, the idea is present in Delaware law. More than once, Delaware courts have recognized the stakeholder principle. In Unocal Corp. v. Mesa Petroleum Co (1985), the court upheld the defensive tactics adopted by the Unocal board against a hostile takeover bid. In doing so, the court referred to the directors’ “fundamental duty and obligation to protect the corporate enterprise, which includes stockholders.” This observation affirmed a more institutional vision of a business corporation – as something more than a mere aggregation of its shareholders. Accordingly the court stressed the duty of the board towards the enterprise as a whole – which necessarily includes groups such as employees, suppliers, and customers.

The stakeholder trend was strengthened in Paramount Communications, Inc. v. Time, Inc. (1990) in which the court upheld action taken by the directors of Time to protect the company’s corporate culture and journalistic integrity, overriding shareholder interests. Again in Credit Lyonnais Bank Nederland, N.V. v. Pathe Communications Corp (1991), the court ruled that the fiduciary duties of directors could extend to the creditors of corporations “operating in the vicinity of insolvency,” Chancellor Allen defined the scope of their duties:

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72 Eric Orts, supra note 62 at 90.
73 Ibid. at 133.
75 571 A.2d 1140 (Del. 1990). For a critique of this decision from the perspective of shareholder primacy, see Nell Minow, “Shareholders, Stakeholders, and Boards of Directors” (1992) 21 Stetson L. Rev. 197.
[The board has] an obligation to the community of interests that sustained the corporation to exercise judgment in an informed, good faith effort to maximize the corporation’s long-term wealth creating capacity.\textsuperscript{77}

There are, however, other strands in Delaware corporate law. In \textit{Revlon, Inc. v. MacAndrews & Forbes Holdings, Inc.},\textsuperscript{78} the court had to deal with the takeover and the breakup of a corporation. In that situation, the court treated the board of directors as auctioneers for the shareholders, and charged them with a duty to procure the highest possible price for the shares. There was little room for non-shareholder groups in that framework. The \textit{Revlon} principle was recently reiterated in \textit{In re Netsmart Technologies, Inc.}\textsuperscript{79}

It would be difficult to reconcile the shareholder-centric outcomes in \textit{Revlon} and \textit{Netsmart} with the institutional vision that animated \textit{Unocal} and \textit{Paramount Communications}. The latter cases were based on a broader vision of corporate enterprises. The dichotomy between the two sets of cases is because of the different factual situations the court dealt with in these cases. The result is two conflicting visions of business corporations. This stresses the need for developing corporate theory that is wholesome, harmonious, and comprehensive. In this effort, judicial decisions can provide valuable inputs. These issues are dealt with Part IV.

Recently, UK expanded and strengthened the stakeholder principle in its corporate statute. It is also based on directors’ duty. An expansive stakeholder version is included in the \textit{Companies Act 2006}. The provision, extracted below, is comprehensive in scope and sets out the principle with clarity.

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Ibid.} at 38 (**1156).
\textsuperscript{78} 506 A.2d 173 (Del. 1986).
\textsuperscript{79} C.A. No. 2563-VCS, 2007 WL778612 (Del. Ch.).
A director of a company must act in the way he considers, in good faith, would be most likely to promote the success of the company for the benefit of its members as a whole, and in doing so have regard (amongst other matters) to —

(a) the likely consequences of any decision in the long term,
(b) the interests of the company’s employees,
(c) the need to foster the company’s business relationships with suppliers, customers and others,
(d) the impact of the company’s operations on the community and the environment,
(e) the desirability of the company maintaining a reputation for high standards of business conduct, and
(f) the need to act fairly as between members of the company.\(^80\)

The regime is mandatory and applies to all companies on an ongoing basis. At first glance, the provision may appear radical, but it is not really so. It treats the “success of the company for the benefit” of shareholders as the overriding objective, and subordinates all other considerations. In promoting corporate success of this variety, directors are under a duty to consider the interests of non-shareholder groups also. The statutory provision broadens the fiduciary duties of directors. It moves away from the restrictive approach traditionally applied in common law and the emphasis it was understood to place on shareholder primacy. Directors are now under a duty to consider a variety of other interests in promoting the success of the companies. There can be little dispute with the proposition that a company must be successful before it can take proper care of its various stakeholders — including shareholders. The principle of “enlightened shareholder value”\(^81\) now

\(^80\) Companies Act 2006, Section 172(1) (U.K.).
legislated in UK finds increasing acceptance among corporations as the survey reported in Part C below finds.

2. The Stakeholder Remedy Model – Canada

Among the common law jurisdictions Canada was the earliest to grant legislative recognition to the stakeholder principle. It did so by including non-shareholder groups in the remedies available under the Canada Business Corporations Act (CBCA) – namely, derivative actions for wrongs to a corporation and the oppression remedy for wrongs to specific individuals or groups.\(^8\) Traditionally, these remedies were available only to shareholders.

Robert Dickerson Committee, which produced the CBCA, recommended the extension of the statutory remedies against managements to all the constituencies in business corporations.\(^9\) In so recommending, the Dickerson Committee bracketed all stakeholders together, including shareholders. This approach can be traced to the Committee’s understanding of shareholders. The Committee adopted the Berle-Means paradigm of passive shareholders who played no meaningful role in a company – in any case not commensurate with the proprietary position attributed to them in corporate theory.\(^10\) The Dickerson Committee treated shareholders as little more than “security holders,” some years before this position was formally proclaimed for the shareholders in economic theory.\(^11\) This framework had little place for the so-called proprietary position of the shareholders, or the idea that directors were their elected surrogates. Shareholders had no special position or rights and were, in substance, little different from other groups such as employees, suppliers, and creditors who also had interests in the corporations.

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\(^{8}\) Canada Business Corporations Act, Ss. 283-241.


\(^{10}\) Ibid. at 3.

\(^{11}\) See e.g. Frank H. Easterbrook & Daniel R. Fischel, “The Corporate Contract” (1989) 89 Colum. L. Rev. 1416. Before them Jensen & Meckling, supra note 8, described shares as “divisible residual claims” and assumed nonvoting shares in their hypothetical model. These reflected the reality of shareholder inefficacy in corporate America.
With this thinking, the Dickerson Committee extended the two remedies in the *CBCA*—namely, derivative action and relief against oppression to a generic class of “complainants.” The term “complainant” is defined as follows:

“Complainant” means

(a) a registered holder or beneficial owner, and a former registered holder or beneficial owner, of a security of a corporation or any of its affiliates,

(b) a director or an officer or a former director or officer of a corporation or any of its affiliates,

(c) the Director, or

(d) any other person who, in the discretion of a court, is a proper person to make an application under this Part.86

Shareholders, as already pointed out, are swept under the omnibus class of “security” holders, which would include both shareholders and creditors who have lent money to corporations under bonds or debentures.87 Other than security-holders, directors and officers, including those who held office in the past are included in complainants. The Director of corporations, a government official, is also empowered to take action, presumably in the public interest. Finally, the court has the discretion to determine any other person as being “proper” to invoke the remedies provided in the statute. The statute’s conception of the groups that may have complaints against business corporations is, thus, quite broad.

Referring to the stakeholder remedy in the *CBCA*, Stephanie Ben-Ishai developed the “team production” model of Canadian corporate law.88 Ben-Ishai argued that corporate law in Canada accords primacy to directors and considering the nature of the oppression remedy, the directors of

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86 *Canada Business Corporations Act*, Section 238.
87 *Canada Business Corporations Act*, Section 2.
Canadian corporations can be assimilated to the “mediating hierarchs” conceived in the team production theory of Margaret Blair and Lynn Stout.\(^89\)

It is, however, an open question how far the stakeholder remedy provided in the CBCA has been effective. The results in recent stakeholder cases – *People’s* (2004)\(^90\) and *BCE* (2008)\(^91\) – went against the creditors, although the court formally endorsed the stakeholder vision. In *People’s*, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that directors of corporations did not owe fiduciary duties to creditors. In *BCE*, which was an action under the oppression remedy, the court declined to consider the issue of injury to the interests of the creditors, despite the statute facilitating it. The court was more concerned with the “rights” of the parties. In another important case, *Air Canada Pilots Association v. ACE*,\(^92\) the court refused to recognize the Pilots Association of Air Canada as a complainant for questioning a proposal of Air Canada to distribute assets among its shareholders.

The Canadian experience is a pointer to the limitations of the courts as guardians of the interests of non-shareholder groups. In stakeholder conflicts, the issue is often about “interests” which may not have crystallized into well-defined “rights” with which the legal system is familiar. The adversarial system of the courts and technical rules of form, procedure and evidence are other impediments for the courts’ ability to effectively respond to stakeholder disputes. These are some issues with the remedy-based approach to the stakeholder principle.

3. **The Third Alternative – Representation and Empowerment**

A third version of the stakeholder regime is providing representation for non-shareholder groups on corporate boards and empowering them to participate in governance. This is prevalent in Germany where public corporations have a broad cross-section of people on their boards, including employee representatives. The model, termed “codetermination,” is a participatory arrangement designed to promote a broader stakeholder approach to governance.

\(^89\) *Supra* note 50.
\(^90\) *Supra* note 55.
\(^91\) *Supra* note 56.
\(^92\) *Supra* note 70.
The representation-and-empowerment model could have been expected to be popular in the English-speaking countries, considering their political history and ideas about representative democracy. But this has not been the case. The subject of stakeholder representation, in particular employee representation on boards, was discussed in UK and even earlier in Canada, but it was abandoned. Significantly, resistance to the idea came from the labor unions in both countries. In the UK in the wake of recurrent labor unrest in the 1970s, the Committee on Industrial Democracy was formed with Lord Bullock as the chair, to enquire into labor participation in company boards. The committee reported the reluctance of labor unions to sit on boards.93

In Canada, the Dickerson Committee explored the representation approach even earlier.94 The Committee had no quarrel with the argument about stakeholders or their representation in boards, but it had reservations about enlarging the electorate. Hence the Dickerson Committee rejected representation as a regulatory model. While doing so it pointed out that few legal impediments existed for including a wider section of stakeholders on the boards if the corporations wanted to do so. The Committee also recorded that “trade unions ha[d] not shown much interest in having representation on the boards of corporations.”95

In the US, the idea of stakeholder representation does not appear to have been considered with seriousness. A possible explanation is a degree of adversarialism that has traditionally informed union-management relationship and the consequent inability to conceive other possibilities.96 Alfred Conard pointed out that the milieu prevailing in the United States did not encourage the representation model.97

In the common law countries, impediments to the codetermination model are apparently cultural. The trend in these countries is more in favor of having centralized powers in boards, but

94 Proposals for a New Business Corporations Law, supra note 83 at 9.
95 Ibid. at 10.
96 “Nexus of contracts,” the memorable phrase coined by Jensen and Meckling, supra note 8, perhaps captured this sense accurately. It is about each group sorting out their rights and establishing their entitlements to the best of their ability, rather than acting collectively in a spirit of cooperation for common progress.
97 Alfred Conard, “Corporate Constituencies in Western Europe” (1992) 21 Stetson L. Rev. 73.
with a broader mandate in decision-making. The top-down structure is retained, and efforts are made to enlighten the leadership, as it were, with stakeholder considerations. There has been little effort at diffusing corporate power and empowering people at the middle or lower levels. To be clear, such efforts would probably undermine the efficiency of corporate enterprises. Central command is among the chief advantages of the corporate form and it undoubtedly promotes greater efficiency both in planning and execution. It avoids a bureaucratic approach which can be especially problematic for corporations to operate in the highly competitive globalized markets of the present age.

For another reason also, lack of formal representation of the stakeholders may not be a major issue in the emerging landscape. Ideas about director independence and board committees have gained significant traction, and they have the potential to promote a broader vision in the boards of public corporations. Board committees and independent directors are not, in theory, identified with any particular group, such as shareholders or management. This feature can promote greater balance and encourage the application of wider perspectives in shaping policies and strategies even when specific stakeholder groups have no representation in the boards.

III. The Stakeholder Principle and Its Acceptance – A Peep into the “Real World”

The stakeholder debate, as pointed out, began in the 1930s. Eighty years on, it is now time to assess how far the idea has gained traction. How far do companies recognize the stakeholder vision and incorporate it in their governance structure, policies, and practices? To answer this question, this part presents the results of a survey of American, British and Canadian corporations, numbering in all 180, included in the Fortune 500 Global Corporations (2009).

This part has three sections. Section (A) presents the numerical results – namely, the number of corporations that accept or recognize the stakeholder principle. This is followed, in Section (B), by an analysis of the results including samples of the forms in which the principle finds a place in

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98 This article treats the stakeholder vision, notions about corporate responsibility or social responsibility, corporate citizenship as broadly similar concepts that seek to carry companies beyond the limited profit-maximizing or shareholder-value maximizing models. There are no significant peculiarities underlying each of these concepts, and they do not warrant a differential treatment.
companies’ documents. Finally, Section (C) examines the issue about rhetoric and reality in the affirmation of stakeholder concerns by corporations.

A. The Numbers

Among the Fortune 500 global corporations (2009), 180 are based in the US, UK, and Canada. These companies are the sample used in the survey on the stakeholder principle. The country-wise breakup of the corporations is given below.

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fortune 500 Global Corporations 2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of the 180 companies, six were eliminated. Two of them had subsequently merged with other companies (Wyeth with Pfizer and Lloyds Group with HBOS), and two are government sponsored enterprises (U.S. Postal Service and Fannie Mae).¹⁰⁰ For the remaining two, the problem was lack of access to information (Costco Wholesale and Comcast). This left a net number of 174 corporations for the survey – 135 US, 25 UK, and 14 Canadian.

I reviewed the governance-related documents and statements of the companies to determine whether they recognize the stakeholder principle and, if so, identify the manner or style in which this is done. The method was to search for references to non-shareholder groups and understand how the companies treat the role and interests of these groups. The documents reviewed included,

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¹⁰⁰ With government-sponsored enterprises, the presumptions are that the stakeholder paradigm is, to a considerable extent, inherent in their structure and they would not operate with the limited motive of benefiting their shareholders.
mainly, governance guidelines, annual reports, reports on corporate responsibility and sustainability, and vision and mission statements.

The results from the survey are impressive. A total of 97 percent, or 168 of the 174 companies covered in the survey have included non-shareholder interests among their concerns. 101 The results are presented in the figure below.

**Chart 3**

**Stakeholder Idea among Largest US, UK, and Canadian Corporations**

No significant difference is seen among the companies in the three jurisdictions. The number of companies that do not recognize stakeholder interests or social responsibility is quite small in all three – namely, US, UK, and Canada. Individual data for each jurisdiction are provided in the table below.

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101 Predictably, there is considerable variety in the forms in which the corporations provide a place for the stakeholder idea in their governance structure. This is discussed in Section (B) below.
Table 3

Non-Recognition of the Stakeholder Idea – Country Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Net number of companies considered</th>
<th>Companies recognizing stakeholder idea</th>
<th>Companies not recognizing stakeholder idea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.K.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>174</strong></td>
<td><strong>168</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In percentage terms, the ratio of companies that accept the stakeholder idea is the highest for the U.S. (97.75 percent), followed by Canada (92.86 percent). Britain with 90.91 percent has, relatively, the lowest ratio of companies that acknowledge the stakeholder vision.

B. The Stakeholder Principle – A Qualitative Survey

As already pointed out, there is evidence of corporate philanthropy and a concern for non-shareholder groups at least since late 19th century. Yet in the recent decades, the stakeholder idiom and expansive ideas about corporate social responsibility have become more influential. Now they can be considered a part of mainstream governance theory and practice. Increased attention to stakeholders in the recent years is recorded in the statement of BT, the British telecommunication services company (Fortune rank 210):

Business responsibility matters to BT. In fact social and environmental responsibility has been a central part of our business strategy since the early 1990s.102

Similarly, BAE Systems (Fortune rank 279), referred to corporate responsibility in the following terms in its annual report for 2008:

The Group’s corporate responsibility agenda and activity have matured considerably over recent years.\textsuperscript{103}

There is considerable variety in the documents companies have chosen for stating stakeholder concerns or corporate responsibility. These include corporate governance guidelines, vision/mission statements, corporate citizenship/responsibility statements, and sustainability/social responsibility reports. Significantly, and perhaps understandably, several companies paraphrased their stakeholder concerns in the idiom of benefit for the companies’ business.\textsuperscript{104} Hewlett-Packard (\textit{Fortune} rank 32) stated the idea, quite bluntly:

Good citizenship is good business. We live up to our responsibility to society by being an economic, intellectual and social asset to each country and community in which we do business.\textsuperscript{105}

The statement of Time-Warner (\textit{Fortune} rank 159) reflects a similar attitude, although it is couched in relatively broader terms.

As the world’s leading media and entertainment company, our goal is to deliver superior returns to our stockholders and exceptional value to our customers in a sustainable and long-term way. Time Warner’s commitment to corporate social responsibility is one of many ways we achieve long-term growth.\textsuperscript{106}

The trend in favor of the stakeholder principle and responsible practices is becoming stronger because they make good business sense. This invites a question whether corporate responsibility is just a business expedient or independent policy. It may not be necessary to strain the issue with

\begin{footnotes}
\item[104] This reflects the historical thinking on the subject. See e.g. the observations of the court in \textit{Hutton v. West Cork Railway}, supra note 23. To some extent, companies appear to be helpless in the matter. Their efforts at philanthropy in the 1960s were branded as ego-trips for the managers at the cost of the shareholders.
\end{footnotes}
such scrutiny, and it is better to accept healthy and responsible corporate governance at face value – unless of course it is merely a veneer meant to hide other tendencies. Indeed, the concept of enlightened shareholder value now adopted in the UK Companies Act is based on the idea of common interest, although it is presented in hierarchical terms. Also, recent concepts such as the “balanced score card” encourage precisely the variety of behavior that companies that swear by the stakeholder principle profess. There should be nothing wrong, in principle, in combining good business with good ethics. It is what balanced score cards are about.

There is evidence of companies strengthening their commitment to values in corporate governance, regardless of business conditions. BT stated:

We reviewed our corporate responsibility strategy in 2009 financial year, and [w]e remain committed to responsible and sustainable business regardless of economic conditions. We believe this will help BT maintain its competitiveness and emerge from the economic downturn in a strong position.

J. Sainsbury (Fortune rank 261) is another case-in-point. It described the implications of following ethical and eco-friendly practices in price-sensitive markets in the following terms:

Although customers are increasingly price-conscious, ethical and environmental issues remain important for them. We believe that by considering the wider social, environmental and economic impacts of our business, we are able to meet our customers’ expectations by acting responsibly on their behalf. This ultimately delivers long-term shareholder value by securing our future ability to grow as a profitable business.

Amazon.Com (Fortune rank 485) is a recent entrant into the Fortune Global 500 list. It has a somewhat unique position on stakeholders and corporate responsibility. Its vision is restrictive, and the company expressly confines its responsibility to issues of immediate relevance to its business.

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Amazon believes that its "greatest contribution to the good of society comes directly from these core business activities," which it describes as supporting innovation among its business associates – namely, vendors, customers, web developers, and so on.\footnote{Amazon and Our Planet.} Online: \url{http://www.amazon.com/b/ref=gw_m_b_corpres?ie=UTF8&node=13786321}, accessed March 23, 2010.

An interesting trend is visible among companies in the financial sector which was badly hit in the Financial Crisis of 2008-09. Companies that emerged relatively unscathed exhibited a tendency to present corporate responsibility as their distinguishing feature that sets them apart from others in the industry. The statements of Aviva, a British financial company (\textit{Fortune} rank 212), are revealing:

\begin{quotation}
As the global economy faces its toughest challenge in decades, so do many of the world’s best-known organisations. Customer confidence has taken a knock in the financial services sector along with share prices. While Aviva’s robust approach to risk management and financial planning means we are well placed to weather the economic storm, our approach to \textit{Corporate Responsibility} also sets us apart in terms of maintaining customer trust and setting new standards in global corporate citizenship.\footnote{Aviva. Corporate Responsibility Report 2009 at 19. Online: \url{http://www.aviva.com/reports/cr09/page19/}.}
\end{quotation}

Considerable variety is seen in the form in which the companies stated their concerns for the stakeholders or their notions of corporate responsibility. To some extents, this reflects the diverse nature of their businesses which range from manufacturing, extractive or utility corporations (e.g. General Motors, Exxon Mobil and BT) to retailers (e.g. Wal-Mart and Tesco), brand-name owners (Nike) and financial and healthcare service companies (e.g. Citigroup and Cardinal Health). The nature of business will definitely shape the concerns and define their approach. Manufacturing companies that own and operate large plants are necessarily different from corporations which have no significant manufacturing operations. The case is also different with companies in the financial and healthcare sectors.

The companies covered in the survey, as pointed out, accept the stakeholder idea or social responsibility in principle. The logical next step is implementation, for which companies must develop a stakeholder model of governance and integrate it in their policies and business strategy. In
This respect, Magna International, the Canadian automotive company (Fortune rank 384), has an interesting model for fostering stakeholder interests. The company, which describes itself as a “Fair Enterprise Corporation,” has a well-defined and transparent framework for its stakeholder policy. It earmarks specified portions of its resources for each stakeholder group, and these commitments are recorded in the company’s constitution. The stakeholder allocations provided in Magna’s constitution are summarized in the table below.

Table 4

Magna International – Stakeholder Framework112

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder Group</th>
<th>Provision in the Constitution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eligible employees</td>
<td>10 percent of pre-tax profits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shareholders</td>
<td>Distribution of at least 20 percent of the profits over three years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Up to 6 percent of pre-tax profits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research &amp; development</td>
<td>Minimum 7 percent of pre-tax profits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social responsibility</td>
<td>Up to 2 percent of pre-tax profits to &quot;charitable, cultural, educational and political purposes to support the basic fabric of society.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special voting rights for Class ‘A’ nonvoting shares</td>
<td>Class A shares, which are generally nonvoting, would have voting rights for specific matters - namely, amendments to the constitution and for electing additional directors if the company fails to &quot;generate a minimum four percent after-tax return on share capital for two consecutive years.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By adopting this model, Magna International attempts to provide concrete shape to the stakeholder concerns. Most companies, however, stop with making a reference to stakeholder

concerns in broad terms and presenting them generally as a factor in governance. These are not followed up with efforts to classify or rank the interests of various groups.

As already pointed out, several companies declare that their ultimate goal is serving the long-term interests of the company and shareholder value. For example, Honeywell International (Fortune rank 212) stated:

The primary functions of the Honeywell International Inc. Board of Directors are to oversee management performance on behalf of the shareowners, to ensure that the long-term interests of the shareowners are being served, to monitor adherence to Honeywell standards and policies, to promote the exercise of responsible corporate citizenship . . .

Clearly, long-term interests of the shareholders and corporate interests, which necessarily include non-shareholder groups, are considered synonymous. This idea underpins the stakeholder vision recently included in the U.K. Companies Act 2006, discussed earlier. It is difficult to overstate the importance of the profitability and viability of corporate enterprises operating in competitive markets. The recent experience of General Motors offers sobering lessons in this regard. Its healthcare and pension obligations are reported to be a significant drag on the company and they were instrumental in the events of 2008-09, which resulted in the bailout of General Motors by the governments of US and Canada and partial nationalization.

In some companies, the shareholders are bracketed with other groups such as employees and customers, and no significant distinction is made among them. Home Depot (Fortune rank 90) has stated:

Corporate governance is part of our culture and is founded on our daily commitment to living values and principles that recognize our ethical obligations to our shareholders,


114 Section 172.

associates (employees), customers, suppliers, and the communities in which we operate. We understand our responsibility to behave ethically, to understand the impact we have on people and communities and to fairly consider the interests of a broad base of constituencies.

I have earlier referred to the tradition of corporate philanthropy in the US. Reflecting this, many American corporations present their social responsibility in simple terms of charitable contributions and community donations. The following statement of Lowe’s (Fortune rank 153) is an example:

At Lowe’s, we believe community involvement extends beyond the boundaries of the traditional retail setting. Whether it’s helping with natural disaster recovery or taking an active role in programs that make our neighborhoods better places to live, we are committed to helping our neighbors through alliances with well-respected organizations.

Beyond statements of the stakeholder vision and affirmations of corporate responsibility, many companies also prepare reports on these issues. Some of them go further and obtain independent assurance about the contents of their reports on responsibility and sustainability. For instance, BP (Fortune rank 4), stated:

We believe that seeking independent assurance reassures readers and BP’s management that the information we publish is accurate, complete and material and therefore contributes to building trust and credibility with key interest groups.

The evidence suggests that the stakeholder principle is undergoing a process of development in corporate governance. Evidence of acceptance of the stakeholder ideal is strong, and there is also a

118 BP Plc. “Our approach to assurance.” Online: http://www.bp.com/sectiongenericarticle.do?categoryId=9028541&contentId=7052028, accessed March 24, 2010. Interestingly, there was an accident BP’s offshore operations in the Gulf Mexico in 2010. This is discussed in the next subsection.
trend among the companies to take concrete action to actualize the principle in their governance framework and policies.

C. Stakeholder Concerns – Rhetoric and Reality

Considering the concern exhibited by the corporations for stakeholders, a question arises about the seriousness with which they treat the issue and the efforts they make to implement the principle. Joel Bakan was critical of what he perceived as disingenuous corporate behavior in making claims about social responsibility. In discussing Enron, Bakan conceded that the issue was about “flawed institutional character,” and admitted that this was true of “all publicly-traded corporations,” including “even the most respected and socially responsible” among them.

The stakeholder principle is about improving the institutional character of corporations. To begin with, it is unnecessary to deny a potential element of rhetoric in the stakeholder or social responsibility claims made by companies. But complete cynicism would be unfair. There are several dimensions to the stakeholder issue. For instance, risk management offers a useful tool for assessing the genuineness of the stakeholder concerns a corporation might profess. In the emerging landscape, risk is a pervasive factor and the risks range from environmental and financial to product safety and political. Often it is useful for a corporation to view the issue of risk from the stakeholder lens, and pursue a risk management strategy based on the stakeholder principle. For example, the safety features in a hazardous plant or operation can be interpreted in terms of the company’s concern for the environment or the community in which it operates.

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120 Ibid. at 28.
121 A case-in-point is a news report about Disney. The company is accused of securing the eviction of a civil society organization, “Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood” (CFFC), from its place in Boston. CFFC had campaigned against the marketing of “Baby Einstein” videos by Disney, and successfully persuaded Disney to offer refunds for the DVDs the company had sold. Tamar Lewin, “After Victory Over Disney, Group Loses Its Lease” *The New York Times* (9 March 2010).
The interrelationship between risk management and stakeholder governance is evident in the recent Deepwater Horizon oil spill issue of BP in the Gulf of Mexico. BP reportedly had a cost-cutting strategy that contributed to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. This brings out the perils in pursuing short-term advantages with potential stakeholder risks. The company has set up a $20 billion fund to meet claims arising from the spill, and the experience of BP can be a wake-up call for companies. It should encourage them to adopt more committed stakeholder practices.

As pointed out, the stakeholder principle is about improving the institutional character of business corporations. It is about incremental improvements, halting and gradual though the process may be. Viewed in this perspective, a broad acceptance of the stakeholder principle represents progress. It is better to begin with a corporation that professes responsibility, and persuade it to be more committed to the principle, rather than question the company’s motives. It would be even worse to have companies that are either neutral on the issue or actively oppose the principle on conventional grounds – namely, divided loyalty of the managers and lack of clarity and accountability, impact on corporate competitiveness and so on.

To be fair, most companies have gone to some lengths to demonstrate their commitment towards non-shareholder groups. The evidence, presented here, includes practices such as income earmarks, publishing responsibility reports and obtaining assurance reports from independent agencies. Also, corporations are bound to be influenced by the exhortations they make about social responsibility and the stakeholder principle. They will be constrained by their rhetoric which makes it difficult for them to engage in contrary behavior.

IV. **The Stakeholder Principle and Corporate Theory for the 21st Century**

The evidence on adoption of the stakeholder principle by companies is impressive. The trend for companies to widen their concerns has arguably become stronger since the Financial Crisis of

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A challenge that remains is for corporate theory and law to explore the scope for better institutionalizing the stakeholder principle in their framework.

This part argues for a formal statement of the theory underpinning business corporations. It consists of three sections, of which Section (A) reviews the development of corporate theory. Section (B) applies tools from an emerging school of legal theory – namely, new legal realism to develop corporate theory and also examines the issue of legal validity of the stakeholder statements made by companies in different documents. Section (C) concludes with a plea for a formal statement of corporate theory.

A. Corporate Theory and Its Development – An Overview

The theory underlying business corporations is derived from numerous sources, including legislation and judicial decisions. These are, in turn, colored by economic interpretation, opinions of experts and scholars, and popular notions about corporations. These diverse sources bring different perspectives, not all of which are mutually consistent. The resulting theory is a loose amalgam of various elements. It is not necessarily a single integrated framework with parts that are internally consistent. Rather, corporate theory resembles a cluster or a grid of ideas and its pattern must be deduced through analysis. Often it is not possible to achieve a concrete and coherent shape. In the amalgam that is corporate theory, a degree of inconsistency is apparent among some of the elements.

The table below provides a rough timeline summary of the development of corporate theory. The course of development has been influenced and shaped by the ideas that were dominant at different periods. The table interprets events in their chronological order to identify the significant elements in corporate theory over time. This method is helpful in determining the adequacy of the theory for the present and the foreseeable future.

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124 See e.g. “When your calendar is a moral document: A conversation with Reverend Jim Wallis” McKinsey Quarterly (January 2010). Jim Wallis, a prominent advocate of corporate social responsibility, pointed out the increased focus on “values” at the 2010 World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, Switzerland.
# Table 4

## Development of Corporate Theory – A Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominant Ideas</th>
<th>Application/Recognition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Early 19th century</strong></td>
<td>A strictly legal conception of corporations, which were understood as creatures of the state or the sovereign.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Late 19th century</strong></td>
<td>Following the enactment of general incorporation statutes, tendency to equate corporations with the joint-stock companies of UK.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Early 20th century</strong></td>
<td>Shareholders were assimilated to a position of ownership in corporations, and the directors understood as their elected surrogates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mid-20th century</strong></td>
<td>Rising awareness about corporate power and emphasis on the social responsibility of business corporations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1970s onwards</strong></td>
<td>Rise of economic interpretation of corporations – corporations as “nexus of contracts” and emphasis on shareholder value and private ordering as the best guarantor of efficiency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^{125}\) 17 U.S. 518 (1819).
\(^{126}\) 118 U.S. 394 (1886).
\(^{127}\) Supra note 11.
\(^{128}\) 98 A.2d 581 (N.J. 1953).
Shareholder value maxim applied recently *In re Citigroup Inc. Shareholder Derivative Litigation* (2009). The Delaware court observed that the "discretion granted to directors and managers allows them to maximize shareholder value in the long term.”

In Canada, shareholder value maxim recognized in *BCE Inc v. 1976 Debenture-holders* (2008). The Supreme Court of Canada was mainly influenced by the benefit the shareholders would derive from the Leveraged Buyout transaction impugned in the action.

To be clear, the picture is more complex and less linear than suggested in the table above. The table is an effort to detect the *major* line of development of corporate theory and summarize it. It reveals that the proprietary idea associated with shareholders and their right to derive benefit from the corporations was not the only strand. Alongside, ideas about corporate responsibility and stakeholder interests have *also* been recognized at least since late 19th century, especially in the United States. These were expressly affirmed in *Dodge v. Ford Motor Co.* (1919), although the case has since been cited *solely* as the authority for the shareholder primacy and profit maximization principles. *A.P. Smith* (1954) offers a powerful illustration of the non-shareholder concerns that have animated corporate theory. The more expansive corporate framework conceived in *A.P. Smith* has a place for non-shareholder groups as much as for the shareholders.

Case law and legislation are two major sources of corporate theory. The discussion that follows identifies the difficulties with the present framework of judicial decisions as well as statutes, and outlines their implications for the current theoretical underpinnings of business corporations.

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130 964 A.2d 106 (Del. Ch. 2009).
131 *Supra* note 56.
1. Judicial Decisions and Corporate Theory

Understandably in the common law tradition, judicial decisions have played a significant role in shaping corporate theory. This is evident from the table above. Consistent with the same tradition, legislation has not been proactive in developing an explicit theory to underpin business corporations. In the complex world that now exists, there is a need for a formal theory of business corporations that is well-deliberated and reflects the experience gained with corporations. In this effort, court decisions are undoubtedly valuable resources, but there is need for caution in treating judicial pronouncements as the statement of theory. For some time now, legal realists have been highlighting the issues with judicial lawmaking. The following are some problems, specifically in the context of corporate theory.

i. Decisions are rendered in the context of specific facts

A judicial decision is rendered in the context of the facts in a case. There can be no complaint about this because courts must deal with the facts of individual cases, and are not expected to lightly embark on inquiries into policy. But difficulties arise when these decisions are treated as the public policy on vital subjects – such as corporate governance. In corporate theory, there is evidence of incongruities when we attempt to weave principles from case law into an integral framework.

As pointed out earlier, the Delaware court adopted an institutional approach in Unocal Corp. v. Mesa Petroleum Co. (1985), and referred to the directors’ “fundamental duty and obligation to

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132 See generally Michael Steven Green, “Legal Realism as Theory of Law” (2005) 46 Wm. & Mary L. Rev. 1915. The dissatisfaction with judicial precedents as the source of law existed long before the rise of American legal realism. Jeremy Bentham, the founder of the positivist school, was unsparing in his criticism. Bentham wrote:

> It is the judges (as we have seen) that make the common law. Do you know how they make it? Just as a man makes laws for his dog. When your dog does anything you want him of, wait till he does it, and then beat him for it. This is the way you make laws for your dog; and this is the way judges make law for you and me. (John Bowring, ed., The Works of Jeremy Bentham, vol. 5 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962) at 235.)

133 For a more recent analysis of “judging” and the development of legal realism, see Victoria Nourse & Gregory Shaffer, “Varieties of New Legal Realism: Can a New World Order Prompt a New Legal Theory?” (2009) 95 Cornell L. Rev. 61 at 101-108.

134 Decisions also usually reflect the social and historical contexts. See generally Catherine Wells, “Situated Decision making” (1990) 63 S. Cal. L. Rev. 1727.

135 493 A.2d 946 (Del. 1985).
protect the corporate enterprise, which includes stockholders.” The approach was similar in Paramount Communications, Inc. v. Time, Inc. (1990) and Credit Lyonnais Bank Nederland, N.V. v. Pathe Communications Corp (1991). In these cases, the court treated corporations as institutions and attempted to protect the larger institutional interests, distinct from the more narrow interests of the shareholders. There is, however, another group of cases which do not fit in with this view. In Revlon, Inc. v. MacAndrews & Forbes Holdings, Inc. (1986), the court treated the board of directors as auctioneers for the shareholders and charged them with a duty to procure the highest possible price for the shares. There was little room in this milieu for non-shareholder groups or their interests.

There are difficulties in reconciling Revlon with as Unocal and Paramount Communications, which were based on a broader vision of corporate enterprises. The dichotomy is understandable considering the different facts situations with which the court had to deal in these cases. In Revlon the court had no occasion, indeed no business, to consider the issues affecting non-shareholders. The result is two strands of judicial decisions which do not add up to a harmonious whole.

ii. Court rulings are based on choices made from among rival arguments

In the prevailing adversarial system, the limited task of the court is to choose from among the rival arguments made at the bar. The submissions would, in turn, be determined by the facts. The question is about the appropriateness of distilling corporate theory from judicial decisions based on the limited submissions of litigants based on their version of the facts. Quite often, the arguments of rival parties do not offer a reasonable perspective that is sufficiently broad for developing a theory for the vital socioeconomic institution – namely, the business corporation. The arguments advanced in a court might not adequately reflect the institutional character of corporations.

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136 571 A.2d 1140 (Del. 1990).
138 Supra note 78.
iii. Rival submissions are actuated by parties’ self-interests, and not public policy considerations

Another issue with adjudication in the courts is the limited self-interest of the parties which defines their submissions. In presenting a case, a litigant would necessarily be driven by the specific goals which he/she wishes to achieve from the legal process. For instance, when John Norton Pomeroy argued in *Santa Clara* (1882) that a corporation is only its shareholders in the collective, his motive was to save tax for his client-corporation through this interpretation.\(^\text{139}\) It would be difficult to treat the arguments as objective or dispassionate. Pomeroy’s concerns were less about advancing justice, in any sense of the term, or the frontiers of knowledge about corporate theory.\(^\text{140}\) Self-interest of the parties and its impact on litigation are real issues. They are yet another limitation of case law as the source of corporate theory.\(^\text{141}\)

2. Legislation and Corporate Theory

Legislation is another source from which we can glean some aspects of the theory underlying business corporations. The statutes under which corporations are created imbue them with a number of qualities or attributes, such as:

- Corporations as association of individuals
- Corporations as incorporated vehicles for business enterprise
- Corporations as vehicles for pooling financial capital
- Corporations as vehicles that issue securities for trade in the stock market

\(^\text{139}\) Arguments extracted in Morton Horwitz, *supra* note 10 at 177-178.

\(^\text{140}\) I am conscious of legal practitioners being assimilated to officers of the court, and their task is to facilitate the court to arrive at the right decision. It is debatable how far this ideal is realized in practice. In any event, it is undermined by the adversarial principle in litigation and the remuneration system which define lawyers’ loyalties.

\(^\text{141}\) There is a view – usually termed “neoconservative” – that the pursuit of self-interest by every individual or group would collectively promote the public interest. Irrespective of whether one agrees with this view, the argument would be less valid in business corporations where the power is effectively centralized in the directors, *de jure*, and full-time executives, *de facto*. Other than this, there is the law which restricts directors’ loyalty to the shareholders and treats higher share prices as the corporate objective. In this milieu, the ability of the other groups to pursue their self-interest is quite limited.
Here again, a difficulty is that these elements are not necessarily consistent with one another. It makes a difference which attributes receive greater emphasis or prominence in the framework and which ones less.142 For example Attribute #1 – corporations as “associations of individuals” – is relatively ancient, and it turns the focus on the shareholders who have contributed the risk capital of the companies.143 This idea still survives in the company legislation in UK, as already pointed out. But the emphasis in the Delaware statute switched to Attribute #4 – the corporation as a security-issuing vehicle – in early 20th century.144

In Britain, *Companies Act 1948*145 was largely based on Attributes #2, #3, and #4 listed above. The statute treated share capital as the financial resource raised for substantive business activity and forbade companies from dealing in their own shares through practices such as buybacks. In that framework, there could be no question of a company holding its own shares, or assisting others to acquire the shares. The clarity of this vision has been diluted in the *Companies Act 2006* which, incidentally, *also* espouses the stakeholder principle. Subject to conditions, now some companies can purchase and hold their own shares and even assist others to purchase the shares.146 These provisions point towards “commoditization” of shares *a la* North America. Obviously, the boom in the stock market since the 1980s made an impact and trade in financial securities gained a legitimacy it lacked in the aftermath of the Great Depression and World War II.147

In sum, the current theory of corporations gleaned from legislation and case precedents has significant gaps, ambiguities, and incongruities. It is not a harmonious framework, but a cluster of

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142 For an affirmation of the significance of the role played by the statutes in shaping corporate governance, see E. Merrick Dodd, “Statutory Developments in Business Corporation Law, 1886-1936” (1937) 50 Harv. L. Rev. 27 at 27, and James Hurst, *supra* note 15 at 11-12.


145 11 & 12 Geo. 6, c. 38) (U.K.).

146 See e.g. *Companies Act 2006*, Section 678 (assistance to others for purchase of shares) and Section 690-692 (purchase of own shares).

147 At this writing in 2011, however, we must reckon with the events in the stock market since the onset of the Financial Crisis in 2008 and revisit the role of financial markets and ideas about trade in securities as a means to promote general prosperity.
ideas drawn from several judicial pronouncements and specific elements in the statutes. The philosophy underlying the corporate statutes requires closer examination. Commodityization of shares and the elevation of financial capital above the substantive business of corporate enterprises are important issues, and there is a need to revisit them in the post-Enron, post-Credit Crisis world.

B. The Stakeholder Principle – Some Useful Perspectives

1. New Legal Realism and the Stakeholder Principle

New legal realism, an emerging school of legal theory, provides some tools in developing corporate theory for the 21st century and including the stakeholder principle in the framework of corporate enterprises. New legal realism, as the title suggests, is derived from conventional realism but moves beyond its disenchantment with judicial lawmaking and doctrinal formalism. Classical realism is essentially negative in content, rather than a positive statement of theory. In contrast, New Legal Realism (NLR) identifies a proactive role for law and advocates greater engagement of the law with contemporary issues. Victoria Nourse and Gregory Shaffer present NLR as a response to:

[the] challenges—of globalization, terror, and the inability of financial markets to restrain themselves, of gaping income inequality (with eighty percent of gains in U.S. net income over three decades going to one percent of the population), of societies poised as if on a hair trigger to react globally to the latest crisis, of states realizing their mutual dependence and vulnerability but not knowing how to address them.148

Arguing that “this confluence of challenges comprises the new world order,” Nourse and Shaffer question:

[w]hether the theoretical categories that have dominated law, of markets and efficiency, of rights and texts and procedures, are capable of addressing the experience confronting us on the front pages of our newspapers, an unprecedented market collapse, and the unexpected triumph of political mobilization[?]149

Starting from this premise, NLR advocates a more interdisciplinary approach and greater legal activism in handling the present challenges. It retains the principles of classical realism and relies on incremental improvements. NLR adopts, among other things, the efforts of the old model to

148 Supra Note 133 at 71 (footnote references omitted).
149 Ibid. at 71-72.
“redefine the law in terms of the centrality of facts and empirical evidence” and apply social science
perspectives in dealing with issues.\textsuperscript{150} New realism seeks to be more expansive and inclusive than
the old. It is described as “optimistic, maintaining that law is a world of action and our responsibility
is to participate in it.”\textsuperscript{151} To accomplish this goal, NLR adopts a number of tools and techniques
developed in the recent decades. There is, for example, a stress on “translation between high-
quality research using a variety of methods, on the one hand, and law/policy, on the other.\textsuperscript{152} NLR
also continues with a stress on values, similar to classical legal realism. Felix Cohen argued in 1935:

\begin{quote}
We never shall thoroughly understand the facts as they are, and we are not likely to make
much progress towards such understanding unless we at the same time bring into play a
critical theory of values. . . . Legal description is blind without the guiding light of a theory of
values.\textsuperscript{153}
\end{quote}

Given its broad approach, NLR predictably has some disagreements with the law-and-
economics school and its more narrow beliefs and concerns such as simple wealth maximization,
individuals as rational actors and efficiency of the markets.\textsuperscript{154} NLR theorists argue that there is little
difference between old formalism, driven by \textit{laissez-faire} ideas, and the new model which treats
economic efficiency as the desideratum.\textsuperscript{155} NLR, on the other hand, recognizes that:

\begin{itemize}
\item individuals are vulnerable and subject to institutional influence
\item the state is a supportive institution, though subject to malfunction
\item empirical but non-reductive studies are valuable in developing legal theory
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{150} \textit{Ibid.} at 72.
\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Ibid.} at 137.
\textsuperscript{152} Elizabeth Mertz, cited in \textit{ibid.} at 83.
\textsuperscript{153} Felix Cohen, “Transcendental Nonsense and the Functional Approach” (1935) 35 Colum. L. Rev. 809 at 848-
849.
\textsuperscript{154} For a recent assertion of efficiency of the stock markets in corporate governance, see Jonathan R. Macey,
\textsuperscript{155} Nourse & Shaffer, \textit{supra} note 133 at 98, have provided a comparative table of the features of the two
schools.
The stakeholder theory of corporate governance would sit, quite comfortably, in the paradigm of new legal realism outlined above. The stakeholder principle shares these ideas – namely, the vulnerability of individuals, the need for institutional support, and the importance of a mediating rather than an adversarial approach to resolve disputes and conflicts. Major themes in the stakeholder theory are the imbalances in the corporate structure (centralization of powers), the ramifications of lopsided corporate objectives (such as an emphasis on shareholder value), greater awareness of the institutional character of business corporations and the need to balance and reconcile the community of interests represented in them.

New legal realism is more capable of addressing some crucial issues in corporate governance and respond more effectively to the challenges. The stakeholder model recognizes the state as a facilitator, rather than an impediment. The state, acting through elected assemblies, has the responsibility to develop appropriate frameworks and mechanisms through legislative policy, and encourage private actors to move towards optimum results. The stakeholder vision eschews the “command-and-control” approach, and is not about the traditional policing role played by the state.

Behavioral economics, microanalysis of institutions, and law in action are some of the other tools in the NLR framework. These are applied in analyzing law and legal theory, and they can be instrumental in institutionalizing the stakeholder model. In the new paradigm, the law is not entirely passive; it seeks to shape behavior and events more dynamically and proactively. These emerging ideas, which are shaping the environment, present an opportunity to update corporate theory and law, to promote healthy and responsible governance of business corporations.

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156 Ibid. at 132.
157 See e.g. Daniel A. Farber, “Toward a New Legal Realism” (2001) 68 U. Chi. L. Rev. 279.
2. The Stakeholder Principle in Conventional Common Law

To be clear, institutionalizing the stakeholder vision is possible even in the more formalistic setting of the common law. In this effort, the empirical evidence presented here is important. The fact that the stakeholder principle finds widespread acceptance among companies makes it, ipso facto, an integral part of the corporate landscape and a feature of prevailing practices and current values. It can, therefore, be viewed as an emerging principle of the common law on corporate governance. Simeon Baldwin (1915) observed:

The common law on any point existed, in theory at least, before any case in which it may be applied. It was the practice of the people, or the rule which to them seemed naturally right.

Baldwin presented the common law as endogenous to the society. The general practices at a given point in time and the prevailing value systems would be the foundations for the common law. In deciding legal cases, courts would merely apply the law distilling it from current practices and values. Roscoe Pound reflected this idea when he stated that judges (indeed, even legislators) merely codify or crystallize the law, rather than create it. More recently, Patrick Devlin referred to the tradition of legal adjudication by looking at contemporary practices and notions of morality.
The evidence on the adoption of the stakeholder principle by public corporations is solid. Many corporations state their stakeholder concerns in a moralistic tone, which suggests that the issue is also viewed in ethical terms. If prevailing practices and customs and ethical notions are treated as the common law then, as already pointed out, adoption of the stakeholder vision by corporations renders the model a principle of the common law on the subject of corporate governance.

3. The Legal Force of Stakeholder Declarations

In considering the stakeholder model from the legal perspective, the content and wording of the stakeholder statements made by the companies is relevant. Most often, the references to stakeholders are in general terms and lack the level of precision usually found in legal documents. They would make little sense in the universe of conventional law. Are the statements meant to be legally binding? Do they create a right in the beneficiaries to seek enforcement through regular legal process, if a company commits any breach? If so, what is the measure or standard to be applied by a court in providing a remedy? These are some typical questions that would arise in the legal setting, and they can undermine the “stakeholder principle as law” argument advanced here.

The legalistic approach seeks to reduce the stakeholder principle to a term of contract, and the questions would be valid only if the issue is viewed from the contractarian lens. The argument advanced here is, on the other hand, about the stakeholder principle as an emerging rule of law both in the New Legal Realism paradigm and by applying the conventional notions about the common law and its development. Here it would be unnecessary, in fact inappropriate, to test the issue with tools from the law of contract.

Yet another perspective is available for analyzing the legal dimension of the stakeholder issue. This is about the character of the document in which companies record their stakeholder concerns. As mentioned earlier, the following are the common documents the companies use for the purpose:
- Corporate governance guidelines
- Vision/mission statements
- Corporate citizenship/responsibility statements
- Sustainability/social responsibility reports

From a management or governance perspective, possibly it makes little difference which document a company has selected for declaring its stakeholder concerns. This could, however, have some relevance from a regulatory or legal standpoint. Among the four documents listed above, at least one of them – namely, corporate governance guidelines has a link with regulation. The guidelines are now mandatory in most jurisdictions and listed companies must develop guidelines or charters which set out their governance policies. Therefore, it is possible to argue that these guidelines are legal documents with binding force and validity. Companies are under an obligation to apply the stakeholder principle they espouse in the guidelines.

Several companies – including General Electric, Citigroup, AmerisourceBergen, Boeing, Microsoft, and Sunoco – have included stakeholder concerns among the responsibilities of their boards of directors. They declare, in their corporate governance guidelines, the community of interests among non-shareholders and shareholders. The statement of Boeing (Fortune rank 116) on the subject is typical:

The Board has the responsibility of overseeing, counseling and directing the corporate officers to ensure that the long-term interests of the Company and its shareholders are being served. The Board and the corporate officers recognize that the long-term interests of the Company and its shareholders are advanced when they take into account the concerns of employees, customers, suppliers and communities.  

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Interestingly, the statement of Boeing corresponds almost exactly with the stakeholder vision recently included in the UK *Companies Act 2006*. In other words, the statute codifies or reflects a practice that has already emerged. Several companies have made similar provisions in their governance charters. When companies affirm the stakeholder principle in clear terms and include it in corporate governance guidelines, they are obviously serious about it. The guidelines, as pointed out earlier, can be traced to regulation. This can be a consideration in determining the legal force and effect of the statements about stakeholders included in them.

In a limited technical sense of regulatory connection, the case is different with other documents such as vision/mission statements, corporate citizenship/responsibility statements and sustainability reports. These are not, at present, regulatory requirements and are voluntary in nature. Yet they are statements of corporate policy and acknowledge the vision that animates governance. They would be valuable as evidence of practice, and can be treated as representations in the legal sense. These are some reasons for treating declarations of stakeholder concerns with seriousness, wherever they may be made.

(C. Corporate Theory – A Case for a Formal Statement

The loose theoretical framework that can now be assembled from judicial precedents and legislation has some anomalies and incongruities, as I have pointed out. At any rate, it is possible to argue that shareholder primacy is the central principle, and shareholder value is the primary and overriding corporate objective or goal. This position is at odds with corporate practice. Business corporations, as revealed in the survey presented here, increasingly recognize non-shareholder groups and their importance in promoting long-term corporate interests.

In some cases, courts have no doubt adopted an institutional view of business corporations that considers non-shareholder groups and their interests. But the law is still constrained by the traditional ideas about shareholders and the “principal-agent” paradigm of their relationship with the directors. These factors inhibit the development of stakeholder governance. There is a need to
iron out the wrinkles and creases in corporate theory and align it with current management theory and practice.

There is a case for a formal statement of corporate theory – a set of overarching principles that define the character, goals and functions of business corporations. A public statement of theory can be an effective in correcting the anomalies in the current framework of business corporations and promoting greater harmony in the functioning of this significant socioeconomic institution.

Not the least among the reasons for a formal theory of corporations is the persisting stream of negative opinion about them. Suspicions about business corporations and unease with their power and influence have existed since the 18th century. They continue to the present. The complaints about corporations made in the recent years include short-termism and preoccupation with share prices,167 their apparently insatiable appetite for profit and power,168 and an autocratic culture of functioning that is opposed to the democratic values of the society.169

Recently, evidence of the disquiet about corporations was seen in a poll on the decision of the US Supreme Court in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission.170 In this case, the Supreme Court put its seal of approval on corporate funding of elections, and the decision has been controversial. A poll found that 8 in 10 respondents opposed the decision, and the disapproval cut across party affiliations (Democrats – 85 percent, Republicans – 76 percent, and independents – 81 percent).171

Experience in the Financial Crisis of 2008-09 also serves as a reminder of the rationale behind some of the restrictions, such as those on size and activities, applied in corporate law during most of the 19th century. The perils of the unfettered freedom of corporations to pursue any business activity

168 Joel Bakan, supra note 119.
169 Allan Hutchinson, The Companies We Keep: Corporate Governance for a Democratic Society (Toronto: Irwin Law, 2005).
170 Supra note 143.
were evident in the case of American International Group (AIG). The Credit Default Swaps (CDS) business done in the Financial Services division of AIG brought the entire company to its knees exposing the other divisions, including the insurance unit and its thousands of policyholders, worldwide, to the risks of serious loss and the sudden disappearance of insurance protection for no fault of theirs.

Size is another issue. During the Financial Crisis, the huge amount of financial assistance that US and UK governments extended to the financial corporations was justified on the ground that these companies were “too big to fail.” Whatever the other merits of the decision, it was tantamount to endorsing less-than-responsible governance practices at these corporations. The events leading to the Financial Crisis revealed the systemic risks inherent in large agglomerations.\(^{172}\)

The facts and the outcome in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* offer fresh lessons on the need for a formal statement of corporate theory. In a significant passage, the U.S. Supreme Court referred to corporations as “associations of citizens.” It is not clear if the citizens referred to here are the shareholders. In any case, it is debatable whether a contemporary corporation, in fact, represents an association of citizens.\(^ {173}\) The following exchange in the court revealed the openness of current theory; it stresses the need for a deliberated consensus on the issues of corporate character and goals:

**GENERAL KAGAN** (U.S. Solicitor General): A lot of [corporations] do [contribute to both political parties], which is a suggestion about how corporations engage the political process and how corporations are different from individuals in this respect. You know, an individual can be the wealthiest person in the world but few of us -- maybe some -- but *few of us are only our economic interests*. We have beliefs, we have convictions; we have likes and

\(^{172}\) For a call to dismantle the large American investment banking houses because they are “too big to exist,” see Simon Johnson & James Kwak, *13 Bankers, Wall Street Takeover and the Next Financial Meltdown* (New York: Random House, 2010).

\(^{173}\) The case involved a non-profit corporation, but the plea made was for striking down the statutory provisions that prohibited funding of elections by all corporations without any distinction about their character. During the arguments in the Supreme Court, the federal government specifically declined a suggestion from the court that the case can be confined to non-profit corporations. The government expressed a fear that if non-profit corporations were to be excluded from the prohibition, they would be used as conduits by business corporations for participating in the electoral process. Oral argument transcripts. Online: [http://www.supremecourt.gov/oral_arguments/argument_transcripts/08-205%5BReargued%5D.pdf](http://www.supremecourt.gov/oral_arguments/argument_transcripts/08-205%5BReargued%5D.pdf), accessed September 14, 2011.
dislikes. Corporations engage the political process in an entirely different way and this is what makes them so much more damaging.

CHAIR JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, that's not—I'm sorry, but that seems rather odd. A large corporation just like an individual has many diverse interests. A corporation may want to support a particular candidate, but they may be concerned just as you say about what their shareholders are going to think about that. They may be concerned that the shareholders would rather they spend their money doing something else. The idea that corporations are different than individuals in that respect, I just don't think holds up. 174 (Emphases mine)

Business corporations are only human constructs, and it is ironical that so much obscurity apparently surrounds their character. The presence of a formal theory on the subject can make a meaningful difference to the situation. The complaints and criticisms made about corporations cannot be brushed aside lightly. They deserve to be addressed, and action is needed to promote greater convergence between business/corporate interests and larger socioeconomic interests. Developing a formal theory of corporations would help in turning the focus on the key issues in the corporate framework and in identifying solutions. This is, appropriately, a task for legislation which represents the statement of public policy on a given subject.

The function of corporate legislation, it has been argued, is limited to facilitating business. 175 According to this school, regulating the business activities of corporations in their various aspects, such as employment, environmental care, anticompetitive practices, and so on, must be the concern of individual branches of law which apply to all enterprises, irrespective of their form of organization—proprietary, partnership or corporate. In other words, there is no justification for singling out corporations and attempting to regulate them structurally. 176 Regulation, according to this school, must be “external,” rather than structural or organic.

174 Ibid. at 53.
175 Henry Ballantine was, apparently, the first to make this argument. See Ballantine on Corporations (Chicago: Callaghan & Co., 1946). Writing in 1970, at the zenith of American industrial power, James Hurst, supra note 15, offered the commercial success of business corporations as validation of the minimalism of corporate law and the “enabling” character of the statutes.
176 Recently, this argument was made by Adam Winkler, “Corporate Law or the Law of Business?: Stakeholders and Corporate Governance at the End of History” (2004) 67 Law & Contemp Probs. 109.
External regulation of corporations has existed for several decades now, and its limitations are evident. If we consider the object of regulation as guiding behavior and deterring deviant trends, doubts arise about the capacity of external regulation to accomplish these goals. Joel Bakan’s discussion of General Electric Company (GE) is instructive. GE was found to have committed 42 “major legal breaches” between 1990 and 2001.\(^{177}\) The charges included breach of regulations on environmental care, employee safety, and product safety, and defrauding the government in defense contracts. GE has paid the penalties levied on it, and the pattern does not suggest that the penalties have been deterrent in their effect. Rather, GE apparently adopted a purely economic approach and treated the penalty as an item of cost that was affordable.

External regulation has proved its limitations. The need is for multipronged approaches in dealing with complex issues such as corporate governance. External regulation can be usefully coupled with internal or structural regulation considering the unique features of business corporations – the vast resources they control, central command, absence of significant proprietary interest in the executives, and their vulnerability to market compulsions. If we accept the institutional character of companies, there is a case for legislation to move away from minimalism and seek a more active role in guiding corporate conduct. There is evidence that this trend is already at work. Increasingly, stock exchange rules and securities regulation are more interventionist and they seek to guide the governance of listed companies.\(^{178}\)

A theory of business corporations, stated in legislation, would necessarily reflect a degree of consensus on the subject and provide valuable guidance in issues involving corporations. Developing such a theory is, undoubtedly, a challenge. For want of better alternatives elected legislatures, with all their limitations, present themselves as the appropriate agency to handle the task. This is for a number of reasons:

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\(^{177}\) See the discussion by Joel Bakan, *supra* note 119 at 75-79.

\(^{178}\) See e.g. Mark Roe, “Delaware’s Competition” (2003) 117 Harv. L. Rev. 588.
Foremost is the fact that corporations are created under legislation. As the creators of corporations, it would be appropriate and legitimate for legislation to explain or articulate their underlying theory – namely, character, goals and functions.

The statutes enacted by the elected legislatures of modern democratic societies represent, in effect, statements of public policy on a given subject. Understood thus, the statutes which create corporations carry a moral obligation to promote their healthy functioning and minimize externalities. To some extent, the stakeholder statutes already accomplish this goal.

In the recent decades, the discourse on democratic theory has been enriched by ideas about deliberation and public reasoning. They move beyond traditional notions of democracy which were formalistic and confined, more or less, to numbers, the majority rule, and the election procedure. The outcome of the democratic process and its quality did not receive significant attention. There is now evidence of rising consciousness about the legitimacy of the democratic process and its outcome, and a decline of the idea that electoral democracy represents an end in itself. This development augurs well for corporate legislation to assume

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179 This fact cannot be seriously disputed. A corporation can come into existence only by complying with the terms of a statute and it would be governed by the statute during its lifetime. To put an end to the corporation, again, one must follow the procedure prescribed in the statute. Robert Hessen, In Defense of the Corporation (Stanford, CA.: Hoover Institution Press, 1979) argued that there is an inherent right of the citizens to attain incorporation, which it is not dependent on the will of the sovereign. This much became a reality with the advent of the general incorporation statutes in the 19th century. These statutes represented the emergence of a broad consensus about making the corporate form available to all. But the terms on which incorporation will be granted is a different issue. This must necessarily depend on the prevailing social and economic circumstances, and reflect the lessons learned from the experience with corporations.

180 This is not a completely novel idea. In the British Commonwealth, most statutes carry a brief preamble which states the objects of the legislation. The U.S. Securities Exchange Act of 1934 (15 U.S.C. §78a et seq.) has a lengthy statement of the “necessity for regulation” (Section 2). The plea made here is only for a more elaborate statement.

181 See e.g. Jon Elster, ed., Deliberative Democracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). On public reasoning and its place in democratic societies, see Amartya Sen, The Idea of Justice (London: Allen Lane, 2009). Sen presents, in Chapter 15, deliberation as the idea underlying democracy and “democracy as public reason.” The historical accuracy of this characterization of majority rule and its underlying idea is questionable, although Sen’s version presents an ideal which the democratic system can strive to attain. In my opinion, the voting system in its origin was more concerned with liberty and self-determination than it was with reasoned deliberations in assemblies.

182 See e.g. John Adams’ explanation of the rationale for elections and the majority rule in “Thoughts on Government” (1776). Online: www.constitution.org/jadams/thoughts.htm, accessed September 14, 2011.
a more robust role in defining the goals for corporations – in terms of what it expects them
to do and how they should function.\textsuperscript{183}

To play the more expansive role advocated here, legislation must move beyond narrow
notions of property and contract which are dominant in the current theory of business corporations.
Corporations of the present, and the future, are increasingly driven by an institutional vision and
culture. Legislation, as the statement of public policy, must equally reflect this vision. In this effort, a
possibility for the statutes is to adopt the “enlightened shareholder value” model recently included
in the UK statute. This is subject to the caveat that the statute, as a whole, has a wholesome and
consistent theme. As pointed out earlier, it is possible to view the stakeholder provision in the UK
Companies Act 2006 as a standalone provision, rather than the organizing principle.\textsuperscript{184}

Yet the UK statute offers specific guidance to corporations in managing their business and
affairs. Shareholder benefit is stated to be the goal, but this is coupled with a duty to consider the
diverse other interests included in the corporate framework. Such a provision can take care of a
complaint against the general exhortations of the stakeholder principle – namely, that they do not
provide explicit guidance to corporations in ordering their affairs.\textsuperscript{185} It can also substantially resolve
the inconsistencies in the law in Delaware, discussed earlier. While the UK model may not be
perfect, it offers at least a practicable solution to the Great Debate in corporate governance,\textsuperscript{186} and a
useful starting point.

There is an important question is about the legitimacy of the law, more specifically statute
law, stating a theory of business corporations. This conflicts with the recent emphasis on market
law, stating a theory of business corporations. This conflicts with the recent emphasis on market

\begin{footnotes}
\item[183] At the same time, lobbying has emerged as a regular profession and government policy – both legislative
and executive – are susceptible to its influence. Predictably, business corporations with their resources and
expertise are active in lobbying (See e.g. Michael Lord, “Corporate Political Strategy and Legislative Decision
Making” (2000) 39 Bus. & Society 76). Emerging ideas about deliberative democracy and justice can
potentially check power politics and promote better reasoning in the formulation of public policy. It is about
considering all points of view – including the corporate or business dimension.

\item[184] To illustrate, the statutory remedies in the Companies Act 2006 are not available to non-shareholder groups
(Sections 260-269 (derivative action) and Sections 994-996 (unfair prejudice to shareholders)).

\item[185] Ed Waitzer and Johnny Jaswal, “People’s, BCE and the Good Corporate Citizen” (2009) 47 Osgoode Hall L. J.
439.

\item[186] See Lynn Stout, “New Thinking on Shareholder Primacy” in P.M. Vasudev and Susan Watson, eds.,
Corporate Governance after the Financial Crisis (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2012) (Forthcoming).
\end{footnotes}
arrangements and their efficiency. The case for legislative statement becomes stronger when the following are considered.

- Corporations are a hybrid construct in which the society and the state, seen as two distinctive entities, collaborate to create and operate.
- The dividing line between the state and the society and notions about the public and the private in the Anglo-American tradition are considerably erased by the strengthening of the democratic principle and emerging awareness of the need to provide good governance according to evolving circumstances, rather than the raw application of values developed in a different age and setting.
- No simple acceptance of the idea that all the actors in corporations (e.g. employees and communities) are present there purely because they have chosen to be there (by contract) and have negotiated the best terms possible for that contract.
- Greater sensitivity to the power structures in business corporations and the trends seen in their governance, historically and in the recent past (notably, rising levels of managerial pay and stagnation in the pay of other employees).

V. Corporate Theory for the 21st Century – Some Potential Features

Developing a theory of corporations for the present and the future is a daunting task. In charting the course, the past offers valuable guidance. To begin with, the new theory must be animated by an institutional vision. In this effort, the stakeholder idea is a valuable tool. The stakeholder idea has its origin in greater sensitivity to what are termed the “externalities” of corporate practices – namely, the impact that corporations have on employees, environment, communities, and so on. It is about justice in the collective – with the corporation understood as an institution.

In the recent decades, the emphasis on justice in collective arrangements has become greater. Traditionally in the Anglo-American conception, ideas about justice or ethics have been more in the
sense of the individual, rather than the collective.\textsuperscript{187} John Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* (1971)\textsuperscript{188} made a significant contribution in strengthening the ideas about the collective, or institutional, model of justice. The framework discussed here is offered as a possible approach to developing a theory of corporate justice. Rawls reformulated the following principles of justice in 2001:

- Each person has the same indefeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all; and
- Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be of the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society.\textsuperscript{189}

These principles can, with some modifications, be adapted to the stakeholder vision in corporate governance. The process of adaptation can start from the second principle. Corporate organizations are, essentially, unequal in their constitution.\textsuperscript{190} Centralization of powers in the directors is the norm, which is acceptable in Rawls’ framework – provided the powers of the directors place them under an obligation to protect the interests of the other groups that do not have power and are vulnerable.\textsuperscript{191} This idea resonates well with the stakeholder theory, which is egalitarian in its vision and method, and stresses the importance of considering the interests of all the groups without specific preference for any of them.

\textsuperscript{187} The prescriptions of John Locke (1632-1704) about property rights, or the ideas of Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) about liberty were derived from a conception of the individual struggling against an omnipotent, as-yet untamed sovereign. The individualist element was equally present in the works of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) – for example, his depiction of “pleasure” and “pain” as the motives for human behavior.

\textsuperscript{188} (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press, 1971).


\textsuperscript{190} The ongoing debate on executive compensation, including the efforts under the *Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010*, is proof of this fact.

\textsuperscript{191} This idea is quite aligned to the definition of stakeholder interests in management theory by James E. Post, et al, *Redefining the Corporation: Stakeholder Management and Organizational Wealth* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Business Books, 2002). Post et al. were particularly concerned about groups that had no legal power or right over the corporations. The duty-based approach advocated by John Rawls is found in a verse in the New Testament, “unto whom much is given, much will be demanded” (Luke 12:48). In popular culture, the same idea is reflected in the statement, “with great power comes great responsibility,” in the movie *Spiderman* (2002).
Stakeholder theory can, without serious complaint or criticism, accept the inequality in corporate organizations and the concentration of powers in the boards. Unified command is indispensable for business efficiency. This is subject to the condition that the directors who hold the powers are under a duty to consider the interests of all the groups. The consideration to which the other groups are entitled, and the resulting security and lack of vulnerability, would promote Rawls’ first principle of liberty. As emphasized by the great philosophers, John Locke and Thomas Jefferson, an individual must first be secure before he/she can realize liberty and its benefits. In the present age, “human vulnerability and mutual interdependence” are real, as Victoria Nourse and Gregory Shaffer pointed out. They argued:

[L]iberty alone is not enough; other concerns may be in tension with liberty, whether they are conceived in terms of separate values or aspects of liberty itself. These values include concerns over equality, efficiency and security.

Rawls’ reference to “the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged” in his second principle is somewhat troublesome. It reflects the idea of affirmative action. The stakeholder theory, in its essence, is about equal consideration for all groups, rather than affirmative action for the benefit of the weak. The stakeholder vision spans a wide spectrum – from a minimum of responsible corporate practices that do not inflict serious externalities (including market distortions) or mitigate them in any event, at one end, to voluntary activism and initiatives for amelioration at the other. The latter – activism and social initiatives – is welcome but not essential, but the former – attention to externalities – is an imperative.

Economic interpretation is a valuable source of material for developing a new theory of corporations. Economic theory has greatly enhanced the understanding of contemporary business corporations and their governance. It is, however, a mixed bag, and we must be selective in dealing

192 This has been accomplished, by and large, in the U.K. Companies Act 2006.
193 Nourse & Shaffer, supra note 133 at 135.
with it. The emphasis on agency costs continues to be relevant, as evident from the events in the Financial Crisis. Many corporations in the financial sector engaged in unsustainable business practices and assumed unmanageable risk, and large bonus payments were made to senior managers for these questionable decisions.\(^1^{95}\) This is a recent demonstration of the agency issue stressed in economic theory.

The prescriptions in economic theory about shareholder value and aligning the interests of the managers and the shareholders through stock options have proven to be simplistic, although they appeared to work in the short term. The shareholder value maxim and stock options played an important role in the failures seen at the turn of the century in major corporations such as Enron, WorldCom and Tyco. They placed the managers under pressure to meet earnings expectations, neglecting the long-term interests of the corporations.\(^1^{96}\)

To be fair, Michael Jensen and William Meckling referred to Pareto optimality while advocating shareholder value as the goal of corporate governance. This was in 1976. In Jensen and Meckling’s conception, every group was deriving value from the corporations – except the shareholders who languished from stagnant share prices. *Ceteris Paribus*,\(^1^{97}\) they argued, everyone will be better off if share prices increased. But *ceteris is never paribus* in this dynamic planet. The decades since have witnessed industrial decline and loss of manufacturing and other skilled jobs in the western countries.\(^1^{98}\) These developments have occurred alongside the rise in share prices which lasted until 2008. Since then there has been a slide and partial recovery in share prices, which points towards a degree of instability inherent in the market.


\(^{196}\) A survey of more than 400 CFOs of U.S. corporations reported that almost 80 percent of them would have been ready to alter the financial reports to meet analyst expectations about profits. John R. Graham, Campbell R. Harvey & Shivram Rajgopal, “The Economic Implications of Corporate Financial Reporting” (2005) 40 J. Acc. Econ. 3.

\(^{197}\) *Ceteris Paribus*, a Latin expression, means “other things remaining unchanged.”

\(^{198}\) See e.g. Robert E. Scott, “Unfair China Trade Costs Local Jobs” (March 2010), online: Economic Policy Institute [http://epi.3cdn.net/91b2eeffce66c1a10_v5m6beqhi.pdf](http://epi.3cdn.net/91b2eeffce66c1a10_v5m6beqhi.pdf), accessed September 14, 2011.
There is increasing evidence of corporations moving away from the short-termism that underpins the shareholder value idea. It is, however, doubtful how far corporations attempt to actualize the professed ideals about the long-term and sustainability. A recent survey found that the criteria applied for determining managerial incentives are still the conventional ones — Earnings per Share (EPS), revenue, operating income, net income and free cash flow. Research expenditure or investments, which would be more about the future and the long-term, are prominently missing from the criteria. Companies need to move seriously beyond rhetoric, and develop practices and principles that actually turn managerial focus towards the long-term. This is a potential issue for a new theory of business corporations.

Encouragement of high executive pay is another issue with economic theory. The issue is even more acute in the post-Financial Crisis world. Economic scholars conferred legitimacy on high executive pay and bonus policies, which played a role in encouraging the credit derivatives business in the financial sector and the resulting crisis. The Dodd Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010 attempts to deal with the issue through a nonbinding shareholder vote on executive compensation. Executive pay is an important area for action. Compensation committees have existed in business corporations for some time now, and providing them with objective and transparent guidelines can promote greater reason and equity in corporate executive pay structures. This can be an element in the new corporate theory.

Economic theory does not pay much attention to the distinction between debt and equity, and the perils of excessive leverage. There are reports that corporate leverage increased significantly in the recent decades. There is a case for a survey of the debt levels of companies and the

199 See e.g. “Long-Term Value Creation: Guiding Principles for Corporations and Investors” (New York: The Aspen Institute, 2009).
consequent risk of financial stress. This can be an important area for future research. Excessive leverage is inimical to stability, and there is a case for including this issue in the new theory.

The economic prescription about grant of stock options to managers strengthened the trend for the commoditization of shares. The bull phase in the stock market from early 1980s until 2008 appeared to affirm the practice, but the decline in share prices since then raises questions – both practical and ethical – about treating shares as commodities and encouraging companies to issue and deal in them freely. The recent market instability underscores the need for reconsidering finance-centric governance policies and for weaning companies away from preoccupation with the stock market and share prices.

In promoting the stakeholder principle and re-conceptualizing the business corporation for the future, it would be necessary to move beyond some troubling shadows of the past – namely:

- The idea that companies are shareholders in the collective
- Pre-eminence of the shareholders, and directors as their elected surrogates or agents
- The idea that a company is equivalent to a natural person in itself and must be assimilated to humans, so it can claim all the rights and protections available to individuals

These historical notions lack relevance or validity for the present. They originated in a different age, and it is time to move beyond them – towards a clearer vision that better reflects the needs of the present and the future. In the effort to re-conceptualize business corporations, the following description by Gerard Henderson (1918) can be handy:

[The corporate device] is not an expression of any philosophic quality in the group – of any group will or group organism. It is no more than a convenient technical device . . . to achieve the practical results desired, of unity of action, continuity of policy [and] limited liability...

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203 The “natural person” idea was used in America for practical purposes – to remove the restrictions applied to corporations. A variant of the natural person idea can be seen in the efforts of the German scholar, Otto Gierke, to conceive an independent “corporate personality” – one with moral and ethical attributes. Political Theories of the Middle Age, trans. by Frederic Maitland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900).
Similar thinking can be detected in the following observations of the New York court in *Farmers’ Loan & Trust Co. v. Pierson* (1927):

A corporation is more nearly a method than a things, and . . . the law in dealing with a corporation has no need of defining it as a person or an entity, or even as an embodiment of functions, rights and duties, but may treat it as a useful name and a usual collection of jural relations, each of which must in every sense be ascertained, analyzed and assigned to its appropriate place according to the circumstances of the particular case, having due regard to the purposes to be achieved.205

The conception of business corporations in the *Canada Business Corporations Act* is most closely aligned to this idea.206 In the Canadian federal statute, a corporation is merely a device or a mechanism designed for business activity. It comes into existence on the grant of certificate of incorporation by a public official. A new theory of business corporations can adopt this principle, which can help in avoiding the confusion between corporations and their shareholders, or mystifying corporations with references to the “corporate personality,” or treating them as natural persons.

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