

Editorial

The editor of this Journal learned an important lesson about the nature of the co-operative movement nearly fifty years ago. If one peered into one co-operative shop in Liverpool at that time, one could observe some gold lettering on the marble tiles at ceiling level which seemed at the time to capture the essence of the Co-op. As one read around the tiles, the bold message proclaimed was "Liberty ... Equality ... Boot Repairs"! The juxtaposition of lofty ideals and practicality seemed, somehow, appropriate. It captured the notion that co-operation, at one level, reflected the practical efforts of communities of members to band together to meet a common need and, at another level, the aspirations of its pioneers to develop a social movement which could transcend the boundaries of communities and nations.

This dual nature of co-operation is reflected in the themes of commonwealth, community and common bond in the articles in this issue. The lofty ideals are considered in Roger Jones' paper on the nature of the concept of the Co-operative Commonwealth in the 21st century. This exploration of the development of co-operation beyond a business model as a principle for the organisation of society stimulated a lively discussion when it was presented at a fringe meeting at the 2003 UK Co-operative Congress in Manchester and it is reproduced here in the hope of extending the debate to a wider audience. The international perspective of co-operators is further reflected in the article by Basil Loveridge.

The practicalities of building co-operatives around tangible communities with common needs are examined in the other two papers. One of the distinctive features of credit unions as co-operatives is that they are required to define carefully the nature of the community for which they are created through their common bond. The influence of the common bond on the scope for the development of credit unions is examined in a paper by Nick Ryder and Andrew Baker. They make detailed comparisons of the legal and regulatory frameworks governing credit unions in Great Britain, Northern Ireland, the Irish Republic and the USA in

order to argue the case for a more flexible interpretation of the concept of common bond by regulatory bodies in Great Britain. Housing co-operatives share the feature of existing to meet a practical need of a clearly defined community. The paper by Jack Quarter and examines the development of co-operative solutions to the provision of social housing in Canada.

In an era of globalisation, the dual nature of co-operation is, arguably, essential to its survival. Co-operatives as businesses need to define the nature of the community for which they exist and the advantages they seek to deliver to their members as through organising co-operatively. At the same time, they need to avoid becoming purely defensive and protectionist in their thinking and actively seek to co-operate across community and national boundaries to ensure that globalisation becomes an opportunity rather than a threat for their members.

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