

## Editorial

### Special Issue on the UK Co-operative Commission Report, 2001

The year 2000 saw the co-operative movement in the UK, submit to a fundamental review of all its activities. Instigated by what some might see as the 'old guard' within the consumer sector and endorsed by no less than the Prime Minister, the Co-operative Commission asked the question 'What is the vision of the co-operative movement as we enter the new century - in terms of commercial objectives and social goals?' In early 2001, the Commission published its report. Shortly afterwards and to take the debates forward, we issued a call for papers to be published in this Journal. I am now delighted to present a special edition on this theme.

Professor Leigh Sparks in his first contribution to this Journal since the '150 year' celebrations of 1994, provides a candid view of prospects for some of the Commission's recommendations. The report calls for substantial new investment and ambitious new return-on-capital-employed targets. This will demand much higher sales volumes and a significant improvement in operating efficiency, all whilst in direct competition with some of the world's biggest retailers. Professor Sparks is sceptical when fundamentally, 'the benchmark in retailing is not the Co-operative Movement.' Beyond retail service delivery, the lack of an identifiable 'Co-operative Advantage', provides yet further uncomfortable reading. If such an advantage exists, why do co-operatives need protection from corporate raiders and why does membership need advocating to employees; both recommended by the Commission?

Joshua Bamfield traces the ideas behind some of the recommendations back through the Commission report's predecessors in 1958 and 1919, whilst noting its evident modernisation. His paper again has a broad approach, but focuses on several issues including the prospects for working together in a movement where this has often been difficult to realise. The report testifies to both the achievements of the Co-operative Retail Trading Group and to the remaining obstacles in the path of this worthy initiative.

Richard Bickle presents a powerful case for reconsidering the role of education in delivering co-operative success. His paper challenges narrow interpretations such as member education, public relations and staff training, promoted by co-operative officials. The movement will not succeed without a coherent strategy covering members, staff and the general public. The paper is critical of the

Commission report's failure to provide a clearer explanation of the 'Co-operative Advantage'.

In the last of the commission report papers, Bill Connor provides a perspective from the shop-workers' trade union. The paper notes to downward trend in the trading performance of the retail co-operative sector during the second half of the twentieth century and with it, a deterioration in the terms and conditions of co-operative employees, to a point where leading competitors offer a better deal. Currently, the workforce is not properly recognised or represented in the decision-making processes of most co-operative societies. This paper supports the commission's recommendation of a reserved employee member constituency on elected boards of directors as being the way forward.

Whilst not directly focused on the Commission's report, our last contribution sits very well in this issue. Wendy Wrigley provides a very interesting insight into the practical issues that relate to implementing the Co-operative Group's 'responsible retailing' initiative. From being relatively obscure ten years ago, the social cost of conducting retail business has gained a much higher profile across the whole industry. Consumers are becoming more sophisticated and more demanding, and retailers have responded by developing policies and codes of practice designed to address these concerns. All of which puts pressure on co-operative organisations seeking to differentiate themselves from private enterprise in the eyes of the consumer and achieve competitive advantage from meeting social goals. Behaving ethically is not the exclusive domain of co-operatives. Wendy Wrigley's paper covers the full breadth of the Co-operative Group's approach.

I hope that this themed issue on the UK Co-operative Commission report published last year, is a stimulating read. It is also my hope that readers from overseas will find something of interest here. I am sure we can learn from each other, even if international experience is poorly represented in this Commission's work!

Readers of the journal will have noticed that we have ended our recent association with the Plunkett Foundation, who have withdrawn from the arrangement. Therefore, the Journal of Co-operative Studies once again assumes its status as solely published by the Society for Co-operative Studies. I would like to thank the Plunkett Foundation for their worthy contribution during our brief association.

**James Bell**  
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