

# Liberty, Equality, Boot Repairs: an Obituary for Ian Pyper

**Richard Bickle**

An obituary and celebration of the life of Ian Pyper, Chair of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies and former editor of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*.

It was with great shock that co-operators learned of the sudden death of Ian Pyper, recently elected Chair of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies, from pancreatic cancer on the eve of Co-operative Congress in June. He was first elected to the Executive Committee of the society at the 2001 AGM and had served as Editor of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* from 2002-2005.

Ian opened one of his early Editorials for the *Journal* with the following memorable story about an early encounter with 'co-operation' in his native Liverpool:

The Editor of this *Journal* learned an important lesson about the nature of the co-operative movement nearly 50 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 people to band together to meet a common need and, at another level, the aspirations of its pioneers to develop a social movement that could transcend the boundaries of communities and nations.

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Ian had clear and perceptive aspirations for the *Journal's* development. These are set out below in his own words, in an extract from Ian's Editorial in the *Journal* edition of April 2004 (Vol 37 Number 1 pp 3-4). Ian's ideas still have currency today, a measure of his contribution to thinking within the Society.

The Society for Co-operative Studies has always tried to act as a bridge between academics from a range of disciplines who have a research interest in co-operatives and the practitioners, the lay activists and

managers who wish to reflect on their engagement with co-operative enterprises ...

As an academic journal, we have developed an international character, attracting refereed papers from academic contributors from all over the world. Most of these report the results of empirical studies on a wide variety of co-operative organisations. Whilst it is important that such research is reported, this section of the *Journal* is largely addressed to an academic audience. Most practitioners will find much of this material somewhat esoteric to be of great interest to them. Instead, they may well find more relevance in the nonrefereed short articles.

The danger is thus that, instead of acting as a bridge, ours becomes a journal in which academics talk to academics whilst practitioners separately talk to practitioners.

Another concern relates to the impact upon relatively specialist niche *Journals* such as ours of the increasingly selective research funding approach being adopted in the United Kingdom. The RAE, the research assessment process to which all UK universities are subjected, tends not to reward publication in such specialist journals ...

This makes it increasingly difficult for us to convince leading UK academic researchers that they should target the papers reporting the results of their major research projects at the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* rather than at the '5' and '5\*' RAE rated journals of their disciplines ...

## **A way forward**

Rather than the schizophrenic character referred to above, our aim should be to publish papers which will be of interest to the entire readership and further this bridging function. There has been discussion within the Society of ways in which we could play a more active role in developing what could, in effect become a virtual co-operative research institute. Perhaps we should be more active in building up links with such bodies as the

Co-operative College to develop a network of researchers who would join forces across institutional boundaries to attract funding for collaborative research activity.

The input of the College and active practitioners should help to ground such research projects in live issues for the co-operative movement. Within such an approach, perhaps the Journal should give greater emphasis to articles both from academics and practitioners which are theoretical or reflective in character.

The distinction between refereed and non-refereed articles would disappear as all such contributions would be subjected to scrutiny within an active and possibly re-constituted Editorial Advisory Board. Hopefully, such articles might help to stimulate proposals for new research projects.

Whilst we would continue to publish suitable peer reviewed research based papers and research reports, we might anticipate that a desired outcome of many of the research projects referred to above might be publication in the leading journals within the subject disciplines of the academic researchers concerned. This would help to raise their profile and that of co-operative studies as a field of research.  
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In addition to his roles within the UK SCS, Ian could look back on a lifetime of service to Higher Education and the co-operative movement. He studied at Loughborough University, where as part of his course he spent a year working for the Foundry Industry Training Board, and then joined Co-operative Retail Services as a Management Trainee.

After a variety of roles in Liverpool, he was appointed as the Member Relations/Personnel Officer of CRS's East Anglia Region based in Bury St Edmunds. On arrival, he was told by the Regional General Manager that in recent years the only people attending the members' meetings had been the Regional Committee and their spouses; it was his role in member relations was to make sure that this remained the case! To that end he was advised to give money given to the Woodcraft Folk whose members were

too young to attend, and that sponsoring bands and choirs was also useful because their members were only interested in music.

Having become somewhat disillusioned by the prevailing culture in the co-operative retail sector in the UK at that time, Ian took the opportunity to return to education as a lecturer at the Co-operative College. During his years at the College, he got to know the Personnel Officers of many societies including Peter Marks (current Chief Executive of the Co-operative Group), then working for the West Yorkshire Society, and Alan Gill, who later became Chief Executive at Leeds.

His career then led to Northern Ireland where he took up a post lecturing in Business and Management at the University of Ulster where for many years he had pastoral oversight of first year students living in University accommodation. Several generations of students had reason to be thankful for Ian's good humour and circumspect attitude to being summoned from his bed in the early hours of the morning to respond to one incident or another!

As a co-operative activist, Ian had served on the Regional Board of the CWS and then the Co-operative Group in Northern Ireland. He was a regular delegate at Congress, half-yearly meetings and other functions and, while his incisive sense of what needed to happen was not always reflected in the agreed action, his colleagues valued his insight and analytical skills as well as his shrewd political instincts.

Having announced his retirement and relocation to Burnley, Ian was elected as Chair of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies in September 2009. One of his legacies to the society and movement is the developing relationship between the UK SCS and the Irish SCS. One of the fruits of this was the Irish Co-operative Conference that took place in Dublin a few weeks after his death.

The Society is considering ways to mark Ian's contribution to the movement, and to the Society in particular.

It is hard to believe that Ian is gone, but those of us who knew him are thankful for the time we spent with him. Rest in peace.

**Richard Bickle is Secretary of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies.**