

The Labour View

by Joyce Quin MP

The Co-operative and the Labour movements have long been on very good terms with each other. That it should be so is not surprising, for the principles of Co-operation foretold in many ways the principles of the Labour Party, years before the Party itself was born. Rochdale's pioneers struck a huge blow for working class self-determination against the Government which denied them the vote and the manufacturers who sought to exploit them; and their venture had immediate practical gains as well as massive philosophical ones. No history of the Labour movement, or indeed the country, is complete without it.

The Labour - Co-operative Alliance

Although the consumer Co-operative movement started out as resolutely non-party, it was natural that in time it should come to ally itself with the party that shared so many of its emancipatory ideals, the party that had learned so much from the Co-operators. The formal relationship between the Labour and Co-operative parties is now in its 62nd year. Through the 15-strong Co-op Parliamentary Group of MPs and Peers, and by their right to affiliate to local Labour Parties, Co-operators can make their views known at all levels. Labour, in turn, is increasingly drawing on Co-operative ideas and solutions.

The dual nature of the Co-operative movement is to be found in the existence of the producer and the consumer Co-ops. I was surprised to note that Beatrice Webb, back in the 1920s, took the view that producer Co-ops could not survive and that it was "consumers' Co-operation...which will constitute the greater part of the social order of 100 years hence". The view today is more mixed. Consumer Co-ops, while still the weightiest element in the Co-operative movement, have had to move on from the heady days of the 1920s. Worker Co-operatives have done better than Beatrice Webb thought they would, though they have still to reach the levels they have attained in some European countries. It is those I would like to turn to first.

Worker Co-operatives

For some time now, the idea of large-scale nationalised corporations, Herbert Morrison style, has been somewhat in retreat. The way these were managed, and their sheer size, often meant they were remote from the workers they employed and did little to promote workers' involvement. The lack of public esteem in which some were held allowed the Conservatives to

embark upon a programme of asset-stripping and even, for a time, to achieve some popularity for doing so. Yet the shortcomings of some nationalised industry in practice should not mean that we abandon all thoughts of stale ownership or of greater workers' control and tamely accept unbridled, often monopoly, capitalism for all of our industry. Nor will we.

Co-operatives have a significant part to play in the democratisation of the British industrial landscape. They are an attractive alternative to the risks of over-centralisation as well as to the elitism of the current status quo. They hold out the prospect of genuine participation and increased industrial harmony. But there are difficulties too, for worker Co-operatives, such as that of getting off the ground. Excellent principles at the heart of the Co-operative ideal - that capital should not manipulate labour - may nonetheless create problems of under-capitalisation. Labour wishes to help overcome this with its proposals for a range of local and regional investment banks, serviced and co-ordinated by a British investment bank. This will enable loans to be advanced on a scale, and on terms more sympathetic, than many of the current commercial lenders.

Labour has, in any case, already a strong record of support for Co-operatives from the Labour Government's "Co-operative Development Act" to the support for Co-operatives from many Labour local authorities across Britain. Our 1987 Manifesto contained the pledge to "encourage Co-operation in all forms". Furthermore, having been a Member of the European Parliament for the last 10 years, I know that support for Co-operatives is strong throughout the whole of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament and that European opinion generally, is favourable to the expansion of the Co-operative sector.

Housing Co-operatives

Labour is also aware of the role of housing Co-operatives. The recent Policy Review states, "We would seek to increase the resources available to local authorities, housing associations, and housing Co-operatives. We will examine and assist ways of supporting Co-operative housing, including the establishment of a national development agency".

Consumer Co-operation

The flagships of the consumer Co-operative movement, the CWS, and the Co-op stores, will I hope, play an important part in the lives of British consumers. This is despite the difficulties and competition of recent years. It is not for me to tell the readers of this *Journal*, many of whom have a deep knowledge of the Movement, where the future of the Co-operative retail movement lies. Nevertheless, I hope that the future will include

some annexation of new ground as well as consolidation of existing territory. One area where perhaps the Co-op could be a trendsetter is in catering for the environmentally aware and socially responsible consumer. In increasing numbers, consumers are keen to harness their spending power to the purchase of goods which do not damage the environment, and which do not rely, in their manufacture, on the exploitation of other human beings.

Finally, Labour with the Co-operative movement, opposes moves to general Sunday trading and the possible seven-day weeks for some shop workers which could result.

Co-operation, in a broad sense of the term, is likely to become more central to the political debate in this country over the next few years and there will be a preference for solutions which bring general benefits, rather than the divisive approach of Britain under Mrs. Thatcher. Take, for example, the current debate over the nature of the European single-market in 1992. Here we have a chance to prove that better social measures, and worker participation in industry, produces superior results both in terms of industrial relations and economic growth than the resolutely non-co-operative approach of many British managers and of Government. After the conflicts of the last few years, I believe that co-operation in all its forms will increasingly be seen, in the eyes of the general public, as offering the best way forward.

The Author

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