

The Co-operative Party

by David Wise

It has been illuminating to read the statements made in the Journal by the various Party spokesmen on the role of Co-operation. All of them expressed support for the principles and practices of Co-operation and, by implication, have suggested that its development occupies a central role in their policies.

But if one were to ask the same people, in other circumstances, for an exposition of their Party's policies, I feel that a different response would be forthcoming. Co-operation would be unlikely to receive the briefest of mentions.

Home Grown Is Best

But for us it is different. We are, after all, made up entirely of Co-operators. The promotion of Co-operation is the very reason for our existence. As that most distinguished predecessor of mine, Sir Jack Bailey, said in 1966, "The task of the Co-operative Party is with diligence, enthusiasm and pride, to protect and promote Co-operative interests and to apply Co-operative principles to the wider world we live in". How best to achieve those objectives has always been a matter of concern and even in the more fluid conditions of the 1920s it was realised that total political independence was impossible.

First, the Co-op had to forge an alliance with its comrades within the trade unions and Labour Party. Next, we had to recognise the indivisibility of the working-class movement and accept that for our Co-operative Party to succeed it must be an integral part of the Labour Party and act as a pressure group within it. That relationship has continued, has prospered, and has provided the Movement's many political successes.

Two Roles

There are, of course, times when things do not go well for Labour! For some faint-hearts (and closet Tories) these are times for trying to opt out of politics. But during an extended period of Conservative Government we still have two roles.

A Lobbying Force

A primary duty is to look after the Movement's day-to-day political interests as an effective lobbying force. This is a task that is undertaken by our competitors too. In our case, it has been a longstanding practice to act on and not behind the Parliamentary scene. We have taken the view that to adopt the

hole and corner method of many private vested interests would not only cost much more but would also detract from the Movement's standing and its reputation for fair dealing.

A Brake on Tory Government

Additionally, the Party has the role, during a period of Tory Government, to act as a brake. We do our best to reduce the impact of the assault on Co-operative standards and values inherent in Thatcherite policies. The view of the present Government that "society", "community", "public ownership", "local authority", and other collective groups are somehow inevitably inefficient and inherently inferior, needs to be countered. The Party, as the Movement's political fighting force, has to make sure that everyone - including those charged with the responsibility of running our Co-operative businesses - are not led astray by siren voices and continue to adhere to basic Co-operative principles at a time when they are under attack. The scandal of privatisation and the move towards the abandonment of mutuality status among building societies could be followed by an out and out attempt to destabilise consumer Co-operatives and to encourage them to abandon the role for which they were established.

A Spur to Labour

However, as the recent Euro-Elections have reminded us, nothing is for ever and the Co-op Party's principal task is, whilst applying that brake on Thatcherism, to spur on Labour's commitment to Co-operative development.

We have no doubt about the Labour Party's willingness to provide opportunities for the expansion of Co-operation. As Neil Kinnock says in his introduction to "Meet the Challenge, Make the Change", the Labour Policy Review, "Throughout this Policy Review, therefore, we develop the case for a democratic, decentralised form of government, involving people as directly as possible in the decisions which affect them, using the accountable power of the State to help create a society in which citizens have the means and the self-assurance to take responsibility for their own lives and to fulfil their obligations to others".

That is our green light. There are any number of ways in which positive support for individual, independent, autonomous, and self-governing Co-operatives can be provided by a government that *believes* in Co-operation.

Lines of Advance

A restored and strengthened *Co-operative Development Agency* should have as its remit a substantial programme of support for the development of worker Co-operatives. Enterprises which are collectively owned by the work force on

a Co-operative basis will retain the enthusiasm of the workers and, at the same time, will encourage a sense of community.

In Journal 61 Lord Gallacher put the case for *statutory Co-ops taking over such natural monopolies as the water industry*. The public furore over the Government's privatisation indicates a strong desire for consumer involvement and we shall press for a solution which will provide this. Other natural monopolies ought to be treated in a like manner.

More must be done to give assistance to *housing Co-operatives* for the general public and for specialist groups. The successes achieved among housing Co-ops by the development of an esprit de corps among member owners has already been demonstrated.

We shall also, through our Labour and Co-op Group in Parliament, be pressing for a commitment to Co-operative development in other areas. For example experience in other countries shows that Co-op methods can be made more use of *within the Health and Social Services fields*. Residential homes for both the elderly and the disabled can be operated on Co-operative or semi-Co-operative lines. They might well be integrated with producer Co-operatives which already, though to a limited extent, are helping to increase employment and social opportunities for disabled groups and others.

More can be done to develop Co-operatively operated creches for working mothers, especially in providing facilities for employees in small scale factories, shops, or offices where lack of numbers makes it difficult for employers to provide nursery facilities on an individual basis.

Further impetus should also be given to the development of *those groups which, whilst not calling themselves Co-operatives, work on Co-operative lines* and are socially motivated. A Labour and Co-operative Government will reverse this Government's wind-down of the NHS and will channel extra resources into the Service. But there will still be a real need for the whole of the community to give extra help and support both financial and physical. The enthusiasm that the NHS has generated - in part due to the misguided attack on it by this Government - could be turned to advantage by the promotion of a National Federation of Support Groups run on Co-operative lines.

There is thus no shortage of opportunities and no shortage of ideas. A vigorous Co-operative Party can ensure that a Labour and Co-operative Government puts them into effect.

The Author

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