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Society Notes

My Joint Editor is a rich source of good stories - and among them is that of a Scottish father exemplifying the national inclination to concentrate on the weaknesses of any situation, the flaws in any achievement, the cloud to every silver lining. A son had left Scotland to seek fortune in the United States and did indeed capture it. In due season he returned with the sparkle of accomplishment upon him and on his first evening by the hearth, brought out with great pride the album of photographs recording something of his work, his American wife and family and his home. The old man looked carefully enough through all the photographs, marking particularly eight of them; then he considered the eight and reduced them to four; on further scrutiny he reduced these to two and then with slow deliberation gave his judgement - "Aye", he said, "Aye, these are the two worst"!

Well, Scots often do respond like that and I recognise only too inescapably in myself that inclination. However, I plead I am not now indulging it in reporting the renewal of a familiar impression from our Annual Conference last October. The theme was "Management in a Co-operative Setting" and it is reviewed later in this Journal by Peter Davis, the organiser, in an article which is usefully not only a record of the Conference but an identification of further lines of action arising from it, some of which it is hoped to explore during Peter's year of office as Chairman of the Society. Certainly the Conference felt itself well served in organisation, in quality of lectures and in variety of programme.

The Problem of Being a Co-operative Manager

And yet and yet. This particular impression I report, derived specially from the discussions from the floor, was of very distinctive difficulties which the Co-operative manager has to contend with.

First of all, his tasks are very wide ranging. He has to respond to the commercial imperatives which shoppers, including most of the members, apply to him as to any other retailer - the prices, the quality, the service and the conditions they find in the shops. In addition, insists the Co-operative

“activist”, he has to identify and respond to the imperatives, often ill-defined, that emerge from the Co-operative character of the organisation.

Secondly, the tasks are not only extensive, they contain within themselves a serious tension and even contradiction which makes their fulfilment more complicated and demanding. The Movement needs activists, and those we have attracted have in the main, identified in Co-operation an ideological and political character which on their logic leads quite properly not only to the formation and support of the Co-operative Party, but to the association and alliance of the Party and the Movement with the Labour Party. That relation is firmly fixed in our public image.

However, the Movement needs and seeks also legions more “to shop at the Co-op” and in these legions are many who do not share the interests of the “activists” and in particular who do not share the favour for the Labour Party and may be positively opposed to it. The Movement in its address to them has not only to meet their commercial standards but to overcome their ideological and political resistance. Measurement of the width and depth of that resistance is not precise and would be worth some research; but there it is. Our response, in present circumstances, is to seek to make “shopping at the Co-op” so commercially attractive that we overcome such resistance and therein lies the distinctive challenge to the Co-operative manager.

One of the speakers at the Conference out of his management experience, spoke clearly and courageously of this problem of serving the two sets of demands. He might have been reminded of the story - again from Scotland - of a reply to a similar kind of dilemma. James Maxton, the ILP Member of Parliament, confronted with a kindred problem for a politician trying to meet two competing pressures, was asked what the politician could do. His answer was robust, and of limited helpfulness: “Do his best - and if he finds he cannot ride the two horses at once then he should get out of the bloody circus”.

I left our Conference sympathetic and grateful to the effective managers who are trying to meet that challenge in Co-operative terms.

The Annual General Meeting and Committee

A report of the AGM is given below. To my old eyes, as they recall past occasions, it was comparatively brief and not well attended. The report below records the appointment of officers and Committee for 1988/89 and includes items raised which will have the attention of that Committee.

One has already been heeded with exemplary and even painful expedition: the Committee at its October meeting decided that the price of the Journal should

be increased to £2. The Committee noted that most frequent of pressures, "increasing costs of production": moreover, to find the last increase it had to look back a long way, indeed to 1979; and in looking forward it bore in mind the prudent injunction in the Treasurer's Report that the Society should move as close as it can to self-financing by measures large or small. And members of the Society as they pay their annual subscriptions (£5 for individuals and £20 for organisations) and as they receive their usual supplies of the Journal, may find comfort in the reflection that the price to others of what members get for the same sub has gone up and its value, of course, remains high and steady - we hope!

Some Items on the Agenda

Other conclusions and considerations from the A.G. M. and the Committee can be noted from even a brief tour of that horizon. There are the changes in the list of national office holders - which fortunately do not impose on us the harsh injunction "off with the old" before getting "on with the new". All the colleagues outgoing from the list will not only continue to have our fresh and firm thanks, but will remain in some form of personal or professional association with the Society: Geoff Wade, John Brown, Fred Broughton and Nancy Scott. And the incoming colleagues are already familiar and reassuring to us: Ken Penney becomes Vice-Chairman, Frank Dent Membership Secretary and Bernard Rhodes and Frank Toft members of the committee. We look forward, also, to the reinforcement of Elizabeth Atkinson as Secretary of the North Region - and note, again, with appreciation the varied programme which Nancy Scott has achieved for the Metropolitan and South Region.

Items carried forward from the old to the new provide useful development. There is interest and concern for the prospects of the Co-operative Forum. Its meeting in January 1989 and the report of our representatives on it awaited eagerly. Through Johnston Birchall we are in touch with the Co-operative Union's discussions and particularly its educational plans for the Co-operative Studies Year 1994.

And Johnston and Peter Davis are trying to make progress on two long-cherished intentions. First, there is the objective of marketing the Journal more effectively to libraries in Universities, colleges and relevant institutions. Secondly, there is the objective of planning, encouraging and sustaining research into the development of the consumer Movement in the U.K. This, of course, is central to the role of the Society. Its objectives as set out in its Constitution all refer to this responsibility and indeed the most distinctive contribution it can make is to help in providing more informed and systematic analysis and advocacy on the problems confronting the Movement.

Present Joys - And Joys to Come

The Committee members have also agreed, following the brief attention to the Journal at the AGM to try to develop their service of review and suggestion - by allocating time more spaciouly and explicitly to that role. In the meantime, this present issue matches pretty well the general purpose set for the Journal. We should examine independently and in some depth issues in the development, both economic and social, of the consumer Co-operative Movement in the United Kingdom: and that should include the Movement's interest in the full range of Co-operative organisation nationally and internationally, and the exploration of "Co-operation between Co-operators". The Contents list can look that specification in the eye confidently enough.

In the next issue if there has been further development in the issue of CWS/CRS Relations, we shall return to it: the series "Party Policies: The Role of Co-operation" should be concluded: and we propose to turn to the Condition and Prospects of Co-operative Democracy and, in particular, the significance past, present and future of the Co-operative Auxiliaries.

And Conference 1989

The Committee of the Society has settled the date of the next conference and AGM - 8th/9th September 1989, to be inscribed in letters of burning gold in your memories and your diaries for the year.

November 1988

R.L.M.