

SDP and Co-ops

by Michael Young

The Social Democratic Party is not exactly in the best of order at the moment! So it would not make a lot of sense to quote from old policy statements and the like. But I can say with some confidence that I have, in discussions in the Party, always found a great deal of sympathy for Co-operatives of all kinds. It comes naturally to a Party in the middle, not committed to nationalisation on the one hand, nor unadulterated capitalist enterprise on the other, to rest particular faith in Co-operatives. My own hope is that when and if there is a popular front on the left, embracing the three opposition parties, Co-ops will get the prominence they deserve.

Prospects for Worker Co-ops?

I have set out my own views most recently in a book that I wrote with Marianne Rigge, *Revolution from Within*, (Weidenfeld) that was published for the SDP. I said there, and still believe, that what happened with National Freight is one of the most hopeful things that happened for worker Co-ops since the John Lewis Partnership. John Lewis could be one of the best supporters the Society for Co-operative Studies has ever had! Waitrose is a good example of a Co-op in action. It follows that the fullest possible emphasis should be given to management and worker buyouts. The Industrial and Commercial Finance Corporation could be a powerful help, and a government which cared about a 'property owning democracy' in industry could give the lead. If the Royal Mail was going to be passed over to a worker Co-operative, that really would be something - not that it is ever likely to happen. But the Post office has for long been pretty close to a Co-op.

Co-ops for People over 60?

As for consumer Co-ops I am less sanguine. This is mainly because the Co-operative consumer movement has, in my lifetime, been so conservative, and a hundred opportunities for new departures have been lost. I have myself started four 'information Co-operatives' for consumers which have gone well on the whole - the Consumers' Association (publishers of Which?), the Advisory Centre for Education, the College of Health and, most recently, the Open College of the Arts which is booming for home study based on informal and formal co-operation. But that is no more than touching the margin of the possible.

If I had to plump, I would say the best bet (of many bets) would be the

development of a vast system of Co-ops for people over 60. They could be happy in housing Co-ops as in some of the best British ones; they could buy their holidays and insurance and non-prescription medicines and books and educational courses on the lines of the 8-million strong American Association of Retired Persons; they could do services for each other and for children by means of the excellent 'labour exchanges' for old people in Sweden.

And Developing Small Co-op Shops

My fear is, as I say, that the existing movement will not rise to the opportunity or, incidentally, do enough to back the excellent initiatives of Johnston Birchall and others with small Co-op shops. I would like to see Co-ops franchising small Asian retailers! But if there is ever a government with any SDP participation, there could still be a chance that the century will end in a way of which the Rochdale Pioneers would have been proud. They were the wonderful visionaries of industrial society, and still are.

The Author

MICHAEL YOUNG was Secretary of the Research Department of the Labour Party from 1945 to 1951. He devised the plan for mutualisation of the insurance industry which figured in the 1950 Election programme. He is the originator of the Open University, the National Extension College and the Open College of the Arts.