

FOREWORD

Immediately before, and for the information of Congress each year, the Co-operative Union publishes these *Provisional Figures* for the previous year analysing various aspects of the retail performance particularly within a framework which groups societies by their size. These *Provisional Figures* have never been significantly different from the later final statistics. We were privileged to have copies of the *Provisional Figures 1987* after Congress and these elicited from John A. Dawson, Professor of Distributive Studies at the University of Stirling, the caution "It is obviously very difficult to draw particular conclusions without much more time being spent analysing these figures or indeed getting to know the societies better".

However, Professor Dawson also made these ventures:-

"A couple of slightly surprising features are revealed to my untutored eye. The first is that the very largest societies in terms of turnover are not as profitable as the medium-sized ones at least in percentage terms. If we take the grouping in the 10-50 million size band then the 19 societies in that grouping are undoubtedly those with the highest average net surplus as a percentage of sales. To some extent these figures are skewed by the Channel Islands Society which I know is a very special one but the higher figure for this overall group cannot simply be explained in the terms of that one Society.

"The second point perhaps worth making is that the turnover growth is mainly coming from the very largest societies. There is some evidence that the bigger the turnover the bigger the percentage growth in turnover so that the big are growing fastest but this does not always carry through into a higher net surplus as a percentage of sales. It could be argued that the very largest societies appear to be going for volume growth but are not controlling various costs in order to gain the benefits from the added sales volume. The medium-size societies, on the other hand, are perhaps growing less rapidly but are getting profit growth presumably through tighter cost control."

Against the frequent warnings to my youth “much always wants more”, we were then gratified to have more detailed responses from Professor Noel Branton, T.E. Stephenson and James Wood: and only a visit to Canada (unescapable but also, I would say, very agreeable) prevented W.H. Farrow from joining in this symposium.

These five form the Panel from whom we hope in the future to draw our *Annual Co-operative Review*: in the meantime, here is a very positive contribution along that line.

July 1988

R.L.M.