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The Society for Co-operative Studies
REPORT OF THE TENTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
2nd/3rd APRIL 1976
at the Co-operative College, Stanford Hall

1. Attendance

MR. C. ARKWRIGHT	MR. J. ATKINSON
MR. T. BAILLESS	MR. J. A. N. BAMFIELD
MR. J. J. BLAIZE	MR. R. BLUER
MRS. J. BRABHAM	MR. K. BRADSHAW
MR. I. BRIERLEY	DR. R. BRISCOE
MR. J. R. BROWN	DR. T. F. CARBERY
MR. S. P. CLARKE	MR. G. N. COOKE
MR. E. COOPER	MR. K. COOPER
MR. W. G. DAVIDSON	MR. J. W. DEANE
MR. P. DERRICK	MR. W. A. EDWARDS
MR. L. C. FOX	MR. W. FROST
MR. T. FYNN	MR. R. GARRATT
MR. W. GATHERER	MR. G. GAY
MR. M. GIBSON	MR. J. HALL
MR. L. HOLLIS	MRS. M. W. HORNE
MRS. L. HOWE	MRS. E. KING
MR. M. KIRKMAN	MR. T. LAZARUS
MR. J. LEONARD	MR. R. MARRIOTT
MR. R. L. MARSHALL	MR. A. P. MARTIN
MR. K. MASLEN	MR. J. L. McKEE
MR. D. McKELVIE	MR. D. G. F. MUNSON
LORD ORAM	MR. B. PARISH
MR. J. PECK	MR. J. H. PERROW
MR. L. W. PRESTON	COUNCILLOR W. J. PRICHARD
MRS. PRICHARD	MR. B. RHODES
MRS. R. RHODES	MR. C. J. F. RINGROSE
MRS. G. RINGROSE	MR. H. ROBINSON
MR. B. J. ROSE	MR. W. E. ROUNCE
MR. W. SHEARER	MRS. K. SPENSER
MRS. J. STANSFIELD	MR. E. E. STEPHENS
MR. S. STOTT	MR. E. J. TAYLOR
MR. E. W. TAYLOR	MR. M. THOMAS
MR. W. P. WATKINS	MRS. W. P. WATKINS
MR. G. WILKINSON	MISS G. M. WINCH
MR. A. W. WOOD	MR. J. M. WOOD

2. Chairman's Introduction

In his opening remarks Mr. Ringrose commented on the fact that the Society was entering its tenth year. He expressed his belief that during its existence the Society had served a necessary purpose and had provided a forum that would otherwise not have existed. Much of the credit for the survival of the Society, he argued, must go to the work of Mr. Marshall, whom he also congratulated on being made President of Congress.

3. Report of the National Officers for 1975/76

(a) Membership: It was reported that membership stood at its highest-ever level and some members had recently been recruited who had no previous attachment to the Co-operative Movement.

(b) Services to Members: The officers were of the opinion that the two most effective services were the annual Conference and the Bulletin. The latter had become particularly successful in the last year. Activities at the Regional level continued to be moribund but there was still some hope that more localised activities could be successful.

(c) Financial Situation: This continued to be reasonably stable. The officers had given some consideration to the possibility of increasing the subscription (which had remained unchanged since the Society's inauguration) but had decided against it for the time being.

4. Appointment of Officers

(a) It was announced that the Society's national officers were recommending the re-election en bloc of the list of Presidents. This was approved unanimously.

(b) The following members were recommended and elected for office for 1976/77:-

- (i) Mr. Michael Gibson as Chairman.
- (ii) Mr. T. R. Edmondson and Professor J. A. Banks as Vice-Chairmen.
- (iii) Mr. R. L. Marshall as Secretary and Treasurer.
- (iv) Mr. R. L. Marshall and Dr. T. F. Carbery as Editors of the Bulletin.

Mr. Ringrose was thanked for his services as Chairman during 1975/76.

CONFERENCE SESSION 1

"Workers' Participation in Co-operatives"

Bulletin 26 had dealt with this topic.

The Lord Oram introduced the session putting forward a series of proposals that would make workers' co-operatives an important method of invigorating the economy. If 2000 new workers' co-operatives were to be set up, each with an average membership of 500, he argued, this would provide employment for one million people. On the basis of recent experience with worker co-operatives, Lord Oram suggested that setting up a large number of these institutions would improve industrial productivity, help labour-management relations, and cut the level of unemployment.

Workers' co-operatives should each be of a fairly small size. Their boards ought to represent a balance of interests (25% each going to employees, TUC nominees, distributive outlets, and the consumer interest).

Lord Oram argued that a pioneering initiative was needed to cut through the traditional constraints of Keynesian economics and to help overcome many of our most basic problems.

In the discussion which followed, the following points were made:-

(a) 'Workers' co-operatives had to be viable in the long run: marketable products were needed; and the firms would have to be run efficiently. If workers' co-operatives were seen mainly as a form of job preservation (e.g., stagecoach building), it was difficult to see that they had a long-term future.

(b) It seemed unjust to provide assistance to industrial workers merely because they worked in factories rather than shops. Nobody was owed a living.

(c) The argument that retail societies should be turned into worker co-operatives was opposed. Although it was true that share capital was a declining source of funds, the shareholders' interest also included reserves, which meant that shareholders were still the most significant (and exploited) contributors of societies' capital.

(d) Several speakers indicated the possibility of workers' co-operatives being able to produce goods of an environmental, energy-saving, or public utility nature on the scale suggested by the Lucas Aerospace Industries Report.

(e) It was also argued that subsidies for job-saving were not a real addition to Government spending, but merely a diversion of unemployment benefit.

(f) Although workers' co-operative production might be considered uneconomic, a number of speakers stressed that the improvement in attitudes and labour-management relations more than compensated for this.

CONFERENCE SESSION 2

"A Single National Federation?"

Bulletin 25 had dealt with this topic.

Conference was addressed by Mr. S. Stott and by Mr. G. Gay on the matters under consideration by the Special Committee on the Single National Federation.

Mr. Stott argued that the Committee had been established for three reasons: because of the difficulties of the current relationship between the retail societies and the CWS; because of the Union's lack of impetus and speed in developing positive new policies; and because of the complexity and duplication of the present national federal structure. He reported that the submission to the Special Committee from Birkenhead Region of CRS had taken account of the fact that the ten biggest societies now dominated the Co-operative scene with almost half of all sales and share capital, holding nearly a half of CWS share capital and paying half (together with the CWS) of Co-operative Union subscriptions. A single national federation, which he favoured, should aim to strengthen interdependence within the Movement, to become a strong central federation, to provide one central authoritative voice for the Movement, to anticipate and avoid inflation's effects on the present Union services, to promote the Movement's lay leadership, to promote consumer and member education in a contemporary fashion, and to provide a unified approach to weak and failing societies. The aim of this new organisation should be to aid the achievement of the maximum penetration of the national retail trade by democratically-controlled, socially-owned Co-operative enterprise and its structure should ensure an adequate representation of the large societies, a clear and

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easily understood electoral structure, guaranteed and adequate representation of retail society lay leaders on its committees, a democratic regional involvement, the opportunity for retail trading managers to influence the trading practices of the federation, representation of the Movement's political voice, and a reduction of the multiplicity of committees. The single national federation was certainly not the means by which everything was to be achieved but it would provide a framework in which more immediately important tasks could be better pursued.

In his submission which, he stressed, reflected his personal views, Mr. Gay argued that the functions of the two existing federations were so different that a merger would be particularly difficult. He went on to consider four arguments he suggested were frequently used by advocates of the merger. First, he questioned whether a single federation would enable the Movement to speak with one voice as was sometimes claimed. Short of a national society that was impossible. Secondly, he doubted whether there was duplication and overlapping of services provided by the present organisations. There were certainly no savings to be made by way of a merger, he argued, unless services were actually cut, and in fact many services were in more need of expansion than contraction. In any case, whoever provided the services the retail societies still had to pay by some means or other. Thirdly, he claimed, advocates of the merger were claiming that the new federation would be more streamlined or more democratic or even both at the same time. It was in fact the classic Co-operative dilemma of efficiency and democracy. It was significant in this regard, however, that all the Union's important national committees had serious reservations about the merger. Fourthly, he considered the experience of foreign Co-operative Movements which was sometimes used to support the merger and on the basis of the variety of experience suggested that the organisational structure at the national level probably was relatively unimportant in a Movement's success or failure. From this point he went on to conclude that the basic problems of the Movement, even within the

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context of recent encouraging trends, were retail ones and he feared that the long and continuing consideration of national organisation was a form of escapism from those real and basic problems which would only be solved on the retail society level.

This was an issue taken up in the ensuing, wide-ranging discussion, when it was suggested that most of the national committees of enquiry of the past fifteen years had been concerned with the national federations and that the retail societies should look more to their own shortcomings and concentrate on their own performance. There was also discussion of staff morale in the Co-operative Union, particularly if the uncertainty continued, whether a single federation would maintain the Union's range of interests, and about the legal problems of merging a trade association and a trading organisation. With regard to foreign experience, the view was put that generalisation was difficult but that perhaps the strongest Movements had not a common national framework but a concern for and close contact with their individual members. On the services provided by Union and CWS, it was suggested that even where there was not duplication, certain services would gain from closer collaboration, e.g., staff training and trade or consumer education and trade.

In his concluding remarks Mr. Gay took up a point from the discussion that the Special Committee should provide a detailed and informed analysis of the problem and argued that was unlikely to emerge when some members had already taken up clear positions. For his part, Mr. Stott doubted whether the discussion had been truly representative since in the main the participants represented areas of Co-operative success which were not typical of the British Co-operative Movement of the past twenty years. The Movement needed a national structure which took account of its major problems.