

Developing the Co-operative Non-Food Trade

A FOREWORD

No area of Co-operative trade, of course, has attracted more analysis, debate, conferences, papers, anxiety from our friends, relief from our competitors and diagnosis and prescription from one and all than the non-food trade. We justified to ourselves the planning for this Bulletin of yet another symposium on three considerations. First, there is the fact that the Movement's overall performance in that area and particularly in clothing and footwear is still unsatisfactory. For more than twenty years there has been a continuous loss of market share. In some sections the Movement is fast diminishing as a significant element in the retail trade and the basic trends are fairly general in their application throughout retail societies. Secondly, there was the consideration that while the commitment is maintained to the autonomy of individual societies, the way forward has still to be sought in discussion and the search for consensus about the action to be taken. Thirdly, there was our intention to seek for the Bulletin reports and recommendations from different areas of experience in the Movement and on different aspects of the non-food trade, which would help to improve and transform the situation and would deal with such particular questions as these:

- the practical consequences for the trade of traditional Co-operative attitudes and organisation.
- the need for injecting more capital into new and improved non-food retailing facilities.
- improvement in the standards of non-food management in Societies.

- the case for structural reorganisation e.g. more specialist chains such as Shoefayre or a comprehensive examination, re-appraisal and integration of Co-operative Department stores.

- development of the retail/wholesale relationships needed for more effective central co-ordination of merchandise ranges and procurement and why there has not been more progress during the last ten years towards the sort of relationships which the Joint Re-organisation Committee urged in the mid-sixties.

Scope of the Bulletin

So we asked Mr. Stephenson for a general analysis of the trade and its implications. And if all contributors, are equal in our appreciation, he is even more equal than others because he was responding to a second successive request on behalf of the Bulletin. Similarly Mr. Edmondson undertook a general review, but emerging more directly out of his personal and professional experience especially in retailing. Mr. Clayton was asked to describe and assess the organisation and significance of Shoefayre, generally acknowledged among all the competing contentions of the articles to be a story of success already achieved, and a model for more. On the question of wholesale/retail relations we reprint Mr. Byrom from Bulletin 30 where he is dealing substantially with that issue though in a broader context; and from the retail side we have summaries from five chief officials, Messrs. Doherty, Farrow, Fyfe, Tailby and Wright.

So after all that: is there a case made out for action on two time-scales? Should there be a further general review on behalf of the Movement as some of the articles urge or imply? And in the meantime are there specific things of practical, immediate feasibility that should be undertaken

without waiting for that general survey and report?
Contrary to yesterday's and Cardinal Newman's hymn:-

I wish to see the distant scene
And also take the steps before me now.

13 February 1978

R.L.M.