

Some Personal Comment

AS IT SEEMS

I spend a lot of time now in being a member of commissions or councils or boards or working parties or ad hoc groups etc. etc. all served by professional officers. The other night as I walked away from a group in which many of my devoted hours are spent I reflected on the contrast with the dear departed days when I was on the other side of the table - a professional officer serving the committee masters. It is a pleasant change of role.

There are, of course, many kinds of committee member. There are the "signalmen" seeking to determine the direction and course of the discussion. There are the "drivers" - concerned with the pace of progress; hastening to decision sometimes out of the most lofty motives and sometimes simply because they are hungry. The "guards" and "ticket-collectors" play their part - negative rather than positive, checking credentials and procedures with a zest for which I could never muster more than a lack-lustre approval. And of course, there are the "passengers" - not guiding, pace-making or checking but simply carried to a conclusion which they share without ever shaping.

So there are many roles and many combinations of them. But we all share a great blessing. Only some of us may read the papers that are presented to us and only some of us may share in the discussion of these. All of us, however, share in the call for more papers - and the blessing is that the staff has to prepare that material for us. Oh happy days when we have only to ask and others have to give!

Oxford - Home of Successful Courses

Some months ago I visited two friends who were temporarily near Woodstock - and among the enjoyments the visit

yielded was a Co-operative satisfaction. My two friends are not easily moved to enthusiasm about anything - both are from Yorkshire: neither has any special zeal or prejudice for Co-operation; and one is professionally trained in home management and the other in art.

I mention all this to indicate the substance to the tribute they paid to the Co-operative shop in Woodstock: for its size, it was, they said, the best in standards of service, range of goods, hygiene and general aspect which they had recently encountered. I have told this, of course, to Mr Wallace the Chief Officer of the Oxford and Swindon Society and he has passed the message to his Branch Manager. I repeat it to you - out of this passing fancy. Our Co-operative aspirations to move our standards higher, so that wider still and wider may our bounds be set, need to be sustained of course by wide ranging analysis and projections. They might also be served sometimes by narrower investigations of particular cases: such as Woodstock. What are the factors in its success and how can they be reproduced elsewhere?

Dividend or Else

It has been interesting to watch and listen to the debate in the Co-operative News about the significance of dividend - as the contenders:-

"Drink delight of battle with their peers
far on the ringing plains of windy Troy"

At the end of it all I still felt a bit confused and in an effort to escape out of that uncertainty I am trying to follow this guideline:-

1. A central Co-operative principle as paraphrased elsewhere in this Bulletin by Max Wood is the distribution of the trading surplus in proportion to the consumer's purchases.

2. This principle of relating the benefit received to the degree of the individual's participation is present whether there is traditional dividend or there is a reliance on dividend stamps or as I would say the anticipated surplus is used to provide discounts in the prices that are charged.
3. It is not present if the available trading surplus is devoted entirely to "collective" social benefits. However desirable or necessary these may be they are not an expression of the Co-operative principle and many Co-operators even showed relish in saying that to the Migros organisation in Switzerland when it claimed to exhibit a Co-operative character by providing concerts, dramatic performances etc. from the profits it made.

I am not sure I have got the formulation quite right but it is worth trying. We should see clearly what we are about and if dividend related to transactions cannot be maintained we gain nothing but a dangerous and temporary comfort by pretending that this is other than the loss of a central Co-operative principle and practice.

Co-operation and Mr Gradgrind

Sometimes the significance of the day's news is stronger in the small print than in the heavy headlines. So I thought as I read that a senior Trade Union officer had committed himself, though possibly not his members, to the proposition that we need as a community to work harder to get out of our present difficulties. First it may have looked like just another pious generalisation from which to escape quickly to some more arresting trade union announcement. And yet - I could read into it the main analysis of our national malaise:-

1. Low productivity is a central element of the situation.
2. That drastically limits the resources available to us. For on the one hand we do not provide the State from our productiveness with the resources needed to expand its social services; and yet we continue to demand that expansion.

Here is the most dangerous dilemma of our time, How to escape from that tension and trap? The senior trade unionist seemed to me to be giving an essential part of the answer - a part particularly in line with the professions of a Co-operative movement whose tradition rested so much on the necessity of "self-help".

A Vote of Thanks

Speaking of hard and effective work I have had the chance elsewhere of expressing thanks to Mr W Shearer, Senior Tutor of the College, who retired in December 1978 and to Miss H Watling the Housekeeper, who lays down her office in April 1979. Even their tolerance would be strained if I repeated all I said then. Let me send at least this brief greeting. The College (and the Movement) has gained greatly from what they did - in many spheres in addition to their professional service. It gained as much from what they are - from their distinctive characters, which contributed so much to the quality of life at Stanford Hall. The College could be sure of them because they were sure of themselves: not in any arrogant or self-righteous way, not in the sense that they were merely reflections of changing fashion or social mood, but because they had standards of belief and behaviour from which they contributed distinctively and reliably. For their achievement and example and companionship a great host of students and colleagues send them great respect and affection and the very best of good wishes.

Who said it?

Let me share with you finally a quotation which I enjoyed largely because its source was so unexpected.

"Twenty-two acknowledged concubines and a library of sixty-two thousand volumes attested to the variety of his inclinations; and from the production which he left behind it appears that the former as well as the latter were designed for use rather than ostentation.

It was, of course, said of a Roman Emperor.

- but by whom?

RLM

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