

* S P E C I A L F E A T U R E *

CO-OPERATION AND THE CONSUMER

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A FOREWORD

I recall from my service to the Co-operative Union's 1971/3 Working Party on Consumer Education and Protection and the 1973/5 Consumer Protection Committee how frequently they were battle-grounds almost of contending interests. In particular there was the tension between the moderates and the militants, gradualists and the radicals and this distinction was often between those who would be in the forefront with practical responsibility and those who were advising from the sidelines or the rear. And those in the front cried 'back' and those in the rear cried 'forward'.

However, all agreed on what we meant by "consumerism" and so it was defined in the earlier report:-

"By (consumerism) we mean a public initiative in the form of voluntary organisation at both national and local level (an initiative which no doubt reflects the increasing levels both of education and expectation within our Society) consequent pressure for statutory attention to the consumer "safety-net" and a response by Government in the form of continuing concern and legislation for the interests of the consumer."

It is timely to re-assess the situation now, three years on, and we posed to a number of people of interest and experience inside and outside the Movement this question:-

"Given the more positive role now assumed in consumer protection and education by Government and other Agencies, how should the Co-operative Movement adapt its training, political, social and educational activities in service to the consumer?"

The contributors write, of course, from different areas of work and with different standards of judgment. They seem to me sometimes, as I give devoted scrutiny, to linger a deal on the deficiencies of the Movement's service and rather little on its achievement. Sometimes too, they stop short of indicating specifically what in practical terms the Movement ought to do. All contributors might well, however, acknowledge conditions and even constraints within which the Movement's service to the consumer has to be developed:-

- There are differences within the Movement on what its role should be: some argue for concentration on making its trading services as efficient as possible; others would add the support of guidance and teaching for the consumer. Among the latter advocacies there is a further difference: whether the Movement's "social" involvement should stay within the area of goods and services which the Movement provides or to extend to "consumers" in a much wider sense.

- There is the tension at the top: of a division on national level between the functions of the Co-operative Union and the Co-operative Wholesale Society and conceivably to put it mildly, the possibility of difference of emphasis and view between them over the Movement's response to consumerism.

- There is the tension between what may be said and done nationally and the response made locally by the retail societies. Read Mr Cartwright on the "Code of Practice"!

- And there are differences in the efforts and achievements of the local societies. Some have a proud record, others offer to that only a sad comparison.

To say all this is not luxuriate in pessimism with self-indulgent relish. We merely acknowledge the conditions within which any practical action has to be planned and undertaken.

And for that action there are perhaps these main specifications. First, the Movement has to decide what distinctive role it really wants to assume in service to the consumer covering both trading and social action, both practice and profession. Secondly, any role has to be supported by an agreed and co-ordinated national policy: the C.W.S. and its senior officials were too little involved for example in the Consumer Protection Committee. Thirdly, policy should be visible in quite specific and identifiable activities which the consumer can recognise.

A good deal may be at stake.

"The clue to Co-operative democracy in a real sense is better service - more interesting service - service designed to interest the individual consumer in a variety of ways and make her or him look to the Co-op for help and advice over a wide range of the contingencies of life. If the Movement can render this kind of service its members - many more of them - will respond with the loyalty it asks of them and will become active participants in the various aspects of its work. Unless they are personally interested they will not respond and the formal democracy of the Movement will not be real democracy."

It is significant and reassuring that this was the judgement of Professor G. D. H. Cole - in his lecture Democracy and Authority in the Co-operative Movement under the auspices of the London Co-operative Societies' Joint Education Committee. It is also significant and perhaps less reassuring that it was delivered in 1953 - and we have still a lot to do.

R.L.M.