

Some Personal Comment

AS IT SEEMS

Recently I shared in a discussion among Co-operators on the level of human ability now in action in Co-operative democratic service. Afterwards I thought how difficult this was to measure and analyse - and, perhaps for this reason, how neglected it was as an area of attention. I even reflected that I had shared in this neglect.

I had been involved in efforts to acknowledge and to correct the possibility of impoverishment in professional leadership. There had long been warnings that, the increase of educational opportunity which had been achieved in Britain (with the support of the Co-operative Movement) had meant that the kind of ability which once came into Co-operative service at the minimum school-leaving age now moved into higher levels of the school system, and into the universities and was not recruited from there into the Movement. By a familiar irony of history we were in danger of becoming victims of our own achievement. And the Management Trainee Scheme in recruiting participants from full-time education for university degrees or higher national diplomas was an adaptation to this new social and educational situation which aimed at rescuing the Movement from that danger.

We had also undertaken considerable scrutiny of Co-operative democratic leadership in quantitative terms. There were reports on Democracy in Regional Societies on Lay Leadership and on Developing Membership and Leadership in which we dealt with the number of posts of democratic responsibility and so on, the number of candidates for them, the age of these candidates, the number of vacancies unfilled, the number of vacancies filled without contest etc. etc. -

all measurable factors in this situation. But ability - we have not really given much attention to that.

I appreciate that it is difficult to define precisely what we mean - to specify the experience, intellectual capacity and social competence and so on which make up the good democratic participant. No doubt, too, it is delicate to make this exploration - to ask what is the level of ability now available in the committees and auxiliaries of the Movement and even more widely, in what we traditionally call the working class; and if some ability has moved out from that class into others, is the Movement recruiting more widely from these others? The questions are of first importance. My impression - to take a risk - is that the working class has less ability in proportion to its size than it once did and that there is a diminished capacity in the Co-operative Movement to attract ability from that source or any other into service. This impression is not, I think, merely the reflection of my age and stage of life, but however that may be, here is a useful area of research awaiting cultivation.

The Fount of Honours

The fount of honours has played once again on New Year's Day and it was good to see that Joan Straker and Alf Morris had been distinguished in it. Beyond that however, there were more general reflections which were less agreeable.

Should there not be more Co-operators? I am not thinking of one or two who with intense zeal may pursue these awards to advance their own ambition. (I was once asked by a Government Minister who was being relentlessly pressed for an honour by a persistent Co-operator if I could do anything to divert the pursuer: I could not.) I am thinking rather of those who have quietly earned inclusion in the scheme - in general the community's recognition of service

to it above average and more particularly, the acknowledgment that some of that service if not voluntary, has still been paid below the stage of remuneration that would be appropriate elsewhere in the market place. Of course, some co-operators who qualify on both these standards have been properly recognised but there are plenty of others on all levels on whom the fount certainly does not play beneficently.

My second reflection was more general - that working people get far too little attention in such institutions. I am not thinking of their political or trade union representatives: they may well feel neglected too but at the moment my sympathy is cold to the relation of their misery. I think of the men who give hard work at the coal face or on the factory floor and who seldom seem to get this recognition. I think, for example, of my father. He was a pit boy at the age of 11 - and I recall how moving I found it when in the latter days of his life his memory went back to his first pit pony called "Prince". He worked underground all his life and was long a volunteer in the pit "rescue brigade". And the qualifications he could aspire to had to be won by travel to a technical college at Coatbridge at the end of long and unbelievably hard work below ground. The community ought to be so organised that it recognises such worth and service. It ought to identify and represent such people in all the great State occasions: put them in the high places of coronation and Jubilee celebrations; let them wander if they wish in the Palace garden parties; see that they are included should they fancy it in the presentations to the high and mighty of the land; and certainly ensure that they are included in the Honours' Lists.

This could be argued as a good thing for the "establishment" on consideration of its self-interest - they would gain in security from showing some sensitivity to the industry and industrial workers on whom they depend. Here, however, I argue it on nobler grounds - that these individuals deserve to be honoured, and certainly do so infinitely more convincingly

than the "place men", charlatans and confidence tricksters who are sometimes included in the lists at present. Let the sun shine more widely on the just even if there is less warmth for the unjust.

Your Favourite Quotation?

Claud Cockburn reported once a conversation which turned to the selection by each friend of the short passage which seemed to him wisest and most pleasing. The choice by Cockburn himself was:-

"The toad beneath the harrow knows
Where each tooth of the harrow goes.
The butterfly upon the road
Preaches contentment to the toad".

Clearly there is good sense in it.

When once I mentioned elsewhere this kind of parlour diversion it was interesting and pleasant to hear some of the responses. For example, the late John Douglas, Secretary and Chief Executive Officer of the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society gave his loyalty, perhaps inevitably, to a quotation from Burns.

"Aye free, off han', your story tell
When wi' a bosom crony;
But still keep something to yoursel
Ye scarcely tell to ony".

My own favourite - and I confess, I hope disarmingly, that it is longer than the others - is from Bernard Shaw's 'St. Joan'. It is a statement by the English chaplain DeStogumper who had demanded that Joan be burned. Then he had to witness the burning and here is what he said:-

"If I had known I would have torn her from their hands. You don't know; you haven't seen, it is so easy to talk when you don't know. You madden yourself with words; you damn yourself because it feels grand to throw oil on the flaming hell of your own temper. But when it is brought home to you; when you see the things you have done, when it is blinding your eyes, stifling your nostrils, pulling your heart; then oh God take away this sight from me."

I commend this to all those who take up large postures and urge bold policies - and refuse to face the consequences of their advocacies in practical and specific detail.

"We will stop the lorries getting through" say some strikers: all right; but let them place before their eyes the consequences for, say, the old and the sick. "We will fight to the last man", say some politicians: again it may be a wise commitment but when they make it, let them see war in all its reality. "More services for the young", say the educationalists: again an admirable ambition but we must face the need for the wealth-providing activities on which these services can be supported.

Well - that is my choice: what is yours?

The English Manner and the British Empire

Recently I was arguing over the truth and consequences of the proposition that the English manner is a poor medium for expressing feelings.

Of course, we need to know what the manner is - and I think we do: undemonstrative, detached, inclined to understatement, unrevealing of its own emotions and apparently unsympathetic and uncomfortable about other people's. And, of course, the generalisation that the manner is English

demands immediate and lavish qualification. It was the style of a social elite, though no doubt it was diffused widely from them; and it has long been going out of fashion and may have almost vanished by now.

But, it has had its importance and part of that, so I argued, lay in its contribution to the dissolution of the British Empire. The manner was sometimes strong among the officers of British Colonial service and must have been a barrier between them and the peoples of the various countries. It also exercised a positive alienation and estrangement: the manner breeds the view that if the English do not show feelings, then they do not have any and in that sense, at least, are un-human. Such a view might help the English in the colonial functions of being law-givers and sources of all kinds of authority. It was, however, a powerful hindrance against emotional sympathy and solidarity with the people they ruled.

There springs unbidden, and not quite aptly, to my memory the story of two staunchly communist miners in Fife who could read the class war in every aspect of the human condition and who provided this epitaph for the gravestone of their mother:

"Died peacefully at the age
of 89 years:
A victim of British capitalism"

The English manner I would find responsible for much of the British condition. Certainly a case could be made for the memorial to the British Empire.

"Died more or less peacefully in the years
since the Second World War.
A victim of the English manner"

If the memorial had room, I would add - "A victim also of the English Memsahibs": but that is another story.

A Coda of Comfort

As I read over these notes some of them seem to have a somewhat tetchy and grudging quality - and of course I do not want to reveal so much of the truth about myself. So by way of recovery or of cover-up let me end on a more reassuring item.

Most Sundays I visit a centre for the mentally handicapped and from this slight involvement I take these propositions:-

- the services of the ancillary staff seem to be excellent. Admittedly my observation is limited but I speak as I find: they are kindly and competent and deserving of the community's respect and reward.
- The supporting voluntary work is far more varied and extensive than ever I realised. In addition to, if not in place of, the large words of politics and organisation we need the small deeds of the volunteers in great abundance and they are forthcoming on a great scale.
- A National Health Service is surely one of the best aspirations a community can frame. Out of all the hopes with which we emerged from the war and indeed, with which we ended it, and of all the disappointment that has attended these the N.H.S. has one of the highest claims on the resources the community has.

And finally in my utopia there would be a mechanism which ensured that every fit person regularly visited a centre of sickness or of handicap and exposed to his own sense of well being the evidence of the suffering of others. Whatever

good it did them it would certainly be a salutary experience for us.

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