

Politics and the Co-operative MovementTHE CO-OPERATIVE PARTY AND THE CONSUMER MOVEMENT

by

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This article is in no small measure provoked by that of Tom Carbery which appeared in the last issue of the Bulletin. ("The Co-operative and the Consumer Movements" Bulletin 34, pages 79-82) and in essence what I want to argue is that if there has been and is a danger that the trading side of the Movement will be under-appreciated by and in blunt language, in no small measure out-flanked by the Consumer Movement, then there is even greater danger of the Co-operative Party being under-appreciated and out-flanked.

The contribution of the Party to the advance of consumer affairs has been well documented not least by Carbery himself. His "Consumers in Politics" published by Manchester University Press in the middle sixties contains a whole chapter titled "The Party and Consumer Affairs." But the acknowledgement of the Party's contribution was not confined to that chapter on the contrary as the book title suggests it is an omnipresent, recurring theme that runs throughout the book. In particular the book has two telling observations. First it brings out that an interest in and an expertise of consumer affairs has been and was at the time of writing one of the three areas of expertise on the part of the Co-operative Party distinguishing it from other elements in the Parliamentary Labour Party. Later, in his conclusions, Carbery turns that point through ninety degrees and uses it to argue that unlike other elements in the Parliamentary Labour Party (the trade unions?) "The Co-operatives have some fairly clear ideas of their role in a planned, mixed economy

weakening Role of Party in Consumer Affairs

All that however, was well over a decade ago. It seems to me that the last 10/11/12 years have seen three developments taking place which, when taken together, could be seen as weakening, eroding that position of strength, indeed of primacy which the Co-operative Movement operating through the party had in the politics of consumer affairs.

The first of these three factors is within the Co-operative party itself. Rightly or wrongly it seems to me that some of the newer people in the ranks of the Co-operative Parliamentary Group are not quite as conversant with or as interested in consumer affairs as some of their predecessors. Thus, those on the Right Wing of the Group are better educated than their predecessors and so tend to spread themselves over a wider range of topics - not least the economy, the international money market, Europe and so on. Those on the Left - and I alone in discerning a move to the Left within the commons group? - tend to be increasingly indistinguishable in interest from their friends in the Tribune Group and to a lesser extent London Co-operative Political Committee. All of them show an interest in workers' co-operatives and other matters which, however much of interest to the Co-operative Movement are not consumer affairs. The overall conclusion then is that while there are noteworthy exceptions such as Jim Craigen, the group, as a group, is less knowledgeable of and less interested in consumer affairs than was the case when Carbery was writing in the middle sixties. Government officials are doubtless one partial explanation for this but explaining it is appropriate only after the point has been established - and conceded.

The second point I would make is complementary to the first in that like figures in the weather house, as the Co-operative group tends to move out of the House of Politics of Consumer Affairs, others tend to move in.

Thus the years since "Consumers in Politics" have seen first, an increase in statutory consumer bodies - the National Consumer Council, the Celtic fringe of the Welsh, Irish and Scottish Councils, the extended and more powerful bodies attached to nationalised bodies and the like - and, secondly, an increase in their professionals. Both these developments have seen the entry to consumer affairs of "the new young people", mainly radical, mainly to the left of centre of the Parliamentary Labour Party and occasionally, let it be said, to the left of the Communist Party of Great Britain, who justify their spirited iconoclastic approach on the grounds that to be a consumerist is to be radical. That apart they are not averse to proffering themselves as potential Labour candidates. But if they succeed (and it seems to me we can take it that some shall) then the Co-op Group could well find itself joined in the Parliamentary Labour Group by others with greater personal involvement in and greater personal contact with the wider Consumer Movement than the Co-operative-sponsored members.

The third point is really an extension of the second. It is that the "nouveau" group is in the forefront of the campaign being waged within the Consumer Movement to give it the greater respectability of greater democracy. It would be too cynical, and too dangerous to suggest that those who are joining in this campaign are doing so in order to further their political careers. What we can say is that which H H Wilson said of certain Conservative backbenchers who were involved in the campaign for commercial broadcasting "they were fortunate that that which they deemed to be in the interests of the nation and that which advanced their careers ran on parallel lines".