

Some Personal Comment

AS IT SEEMS

The plea for "Co-op - Great Britain" made by Mr J. H. Perrow in his Presidential address to Congress has a long and distinguished pedigree and Mr Perrow extends the advocacy firmly in these terms:-

- "The formation of a completely new society to which the Co-operative Wholesale Society, Co-operative Retail Services and those retail societies fully participating would transfer their engagements."
- "Great Britain would be divided into sections similar to the present arrangement. There could well be within the United Kingdom 20-25 regional societies, each region having a board which would be responsible to the national board."
- "The chief executive of Co-op - Great Britain ultimately would be responsible to the board for the whole of the Co-operative Movement's trading activity, whether it be production, procurement or retailing. Under the chief executive officer there would be senior executives with responsibility for the various aspects of the society's operations."

Well - what will the Movement say, if anything? I do not know but I have my fears. What can I say? Let me venture for the moment:-

1. That our reputation as a Movement is locally very varied and collectively unpromising in many ways.

2. That the impediment to better achievement lies locally, not mainly in the limited size of societies but in variation of management ability, and collectively in the failure to act cohesively and even work co-operatively.
3. The case for a national society does not rest predominantly on the argument which Mr Perrow repeats that at present "we operate a system which demands that two profits be made from one margin, ie, producer to retailer, whilst our competitors secure maximum gross profit at shop level, ie, one profit". Any form of organisation will have to include both wholesaling and retailing and pay for both. The case rests on the centralised grouping of resources: planning and operation which would be possible under the authority of such an organisation.
4. In these terms a national society would not guarantee success. It offers even a frightening opportunity of failure - for if there is bad management of this single unified organisation then we could all do down with it, whereas at the moment some societies may survive and succeed even if others droop and fail. However, it could succeed - if it had adequate organisation, financial resources, management capacity and authority.
5. That its size would offer an impossible setting for the kind of traditional democracy to which the Movement has aspired from its earlier days. However, in the large regional societies which we have and to whose pattern we are still moving, that kind of democracy has pretty well become a myth anyhow. In a national society there would still survive the possibility of democratic accountability, if not democratic control, and this could be given some reality if enough resources were committed to it.

6. That the independence for the Co-operative Union which Mr Perrow includes within his scheme is really a denial of the logic of the rest of his case. It is difficult to argue a case for unity of action and then within the same advocacy propose that the Co-operative Union should be detached for its service to the Movement's Parliamentary, educational and political work. And in practical terms I think the Co-operative Union would the more rapidly decline the more remote it becomes from the economic power and responsibility of the Movement.
7. That the possibility that has been raised requires now both enthusiasm and practical specification from its adherents. Don't remit it to such a procedure as that of the Working Party on the Single National Federation which so singularly failed - whatever the merits of its competing conclusions - to match the importance of the issue which had been entrusted to it! And the failure came partly from entrusting such a delicate proposal too early to an agency composed of firm and staunchly contradictory views. "Co-op - Great Britain" needs the thrust that can be generated by enthusiastic commitment: change can be achieved by such power. Then it needs to have its practical organisation derived with the benefit of as much Co-operative experience as its advocates can secure.

The final stage would be the submission of such a proposal to democratic judgement, and democracy could effectively and decisively operate at that stage.

Another Coda of Caution

In the last Bulletin I speculated about our choice of favourite quotations. There came an answering voice,

and a pleasant extension of the speculation from Heriot Watt University and Frank McMahon. Mr McMahon made the point that the simple game may be elaborated into the adaptation of familiar quotations into forms which are even more striking or stimulating than the original. He took, for example, that sonorous observation from Lord Acton, "Power corrupts: and absolute power corrupts absolutely" and added the rendition which came originally, I think, from Adlai Stevenson:-

"Power corrupts: and lack of power corrupts absolutely".

And that, to put it a little dramatically is the danger confronting the Movement. Unless we get cohesion and vigour, then the centre will not hold, the parts will fall away. Mr Perrow is asking, if in words less fateful than Adlai Stevenson for serious attention to a possibility of arresting decline.

June 1979

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