

Co-operation - And Universities and Colleges

FOREWORD

It seemed timely to look at the engagement between the Co-operative Movement and the work of universities and colleges, and even more particularly at the role of the Society in serving as a bridge between them. So the editors sent out the most enticing note they could contrive to various academics and Co-operative practitioners, looking especially to those who had some link with the Society and asked specifically:-

- What would be the advantages of increasing this engagement?
- What general conditions and mechanisms should be explored?
- What practical steps could be taken, including action by the Society for Co-operative Studies?

We are very grateful to those who have responded and regret some vacancies in places we had hoped to fill! Anyhow looking over the record I am impressed, but a little sceptical about some of the spacious purposes attributed to the Society in its early days. I think back to these beginnings in discussion with Alex Wilson and I was not really aware that we were assuming many responsibilities of the Co-operative Union, the CWS, the Social Science Research Council and probably the Fabian Society! I was however keenly aware that we were likely to have only limited resources and within these limits we were trying to identify a quite distinctive role for the Society - as any organisation has to do. It would be justified only if we found tasks which no one else was undertaking or could

undertake or which we could do better than anybody else. It is useful now to consider the specific activities which the 1967 constitution envisaged:-

1. To provide a forum for those "primarily associated with the Co-operative interest" and "with the academic interest."

This basic service as a meeting place, governed by those taking part in it, has been usefully developed. We may say too few gather there but there is a capacity for development.

2. "... the exchange of information and experience on Co-operative studies and research"

This has been limited as some of the succeeding articles indicate but there has also been some progress - through Bulletin Reports from the Regions on Co-operative studies and research in Universities and Colleges and its Select Bibliographies of Recent Co-operative Publications. In particular, there was the ambition to provide a link between the Movement and teachers - and here a very modest record.

Such functions are now, perhaps, likely to be assumed by agencies established since the Society began e.g. the Co-operative Liaison Educational and Research unit of the Co-operative Union and the Co-operative Research Unit of the Open University. However, the Society has few details yet of these initiatives.

3. "Encouragement of courses and research projects at Universities and Colleges and at the Co-operative College"

Encouragement has been offered directly and also through occasional attention in the Bulletin to successful

achievements eg the day release courses at Leeds University for Co-operative managers. The Society however has not had a systematic capacity for this - and the Co-operative Union's C.L.E.A.R. Unit may well have the function and the resources for it.

4. "Meetings and Seminars" regionally and nationally

The Society's annual conference has established itself usefully in the Co-operative calendar but in recent years there has been extensively little regional activity. Indeed the Society in itself has regionally little organising capacity and a very limited range of members to be organised - and there are other agencies in the conference business.

5. "Relations with international organisations for Co-operative studies and research"

Links have been undertaken and attendance supported at international conferences - but the resources have been quite inadequate for large-scale development.

6. "Publications"

Although the constitution says little about this, it is, I think, the area where there is most achievement and prospect. The Bulletin is already a useful journal, and within it there is an even more effective publication trying to get out.

We have defined it for ourselves as "a regular journal devoted in a particular issue to independent and comparatively detailed examination by a variety of contributors of some important problem", and for this service out of interest in the Co-operative Movement but independent of it there is no other agency available at present. The service needs to be developed further. In Bulletin 35 in

readiness for the Annual Conference some lines of possible improvement were suggested and perhaps they can bear some repetition and elaboration now, particularly since the A.G.M. gave little attention to them.

- More service as a journal of topical comment on Co-operative issues of the day, in addition to the concentration in each issue on an independent topic.
- More controversy.
- More reaction from readers.
- More attention to the printing and the format of the Bulletin.
- Much more attention to marketing the Bulletin widely.

These, however, depend on additional resources. There is already a good deal more work, I suspect, on the Bulletin than many appreciate, much of it unpaid and the rest of it for typing and printing quite modestly rewarded. Even for that resources are limited. This particular Bulletin now has been delayed a bit longer than was intended because we had a signal from the Society that there was a cash flow problem which had to be heeded.

As the Society's Auditor reminded us when commenting properly on the general financial situation for 1978/79 expenditure on the Bulletin (as on other things) needs to be contained within the money available. A rather more positive way of rendering the same great truth is that resources need to be made available to the Society for the kind of Bulletin which the self-respect and the satisfaction of the Society require. As the increased subscription rate begins to operate, there will be some relief - and it is needed urgently and substantially. There is still,

however, a case to be considered for seeking a link between the Society and some organisation professionally engaged in publication which would respect the independence and editorial freedom of the Bulletin and the responsibility of the Society for it, but would put marketing expertise and perhaps some resources into the venture. There indeed lies a prospect to be explored with zeal.

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R.L.M.

P.S. And - it is fair to appreciate rather more pressingly than is shown above or below - that any or all of our high ambitions for the Society depend quite heavily on the competence of its administration. That does not guarantee success: but without it "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold".