

Co-operation - and Universities and CollegesTHE WAY AHEAD?

by

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It could be strenuously denied that the Society for Co-operative Studies ever suffered, or enjoyed, a flush of over-optimism about its task and its prospects for success. Starting off in a period when the Co-operative Movement in the United Kingdom stood at the crossroads in relation to any aspects of its existence, it was fairly easy for the Society to set itself quite limited and clear objectives, and it has never been under any illusion that these objectives have been adequately achieved. One of the general purposes of the Society is "to promote the exchange of information and experience on Co-operative studies and research" and particularly to encourage a closer engagement of universities and colleges with the Co-operative Movement. After twelve years of existence, it is perhaps time to ask ourselves whether we have achieved enough success in this major purpose to warrant further effort, and if we decide to continue what are the problems and possibilities on the way ahead towards our major goals.

Intentions

May I remind you of the initial intentions of the Society? These were roughly:-

1. To improve communications between Universities and the Co-operative Movement. These had often been close throughout much of the history of the Movement, but

had fallen away since the late 1930s.

2. To concentrate attention on a short-term objective - that of raising the business efficiency of the Co-operative Movement during a critical period when many important sectors and influential people appeared to be somewhat complacently contemplating the build-up of massive competition which threatened its entire existence.
3. To introduce an element of long-term thinking about the Co-operative Movement, in terms of concern with the objectives and strategy of the Movement in the 1970s and 1980s, and in terms of concern with closer integration of the various wings of the Movement, retail, wholesale, productive and services, which - thanks to the prompting of the Independent Co-operative Commission Report in the late '50s and the consequent amalgamation moves of the early '60s - gave some promise of regional and national approaches towards meeting the challenge facing the business side of the Movement, and of mobilising its potential strength, latent especially on the retail side.
4. To develop a field of study in the universities and colleges of higher education focused on Co-operative philosophy and enterprise - so that in the rapidly developing environment of management education, Co-operative and public enterprise would receive a due share of attention from business school professionals, rather than neglect as rather strange special cases - and so that there would emerge a career path for bright young academics with more than a sneaking interest in the history, performance and future of the Co-operative Movement.

5. To provide a forum for all those with a concern for the future of Co-operation, so that in each region of the UK there would be a developing association between the managers and directors of retail societies, senior officials of the CWS (and SCWS), officers of the Co-operative Union, officials of USDAW and the other unions, along with sympathetic observers of the Co-operative scene from the educational world. Such a forum should not be an all-embracing talking shop, but a coming together of people capable of getting action taken in implementing joint decisions. It should be large enough to include all those strategically placed to further the development of the Movement but small enough to allow everyone to know everyone else.
6. To publish a bulletin with modest pretensions, but which would regularly publish material likely to be useful to academics and business men. It would not become a 'learned journal' primarily for the publication of the results of research, but would rather provide information about research projects and work in hand, courses for directors and managers, and reports on local meetings, seminars and conferences.

Realisation

Twelve years later a fairly cool assessment might indicate:-

1. The Society for Co-operative Studies continues to exist, and seems likely to do so for at least a few more years. It retains the good-will of many important retail societies, and has received a good deal of loyal support from a substantial list of influential people within the Co-operative Movement, and to a lesser extent in universities and higher education.

It organises annually an interesting conference which nowadays always takes place at Stanford Hall, and it produces quarterly a very useful bulletin. But at present it is not showing any strength except on the publishing side. It has failed to attract and retain the support of academics, chief executive officers of retail societies, senior officials of the CWS and CRS, or MPs in anything like the numbers hoped for. Only USDAW of the trade unions involved with the Movement has shown any real interest, and even that has been intermittent.

2. Regional activities which were intended to provide the main impetus and lifeblood of the Society have failed to build up any head of steam, except for a time in the North West and in Scotland, and in recent years have quietly withered away. This is a sad situation in the several regions in which both the universities and Co-operative organisations have greatest strength.
3. The promise of a closer association between the universities and local Co-operative organisations in the field of management education has gradually ebbed away. Already in 1967-68 and again in the following year, about 20 courses were held in about 10 universities and 5 colleges of technology and commerce, but instead of steady expansion, the trend thereafter was one of steady decline. Changes in structure within the Movement, and changes in personnel in both the Movement and the universities have played some part in this disappointing outcome. Possibly such courses have been seen as competing with in-society training programmes, DITB or FDTITB supported programmes, or Co-operative College courses, rather than complementing and supplementing these. Certainly with the rationalisation of retail Societies, there

is reduced scope for seminars and workshops for chief officers, but there are many senior officials and directors for whom there is little offered locally which has any close relationship to their work and problems. Possibly the financial squeezes to which both universities and Co-operative organisations have been continually subjected since 1973 have also played their part.

4. The attention devoted to Co-operation in teaching and research in higher education remains conspicuously limited. Only one university, Loughborough, offers a Diploma in Co-operative Development, and that is primarily intended for students from developing countries, while another, Nottingham, offers a Diploma in which Co-operative studies plays a major role. There are still no chairs in Co-operation, nor even any lectureships, though there have been a few research fellowships, which have produced interesting studies in member participation in co-operative societies, and on the legal treatment of Co-operative societies in different European countries. This is in total not quite as rich a harvest as we had hoped for some 12 years ago, and it shows up badly in comparison with Germany, where several universities have their Institutes of Co-operative Studies, with the Institutes in Belgium, Austria and Finland, or with the College Co-operatif at the Sorbonne. Compared with the U.K., Co-operative studies have also been treated far more seriously in Canada, USA and in Latin America, where numerous universities organise teaching at many different levels and promote research on varied aspects of Co-operation.

The Way Ahead?

Is there any prospect within the next five years of the Society revitalising itself, and doing more to justify

existence than simply relying on the stalwart efforts of its editors?

One path is to revive regional organisation and activity. The most obvious procedure here would be to appoint joint convenors - a university person and a Co-operative official or director - in each region, or possibly in some cases in large districts surrounding a university, to organise quarterly meetings which would be concerned primarily with the subject matter of the latest Bulletin. University campuses would in most cases provide the best locations, but with the increasing costs of portering, heating and security, there has been a growing trend to close University buildings at 9 p.m., or even 8.30 p.m., so that this becomes a severe restriction on the length of evening meetings where participants have journeys of any length to make. An alternative would be for the convenors to obtain invitations to retail society boardrooms, where the local directors and managers could join the members, as well as playing hosts for the evening.

Another step forward would be for the officers of the Society to encourage Co-operative development councils wherever they exist to sponsor seminars for directors and managers in each region, on the lines of those which ran for many years at Manchester University, and still do so in association with Leeds University. Most extra-mural departments, in conjunction with management sciences departments, would readily respond to any genuine demand, and where necessary the officers of the Society could provide helpful advice in initiating such programmes.

Additionally regional Co-operative groupings should be encouraged to sponsor teaching and research fellowships in economics or management sciences departments, or tutor/organising appointments in extra-mural departments. These would be acceptable to most universities if financed on an

annually renewed three-year rolling forward basis. There has been talk of such appointments - and even of Chairs in Co-operation - for 20 years or more, but when the CWS, SCWS or retail Societies have generously donated to the cause of management education, the money has tended to be dropped into bottomless pits, with far too few strings attached. Certainly the CWS, the CRS, and the CDA should look carefully into this line of advance, and once again the officers of the Society should expect to be consulted in the preparatory stages of any such deals.

Then with the growing probability of improved opportunities for mature students to participate in part-time degree courses, there should be some Co-operative pressure for Co-operative Studies options to be available on part-time degree courses in managements studies, economics, politics and sociology. Here the Society could do some helpful preparatory work in assessing the likely demand for participation on such courses by Co-operative employees, and in the working out of guidelines for their employing organisations in relation to study leave, payment of course fees, travel and incidental expenses.

Another development within universities and colleges which might be turned to considerable advantage is the tendency to allow academic staff periods of study leave. Such periods are granted more readily if the proposed research projects have received the blessing of some outside organisation, and the promise of some financial support towards the research expenses. If the Society for Co-operative Studies can find ways of assuring some contribution towards research costs of its academic members, this will often swing the choice of research projects in directions which are of interest to the Society - especially if there is the further possibility of some help with the publication of the research findings.

To make some progress on any two or three of these tactical approaches might seem sufficient challenge to the Society for the next five years, but I should not be happy to end without issuing an even more daunting two-part challenge. The first part is to the academics of the Society, and it is to take a leaf out of the book of the Association of Tutors in Adult Education with its initiative in the 1930s to produce an authoritative textbook on "Consumers' Education in Great Britain". What a splendid and influential work that would have been had it not been overshadowed by a great war a year later. The second part is rather more impertinently to the businessmen of the Society to take the initiative to update the Co-operative Independent Commission Report of 1958. This is not an invitation to indulge once again in a mortifying process of rigorous self-examination in public, but rather to draw together the better-established findings of the various joint negotiating committees in recent decades and the lessons of both bitter and encouraging trading experience during the 1970s. Since the Crosland report appeared, the retail wing has suffered a massive drop in its share of total trade, and has been substantially reshaped with 85% of the remaining trade defended by 50 large societies. Against an environment of fierce competition, which became considerably more threatening than could be foreseen in 1958, much of the Co-operative Movement has survived a most critical phase, and in recent years has even made some encouraging signs of recovery. There have been dramatic changes in the CRS and in the CWS, and - less happily - in the SCWS. Yet some of the fundamental and worrying problems identified in the Crosland report have still not been solved. The long-troubled defensive relationships between the CWS and the larger societies, the legacy of under-investment in growth areas, new forms of trading and warehousing, and the difficulty of implementing any major development plans on a national basis still make it doubtful whether the Movement can ever be expected to fully realise its

potential strength. The time is fast approaching when the Co-operative Movement needs to take a hard look at how well it is structured and inter-related to withstand the next critical phase in distribution which appears to be already with us.