
Reflections of a Parliamentary Secretary

by Bernard Rhodes

To many Co-operators the role of the Co-operative Union's Parliamentary Committee appears a benign mystery. It is known to get results, but few seem to comprehend its functions or its operation.

It is distinct from the Co-operative Party, with which nevertheless it has to work closely. The Parliamentary Committee seeks to articulate and advance the Movement's views on matters affecting its trading and financial interests, and to express these within a Co-operative consumerist framework. The Co-operative Party's concern is to develop political influence through its association with the Labour Party and the election to Parliament and local government of committed Co-operators.

As the Parliamentary Committee meets only four times yearly and deals with almost 200 Parliamentary, European Community and local government issues, its policy decisions are heavily influenced by consultation with specialists within the Movement.

Delegation to the Secretary

Inevitably, the great bulk of its work is delegated. While operating within the parameters expressed above, the Parliamentary Secretary must be free to take appropriate action on matters arising between Committee meetings. John Milton might have written part of his job description: he requires to scorn delights and live laborious days. After judgement and commitment, application is the prime quality he needs. His meetings are numerous, his reading omniverous. Each day Hansards, Order papers and other Parliamentary publications are scrutinised, while a heavy flow of reports from nationalised industries, the Office of Fair Trading and numerous other sources needs examination. What should they know of England who only England know? Alas, the European Commission's publications form its biggest mountain.

His meetings may be with a Minister, civil servants, the Co-operative Parliamentary Group, individual members of Parliament. His movements are influenced partly by the exigency of an individual issue, partly by the routine of regular engagements. For example, he attends each meeting of the Co-operative Parliamentary Group, the Co-operative Party National Executive, the Central Executive of the Co-operative Union, the Retail Consortium's Council and its other committees, and the Steering Group of

Keep Sunday Special. He holds regular liaison meetings with representatives of the Co-operative Employers' Association, Retail Consortium officials, and civil servants responsible for dealing with retail interests within the Department of Trade and Industry.

Bringing Influence to Bear . . .

On Parliamentary matters much activity is involved in the pre-legislative stage. Many statutes originate from a consultative document. The opportunity thus arises to seek the views of appropriate constituents, to reconcile these where necessary in order to achieve a Co-operative consensus, to urge support from other interest parties, and to submit effectively the view determined to the Government department concerned. Not infrequently this process is followed by a meeting with civil servants or even a Minister.

At the beginning of each session the Queen's Speech adumbrates legislation envisaged during its course. It is thus possible to alert the Movement on issues that will concern it. Briefs are often prepared for Co-operative Parliamentary Group members, and supportive material provided for those who will speak on a Bill, particularly when concerned with the detail of individual clauses at Committee Stage.

As much legislative detail is often expressed in subsequent statutory instruments, a third stage for influencing opinion exists. A recent illustration is provided by the Consumer Protection Act. This prescribed general powers to regulate misleading price indications. Disquiet by retailers, including Co-operative Societies, at the guidelines led to a series of meetings with civil servants and the Minister concerned. Co-operation was possible, not merely with the Retail Consortium, but also with associations representing consumer bodies and enforcement officers. This 'Concordat' materially improved the proposed guidelines before their final form was adopted.

Some Major Issues

Perhaps I can illustrate by indicating how I dealt with some major issues during my period as Parliamentary Secretary. Before doing so, I should acknowledge the contribution made by the three dedicated and efficient support staff at the Parliamentary Office. Their zeal and ability enabled me to maintain performance standards, which appear to be perceived by the Movement as generally not unsatisfactory.

The defeat of the Government's proposals in 1986 to deregulate shopping hours was one of the greatest lobbying successes in Parliamentary history.

Much effort and sound judgement were needed to achieve this success. The crucial factors were achieving within the Co-operative Movement an agreed approach, and sponsoring an independent survey that established that the majority of Co-operative shoppers opposed the complete deregulation of Sunday shopping. My decision to link with Keep Sunday Special elevated the campaign; self interest became subordinate to principle.

Two other issues which caused me much effort concerned the GLC lorry ban, and the intention of several local authorities to develop municipal funeral services. While the need to protect Co-operative trading interests was paramount, it was equally advisable to ensure that our representations were expressed positively. In both cases extensive consultation was necessary before trading interests became satisfied that this reasoned approach was appropriate. Both issues were resolved to the satisfaction of the Movement.

Less successful were attempts to persuade the Government to restore the distinctive treatment on corporation tax which Co-operative Societies had enjoyed before the 1984 budget. A deputation to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury persuaded him that our case justified further examination, and a series of meetings convinced Inland Revenue officials of its merits. When 'fiscal neutrality', in the Chancellor's euphemism, prevailed, Roy Hattersley, then Shadow Chancellor, was briefed to demonstrate to the Commons the inequity of this treatment.

Consultation - Consensus - Communication

As Parliamentary Secretary I sought, wherever possible, to achieve consensus. I also endeavoured to disseminate all relevant information as widely as possible. The Parliamentary Office Bulletin exemplifies this policy. Its succinct summary of current Parliamentary and European Community issues, its clear style and its report of achievement have already attracted an extensive readership.

The appointment of Lord Graham as Parliamentary Consultant has been most effective. He gave me continuous assistance of enormous value. His activity at Westminster complemented my own.

Need for Representation in Parliament -

In demitting office one asks: would any changes in the Parliamentary Committee's approach be beneficial? With the Labour Party's current fortunes at low level, the advisability of the Movement's involvement with it is questioned. At last year's Congress it was suggested that financial support for the Co-operative Party be ended and that the Parliamentary Office concentrate its efforts through the Retail Consortium.

I do not believe this suggestion is feasible. The Movement needs to have in Parliament those who can express its interests. If a coalition of six trade associations (each with veto powers), the Consortium cannot easily develop a position representative of all its members' interests on every subject of interest to Co-operators. It is not sufficient merely to express trade interests; these have to be expressed in a social, and thus often in a political context.

- And for Clearer Policies to Represent

The Movement could find it advisable to give further thought to its policy formation. At present the Parliamentary Committee's views are based primarily on submissions from the Co-operative trade panels; and from the Co-operative Employers' Association the Co-operative Union and CWS officials. Increasingly we have tended to involve societies, especially the largest twenty, in consultation. The Parliamentary Committee has sometimes to reconcile differing perceptions of what the Co-operative attitude should be.

The protean nature of the Movement inevitably means that on some issues differences of emphasis, even of substance, can exist. These reflect some uncertainty as to the real function of the Movement itself. When that has been clearly defined, a consistently coherent expression of Co-operative interests could more effectively be expressed. Until that time, the Parliamentary Committee and Secretary can be relied on to exert their own efforts to achieve this end.

The Author

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