

Government and Co-operation

UNITY AMONG CO-OPERATIVES - AND ACTION

by

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None of us is free of government. None of us is free without good government. This is true of a Co-operative Society no less than of an individual.

The question arises, what is good government? I am not a political philosopher and any definition I may offer will be found to be inadequate by those who are. But for my purposes a working hypothesis would be: a government that within its strategy seeks to create conditions that encourage to the greatest extent the full flowering of individual talent, the realisation to the full of his (or her) potentiality, reconciling as far as possible the conflict that arises within the individual as both a self-regarding and a social animal.

Now I know we are on dangerous ground here and this imperfect definition (if indeed it deserves such a term) is riddled with questions begged. They are questions which I do not intend to pursue, for two very good reasons: because this is not the place in which to do so, and because I am not in the least equipped to attempt the task.

However, starting from that premise, I can begin to build my thesis, even with such reservations.

The Meaning of Co-operation

Because Co-operation is a form of enterprise which is based on self-help and mutual aid it is a

virtually unique instrument for drawing out the individual to develop himself responsibly within a community both for himself and for his peers. In and through active participation in a Co-operative enterprise in which he has a personal stake, he may learn how to shoulder responsibilities and exercise power; how to balance his own interests with the common weal; to confront the pros and cons of any action proposed and arrive at a considered judgement which will have its effect on himself as well as others. In other words he learns the art of democratic participation, sharing with fellow Co-operators the risks as well as the rewards of his and their actions. While serving himself he learns to be a responsible citizen.

If this be so, if I am not guilty of putting an impossibly idealistic gloss over what happens in a Co-operative undertaking (and, of course, I could be so accused) then any democratic government would be foolish not to regard the development of a strong and healthy Co-operative movement in many spheres as a wholly desirable part of its social, economic and, yes, its political strategy. Even if the reality falls far short of the ideal - as it usually does - the point is valid.

What Government should do for Co-operation

But how far should such a government be expected to support Co-operative enterprises? Certainly to the extent that obstacles, fiscal and legislative, impeding their progress are removed. That I would regard as the minimum. To go further, I would expect good government to see clearly the benefit to it of a healthy growth of Co-operative activity and to encourage, through educational institutions - schools, colleges, universities - the study of co-operative philosophy and practice in all its forms.

I would not expect - nor do I think it desirable for - government to cosset or cocoon co-operatives. That would be self-defeating. A Co-operative must stand or fall on its own unimpeded efforts. If it cannot generate and sustain interest in its affairs among a sufficient number of those it seeks to serve to ensure its continuance as a Co-operative it deserves to die and artificial means should not be used to keep it nominally alive.

But it must be given a fair wind. And that does mean asking something positive of government. Where it has the power and the influence, and it has both, it should use its best endeavours to ensure (forgive the cliché) a climate of opinion at least as much in favour of Co-operative enterprise as today is given to the competitive spirit and so-called private enterprise.

I would, of course, expect more from a socialist government. I would expect it to assert that Co-operation is a form of social ownership not less acceptable than municipal and state enterprise and a great deal more appropriate in many cases. I would expect it to show positive enthusiasm, not just a benign tolerance, for all forms of Co-operative endeavour; yet not to regard the Co-operative sector as an arm of government, not a part of the state apparatus, but as an essential element in a pluralist, a mixed economy. For in my book a socialist society is necessarily a pluralist, not a monolithic society. "Democratic centralism" is too authoritarian for me. I do not regard it as socialist.

The Response of the Movement?

That for the government's responsibility. And what of us? What of our movement's responsibility to help government to create the climate of opinion

we need to ensure a fair wind in our sails? What have we done and what are we doing to deserve it?

By "our movement" I mean to include the whole wide spectrum of Co-operative enterprise, the long established and by now traditional consumer and agricultural sectors as well as the newly emerging young, aspiring credit unions and housing Co-ops, the community of neighbourhood service Co-ops, the workers' or industrial Co-ops (not a new concept but with hopefully a new lease of life in this country) and the less often regarded but no less important Co-operatives of professional people, such as the members of some of the great London symphony orchestras.

We act and think and appear to the public as separate and unattached entities. And so we have failed to present ourselves convincingly as Co-operative enterprise in the round, as a substantial and growing sector of the community (which is what we are). We act individually, unco-ordinatedly, each grouping largely self absorbed with its own problems, insular. To use a term one hears more and more these days in another context, we fail to present ourselves as a broad church, within which there are many valid variations of the same theme.

We should be shamefaced at the fact that it took an Act of Parliament and a government sponsored agency to begin even tentatively to build bridges over our great divides. If we want Co-operation to be recognised as a legitimate alternative form of organisation with real significance and not just a fringe activity of limited relevance to the economic and social problems of the eighties then we have to act as if we really believed it ourselves.

All Co-operatives to Co-operate

When Co-operatives learn to co-operate governments will have cause to treat us with much greater respect than they do now. If there were a clearly recognisable Co-operative sector in this country embracing all forms of Co-operative enterprise speaking in all essentials with one voice no government would dare to ignore it. We would rank with the TUC and the CBI as a vital interest whose representatives it would be unthinkable not to consult. Our influence on the policy makers would be tangible whichever party were in power at Westminster.

To get there Co-operators must stop acting mostly within their several water-tight compartments. The two long established Co-operative organisations in this country, representing consumers and the agricultural community, should be giving a much more decisive lead in this direction. We have the experience, the weight and authority the others do not yet possess. We have the resources. Have we not the vision perhaps even the courage to break down the barriers that lie between us?

I know very well that one of the stumbling blocks preventing a much closer relationship between the agricultural and consumer movements has been the Co-operative Party and our Labour Party connection. There may be other more fundamental differences which this obscures. The agricultural interest is after all a producer's interest. But the conflict between producer and consumer must be reconcilable within a Co-operative context. For we are inter-dependent one on another. It is nonsense to stand aloof from each other.

As to the politics - there have been times when the agricultural movement has found it useful

to have Co-operative MPs championing its cause in the House. Just as the Co-operative Union and its constituent bodies have on occasion been ready to seek the support of Conservative MPs and Ministers.

Co-operation and Labour - and Conservatives and Liberals

The same may be said of the other sections of the movement - industrial and housing Co-ops, and the credit unions - all of whom have sought allies within the Labour, Liberal and Tory Parties. And why not? Co-operation has commended itself to a broad expanse of political, religious and social opinion ever since the middle of the 19th Century in this country when High Anglican Tories and Christian Socialists like Charles Kingsley and F D Maurice, Liberals of the J S Mill School, socialist atheists like Robert Owen, and radical atheists like Jacob Holyoake, Methodists and humanists combined in a most unlikely alliance to support Co-operative enterprise in all its manifold forms.

In our own day housing Co-ops have had the support of Labour, Liberal and Tory politicians at the local and national level; the same may be said of industrial Co-ops. And many a local Tory big-wig is known to shop at the Co-op.

Socialists will see in Co-operative enterprise a form of social ownership and democratic control which commends itself to their political philosophy; Tories will see in it an expression of self-reliance and self-help which will remind them of Samuel Smiles their Victorian archetype; and Liberals will identify with its application of the principles of grass roots democracy which they so favour.