

"WHERE IS THE CO-OPERATIVE PARTY GOING?"

by

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In the September issue of Co-operative Management and Marketing I argued that the Co-operative Party is at heart a Co-operative Representation Committee within the Parliamentary Labour Party. The loss of four Co-operative MPs to the SDP and retirement of a fifth has reduced the Commons Group to a dozen and for the first time in over thirty years it no longer outnumbers the Liberals.

Retirals and the ever-present hazards of reselection, if not re-distribution, could conceivably result in Co-operative MPs being outnumbered by Co-operative Peers after the next general election unless the Party increases its number of winnable candidacies beforehand.

Lines of Development for Westminster

The Co-operative Party must face up to the questions: what it wants to do within the wider Labour movement; and how it proposes to expand the areas of co-operative enterprise. It must decide if our present and past ways and means of pursuing these objectives are necessarily appropriate in the future. This year's Brighton Conference of the Labour Party, for example, saw

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meetings of Solidarity, Labour Co-ordinating Committee, Militant, the Fabians - you name it and it was there. The Co-operative Party was not on the Fringe nor was the voice of Co-operation raised a month earlier at the Blackpool TUC. The relevance of the Co-operative Party is not in doubt: it is the Party's practical significance to Co-operative advance which should give cause for anxiety.

The Co-operative Party has a wide potential access to Government and public agencies if it cares to use these. In many ways the relationship between the Co-operative Parliamentary Group, the Party Head Office and National Organisers throughout the country is more intimate than that between the PLP and Labour party bureaucracy. Much depends on the character of communication between the Parliamentarians and the trading and wider Co-operative interests. The present dual system of Parliamentary Committee of the Co-operative Union and National Executive of the Co-operative Party does not always harness the latent skills and experience of the Co-operative Parliamentary Group because there is no clear or common strategy.

The indefatigable briefing of backbench Tory MPs in committees and on the floor of the House when in opposition during the lifetime of the last Labour Government was ever-impressive, enabling them to push their case. Things are of course somewhat different now that their party is in government!

- And for the E.E.C. and Local Government

The links between Westminster MPs and Strasbourg MEPs could also be developed beyond the present informal arrangements for no matter how speedily Labour wishes to extricate the UK from

Europe the fact remains there is much that the Co-operative movement can be doing to influence decisions affecting Co-operative enterprise. Liaison could be developed with that other leg in the Co-operative political triangle: local government prior to reorganisation was a stouter base of Co-operative politics. A periodic get-together with Co-operative councillors would be invaluable on special interests such as planning, transport, education or housing.

It seems untimely in a period when retail Co-operative societies have disappeared in some parts of Britain that the conditions of Party membership should after sixty years be constitutionally dovetailed with membership of a retail society. An active member in a housing, community or producer Co-operative ought not to be less eligible than an inactive shareholder of a consumer Co-operative. There is nothing wrong with tradition and the Co-operative movement has much to be proud of, but the 21st century is only eighteen years away. Too much thought and practice seems rooted in the past, leaving the main thrust of intellectual activity to younger academics and workers interested in Co-operatives.

Amidst all the drama over Labour's deputy leadership election at Brighton, the papers on the party finance were probably the least read. If Labour was ambivalent on the need for state-aid to political parties before the last general election it will be in sore financial need after the next one. Houghton's proposals on state-aid were, however, of little practical relevance to the Co-operative Party as it is not an electoral Party, but a sponsoring Party. Nor, in the years to come, when the Conservatives get around to supporting PR as a means of self-preservation, will either the Single Transferable Vote or the List System be of much use to the Co-operative Party.

Co-operative Shadow Spokesmen?

If Co-operators at times resent the apparent inattention to their interests and views it is because those views too often go by default or are not fed into the make-up of Labour Party policy. A system of Co-operative shadow spokesmen in Parliament on Treasury, Consumer, Industry, Housing and Employment matters would provide a continuing point of contact with frontbench activities generally. If the Liberals could do it with Labour in Government during the period of the Pact, then the Co-operative Group can easily do it in our "alliance" with Labour in Opposition or in Government.

The current Co-operative Party Commission on Employment opens the way for developing a Co-operative contribution in other key areas of social concern such as consumer affairs or housing with perhaps similar commissions or a network of study groups up and down the country involving as many Co-operative Party members as possible.

For the Movement or for Society -

Too often when assessments of the value of the Co-operative Party have been made the judgement has been based on reference to the dividends to the consumer movement. It could just be that those scales are no longer enough and the Co-operative Party will also have to address itself as to how worthwhile its activities are to society as a whole.