

FROM READERS

Myself when old did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint and heard great argu-
ment
About it and about

(from The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam - almost.)

1. THE CO-OPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Holyoake House,
Hanover St.,
Manchester M60 OAS

Dear Dr. Marshall,

I have read the article on the Co-operative Development Agency which appeared in The Society for Co-operative Studies Bulletin no. 42, and which is also entitled "A Critique and Ideas for the Future". The article was of course compiled by three people with the Co-operatives Research Unit of the Open University, Chris Cornforth, Jenny Thornley and Peter Milford.

I can find no complaint in the "Critique" of the CDA, there is nothing exceptional in it and I know many groups of two people who could write this article without difficulty, but I would admit that they have done their research quite well.

Where I must take issue with the authors is where the "Ideas for the Future" are detailed and research appears to be thrown out of the window. Under the heading "Functions" they state a variety of functions that a National CDA SHOULD pursue and included in those functions are manage-

ment services, education and training, research and information. I have for some considerable time had a distinct fear that the various strands of co-operation within the country would tend to develop their own agencies which in turn would offer specialised services, thereby resulting in a considerable duplication of services and ignoring experience gained by one sector over a number of years. In the cases in point, all of the functions are already available within the Co-operative Union, but they are seriously suggesting that a National CDA should create duplicated services. This is the road to Co-operative chaos and the functions which are already available SHOULD be and I believe can be tailored to fit the needs of other organisations. Incidentally we already have one recent example of duplication which caused considerable difficulty for the organisation concerned.

I believe the authors have done the Wider Co-operative Movement no service in glibly and unthinkingly producing these suggestions without serious consideration to the actual situation, and the situation which their suggestions could create. I can only hope that no-one pays any attention to their article and I would seriously suggest that they do some further research into the facilities available within the Co-operative Movement before they enter into print again.

Dick Bluer
(in a personal capacity)

2. A DEMOCRATIC FUTURE FOR THE CO-OP?/

2. A DEMOCRATIC FUTURE FOR THE CO-OP?

London SW11

Who on earth am I, a mere district committee secretary, with no board experience, and only ten years in the movement, to start publishing suggestions about how Co-op Societies should be run? Yet I wonder at the patience of so many people who have worked in the movement for so many years. Their level of understanding of Co-op. principles and practice remains strong, and so does their level of commitment. Yet the movement has its back against the wall, and is rarely able to practice what it preaches.

I feel this acutely because I am frequently in contact with people in the new worker Co-ops. They often dismiss the retail movement as hopelessly beyond redemption. It is sometimes a hard job to convince them that retail societies have a storehouse of experience in Co-operation which the worker Co-ops. would be wise to draw on.

To a relative newcomer, the Co-op. societies seem to have reacted to the modern intensity of competition in the retail industry by trying to imitate the private sector rather than by trying to emphasise how different they are.

The Alternatives

There are clearly two ways in which we could survive. One is by becoming as streamlined and efficient as the private multiples. This will involve creating a standard national image, and achieving massive economies of scale. This must

involve economising on democracy, because a serious democratic input would disrupt and delay decision making.

The other way would be to recognise that Societies have a fund of loyalty which our competitors do not have, and to build on this to provide a service which is quite distinct from the private sector. This will help re-inforce the loyalty of our members, and build up our democracy.

We are currently falling between these two stools. The move towards regional societies achieves only limited economies of scale, while it weakens member loyalty by making societies more remote and anonymous.

While we have sought to imitate the trading practices of the private multiples, we have clung to a democratic structure which makes us inefficient compared with the competition we are taking on. The choice before us is to combine our resources into a national society, with a democratic input only at the top, or to base our societies on coherent local communities in order to win trade by meeting these communities' needs.

The Cost of a National Society

We could survive as a national society, but at what cost? Elections for a national board would be as much a farce as elections for the boards of Building Societies. The issues, and the candidates, would be too remote to raise much interest. The movement would be run by a self-perpetuating oligarchy.

We would survive, but only at the cost of having our policies entirely dictated by private comp-

etition. We would have become a capitalist organisation in our behaviour if not our ownership. It is hard to see how such a movement could retain even the pretence of idealism for long.

The alternative is to base our societies on units - usually one major town and its catchment area - which makes sense as a local community. We should then reform our structure in order to ensure that we learn what the community wants, and develop a flexibility of response which will enable us to meet these needs where possible.

I am acutely aware of having insufficient experience in the movement to put forward detailed practical ideas on how Societies could be run, nevertheless, someone somewhere has to start to do this before it is too late.

Community Co-ops?

Under the heading of opening ourselves up to community demands, we could examine shop committees, publishing manifestos for Society elections, involving staff formally in helping to run Societies, making voting easier, providing trading services reserved for members, and replacing stamps with some form of dividend.

Under the heading of meeting members needs more flexibly, we could go into the mail order business, allow wholefood worker Co-ops. to trade from a corner of a Society store, start Credit Unions among Society members, build a trading relationship with various forms of new Co-op., provide premises and resources to enable members to run a wide range of activities either as forms of trading or as clubs, and adopt a code of honesty in the presentation of the goods we sell with information for customers available at the point of sale.

I hope that my pamphlet*, by setting these ideas out, will encourage people with more experience in the movement to consider whether there might be a practical alternative to a national society. I regard the idea of merging into one monolith as total surrender to private enterprise, since that is the direction in which private enterprise has led as a result of its wish to accumulate capital.

Whether or not the particular ideas my pamphlet suggests are practical it is important that we should examine an approach which says that it is more important to do things which are in accord with our principles, than it is to be big. I would be happier with, and happier to defend, a movement which was offering a service distinct from private enterprise, even if it was a smaller movement.

As it happens, the process of mergers and growing remoteness from our members has been accompanied by a further shrinkage of the movement. Sometimes we have sounded almost like Mrs. Thatcher, urging that a purer pursuit of failed policies will pull us through. A change of direction might lead to a smaller movement, but it is more likely that the rebuilding of our Societies on a basis of community loyalty would open up possibilities for expansion. More and more people nowadays are seeking alternatives to the alienating lifestyles of capitalism, and we ought to be able to draw on this to recapture our sense of purpose as a movement which is seeking to change society.

Alan Taylor

* "A democratic future for the Co-op?"

50p plus postage

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