

SOCIETY NOTES

The January meeting of the national officers noted with lively interest the explorations and consultations by the Union's Education Department about liaison between the Movement and the educational service and the organisation by the Department of the Hodgson Pratt Memorial Lecture at Rochdale by a Society President Professor S. Pollard - dealing with the future development of Co-operation. It also expressed its appreciation of the initiative by the Metropolitan and Southern Region in forming a programme of five meetings over the period September 1979 - April 1980.

The main preoccupation was the future of the Society - with the particular aid of a stimulating paper from Rita Rhodes. Attention was centred substantially and hopefully on the formation of study groups or "syndicates" which would engage with some topic of interest to the members and could lead to a report which might be published in whole or part in the Bulletin. It was found - as it has frequently been, in Co-operative history - that Will Watkins was already pursuing an initiative which exemplified one form: he was the centre of a small syndicate "by correspondence" which was examining the role of central Co-operative federations and particularly the Co-operative Union. At 17 Compton Court, Long Compton, Shipston-on-Stour, Warwicks CV36 5JW, he would be glad to hear from others interested in sharing this correspondence.

The role of "syndicates" in their various forms can be discussed at the A.G.M. of the Society in September but some practical experiment in the meantime would be a great help. Here is a note

which Mrs Rhodes has prepared -

Forward by Syndicates

"Readers of the Bulletin will know that various ideas are being discussed about the Society's future organisation. One considered at the Officers' meeting last January was that syndicates be formed among members in areas of interest to the Society such as Co-operative management, education, research, politics and consumer affairs. This list is by no means exhaustive and there are no doubt others which members could suggest including some which could be formed to meet particular needs and then be wound-up when they had been met.

The idea of syndicates is not new: a number of voluntary bodies tap and channel their members' expertise in this way. But, because the idea is new to the Society, the officers felt that it should be discussed at the Annual Conference and that I should introduce it in the Bulletin.

The establishment of syndicates would seem appropriate for the Society for two reasons. First, the movement attracts members of diverse interests and expertise, and secondly, that despite that diversity a human characteristic is to enjoy meeting like with like.

For the Society, such meetings could be profitable, with the findings of syndicates being discussed at Annual Conferences and through the medium of the Bulletin. They could assist the increased generation of ideas within the Society and, eventually, in the wider Movement.

At present, members' points of contact are regional activities, the Bulletin and the Annual Conference. But these tend to comprise one-off-activities. For example, in the last two years, we have considered Co-operative non-food trade, Co-operation and the consumer, politics and the movement, and of course, the Bulletin has recorded for posterity the ripples of the Co-op Great Britain debate.

All these topics have been interesting enough in themselves. But sometimes you feel that you would like to linger over a topic and to examine it in greater depth with other members of the Society. Or conversely, there are some topics which do not interest you much at all in which case you wait for the next edition of the Bulletin or the next Annual Conference to offer you something ~~which in-~~terests you more. The trouble with that is that annual conferences, like Christmas, come only once a year and the Bulletin only three times a year. Regional activities can help to keep one in touch with the Society but there again they tend to be one-off activities rather than studies in depth of specific subjects.

Syndicates could help to meet the need which some members obviously feel but it is not envisaged that they would function with any great formality. Moreover, they would be intended to supplement existing activities rather than compete with them. Members would be free to join or not to join as they so wished. There would be no geographical

restriction but, having said that, it is as well to acknowledge that rising fares will inhibit frequent nation-wide meetings.

However, as much as we in the Co-op are addicted to meetings, we should recognise that they are not the only form of communication. One recalls the effectiveness of the late 18th century and early 19th century Corresponding Societies. How well they disseminated radical ideas, and did so without the benefit of our modern communications systems.

Correspondence, telephone and the occasional meetings should suffice to meet the needs of most syndicates though it would be helpful if each appointed a convenor or someone to act as a link person.

Having said all this, there is not much point in setting up new organisations merely for their own sake. They should meet objectives which are not being fully met in other ways. Therefore, it is suggested that the Society's approach should be one of encouraging syndicates to evolve voluntarily among members rather than one of setting them up and then trying to match members to them. After all, it is ideas which matter, not people. When great ideas stir, people move. And there are a number of new ideas abroad in the movement at the present time which are worthy of closer examination.

This short introduction to the question is designed to whet appetites rather than to lay out a blue-print. Hopefully, it has

also served to stimulate discussion at the Annual Conference where I hope that we can look forward to the pleasure of seeing you."

Action This Day?

As Mrs Rhodes says, the idea of syndicates is in search of further discussion at the A.G.M. in September. It is also in search of experience now - of individuals willing to take an initiative to bring together a group and a topic of interest to them. Anyone of this helpful inclination should get in touch with the appropriate Regional Secretary of the Society to discuss the possibility and to get any available information that would be useful - for example, of members likely to be interested.

Register of Research and Bibliography

"I shot an arrow into the air
It fell to earth I know not where."

This is a frequent editorial experience - but some speculation in the last Bulletin did fall on receptive ears and draw helpful responses. There was a suggestion of 'letters to the editor' - and the feature is impressively inaugurated later in this Bulletin. There were references to the need for more systematic information of Co-operative research and publications - and Ms. J. Elise Bayley of the Plunkett Foundation has written:-

"... with our published papers of our Research Seminars held in Oxford we included a list of research completed, in progress, and projected. Subsequent meetings with

Paul Chaplin of the Open University's Co-operative Research Unit, and the Foundation's own awareness of the need to collate and publish the titles of research work into agricultural co-operation in the EEC countries resulted in its undertaking to gather all this information and publish annually a Research Register.

Questionnaires in the agricultural co-operative field have already been sent out and those on industrial co-operation in the UK will shortly follow suit. Included in the register will be a list of educational institutions, from university to college, that provide education in co-operation.

It is hoped that this project will adequately meet Mrs Rhodes' proposal for a comprehensive Directory of Co-operative Research in Britain compiled and classified by a small organisation not actually undertaking research.

It will of course be of great assistance to the compiler if your readers would pass on any knowledge of research in progress to the Foundation and suggestions for any particular features they would like to see appear in the Register.

Your Bulletin 37 mentions interestingly two activities that the Foundation has recently been exploring and is now implementing, and again, I am sure your readers will be interested to know of our initiative. The first is a bibliography: some time ago the Foundation called a meeting of the Co-operative Librarians in the UK, to discuss the possibility of producing an annual "union" accessions list. Compilation of the first list is already under way and will be published jointly this year by the Librarians of the Co-operative Party, the

Co-operative Union, the C.W.S., the I.C.A., and the Plunkett Foundation. It will be classified by subject and indexed and should fill the gap noted in your society notes, as listing in this way will comprise in fact a useful subject bibliography, on all aspects of co-operative literature.

As I mentioned earlier, the Foundation is already in contact with the CRU and one of the Plunkett Foundation staff is a member of the working group composed of people from all types of co-operative activity engaged in producing a comprehensive co-operative education programme for the BBC; and in studying methods of collating, storing and acquiring co-operative audio visual material."

Work Completed and in Progress

A Comparative Bibliography, with special reference to Ireland, has been published - prepared by T. O'Brien (see Bulletin 34 for his article Economic Co-operation in Northern Ireland). It has 800 references, including a section on audio-visual material and is available at £3.50 (including p&p) from Publications Department, Irish Management Institute, Sandyford Road, Dublin 14.

And there has been information of two research projects:

by Leonora Stettner:

A study entitled Establishing Criteria for the Economic and Social Performance of Producer-Controlled Enterprises in the United Kingdom has now been completed and is being considered for publication. The

work, which was sponsored by the Co-operative College and financed by the Social Science Research Council, was motivated by the fact that to-date there has been no comprehensive evaluation of the experiments with workers' co-operatives which have recently mushroomed in this country.

The objectives of the investigation were to identify and assemble available data into a usable compendium of basic information; and to assess the social, economic, financial and managerial indicators required for evaluating the performance of such enterprises. In short it attempts a systematic survey and analysis of the workers' co-operative movement as a whole from which conclusions can be drawn as to its social and economic potential.

by Stephen Lawrence:

A study at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth under sponsorship from the Social Science Research Council which surveys the performance of the consumer Movement during the period 1955-1970 in an attempt to make an assessment of:

1. The degree, and area of failure, if any, of the performance of the Co-operatives.
2. In the light of the conclusions drawn from the analysis of performance, the appropriateness of the Co-operative response to the situation.
3. The direction of future Co-operative development.

To Note, Please

Bulletin 39, which we expect to publish in the summer will have as its special feature "The Service of the Co-operative College".

The Annual Conference and A.G.M. will be at Stanford Hall on 26th/27th September. It should be in specially good company since a Directors' Seminar and the Students' Reunion are also being held there on 26th/28th and 27th/28th respectively.

February 1980

R.L.M.