



An appreciation of John Butler

Richard Bickle

John Butler grew up in north-west London and, after leaving school, trained as a draftsman working at Beechams — skills that came in useful many years later when discussions about potential alterations to Holyoake House were taking place!

Politically active from a young age, he joined the Labour Party and was soon recruited as a member of the London Co-operative Society (LCS) where he became part of the London Co-operative Members' Association (LCMA). This was an active members' organisation within the LCS that ran slates of candidates in society elections and was associated with the right wing of the Labour Party. It was led most (in)famously by John Stonehouse MP who later faked his own death while serving as President of the London Society.

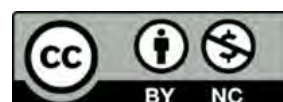
John's first experience of co-operative activism was canvassing in favour of the LCMA slate on a housing estate built for railway workers in Romford and being given a lift in a large American car driven by one of the wealthier members of the association — something that he felt was rather out of place with the local demographics!

Having been spotted as someone who was young, bright, and enthusiastic by members of the London Society's Education Committee (which was actually under the influence of the rival left-wing London Co-operative Campaign Committee 1960), John won a scholarship to the Co-operative College for their full-time two year Co-operative Secretary's Diploma (CSD) course. While he was a student at the College he met his future wife with whom he later had two children and a life-long marriage.

Graduating with his CSD qualification, John enrolled as a mature student in economics at the University of York and followed that with doctoral studies at the University of Manchester. His dissertation explored the impact of retail societies in Yorkshire as a training ground for co-operative leaders, who then went on to take up senior positions in societies nationwide. A copy is held in the National Co-operative Archive.

A career with the Co-operative Union (later Co-operatives UK) followed, where John was initially hired as the South Western Sectional Secretary based in Fairfax House, the Co-operative Retail Services (CRS) department store in Bristol, where he supported the mergers of many small societies in south Wales and the south west. Most of these societies transferred engagements to the then CRS, where John's opinion was often sought on whether the managing secretary

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or other senior managers of an incoming society should be offered roles by CRS following a merger. This sometimes led to angry phone calls to Lloyd Wilkinson, General Secretary of the Co-operative Union, demanding John's sacking from aggrieved executives whose names weren't on the list of people to keep on.

As the financial impact on the movement of the Thatcher years increased, the number of sectional councils was halved and John moved to Holyoake House to head up the newly formed merger unit.

The first of these mergers that John tried to negotiate was between the Sheffield & Ecclesall and the Brightside & Carbrook Societies in Sheffield. Having deployed his significant diplomatic skills to get to a position whereby the boards and management teams in both societies were recommending the merger, it was scuppered by the local Co-operative Women's Guild whose members belonged to both societies. They turned up at one society's special general meeting (SGM) one night and all voted in favour, but then voted against at the other society's SGM the following evening on the basis that the merger was in one of the society's interests but not both!

John later played a key role in the creation of the Oxford, Swindon & Gloucester Society where he was the person who told the Gloucester & Severnside Society board that no society had ever recovered from the financial position they were in and that they would have to pursue a merger. His boss, who was also present, lost his nerve at the last moment and tried to prevaricate.

When the long standing General Secretary of the Co-operative Union, Lloyd Wilkinson, retired, John was assumed by some to be heir apparent. In actual fact, the Central Executive negotiated their own merger with ICOM (a federation of worker co-operatives) and recruited Dame Pauline Green to lead the new organisation. Pauline became Chief Executive and John was appointed to the new role of Society Secretary.

Addressing the corruption and incompetence that had become present in too many societies in the 1970s and 1980s, John led both the creation of the Institute of Co-operative Directors that, with the Co-operative College, provided the first properly structured and accredited training for elected directors of societies — something that the movement would do well to revisit today. He also supported the drafting and adoption of the Code of Governance for Consumer Co-operatives. Along with the cadre of managers that had been trained at the Co-operative College in the 1960s and 1970s, these two initiatives helped to ensure that the UK movement didn't collapse in the way that those in France and Germany did in the 1980s and 1990s.

In his national roles, "honest John" saw part of his job as being the trusted confidante that society presidents and chief executives could turn to when they had problems, or simply needed an independent person to talk to. He also had an extensive book of contacts who could help out when societies got into trouble — for example suggesting interim executives when a board decided to sack its chief executive.

There were a number of occasions when societies faced internal conflicts within their boards, or between board and executives, when John was the only person all sides would talk to. This entailed him stepping in to take minutes in board meetings and at least one CEO credited this simple action with having saved their job when internal politics became difficult.

Outside of his salaried jobs, John also played a leading role in the Society for Co-operative Studies, later UK Society for Co-operative Studies, where he had two lengthy spells as secretary — on each occasion stepping in when the society was in some difficulties and then passing it on with a stable membership and finances.

The second of these stints came to an end in 2002. Conference bookings that year had been slow and the then Chair and Vice Chair had taken the decision to place an advert in the *Morning Star*, a co-operatively owned daily newspaper, to try and drum up a few last minute bookings. It turned out that John had a visceral dislike of the Communist Party (CP) from his days in London and, given the CP history of the *Star*, responded to this decision — that he

also felt had been taken without due process — angrily. That said, although he resigned, he wholeheartedly supported that outgoing Vice Chair (also the author of this tribute!) in taking over the secretaryship.

In many ways, to those who worked with him, John was quite a private person. He spoke warmly about his family, but almost no-one ever met them! He particularly enjoyed holidays in Goa and had an active retirement. Until recently he liked to visit Holyoake House to pay his UKSCS subscription in person each year and took the opportunity to catch up with old friends and colleagues.

There are many people in the movement today who owe a lot to John's friendship and encouragement, and I certainly feel privileged to have known him.

The Author

Richard Bickle was UKSCS Secretary between 2002-2015.