

FROM READERSAgricultural Co-operation in the U.K.Dr. Margaret DigbyNewbury
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"I read with great interest the articles in Bulletin No. 44 on agricultural Co-operation concluding with Peter Clarke's excellent piece on agricultural trade with retail co-operatives.

I have long felt that this is indeed a pathway which has been very inadequately and spasmodically followed. Indeed I wrote a book on it myself some 60 years ago, to which Peter Clarke refers, which received polite attention but did not result in much more mutual trade. Since then this topic has been on the agenda of many congresses, national and international, but usually at the end when most people were either too tired or too anxious about their trains to discuss it properly.

Even then there was a considerable volume of mutual trade between the CWS or the retail societies large and small and the agricultural co-operatives. The CWS was at that time a large producer of "millers' offals" much in demand for livestock feeding. Agricultural Co-operatives were increasing their trade in fresh meat, eggs, fruit and vegetables. Retail consumers societies were also increasing their trade in these commodities though many used the services of their own trained buyers. The movement had also a large overseas trade in cereals and dairy produce much of it coming direct from marketing

Co-operatives in Scandinavia, Holland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The real barriers to a more complete and conscious collaboration were in part political: the belief on each side that the other was a tool either of the communists or the landlords. This was often joined with a simple unwillingness of the buyers to lose any part of their job or their prestige. There was also a feeling on the agricultural side that consumer Co-operatives were amateurishly run and that better terms could be got elsewhere - an opinion perhaps shared by the Gaitskell Commission.

Much however has happened since then and, as Peter Clarke so wisely points out, it is still not too late to amend this state of affairs. But it calls for much closer contact and mutual knowledge on the part of senior men on both sides.

I note, with appreciation, the reference to the Plunkett Foundation and feel sure it would be only too ready to provide any service it could offer in such a cause."

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"May we endorse Peter Clarke's call for the establishment of better trading links between agricultural and retail Co-operatives? The sixth Co-operative principle is all too frequently set aside, perhaps with the excuse that in times

of recession it is difficult enough to keep one's own co-operative house in order let alone contemplate helping others with their's. But these are precisely the times when we should be joining forces to demonstrate that the Co-operative way is a genuine alternative to the capitalist and state sectors which have themselves contributed to the recession we are facing.

Peter Clarke's suggestions as to the way forward are all worthy of consideration and should certainly be tried. But he is equally right that it will take time and that it will not be easy. We have spent much of the last year looking at Co-operative support organisations and at the potential for greater Co-operation between different sectors of the movement. In the course of this work we have talked to many people in many different Co-operative organisations and we have been struck by the fact that all of them believe firmly in what they are doing. Unfortunately, many also believe equally firmly that what other people in other organisations are doing is wrong. The big thing that we have seen missing in the Co-operative movement is tolerance. Without that there can be no unity and unless the Co-operative movement can present a united front and speak with one voice on matters of urgent concern to all of us then it will not be taken seriously by the world of capitalists and state bureaucrats and we can go back to worrying about our own minor concerns. If only we could achieve greater tolerance of one another then many different kinds of practical Co-operation could flourish."