

CWS/CRS RESTRUCTURING

FOREWORD

The question of integration of the Co-operative Wholesale Society and Co-operative Retail Services has been prominent for some time on the consumer Co-operatives, agenda — with some careful, cautious steps towards it recently. In 1982 there was a conference of retail societies and an agreement in principle on “restructuring” and the boards of the two organisations and the Tripartite Committee of the CWS, CRS and the Co-operative Union have proceeded to examine the mechanics for turning the principle into practice. Some report of the outcome is due soon.

Our two contributors Lloyd Harrison and David Hutton consider the issues involved in this “restructuring”. The scale and role of the two organisations indicate their importance to the consumer Movement:—

Co-operative Retail Services

CRS is the largest consumer retail society in the world with a membership of over 1,800,000 and a turnover of more than £900 million. It accounts for one-fifth of all Co-operative trade in Britain. Unlike most societies which are operated in a single town, city or region, CRS operates its retail outlets in various areas throughout England and Wales. It was founded in 1934 by the Co-operative Wholesale Society for the purpose of extending Co-operative trade to areas of the country not already served by other Co-operative societies. However, the prime reason for the growth of CRS is that it has taken over societies unable to continue an independent existence and requiring the security and other benefits offered by CRS, which has now absorbed nearly 200 formerly independent societies. Its board of directors has eight members elected by the Regional Committees of CRS and eight appointed by the CWS.

Co-operative Wholesale Society

The CWS, is owned by the member-retail societies in the United Kingdom and is controlled by a board of directors elected by these societies. It is the principal wholesale supplier for the societies and is also the largest Co-operative productive organisation in the UK with around 90 factories and productive units. In addition, the CWS is engaged in farming, banking and the hotel and travel agency business, and owns or controls a number of subsidiary and associate companies with interests ranging from insurance to milk organisation. It is one of the world's largest trading organisations, ranking among Britain's top businesses. It employs about 21,000 of whom almost 50 per cent are engaged in production and at January 1982 annual sales amounted to about £2,000 million.

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