

"Co-operation between Co-operatives"

A PROGRESS REPORT

by

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Bulletin readers will recall that No. 45 of August 1982 carried a report on the discussions of the SCS Syndicate on "Co-operation between Co-operatives" from mid-1980 to July 1982.

One of the needs identified by the Syndicate was to promote the creation of an adequate forum for discussion of problems common to all sectors of the Movement and the opportunity for the CDA to play its part in encouraging this. In pursuance of this objective and as a result of correspondence and meetings between Syndicate representatives, Will Watkins, John Morley and Harold Campbell and the CDA Chairman, Ralph Woolf and Director George Jones it was agreed that CDA would sponsor a meeting of Chairmen and/or Chief Executives of the widest possible range of national Co-operative organisations to discuss the case for forming a central organisation for Co-operatives in U.K.

That meeting took place on 21st September 1983 in London attended by over 30 representatives from 15 separate Co-operative agencies. The sectors of the Movement represented were consumers, fisheries, agriculture, credit, producers, housing, local and national CDAs and the agenda consisted of two main contributions. The first from John Morley (EEC) on the Mihr report to the European Parliament which sought a way to achieve co-operation across the various Co-operative sectors on a Community-wide scale. The second was from John Morley (Plunkett Foundation) who had encapsulated his cogent contributions to Syndicate meetings in two papers.

The fact that both speakers had the same name had no significance other than happy chance but was taken by the meeting to be a good omen borne out by the way in which their contributions complemented each other.

Co-operation on an EEC Scale

Morley (EEC) pointed out that the main problem in the Mihr report was the difficulty of identifying authorised spokesmen for particular Co-operative sectors. The need for Community-wide legislation on Co-operatives and for training facilities was recognised and accepted by the Parliament as was the value of Co-operation as a source of employment, as a factor for establishing better working conditions and as a training aid in self-development.

Following on these discussions in the European Parliament there have been moves towards establishing firmer links between Co-operative sectors in the Community though these showed up the problem of smaller sectors being swamped in their influence by the power of the larger, older established sectors. It has also become clear that the organisational structure of Co-operatives often cut across the EEC organisational structure in Brussels resulting in difficulties in clarifying whom Co-operatives should talk to within the Commission.

His team in Brussels were working on two main aspects: the first to make European Social Fund money more easily available and the second to assist in employment creation. Consultant teams and seminars (four in UK) were now working on these points to collect local information.

Likely Lines of Policy

As a result of these discussions and investigations an EEC policy paper now in preparation would probably contain the conclusions that:—

- (a) Worker Co-operatives are a good form of employment and deserve recognition and support.
- (b) National Governments should be made more aware that they are a cheap and effective form of employment creation and should be supported.
- (c) Their development and survival are dependent on support services and government help should, therefore, be given to local and national CDAs.
- (d) The concept of a Co-operative Development Fund is impractical and it would be better to tailor existing sources to Co-operative needs.

From the Syndicate's point of view it could reasonably be said that the problems identified and the conclusions reached were not surprising and a little limiting in Co-operative terms. Co-operation is capable of rather wider application than a few worthy job-creation worker Co-operatives. Nonetheless formal recognition of this nature in EEC terms is a very real start particularly as the problems identified seem to support the need for the type of organisation in U.K. outlined by Morley (Plunkett) in the second part of the Forum.

It may be worth noting that the other needs discussed by the SCS Syndicate in 1981 also seem to have reflected fairly closely the results of the EEC study and, in some respects, rather more widely. These parallel recognitions even if not totally similar do suggest that a body of opinion is now emerging that more than pious platitudes are necessary if Co-operation between different types of Co-operative is to be more than an infrequent and often unrecognised happenstance and that if it is to happen some surrender of sovereignty is surely necessary.

This was recognised in John (Plunkett) Morley's paper on "The Case for Forming a Central Organisation for Co-operatives in U.K." which is printed as an Appendix. His other paper outlining the form which such an organisation might take and a draft constitution was not discussed.

Central Organisation in the U.K.?

In recognising the need he pointed out that the debate in the European Parliament on the Mihr Report had inspired the formation of a loosely-knit body of international Co-operative associations to supplement the contacts made by individual associations with the appropriate EEC bodies. He drew the conclusion that the time may now be ripe for similar developments at national level.

The debate also showed that all shades of political opinion accepted that Co-operation, as distinct from Co-operatives, might provide some of the answers to some of the problems facing the Community. Richard Burke, the E.E.C. Commissioner, in his reply to the debate also welcomed the formation of the central body as a means of consultation on legal and financial problems of interest to all Co-operatives irrespective of type.

The discussion which followed John Morley's contribution revealed some misgivings on the possibility of dominance by the consumer sector particularly as both the Co-operative Union and the CWS were ready to join and the former, willing to service a "co-ordinating body". Some fear was also expressed that an "institution" might develop.

There was, as Ralph Woolf the Chairman, said "a broad sense of opinion in favour of forming a 'body' to bring together the various sectors of the Movement". It was then agreed to hold over discussions on the "form" the body should take until a later meeting now arranged for 25th January. The feeling of the Forum was undoubtedly summed up by Will Watkins when he thanked the Chairman and the CDA for the opportunity to attend the historic and important meeting.

"And gie's a hand o'thine"

The meeting on 25th January was no less constructive and whilst discussion initially was tentative the final results were firm and positive.

The following organisations were represented and others not able to be present had expressed their interest:-

Co-operative Union	National Federation of Housing
Productive Board	Co-operatives
Society for Co-operative Studies	National Federation of Housing
Industrial Common Ownership	Associations
Movement	Economic & Political Committee of EEC
Plunkett Foundation	Co-operatives Research Unit of Open
Job Ownership Limited	University
Industrial Common Ownership	Co-operative Development Agency
Finance	CDA's Greater Manchester and Coventry
Society for Co-operative Dwellings	Co-operative News

It was clearly not the wish of the meeting to embark upon setting up a formal organisation with even the loose type of constitution suggested by John Morley. Fears of domination of the "new" sectors of the Movement by the larger longer established sectors were expressed but there was clear agreement that consultation and collaboration between the sectors were necessary and desired. There was a strong need for each sector to be more fully informed of the basis and the activities of the others.

Conclusion and the Next Step

In summing up the discussion Ralph Woolf, Chairman of CDA, suggested that the following had emerged:—

- (a) The objective was to strengthen the basis of Co-operatives in U.K. irrespective of type.
- (b) To this end it is necessary to identify subjects of agreed mutual interest of a practical nature on which action could be taken.
- (c) The CDA's willingness to service future meetings of the Forum at least for the next year was acceptable.

The meeting in accepting this agreed that the Society for Co-operative Studies should be asked to produce a brief on each sector outlining its activities and suggesting areas in which each sector might benefit from concerted action. These briefs would be the basis of discussion by a Working Party representative of all sectors meeting on 21st March 1984 in London. This Working Party would then put an agreed document together for presentation to the next meeting of the Forum to be held in Manchester on Tuesday 3rd July under Co-operative Union auspices. The July meeting should then be able to identify areas in which sectors of the Movement could help each other and a further Forum meeting later in the year could prepare a statement showing areas on which joint action might be possible.

At the end of the meeting John Gatling an observer from the Economic and Social Committee of the European Community briefly addressed the meeting and explained the approach his Committee had taken in their researches. He had been struck by the way in which the discussion had highlighted the similarity between the action needed at U.K. level and that identified as necessary at European Community level.

Note of the Author

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