

PIONEERS PAST

by

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Beyond the shop, the milk float, the Wholesale Society and the bank, beyond them all shone the bright dawn of a Co-operative Commonwealth. A brand new society, transcending the drudgery of service to the greed of capitalism.

Robert Owen's ideas were to see fruition, the pioneers knew it must be so. Contented they returned to their terraced homes, up from the Co-op Hall, boots on cobbles ringing, hopes of future soaring.

I heard those boots again, last night. The tarmac softened the sound, but the ghosts of pioneers past were going back to the Hall. (Only just in time, because the Society aim to pull it down.)

Sleepily, I followed them down to the Hall where dull shapes stood in a circle around a table, covered in the remnants of a recent Co-op meeting.

— The Pioneers Return

Lazily, pages turned as if by breeze or unseen hand. Dreamily, voices were raised in debate.

"Co-operation was meant to be about a way of life, not just a shop", said one.

A female voice, surely a Guildswoman's, murmured, "They have forgotten that Co-operative democracy must spring from the community, reflecting and respecting its wishes".

A male voice cut across her remarks. "Yes, but these folk still dwell in a capitalist community and their competitors are stronger now".

The Guildswoman's hat shook. Was that a stuffed bird atop? "Nothing is stronger than the people", she replied.

A quiet voice mediated. "So they must harness the people to take on these giant companies".

"Trust a teacher". scorned a gruffer voice. "'Harness the people' indeed! Sounds fine, but how do you do it? There's a lot of concern about the democratic structure, just look at all these reports!"

He tossed a document at the shade nearest the table. "Yes, I have read them" snapped the Teacher. "About the only point that rings clear is that the Co-operative Movement is run on 'rumour, rota and rhetoric'".

"Not much different from our day", laughed another, younger voice.

"So we can agree", summed up an obvious past President. "People are

people, and organisations based on democracy, (and organised by mere mortals), will never be perfect”.

“Right”, laughed one, “even we Co-operators past still cannot agree on the perfect structure!”

A young lady spoke. “That shouldn’t stop them questioning, what these reports call, ‘democratic traditions and procedures’. They suited us at the time but traditions and procedures must serve democracy not hinder it”.

— Problems of Size

“That’s all very well but look at the size of their Societies. How do they keep democracy alive?”, asked the younger shade.

“First, lad”, said the President type, “we need to ask the question, have they got democracy now? Seems to me it is the few who elect the few to serve the few fine democracy that is!”

“That’s because they no longer give out a ‘divi’ like we did”, the Guildswoman answered. “Membership doesn’t mean much to them”.

“What about that workers Co-op down the town?”, ventured the Teacher. “It seems to be full of people who are interested”.

“But not in this Co-operative Society”, replied the Guildswoman. The bird shook again.

The President lit up a ghostly pipe and puffed contentedly. “Seems they are going to have to be brought into our Co-operative Movement, though. Start by selling their goods. At least we would be a little different from other shops”.

“Yes, our stores are the same as any other”, a cloth capped shade agreed. “It’s daft. They’ve got lots of folk in this town who’re keen on peace campaigning, but when they go to the Co-op, we offer them toy guns, tanks and war games. You know what they lack today”, he looked around the shadowy circle, “it’s the guts to be different!”

“But they are different. they are democratic”, declared the young lady. “We’ve already agreed that is more in the word than in the deed”, puffed the President.

District Committees Needed

“So what should they do?”, the younger shades asked in unison.

“Well”, began the gruff cloth capped ghost, “in these large Societies they are going to need district committees”.

“Some have got that now”, clipped in the young man.

His older companion said sharply. “Talking shops! They must have power over local management and policy”.

The President sensed trouble, "What about this Society? It's a large region but it has no district committees, you cannot make them out of thin air".

"I don't know", laughed the Guildswoman. "We are made out of it!" "Seriously", said the determined young shade, "Look at what the Woodcraft Folk do. They are successful because each new group tries to create a supporters council".

"That's a point", interrupted the Teacher, "The regional Society without district committees needs Co-op supporters councils created out of the activists in each area".

"These supporters councils could develop into district committees. Take time, though", puffed the President.

"There is no other way to regenerate interest", answered the Teacher.

— And Societies to be More Open

"Will these larger concerns remain Co-operative", asked the Guildswoman darkly, "if democracy is stretched like some elastic band? They get thinner as they are stretched, you know".

"Will our democratic involvement suffer, as the Society is stretched out across a huge area?", re-phrased the Teacher.

"We ghosts cannot vote!", chuckled cloth cap, "but if they have got good local committees and interested folk, their democracy will survive".

"And we are agreed that they can arouse interest by being different from other traders", the young lady declared, "and keeping it all under lively open control".

"Open control, lass?", the President stirred. "What had you in mind?".

"Well, tell people what you are doing, even open up the Board meetings like they've done up at the Council".

"Wouldn't have that in my day", rumbled a ghostly Aldermanic type, who had not spoken before, "but I must admit it works some of the time I suppose the occasional Board could be open . . . but would anyone be interested?

"You don't know until you've tried", pointed out the young man. "All we do know, is that Co-operative democracy, except in workers Co-ops or housing Co-ops, is not a matter of much interest at present".

"Steady on lad", urged the Aldermanic form, "at least it's still in being, which is more than you can say for the Building Societies".

The Forms — and the Spirit

"But will it remain in being?", the bird wobbled again. "especially if these mergers go ahead".

The Aldermanic chest heaved, "Yes, I'm sure it will if the district committees have power and are elected in a sensible manner".

"Sensible for whom?", asked the Teacher.

"For whom?", mocked the cloth cap. "For Co-operators, that's whom. You can only make democracy grow if the message is shouted from the roof-tops and the word spreads natural like".

"Like it did in the beginning", cut in the Guildswoman. "Like ripples from a stone dropped in a pool".

"That's it", her young friend agreed. "Democracy cannot be patched up or go 'hedge-hopping' all over the place".

"Getting bigger for trading reasons", added the Teacher, "makes local democracy more important . . . not less. You need these district committees, but how do you involve them?"

"Easy", answered the young lady, who I could now see wore a 'Votes for Women' sash, "make meetings less formal, more like ideas meetings for activists".

"But how far can you extend informality? Decisions do have to be made you know", the shadowy civic chest swelled again.

"Formal decisions will remain in the hands of those elected to serve, but they must consult those they claim to serve", the President type waxed.

"Talking of formal decisions", the Guildswoman said warmly, "What about those formal events, such as Annual Meetings, Congress, Convention . . . they seem to have lost their fire".

And Less Formality?

"You are right there." the Alderman began, "Why in my day . . ."

"Yes, we can all recall your day", the Presidential form ruled out reminiscing. "The question is, do these events serve the Co-op today?"

"You must have meetings", answered the young lady, "but must they be so boring?"

A ghostly chuckle came from old cloth cap's chest. "You're right, lass. Why, if it were still possible, I could have died of boredom at the Easter . . ."

"You see, these young folk of today", the bonnet steered the debate back to the subject, "they seem to be put off, even gagged by formal arrangements".

"Why not keep formality for those moments of decision by vote, but open up these meetings to all who are interested. Just imagine a Congress of all who are keen . . . debate enjoyed by all!", laughed the Teacher.

So — the Conclusions

"I suspect", mused the President, "there would be more involvement and only about the same amount of muddle as now".

Glancing at the glimmering window, he demanded conclusions. Each shade straightened and cleared a ghostly throat.

"They've failed to make much progress towards a Co-operative Commonwealth"

". . . . and their democracy is in danger".

"They'll need to keep it local and evolve supporters groups if district committees are absent".

"They must question traditions and procedures, they will never be perfect but then perfection's boring".

"Open up their meetings, involve the new Co-ops, consult more people, and as much formality as possible".

"They must have the guts to be different in trade and shout their difference from the roof-tops".

"To sum up", said the Presidential shade, "even if Co-op Societies do get larger, they need not ape their competitors and the need for local democracy is stronger than ever. The requirement to involve more should take precedence over the formality of doing so!"

And the Co-operative Commonwealth?

Daylight slid across the wooden floor. One by one the forms began to fade away still debating.

Daring to interrupt them, I stepped forward. "Please, just one question. What structure should we adopt?"

"Structure!", laughed those pioneers past. "Structure? It's hearts full of Co-operative spirit you need. Structure, indeed. Don't worry too much about that, you'll never get it right. Nurture hearts and minds for Co-operative advance"

The bright dawn flooded the dusty Hall. The Woodcraft Folk posters, and the peace slogans, sparkled into life.

I stepped out into the cold morning.

The CO-OPERATIVE COMMONWEALTH?

It was still on!

Note of the Author

BRIAN TOWNSEND is a Designer by profession who is active over a wide range of the Labour Movement. This has included candidature in Local, County and General elections and service in the Co-operative Party and in Portsea Island Society of which he is at present a Director.