

UK Society for Co-operative Studies Annual Conference

Ian G Andrews

A report of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies Annual Conference that took place at Ruskin College, Oxford, 5-6 September 2009.

The UKSCS Conference could perhaps be described as rounding off a remarkable series of conferences over the summer. The series of three conferences started in Manchester with the Values Conference in July, then moved to Oxford, first for the ICA Research Conference and finally for our UKSCS event.

The Conference for most participants started on the Saturday with lunch which is a potential recipe for disaster for the Keynote address immediately afterwards. Having said that, Neville Richardson, the new Chief Executive of Co-operative Financial Services, had little difficulty keeping our interest alive in *Building a Unique Co-operative Alternative in Financial Services*, and setting the Conference off to a flying start.

This was followed by two panel sessions, the first entitled *Coping with the Global Financial Crisis*. This started with two speakers who told the Conference about what their organisations were doing. Jo White from the Gloucester based Co-operative Futures described how the current financial challenges had been brought about by a change of Government policy but that the advent of social enterprise voucher schemes had brought some short-term relief. In the end the message she delivered was that it was *Co-operation amongst Co-operatives* that was helping, particularly through the Co-operative Group and the sterling support of Midcounties Co-operative Ltd. She was followed by Petra Morris, the Projects and New Ventures Officer from Co-operatives^{UK}, who brought the Conference up to date with broader developments and particularly the work of the Co-operative Business Development Panel. In doing this she explored with Conference the ways the movement could set the agenda for a new economy addressing issues of finance, of the green economy and of healthcare. The third and final speaker for this session should have been Professor Rebecca Boden, from the Institute for Social Innovation at UWIC, but she was unable to attend and so Professor Mary Mellor, of Northumbria University, agreed to stand in at the last minute. The Conference was

roused by a passionate and thought provoking discourse and Mary's presentation almost alone made the weekend worthwhile.

The second panel session was entitled *Transition to a New Economy*, which should have included Dr. Rosamund Stock talking about the LSE and the Network Project but sadly she was unwell. However two other contributors were able to provide examples of projects with real potential and interest. They were John Rhodes, who told us about *The 'Stroud Pound' Co-operative Ltd*, and Jon Walker introduced us to the Transition Network and Slaithwaite Co-operative Society. Both these projects might in time provide the movement with new Pioneers.

There then followed optional workshops. These were: Third Sector Research Centre, facilitated by Dr Simon Teasdale of Birmingham University; Recent Development in Co-operative Housing, facilitated by Jon Stevens, BCHS/ Accord; and Devolution and co-operation – Learning from UK Difference, facilitated by David Smith.

The Conference also provided an opportunity for celebration, first through a short but well attended reception to mark ninetieth Anniversaries of the Co-operative College and the Plunkett Foundation, and secondly at the Conference Dinner sponsored by the Co-operative Press Ltd.

The day was rounded off by a presentation on *Empowerment through Co-operatives in Venezuela* from Alvaro Sanchez, Counsellor of the Venezuelan Embassy and Sabine Kienzl, Researcher of the Venezuelan Embassy. Whilst some in the audience seemed particularly sceptical about the enthusiastic presentation, it was clear that potentially, even in the medium to long term, much good could be achieved by the use of co-operative principles.

After breakfast on Sunday we had the UKSCS Annual General Meeting and the excitement of an election for places on the executive. Such occasions are so often avoided by those who are less committed but it is worth remembering as co-operators we do believe in active participation and it is always good to ensure

those that we elect know that there is competition.

The final session offered us a further panel debate this time on *Public Policy – Towards a Co-operative Commonwealth?* Those on the panel included: Robbie Erbmann, Policy Officer, The Co-operative Party; Dr Ian Manborde, Ruskin College; Paul Gosling, writer and journalist; and Dr Molly Scott Cato, economics spokesperson for the Green Party

Each provided the Conference with a credible perspective, and some provided memorable anecdotes, but the most interesting speaker was the last member of the panel, Dr. Molly Scott-Cato. With this speaker we had an academic

who was also working at the practical end of the theories being developed, not least in Stroud. Dr Scott Cato also brought a different political perspective, one which is increasingly being aired in the *Co-operative News*, that of the Green Party. Clearly whilst there is no chance of the Co-operative Party as currently constituted ending its traditional link with the Labour Party, the Green Party did appear to be more in tune with not only our co-operative values and principles, but with the idealism of the movement.

I left the 2010 Conference feeling that it was not just worthwhile, but an event that in time would be remembered.

Ian G Andrews is a third generation co-operator, who after a career in education administration was for a time a member-relations manager with United Co-operatives. He is now undertaking historical research into the rise and fall of the Conservative Co-operatives.