

Projecting Co-operative Principles

REPORT FROM A WORKING PARTY

(The Education Executive set up in 1971 two Working Parties—one to consider the problem of projecting Co-operative principles and the other to deal with the role of the Movement in consumer affairs. The first of these has now reported and the Education Executive will be taking the Report to its Easter Conference in 1973 and, no doubt, adding its recommendations on any action to be taken. In the meantime we are printing the Report—and a comment on it from Professor J. Banks at the University of Leicester.

The Report on consumer affairs has not yet been completed but we hope to publish it also in a later Bulletin and with it comments from Mrs. Jennifer Jenkins, Chairman of the Consumers' Association and from Dr. T. F. Carbery, author of "Consumers in Politics.")

1 Introduction

In the autumn of 1971 the Education Executive decided to take the initiative in bringing together a Working Party with the following terms of reference:

"To consider and make recommendations on the methods and techniques through which Co-operative principles may be projected most effectively among members and the public today."

The Executive noted the relationship between this Working Party and a second one reviewing the role of the Movement in consumer education and protection and acknowledged that these were interdependent.

2 Membership

The Composition of the Working Party was as follows:

Central Executive	MR. D. AINLEY and MR. K. HULSE, J.P.
Co-operative Wholesale Society	MR. W. G. GIBSON and MR. G. E. PAGE
Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society	MR. S. J. D. DAWSON and MR. S. C. GASTON
Co-operative Press	ALDERMAN A. S. SHELTON, J.P.
Co-operative Education Secretaries' Association	MR. H. FAIR and MR. K. PIKE
Co-operative Publicity Managers' Association	MR. A. DOBBIN and MR. L. J. ROBSON
Education Executive	MR. W. E. LAWN and MR. R. A. REED

Mr. Lawn was elected to the Chair.

In attendance from the College and Education Department were Mr. R. L. Marshall, O.B.E., M.A., Chief Education Officer, and Mr. J. R. Hammond, Officer for Member Education. Mr. Hammond acted as Secretary to the Working Party.

3 Documentation

In addition to taking into account publications, articles and motions adopted at recent Co-operative conferences, which were generally available, the Working Party reviewed the following documents specially prepared for them:

- “The Projection of Co-operative Principles”, a background paper submitted by the Co-operative Union Education Department.
- “Some Notes on Co-operative Membership and Dividend Stamps” by Mr. C. Cross, Manager, C.W.S. Marketing Services.
- “Co-operative Dividend Stamp Scheme” by Mr. C. Cross.
- “Communications: Some suggested Bases for Discussion” by Mr. R. A. Reed, Public Relations Officer, South Western Region C.R.S.
- “Co-operative Content in Society Publicity” by Mr. H. A. Fair, Education Secretary, London Co-operative Society.

4 The Projection of Co-operative Principles

At the outset, the Working Party wish to emphasise the following points as being of particular importance at the present time:

(a) CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPLES

The essential condition and support for the projection of Co-operative principles is convincing evidence to the consumer of the effectiveness of Co-operative practice—in range of services, quality, prices, design and standard of service. This assertion of the importance of what *the Movement does* compared with what *the Movement might say* is in our view of crucial importance. In relation to it we urge:

- (i) That the two aspects are inter-dependent.
- (ii) That if a comparative assessment of their importance has to be made then priority would go to the first.
- (iii) That while there are obviously imperfections in Co-operative practice (though possibly not as many as we sometimes confess) it is still necessary and valid to concern ourselves with the projection of Co-operative principles—and indeed that projection might well have an influence on the improvement of the practice. The necessity for the projection persists even if it has initially an impact on only the active minority of the membership.

The task, therefore, of the Working Party, while acknowledging the relationship between practice and principles, was to define these principles and essentially to suggest specific ways in which they could be effectively communicated.

(b) THE PURPOSE OF A CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY

We accepted as an adequate working definition the following statement based on the Report of the Working Party on Democracy in Regional Societies:

“That a society should exhibit certain principles of organisation, viz: *voluntary association of consumers, social ownership and democratic control* to reconcile and serve the interests of the members, and *distribution of the trading benefits of the enterprise* among the members

in accordance with their transactions; and the society should do all this so effectively that it achieves economic success and social vitality and encourages the application of the same principles to other areas of the community's activities."

Beyond that we stress:

- (i) That while in accordance with our terms of reference a distinction has to be made between the members of the Co-operative Movement and the public—a membership of eleven million in fact represented a very large market indeed for any projection that might be attempted.
- (ii) The relation to our terms of reference of the pre-occupation of the Working Party on the role of the Movement in consumer affairs is clear but while the two efforts are complementary we have felt it incumbent upon us, as argued earlier, to make certain recommendations within the terms of our remit.
- (iii) That in particular while a very important feature of the Co-operative purpose is that of protection and service for the consumer this does not represent the entire scope of Co-operative ambition which also includes aspects of social ownership and democratic control.

5 "Communications: Some Suggested Bases"

A discussion paper under this title was submitted by Mr. R. A. Reed and this was generally reviewed by the Working Party. We note the following points for further action or exploration:

(a) SCHOOLS

In connection with the engagement of the interest in the Movement from teachers and pupils in schools, attention was drawn to particular possibilities in "participatory" techniques such as those of the Jackdaw Kit, and the possibility of extending the service of wallcharts which was already carried out by various societies, and the value of a film—all of these requiring to be well done. We have asked the Education Department to seek advice from the National Union of Teachers and similar organisations on the conditions and the content that should be sought if further engagement with schools is to be achieved.

(b) UNIVERSITIES

We felt that Co-operative principles could be attractively related to the idealism and interests of many University students. In particular the question was raised of the absence from the University scene in Britain of "students' Co-ops". Again, we have asked the Department to seek the advice of the National Union of Students about the lines of approach and service from the Movement that might be most effective. Immediately, however, societies which operate in university towns could usefully take the initiative in offering material and information on the Movement to students' unions.

(c) "A NATIONAL VOICE"

We regret that there is no agency within the Movement which has the

authority to respond quickly to any need for the declaration of a Co-operative consensus—including declaration of the Movement's positions on issues of broad concern to the community. While appreciating the difficulties about the establishment and operation of such an agency, we feel that the case for it should be kept under continuing consideration.

In this connection, we again draw attention to the statement in the Report of the Working Party on Democracy in Regional Societies about the importance of relating Co-operative principles to wider national and international issues and the argument that such extension is essential but must conform to certain conditions:

- That the extension must clearly be a logical projection of Co-operative principles.
- It must seek to avoid contradiction between the profession of the Movement and its practice.
- It must not weaken attention to the necessity for trading leadership, and service to the more long-term and general projection of principles must not mean sacrifice of effort to realise them convincingly in immediate and specific trading practice.

6 Additional Lines of Action

We wish to put forward the following additional suggestions, not as an exhaustive list, but as practical lines of action which could be put into effect by the Movement at the present time:

(a) MEMBERSHIP LITERATURE

We urge the preparation by societies themselves of a simple but attractive leaflet emphasising the advantages of Co-operative membership. Such leaflets could be produced in large quantities and made available at check-outs, new members' meetings, etc. Central advice could be made available and in this connection we noted the publicity leaflet which is issued by C.R.S. nationally. In reviewing this we emphasised again:

- (i) The effectiveness of the Co-operative symbol particularly when boldly displayed.
- (ii) The necessity for achieving a statement of purpose that is both accurate and attractive.
- (iii) The case again for a slogan that will represent the Movement effectively and engage the eye or the ear of the membership and the public.

(b) SLOGANS IN DIVIDEND STAMP BOOKS

In considering the use of stamp books as a vehicle for the communication of basic Co-operative ideas, the Working Party appreciated the development on those lines already achieved and urged:

- (i) That the wording in the stamp books should be constantly reviewed with a view to securing, if possible, fewer and more emphatic slogans.
- (ii) That, since customers must fill in their name and address before redeeming the stamp books, the books represent a valuable means of contact with non-members and new members. In particular public relations or member relations departments of societies should be urged

to contact any non-members handing in completed books for redemption, inviting them to make application for membership.

(c) INFORMATION SERVICE TO SCHOOLS

A statement was submitted to the Working Party by Mr. H. A. Fair, Education Secretary of the London Society, describing the information service to schools provided by that Society's Education Department. Following consideration of this memorandum and of the supporting material provided by Mr. Fair the Working Party reaffirmed:

- (i) That, when seeking to interest children in Co-operative ideas and organisations, such practical and "participatory" ventures as painting competitions and collecting dividend stamps for specific projects are likely to be more effective than formal education.
- (ii) That engagement has to be sought with the student and 'young adult' age range. This age group is concerned about consumer topics and moreover is increasingly articulate and active. The need—and the opportunity—to engage effectively with them becomes greater as the school leaving age is raised.

(d) CO-OPERATIVE CONTENT IN SOCIETY PUBLICITY

A memorandum prepared by Mr. Fair on 'Co-operative Content in Society Publicity' was considered and arising from the discussion on this paper we recommend:

- (i) That societies should insert references to the principles in appropriate literature and local press advertising. Advice is available from C.A.P.R.A. in this regard.
- (ii) The value of a set of slides, with accompanying commentary and matter of practice as well as precept. Experience in a Co-operative shop—including the response of the staff—should encourage confidence in Co-operative principles and identification of the individual with his society.

(e) THE MEDIA

We have acknowledged from time to time in this Report the importance of the media as agencies for the communication of Co-operative principles, and specifically recommend:

- (i) The urgent need for a 16 mm colour film, of 20-30 minutes duration, depicting in an attractive way the Movement's principles and activities. The case for such a film has been urged at a number of recent Co-operative conferences.
- (ii) The value of a set of slides, with accompanying commentary and notes, describing the Movement's aims and organisation.

We stress that action under (i) and (ii) need not depend entirely on central agencies but can be achieved by collaboration between local societies and the national Co-operative organisations.

(f) ACTIVITIES WITH KINDRED ORGANISATIONS

The projection of Co-operative principles can often be effectively achieved by Co-operative participation in joint activities with kindred

organisations, e.g. the Workers' Educational Association, Consumers' Association, etc. Joint conferences and day schools, for example, can obviously assist in bringing the Society and its significance to the attention of members of other bodies.

7 Research

The basic Co-operative principles—voluntary association, democratic control, social ownership, fair distribution of the economic benefits—remain as valid in the 1970s as they were when first formulated more than a century ago. The best testimony for them is effective trading leadership. At the same time, the vigorous projection and communication of the principles to members and the wider public is constantly needed, so that the differences between Co-operative and non-Co-operative enterprise can be widely understood.

The problem is one that needs continuing attention—and continuing research into methods of projecting Co-operative principles in modern circumstances. Our final recommendation is that provision should be made centrally for the techniques employed by the Movement in communicating its principles to its members to be kept under analysis and reassessment.

8 Conclusion

We acknowledge that the problem we have faced consists largely of demonstrating the tangible as distinct from the theoretical benefits that the principles, as such, bring to the consumer. The varying practices of societies in such areas as the issue and redemption of dividend stamps, the provision of member bonuses, the availability of credit facilities, etc., etc., intensify the problem and have the effect of making it more difficult for the Movement to utilise opportunities for using national publicity to foster a greater awareness of its principles of consumer participation.

Our recommendations have to be based on the situation as it exists and on what is immediately practicable. For this reason, they are modest in scope. They cannot be exhaustive. Most societies will have other opportunities, peculiar to themselves, for projecting Co-operative principles and of identifying them with their own local activities.

This report is therefore not intended to be a final document. It is a report to the Education Executive—and it will be the responsibility of that body to identify the most urgent priorities within our recommendations and to determine the lines of action arising from them.

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Comments on the Report

by

PROFESSOR J. BANKS

Professor Banks was a member of the Education Committee of the Enfield Highway Co-operative Society towards the end of the war years and also Editor of Comrade for the B.F.Y.C.; a student, with his wife also an Ex-B.F.Y.C. member, from 1947-1952 at the London School of Economics and for part of this time Hon. Secretary of the Southern Co-operative Education Committees Association; became Assistant Lecturer in Sociology at University College, Leicester in 1952 and stayed there until 1954, working with Geoffrey Ostergaard in a study of Nottingham Society—Co-operative Democracy, Co-operative College Papers No. 2; then went to the Social Science Department of the University of Liverpool until 1970 when he returned to Leicester as Professor of Sociology; publications include most recently, The Sociology of Social Movements, 1972, which uses information from the history of the Co-operative Movement to illustrate some of the points.

Perhaps the most important single point made in the Working Party's Report is to be found in Section 4 (a), the emphasis on the interdependence of Co-operative principles and practice. In this section the comparative assessment of their relative importance gives priority to 'the projection' of Co-operative principles, but however, not solely in order that these principles may be intellectually understood but because they may 'well have an influence on the improvement of practice.' Of course, the reference here is to the range of services, quality of goods, prices, design and standard of service, that is, to Co-operative trading practices. I should like to see this notion extended to cover *all* aspects of co-operative practice, including management-union relations and board-member relations. It is also important to emphasise whenever educational activities are being organised that one of the chief aims of such activities is the improvement of practice in the light of these principles. This means, I think, that more attention must be paid than is apparent in the Report to the promotion of those forms of education which are practical rather than theoretical. Some of the imagination which has gone into employee training for the rather limited aim of improving shop service should be applied to the 'training' of members in the *art of participating* in a mass movement in place of their merely giving it their theoretical support—and it should be understood that I do not regard shopping at the Co-op as participating in this sense.

Training the Activists

Section 4 (a) (iii) touches briefly on the possibility that the projection of principles may initially have an impact 'on only the active minority of the membership.' The significance of this remark, I think, needs further exploration. From what is known of all voluntary organisations, especially once they are too big for every member to be personally acquainted with every other member,

only a minority will ever participate in the actual running of the organisation. There is always a distinction between the active minority whose efforts give that organisation its special quality and the passive majority who are the recipients of whatever the activists achieve. Education Committees have, in fact, always been aware of this within the Co-operative Movement but they have also always believed themselves somehow to be failing in their duty to the membership because their efforts have reached only a tiny section of that membership. I believe that it is now time openly to recognize and to admit that minority participation is all that they can ever hope to achieve and for them to give rather more attention to improving the quality of this minority participation, even if this is at the immediate financial expense of the majority. In the long run raising the standards of co-operative practice will benefit all.

To my mind, moreover, it is important to emphasise in this connection that this minority must always be thought of as *emerging* within the membership itself. While a case can be made for the Working Party's views about communicating with schools and universities—and I certainly would not want to see such communication cease—far more important, it seems to me, is the need for communicating with potential activists within the membership. The Youth Sections and the Guilds have always found recruits for the Movement in this way and so, incidentally, has U.S.D.A.W. through its shop-stewards. What I am now suggesting is that the Movement should intensify its attempts to encourage such recruits to improve the quality of their participation through the organisation of activities which give them direct experience in forms of such participation. This means *more* practical classes in public speaking and chairmanship, *more* mock Congresses and Easter Conventions, run locally, and *more* practical training in the art of arguing a case and negotiating with another Co-operator with a different point of view on an issue. Why not organise mock disputes, for example, where U.S.D.A.W. shop-stewards may be trained to put a case and potential management committee members may be trained to deal with it in terms of co-operative principles and their application? How such principles may be shown to apply in such cases would seem to me to be a much better form of education than formal lectures on the Rochdale Principles and what has happened to them since 1844.

Appeal to the Majority

None of this precludes the necessity for making some appeal to the passive majority. The Working Party suggests 'a simple but attractive leaflet emphasising the advantages of Co-operative membership,' slogans in the dividend stamp book, films, slides and the plethora of long used methods which have for so long been more expensive than effective. These will have no more impact on co-operative *shopping* than more conventional forms of advertising that management committees will employ in any case and there is a marked scarcity of evidence that any co-operative *participant* was ever recruited in this fashion. Indeed, the recognition that only minorities will ever participate requires a radical re-orientation to the general membership. How have the participants been recruited in the past? Surely the best people ever to bring in active participants were the active participants themselves, Women's Guild

members who brought their children, U.S.D.A.W. shop-stewards who persuaded a fellow worker to stand for office in the union, activists of one kind and another who brought in their friends and neighbours. Personal, informal efforts at recruitment of this kind are more likely to be effective than the impersonal impact of a leaflet—if it gets read at all—or the curious experience of sitting in the dark, cut off from other people, watching a film show. If I am right in this assumption, what the Movement needs to concentrate on is ways and means for helping its activists to bring in recruits. This is why the summer schools and the week-end schools have been so important in the past—not, that is to say, for the lectures as for the social and informal activities in which members met members as participating *people*. Of course, I am not suggesting that such a minority should be treated as an élite. Everything organised for activists should be open to *any* member to attend, but the assumption that only activists and potential activists will attend might relieve some Education Committee members of their guilt that they are not doing enough for the rank-and-file. What active Co-operators should be much more conscious of is the possibility that they may sometimes stifle incipient activism in others by putting difficulties in their way and not encouraging them enough.

These remarks are written, of course, in the attempt to strengthen rather than to denigrate the work of the Working Party. Their report, they say, is 'not intended to be a final document.' This means, I presume, that it is open to revision. In the process of revision perhaps the Working Party may be induced to consider some of my ideas.