

# Developing the Society A Personal View

by

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For some time now there have been views expressed on the role of the Society in relation to the contribution made by other agencies within the Co-operative Movement. The usefulness of the Society in providing a medium for the interchange of ideas between academics, lay members and Co-operative professionals has not been in any doubt at the national level, although the question has been asked 'Are we getting returns in proportion to the administrative effort?' Further, with an almost static membership, all the opportunities that do exist for extending the influence of the Society—and thereby increasing its value to the Movement as a whole—have not been realised. At the lower level, with a few notable exceptions, the role of Regional Groups cannot be regarded as entirely successful.

Little purpose is served, however, by an introverted reflection on the past performance of the Society alone. It is much more important to consider the wider environment in which the Society operates, and to assess the needs of the future. Only then will a determinate future role, if any, be identified.

In essence, *what is the real problem, and how best should it be solved?*

## **The Problem**

Without labouring the debate on the many elements that have contributed to the declining Co-operative influence on the British social scene—these have been discussed at length both within and outside the Society—it is useful to reflect on just a few.

Although the galloping decline in Co-operative trading performance of the 1960s has been arrested, it would be foolish to ignore the continuing current trends that still show a decline in our trading fortunes. Added to the mix is a declining and aging membership and a reduced level of interest and participation by those members that remain. In this respect the recent analysis by John Hughes stimulated some very useful avenues of thought.

As Socialists\* we have three mutually compatible—indeed integrated—choices to bring about change in our society. Politically we can achieve some progress through the Labour Party in both local and national government. Similarly

through industrial efforts we can, as trade unionists, help promote our aim to create a better and more equitable way of life. The third choice is to initiate change through consumer action—namely that of trade by Co-operative Societies. We can be justly proud of our record in earlier years, but in the contemporary period this has not been sustained in contrast to performance in the Political and Industrial fronts. The Co-operative contribution is more appropriately measured in terms of its potential rather than by its current performance. In these days of apparent ideological vacuum most people are not necessarily attracted to action in the manner which prompted our forefathers to create and develop the Co-operative Movement. Rather, they are more likely to associate with organisations that practice a philosophy which is seen to operate in a discrete and commercially successful manner.

Thus, to make the progress that we all desire, the paramount need is to improve our trading performance, thereby earning the commitment of the consumer through demonstrating that Co-operation is not a spent force but a truly viable alternative to the grasping and self-centred example of private enterprise. Extending the theme of Alfred Wilson's address to this year's Congress at Scarborough, "Once we have demonstrated that we are the best retailers in the country, no Government can afford to ignore our views." *When we are the best retailers in the country, this is when people will want to associate with us and the way of life that we hold so dear!*

### **The Society's Role**

If achievement of commercial success is the prime need, how can this be best brought about?

To supplement the talent that already exists within the Co-operative Movement, we need to involve a lot more of our traditional friends from the Labour Party and the trade unions. Here the Society has an important role to play by providing a forum through which friends of the Co-op, both within and outside the Movement, can examine the problems and opportunities that face it. The most significant contribution will come from our ability to harness the interest and expertise of not only academics, but the many Socialists who are accomplished in the diverse specialist areas of business and management. Latent potential is in our midst as exemplified by the setting up of the *Labour Economic Finance and Taxation Association*, and the likely formation of Lord Brown's *Labour Managers' Group* and a *Society for Labour Accountants*. Socialists such as these, if attracted to our SOCIETY could provide an outward-looking and innovative stimulus to the Co-operative Movement.

This is all very well, but what practical steps should we take to increase both the membership and influence of our Society?

Just as the Movement itself has problems in communicating effectively with its actual and potential membership, so too does the Society. Many people who could make a valuable contribution are unaware of the Society or its aims. Prospects (potential members) may fall into one or more of the following five categories:

- (1) Lecturers and Students at Colleges and Universities,
- (2) Officials and Directors of Societies,

- (3) Co-operative Membership,
- (4) Labour Party Members, and
- (5) Trade Unionists—including Full-time Officials and Research Staff.

### Support from All Categories:

Of these, only the first and second categories seem to be involved in Society activities—then on a rather limited scale. There is scope through existing contacts to develop this much further.

The third category could be cultivated by officials and directors of Societies, with backup support from the Co-operative Union educational organisers, and perhaps by more references in Co-operative News and in perhaps Co-operative consumer publicity.

For the last two categories, in which exists our greatest void, there is scope for the use of advertisements—nothing too elaborate—and feature articles in *Labour Weekly*, *Tribune*, *the New Statesman*, *Socialist Commentary* and selected trade union journals, particularly those whose members have a stake in the Movement. Prospects in the earlier categories too would be reached by this means.

Another potentially rewarding activity would be for existing members through their knowledge and experience to prepare 'Prospect Lists' and to adopt inertia selling techniques by arranging for Prospects to receive invitations to attend regional group meetings. Similarly, prospects could be sent copies of Committee Papers with the appropriate interest appeal (i.e. finance to accountants, and personnel to trade unionists and personnel managers).

As for regional groups, the problems of travel rule out for most the holding of frequent meetings. However life need not stop because of this. Reproduction facilities could be utilised in the preparation of Committee Papers for discussion by post. Indeed postal consideration of issues could well lead to more action centred discussion at group meetings. In themselves the Committee Papers need not be too detailed or lengthy; their main purpose would be to identify new areas of risk and opportunity.

Summing up, the Society does have an important part to play in cultivating the interest of Socialists who are at present for one reason or another not involved in Co-operative affairs. The Co-op to regain the growth initiative, needs these people. We are unique in that expertise and knowledge are free for the asking. No other commercial undertaking has such latent strengths nor our ambitious aims to effect social change through trade. Our role in the Society is complementary to that of other Agencies. Our own market segment is potentially very fertile, let's sharpen the teeth of our appeal.

\* *Without distracting attention from Mr. Mitchell's argument—a small editorial caution: there is no obligation, of course, for members of the Society to be Socialists and, no doubt, there are differing views on where the line of duty or logic lies.*

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DAVID MORDAUNT

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## 1 Regional Organisation

To an interested newcomer like myself the Society for Co-operative Studies appears to be an organisation capable of offering immense benefits to the Co-operative Movement firstly by conducting towards it an invigorating breeze from the direction of academic ivory towers and secondly by inspiring within it informed, lively and intelligent debate amongst managerial and lay leaders of the Movement. Its present situation, however, seems unsatisfactory and discouraging; the enthusiastic period after its launching appears to have given way to a period of static or falling membership and uncertainty about how to consolidate its success at national level and make its patchy regional network into a stronger and more systematic network.

The organisation at the level of Co-operative Union Sections seems too remote. The basis for organisation for the next stage of the Society's development (not, I trust, its ultimate organisation which would be even more local) should be a centre, or group of centres, within an area of thirty miles radius. In the Midlands, for example, Leicester, Nottingham and Loughborough would form one such area and Wolverhampton, Coventry and Birmingham another such area. The organisation should have not simply joint convenors, as at present at sectional level, but representatives of each interested educational institution and each interested co-operative society forming an executive committee which would meet perhaps six times a year. Without such a "dense" organisation as opposed to the present thinly-spread regional system, the society will be unable to develop from its present vulnerable position.

## 2 Character and Role of the Society

The Society has not coherently developed a view of itself which will give it the necessary confidence and flexibility to act as an effective catalyst as possible in the bringing together of academics and co-operators. It struck me as being a diffident hybrid, straining on the one hand to imitate a learned society and on the other to serve as intellectual handmaiden to the Co-operative Movement. It may well be that these roles are compatible but each needs to be developed independently so that interchange of personnel and ideas from a position of strength can be achieved.

Within the regional branches I envisage above, there could be three types of activity:

- (a) groups and courses within an academic discipline open to both educational and co-operative people, e.g. managers, versed in that discipline,

- (b) groups and courses centred on co-operative societies for the intelligent layman (and even academics are only intelligent laymen outside their own field) interested in the systematic but non-technical study of co-operative matters. Such activities should involve advanced study rather than introductory level study,
- (c) joint activities of (a) and (b).

At national level the annual conference should reflect a similar three-pronged approach. Obviously there is a danger that the discipline-based groups and the lay groups would not interact enough; but setting up such a functional division is a necessary prerequisite for growth. Really effective interaction will come only when some independent growth within a joint framework has been achieved.

### **3 The "Bulletin"**

With a more vigorous approach the "Bulletin" could be a major influence for establishing a prominent place for the Society within the Movement. It needs to be greatly expanded and developed and should become a major platform for the best thinking in the Movement. The primary editorial aim should be to set in motion a continuing dialogue in its pages for the benefits of all intelligent Co-operators and on a more sustained and strenuous level than is possible with "The Co-operative News". The articles published would also provide material for the regional groups.

Secondly, it needs to give information about current academic work relevant to the Movement—perhaps offering abstracts and reviews.

Thirdly, it needs to give information about current activity in the Society.

The second task calls for more than the lists as at present given under the heading of "Current Co-operative Studies and Research". The third task calls for more than the present bare and dull reports given under "Reports from the Regions." "The Bulletin" should become a quarterly publication, twice as long and four times as expensive and be advertised widely in Co-operative circles for sale to non-members.

### **4 On Fostering Academic Study of Co-operative Matters**

In the academic field the Society should act as sponsor of articles in learned journals (which its own "Bulletin" should not seek to emulate or include but rather to complement) and perhaps in conjunction with University authorities as sponsor of a series of books offering academic studies of the Co-operative Movement. Some of the books might be collections of articles sponsored by the Society itself; others might make available research by academics sponsored by the Society and given facilities by Co-operative Societies; others would be suitable for a more general readership like the excellent "Power in Co-operatives" by Ostergaard and Halsey and "Consumers in Politics" by Carbery. With an able and vigorous general editor and willing support from the Movement such a series could do much to promote academic and intellectual interest in and understanding of the Co-operative Movement.

## **5 Follow-up**

A welcome response to these thoughts would be a critical rejoinder from someone more or less in disagreement with me,—it would be a sad reflection on the health of the Society if there were no such response.

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