

Consumer Education and Protection

REPORT FROM A WORKING PARTY

Bulletin No. 17 published a report to the Education Executive on the problem of projecting Co-operative principles and with it a comment from Professor J. Banks. The Executive has now received a Report from a Working Party in Consumer Education and Protection and will be taking this to its Conference at Easter 1973, and discussing further action. In the meantime we are printing this Report 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, with the agreement of the Central Executive, took the initiative in bringing together a Working Party to examine the present role of the Co-operative Movement in the fields of consumer education and protection. The aim of the Working Party was "to identify objectives for the Movement in these areas and the further lines of action which are needed".

2 Membership

The composition of the Working Party was as follows:

Co-operative Wholesale Society	MR. C. CROSS
Chief Executive Officer, Ipswich Co-operative Society	MR. T. R. EDMONDSON
Vice-Chairman, Education Executive	MR. W. FROST, J.P.
Secretary, Co-operative Party	MR. T. E. GRAHAM
Chief Executive Officer, Greater Nottingham Co-operative Society	MR. L. A. HARRISON
General Secretary, Co-operative Women's Guild	MRS. K. KEMPTON
Chairman, Education Executive	MR. W. E. LAWN
Member Relations Officer, South Suburban Co-operative Society	MR. H. T. J. PICHOWSKI
Parliamentary Secretary, Co-operative Union	MR. J. M. WOOD

In attendance from the College and Education Department were Mr. R. L. Marshall, O.B.E., M.A., Chief Education Officer, Mr. J. R. Hammond, Officer for Member Education, Mr. B. J. Rose, Tutor in Social Studies, and Mr. W. F. Pickard, Member Education Development Officer. Mr. Hammond acted as Secretary to the Working Party.

3 Documentation

We considered the following documents in the course of our discussions:

- "The Role of the Movement in Consumer Protection and Education" and "Consumer Education Work of the Consumer Council": submitted by the Education Department.

- “A Co-operative Journal”: two papers submitted by Mr. C. Cross and Mr. T. Edmondson.
- “A Consumer’s Charter?”: submitted by Mr. J. M. Wood.
- “Consumer Affairs — A Co-operative Approach”: submitted by the Co-operative Party.
- “Consumer Protection and the Co-operative Movement”: the address by Mrs. J. Jenkins to Easter Convention 1972.

We also took account of various motions submitted to recent Co-operative Conferences.

4 The Consumer Role of the Movement as Trader

In the Independent Commission Report of 1958, consumer protection is discussed as one of the four main economic principles of co-operation. The discussion in the Report did not in fact give rise to any specific recommendations, but the Commission proposed three aims for each Retail Society as follows:

“First, to sell at prices which are never consistently under-cut by any major competitor: secondly, never to sell shoddy or untested merchandise, but only goods for which it is willing to accept complete responsibility: thirdly, to maintain the highest standard of shop location, layout, appearance and service”.

(Page 24).

At a later point, the Commission remarked on the Movement’s having no internal conflict between shareholder and consumer, and observed that for this reason

“It is especially well placed to represent the consumer in all matters of public policy. In its evidence to Government bodies . . . it does and should take account solely of the interests of the consumer; and it should be known in the public eye as the one trading organisation which can be relied upon to do so”.

That these aims have not been fully realised was common ground. None the less, Co-operative thinking generally has remained reasonably consistent since the Commission reported.

There has been in the past two decades a continuing and possibly an accelerating growth in what we may dignify with the term “consumerism”. By this we mean a public initiative in the form of voluntary organisation at both local and national level (an initiative which no doubt reflects the increasing levels both of education and expectation within our society), consequent pressure for statutory attention to the consumer ‘safety-net’, and a response by government in the form of continuing concern and legislation for the interests of the consumer. When we acknowledge this process, we must acknowledge also that the Movement has been only marginally concerned with it: hence, although to some extent we may have progressed in the direction of the Commission’s aims, we may appear to have slipped back in the public eye as representing a significant agency for protecting the consumer’s interests.

We regard it as most important that the Movement associates itself at all levels more closely with this new consumer consciousness; but at the same time, we urge that initiatives of this kind must be backed by practical trading developments which more clearly show the commitment of the Board and the management of individual retail societies, and also the wholesale societies.

5 The Consumer Role of the Movement as educator

We acknowledge the various attempts that are being made, notably by regional societies, to develop consumer education activities. So far, we see no evidence of a clear national pattern, and it may be that we have not yet reached the stage at which many of these initiatives can be properly evaluated.

It would be foolish to deny the apprehension of some Boards and managers about practical consumer activities mounted by Societies Education Departments which might impinge on the societies trading policy or prospects. *At the same time, we feel that whatever an Education Department may seek to do in consumer education will, because of the trading role of a society, be of very limited value unless it does impinge on trade.* For example, educationists may be concerned with the question of unit pricing and products, but any meetings they may organise, or any resolution they may pass, will be of little consequence unless a practical initiative is taken (or at least an experiment mounted) within stores.

It must therefore be a first priority for every society to maintain a realistic and practical dialogue between the Board and the Education Department. So far as this is achieved (and there are societies in which the relationship is very close, as there are societies in which it is almost non-existent) it will be possible for consumer education to be both taught and evidenced.

6 The Consumer Role of the Movement in relation to other organisations

As we have already mentioned, the Independent Commission discussed the Movement's "evidence to government bodies" and this function continues to be discharged. Both through the Parliamentary Committee of the Co-operative Union and through the Co-operative Party, both formal and informal representations are continually being made at Government level.

There are many ways in which the Movement can make progress in association with the non-co-operative consumer movement in general. We note particularly the work of Consumers Association with local authorities in setting-up consumer advice centres in shopping areas, and are pleased that two recent ventures at Harlow and Greenwich owe much to local co-operative endeavour. We urge that societies should use their influence with local authorities to further such developments in other areas, and that they should be seen to be advocating this publicly.

In the nationalised industries generally—and specifically in the gas, electricity, transport, post office and health sectors—the consumer voice is ostensibly heard through a consumer consultative body. We noted with interest the evidence submitted by the Co-operative Party to the House of Commons Select Committee on relations with the public and nationalised industries, in which the Party advocated that a Consumer Panel, drawn from interested consumer-oriented bodies, should be established in every locality. We recognise a public need to increase consumers' opportunities to influence the policies of nationalised

industries as they affect the consumer, and the hope that co-operators both individually and collectively will give attention to this need.

7 A Code of Practice?

In the light of all these considerations, we recommend as our first priority that all retail societies consider subscribing to, and making public their commitment to, a "code of practice" which gives clear expression to the co-operative ideal of consumer protection.

We considered a code of practice adopted by various Canadian co-operatives, but although we agreed with its intentions we did not feel that it could be "transplanted" into a different organisational and cultural setting. Any code of practice to be used by British Co-operatives should, we feel, have two purposes: it should set appropriate guide-lines for the managers and employees in their trading practices, and it should make the public aware of the society's own commitment.

We feel firstly that it is important that every employee of the society, from the Chief Executive Officer to the most junior assistant, should be aware that the society is committed to an ethical behaviour *vis-a-vis* the consumer. In the light of fierce competition in all fields of trade today, there is undoubtedly a temptation for societies' employees to regard increasing turnover as the first priority. There is surely nothing unethical in this, but as can clearly be seen from the public trading commitments of other national trading chains, a declared commitment to a line of action that protects the individual consumer has its place in successful enterprise.

It is the public awareness of this voluntary undertaking that gives it practical effect. It would be futile for any society to enter into such an undertaking unless it made all its customers aware of its commitment, and aware too of the advantages which are thereby offered to the customer. Hence, secondly, we urge that whatever code of practice may be entered into, it must be of such a kind that it can be communicated to, and understood by, the ordinary consumer.

We therefore submit in the Appendix to this Report our recommendations on a Code, on which we have agreed. There are naturally differences amongst us about extensions of the Code beyond this consensus—and there will be similar differences amongst societies. The Code, however, could, we believe, be adopted as a basis by all British consumer co-operatives and we urge the Education Executive to initiate suitable consultations with a view to its effective promulgation.

As a not unimportant footnote to the above, we feel that the existence of a publicly-accepted Code might have direct consequences to societies in producing new trading initiatives. We were very conscious that there is no general "complaint procedure" within the British Movement; several, if not most, other national trading chains have by now followed, largely if not entirely, what we may call the 'Marks and Spencer' policy of exchange-or-money-refunded-without-question. In the grocery field, Fine Fare (for example) print a "consumer guarantee" with a similar promise on many of their own-label brands, while Co-operative products have nothing comparable except in one or two cases such as sliced bread.

Differential pricing between societies would of course complicate the issue, particularly over cash refunds: but while we acknowledge the problems we feel

that the Movement can no longer ignore the trading advantages which are being pre-empted by its competitors.

8 Further recommendations affecting trading ventures

We agreed that our recommendations could not be expected to cover the whole field of consumer education and protection, but would concentrate on particular developments which seemed to us to be worthy of pursuance at present.

- (a) The 'home economist' project. The Education Department has prepared a pilot scheme, along lines similar to those already undertaken by a number of co-operatives in Scandinavia and the United States (and discussed in the recently-issued Co-operative College Paper 'Consumer Co-operatives in America', which we hope will be widely read), for a short-period experimental appointment. We feel that an experiment of this kind, including full evaluation of the results, is worthy of consideration by regional societies in particular.
- (b) The "point of sale" store project. The Education Department has recently been exploring the possibility of mounting an experimental short period project in a food supermarket, which would combine the provision of point of sale advice and information, a consumer advice stall, and a membership hand-out for shoppers. Again this would need to be not only mounted but also properly evaluated, and we feel that such a venture would be most valuable in terms of the information it could yield. Assuming that the results are favourable, further explorations could be made to extend the project to the non-food area.
- (c) Consumer goods labelling. The demise of the Consumer Council, and the consequent withdrawal of the Teltag scheme, has stifled a valuable national initiative. We hope that the Movement at national level will use every opportunity to press for some similar development, but in the immediate future we recommend two specifically Co-operative possibilities:
 - (i) either as a part of the Code of Practice outlined above, or separately, all British societies could support specific labelling schemes such as the British Standards Institute's kitemark, and the British Electrical Approval Board's label. There are other examples, such as the Design Council label, but these two are the most important in our view. "Support" must be seen as a deliberate trading act, rather than just as an expression of approval in principle, and we hope that societies' Boards will give this practical attention:
 - (ii) the Movement as a whole could develop an informative reliable labelling scheme for its own-brand products, along similar lines to Teltag. We would like to see discussions on this initiated by the Co-operative Union with the wholesale societies in particular.

9 Member/Consumer Contact Journals

We have been greatly impressed by the potential of "member contact" newspapers and periodicals, if they are seen as consumer-oriented rather than as public relations. We considered in particular the example of the *Co-op News* produced (at a net annual cost, sterling equivalent, of £32,500) by the Berkeley (California) Co-operative: this was an 8-12 page tabloid printed weekly, and posted individually to 52,000 of the society's 56,000 members, free of charge.

This is of course on a scale that is far beyond the range of even the most ambitious education budget of any British society—equally, it is on a scale familiar to managers who think in terms of trade promotion. A sustained exercise of this kind is therefore only practicable if it is seen by the Society as a trading venture, and this demands again the close liaison between the Board and the Education Committee which we have already identified as a first priority. Of course the problems are not exclusively financial, though the maxim “Who wills the end must will the means” seems to be applicable here.

We would not like to suggest that British societies have made no efforts in this field. We are aware of the excellent periodicals produced, among others, by Norwest, Greater Nottingham and Leicestershire societies—and for many years London and Royal Arsenal Societies have expended considerable thought and money on attractive popularisations of their trading results. The trend is, and we welcome this development, extending itself to relatively smaller societies: the examples of Chelmsford and Hull societies are known to us.

But none of these endeavours are in any way comparable with the *Co-op News* of Berkeley. They tend to have (either deliberately or because of distribution problems) a high proportion of employee readers, they are in general produced at intervals of months rather than weekly, and (perhaps most important) the *consumer* element, as opposed to the trade-promotion element is generally slight.

Nor would we belittle national Co-operative endeavours. The British *Co-operative News*, and its sister Scottish weekly, are both increasingly concerned with consumer issues; and we welcome this trend, which we hope to see continue. The Education Department, as a part of its Member Education Publications Service, produces a quarterly magazine CHECK with a circulation of just over 1,000. Nevertheless, in our view *national* publications must inevitably concentrate on *national* issues, even though these may be raised by local initiatives: what we would like to urge is the value of local, society, member contact journals which are mainly consumer-oriented.

Neither we, nor indeed the Movement, are unanimous on this. We have studied carefully the papers on “A Co-operative Journal” from two of our members, Mr. Cross and Mr. Edmondson, which have greatly helped us: and we have considered particularly the notion of local insertions into a national format. The problems of cost, and of finding the necessary national finance at a time when the wholesale societies and the Co-operative Union are hard-pressed, seem to us on balance to make the idea of a national journal impracticable at present. The Chief Education Officer has, however, assured us that the Education Department is anxious, given a real expression of interest from one or more societies, to explore the whole question of a large scale Society publication more fully: and we recommend the Education Executive to agree to finance a feasibility study of such a project using all necessary professional assistance, if and when the possibility presents itself.

Without detracting from the importance of the above, we urge all societies now to reconsider the degree of consumer contact they have with their shareholder-members. There are few useful opportunities, and these should surely be used to full advantage.

In particular, we recommend societies:

- (a) to introduce a consumer flavour into their quarterly, half-yearly or annual

meeting: this could have the additional advantage of enlivening such a meeting and making it more entertaining to the members, provided that whatever is done is designed to inform and help consumers and not as a straightforward act of trade promotion. We are pleased to note that the Education Department intend to develop this idea in a future issue of its bi-monthly leaflet 'Ways and Means', and trust that it will be widely circulated.

- (b) to seek to give in their Reports due attention to the phenomenon of "consumerism". The average member who is not an activist is likely to be far more receptive to material which suggests that his or her society is consumer-conscious, than to material which emphasises its trading successes and shop development. Again we hope that the Education Department will develop this matter through their Publications Service.

10 We have been appraised of the National Consumer Conference project which is now in train, and which it is hoped will reach national fruition in the summer of 1973. We look to this project to have three desirable consequences:

- (a) it will encourage participating societies to recognise themselves, and to act, as a community focus of consumer initiatives and resources;
- (b) it will, when the Conference is concluded, enable the Education Department to identify the more fruitful lines of initiative, either actual or prospective, for consumer education ventures, and in its co-ordination will strengthen the flow of ideas and information between the Education Department and local societies.
- (c) it will help locally towards the development of a continuing dialogue involving many different aspects of the consumer interest, in which the society will we hope continue to play a real part.

We are glad to note that the project is being planned in full collaboration with Consumers' Association, the National Federation of Consumer Groups, and other bodies both Co-operative and otherwise. We recognise the valued initiative of South Suburban Society in sponsoring the motion at Education Convention 1971, and we commend the project to all societies.

11 Conclusion

Finally, we wish to record that in our review we have been made once more aware of both problems and prospects. "Consumerism" is a fact of our time, and one which we expect the forthcoming years to make more, not less, vital to the future of British co-operation. We have failed as a Movement, despite many small-scale successes, to respond to non-Co-operative initiatives: we have perhaps tended to think of the overtly democratic business of resolutions and meetings as a solution to this failure, though in our view this can only be a superficial palliative if it is not backed—as in historic perspective it can be seen not to have been backed—by trading enterprise: we may have relied on the notions of "consumer-controlled" and "consumer-oriented" more than our members would have recognised.

But the time is opportune for advance. We are all certain that practical consumer activities will strengthen Co-operation in both trade and education; what this report urges is that the activities must be fully co-ordinated, and that developments in one area are not matched by indifference in the other.

APPENDIX

A CODE OF PRACTICE FOR BRITISH CONSUMER CO-OPERATIVES

1. Our society is in business to give its members and indeed all consumers a fair deal and value for money, including goods of reliable standards, at competitive prices and supported by effective customer and after-sales service. Our members own their society and exercise control through a democratically elected Board of Directors, and membership is open to all persons over the age of 16 years without regard to their race, beliefs or creed.
2. We acknowledge and practice our obligations to consumers, whether they are members or not. Among the most important of these obligations are the following:
 - (a) We will observe the highest standards of truth and accuracy in all our advertising, claims, advice and pricing.
 - (b) We will always seek to give full satisfaction to any consumer who has a genuine problem or complaint about our goods or services.
 - (c) We will observe all appropriate British codes of practice, such as that of the Retail Trading-Standards Association, and we will seek to adopt objective standards of quality where these exist in all our stores and shops.
 - (d) We will provide consumers wherever possible with adequate information about our merchandise so that they are enabled to make a rational choice.

We hope that all consumers will help us in bringing any failure in observing these principles to our notice: and we will provide information on the ways in which they can do this.

Consumer Education and Protection

COMMENTS ON THE REPORT

by

JENNIFER JENKINS*

“Educationists may be concerned with the question of unit pricing and products, but any meeting they may organise, or any resolution they may pass, will be of little consequence unless a political initiative is taken (or at least an experiment mounted) within stores”.

Crystallised in this single sentence is a sentiment which comes close to defining the consumers' attitude to the Co-operative Movement. Consumers look to the Co-operative Movement to put into effect those trading practices which will help to achieve the just treatment of consumers in the economy — a principle which both have long fought for. It is heartening therefore that the Working Party on Consumer Education and Protection should have so clearly recognised that a policy of principle must be allied to a programme of action. Equally important is the Working Party's stress on the need for the Movement to associate with the new consumer consciousness *at all levels*.

Perhaps the most interesting proposal is that for a Code of Practice which would give clear expression to the co-operative ideal of consumer protection. Unquestionably, the evolution and publication of a Code of Practice governing the conduct of trade which was recognisably fair and just to consumers would be a major step forward. Two questions, however, arise. To what extent are consumers themselves to be consulted in drawing up the Code and what action is to be taken to ensure that stores conform to it? As the report states, it would be futile for any society to enter into such an undertaking unless it made all its customers aware of its commitment, and aware too of the advantages. Very true, but consumers are likely to be sceptical of a document concerning their protection in whose derivation they have played no part, and cynical should it turn out to be paper not practice. This is not carping but simply concern that a promising idea should be developed effectively.

Initiatives in Trade

Another recommendation from the Working Party which, for the consumer, has interesting and important implications is that concerning the provision of information points in stores. CA's experience has shown how helpful these would be. It is quite apparent that at the critical point of contact between the consumer and the trader—the discussion at the time of an impending purchase between the shopper and the retail assistant—communication is often incomplete. Many shoppers would certainly benefit from having access to consumer information, particularly in respect of those products which are technically complex (like a sewing machine) and which represent a substantial outlay from the family budget. Information which would help the shopper to determine the best appliance, carpet, piece of furniture or item of kitchen equipment for her

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particular needs, circumstances and resources, would be worthwhile. And, from the traders standpoint an informed consumer is much more likely to be a satisfied customer than one who is not. Moreover, the concept could be extended to include the provision in food departments of information about labelling, date marking, metric quantities, etc.

Labelling indeed is one of the areas in which the Working Party recommends action. Much of what is proposed is welcome, though consumers might like to see a greater willingness to experiment with unit pricing, perhaps in relation to a limited range of packaged goods like biscuits and detergents. The most ambitious proposal is that the Movement should develop its own informative labelling scheme along the lines of Teltag. An informative labelling scheme is certainly necessary, particularly in respect of furniture where the paucity of meaningful brand names and the widespread absence of consumer information of any sort makes the exercise of sensible choice virtually impossible. The question is whether the Movement should go it alone. From the consumers point of view it would clearly be more helpful to have a national scheme, not one which applied only in a particular range of stores. However, the prospects of achieving this are bleak and perhaps the Movement could take a lead. At worst it would earn an increase in consumer gratitude, at best it might prompt others to follow the same line.

Role of Journals?

The ideas considered so far are stimulating and could potentially lead to substantial improvements in protecting and informing consumers. It is less easy to be enthusiastic about member/consumer contact journals. Admittedly the Berkeley example is impressive but it seems both in cost and scope far beyond anything which a regional society in Britain could tackle. Even more doubtful is how helpful they could be as a means of communicating consumer information. Far more effective might be greater concentration on organising meetings of the kind run very successfully by the Nottingham Society where the communication process can be made both painless and entertaining. Additionally, the Education Department might produce for distribution through its Publication Service informative leaflets for widespread distribution—a shopper's guide to V.A.T. for example.

The concluding note must, however, be a welcoming one. The Working Party has made proposals—one or two of them very far-reaching indeed—which could be of great benefit to consumers. I would now like to see the development of these ideas proceed with as much ambition as the thinking which lead to them.

Consumer Education and Protection

COMMENTS ON THE REPORT

by

DR. T. F. CARBERRY*

THE RESOLUTION OF A DILEMMA?

For years the Co-operative championship of the consumer has suffered from the Movement's apparent inability to break out of the confines of a particularly distasteful dilemma. It wanted to champion the consumer with even greater enthusiasm and zest than before and indeed spent a great deal of time and effort and money on campaigning and lobbying on behalf of the consumer. To that extent it did the consumer a great service—an activity which barely earned acknowledgment, far less gratitude. But it was not the lack of kudos which distressed the Co-operative champions of the consumers: it was the realisation that all too many Co-operative Stores, by failing to achieve acceptable standards, seemed to give the lie to this crusade. Logically therefore the Co-operative champions of consumer interest would have rounded on, and exposed their deficient colleagues. Yet to do so could well have resulted in the downfall of some Co-op trading organisations which, for reasons which became all too evident on the occasion of the Millom incident, would in falling have brought down yet more, so giving way to a rapid and intensifying collapse which could have brought down the entire, or almost the entire, Co-operative structure. That would have terminated in no uncertain manner the proselytising by Co-operatives on behalf of the consumer. The lobbying and politic-ing would have ended.

In other words unrestricted, unfettered Co-operative sponsorship of the consumer could have resulted in the termination of that very activity on any scale whatsoever. Yet without frank and public exposure of Co-operative trading deficiencies few were prepared to take seriously the Co-operatives claim to be the consumers' champion.

The Independent Commission's View

There now appears a report which may resolve this impasse.

In 1971 the Educational Executive of the Union brought into being a Working Party to examine the present role of the Co-operative Movement vis-a-vis the entire field of consumer education and protection.

The report reminds the reader of the very sensible observations on these topics which were made by the Independent Commission Report of 1958 when the Commission members proposed three aims for each Co-operative Retail Society. These proposals were:

“First to sell at prices which are never consistently under-cut by any major competitor:

secondly, never to sell shoddy or untested merchandise, but only goods for which it is willing to accept complete responsibility;

* Dr. Carbery is the author of “Consumers in Politics” – an account of the history and activities of the Co-operative Party.

thirdly to maintain the highest standard of shop layout appearance and service.”

Furthermore the Report of the Working Party went on to quote the Gaitskell/Crosland et al document in its observations on the Movement’s role of representative of the consumer.

But what is much more important here is that having done these things the Working Party observes succinctly that “. . . these aims have not been fully realised . . .”

The Working Party observe that they regard it as important that the Movement associates itself much more than hitherto with the expanding consumer consciousness. But what is more regrettable is that it does not probe more than it does on why there is a shortcoming here; why there is ground to be made up; or to put it at its simplest why the aspirations of the Gaitskell Commission have not thus far been achieved. Yet the Working Party does touch on what is perhaps getting close to the heart of the matter. Says the Report

“It would be foolish to deny the apprehension of some Boards and Managers about practical consumer activities mounted by Societies Education Departments which might impinge on the Societies trading policy or prospects.”
Back to the dilemma!

The disconcerting aspect here however is not what is said but what is not said. Thus the Report does not go on to say whether that apprehension is justified or mistaken. Is it, one asks, that the Managers and Boards believe themselves to be vulnerable and, if it is so, why do they regard themselves as vulnerable? One suspects it is because they suspect, or indeed know, that their trading performance is not equal to the demands of consumer interest, and, if this is the case yet again the question is “why”? Why do they regard themselves as not equal to the task—is it due to a lack of financial resources or is it due to their lack of ability? Moreover quite apart from why the Managers and Boards do not feel equal to the task, the Working Party does not reveal to us to what they would attribute the misgivings.

Such observations would have involved the Working Party in candour, but then candour is one of the obligations as well as one of the privileges of friendship!

With a view to remedying the situation the Working Party makes what are in effect two recommendations.

The Role of the Employee

The first of these is that they reckon it is important that every employee of a Co-operative Society from the Chief Executive Officer to the most junior assistant should be aware the Society is committed to ethical behaviour towards the consumer. The inference is that the employees will not only be aware but will take cognizance to the point of so conducting themselves that their own behaviour is not inconsistent with that commitment.

It would be myopic not to realise that this will call for a great effort on the part of Personnel Officers and U.S.D.A.W. and other trade union officials. Heaven knows that Co-operative Societies have not been as generous towards their employees as they would have wished to be, but many have been immeasurably more considerate on salaries, wages, conditions of service, termination of

employment, pension provision, holidays and the like than the vast majority of their competitors, many of whom subscribe to all the delicacy of touch of the Hire and Fire approach. There may be organisational gratitude and acknowledgment expressed by U.S.D.A.W. but its members at shop floor level seem to be little aware that it is so. All too often too many of them seem addicted to truculence and in the same way as too many academics behave as though Universities would be great places were it not for the students, they give the impression that they regard Co-operative Stores as pleasant places if only customers did not come in to annoy them. This may be no worse than it is elsewhere but (i) I think in some instances it *is* worse than elsewhere and (ii) it should—for reasons already argued—be much better than elsewhere.

If indeed there is to be consumer-conscious frame of mind emanating from every Co-operative counter there is going to have to be a marked change. To say it is otherwise would be a dis-service to those on the Working Party.

A Code of Practice

The other recommendation is the adoption of a Code of Practice, I have a great sympathy for this approach having just been instrumental in selling a Code of Practice on Safety to British Universities. On hearing of this recommendation ones immediate reaction was that it would either be meaningless and vague—like calling for Liberty, Freedom and Democracy as a solution to the Northern Ireland situation—or it would be succinct and definite. The Party in talking of the Code say the important consideration is that it should be capable of being understood by consumers. But even more important is that it should be honoured. But in a foul Machiavellian sort of way if the Movement could not see itself honouring the detail of the latter it would be better to go for the former. Vagueness can be a cloak to failure.

The Working Party, in this section of its Report, is to be commended for the realism with which it refers to the already high-standing in consumer affairs of Marks & Spencers and Fine Fare where the now-departing Mr. Gulliver, himself of original pro-Co-operative disposition, introduced an element of consumer consciousness. But the Report is somewhat less outspoken in referring to its own dichotomy over the efficacy of journals and certain proposals thereon.

Another point the members make is on the need to impress on shoppers that the Co-operative Society is consumer-conscious: here one would have thought the simplest measure which could have been advocated would have been to change the name of each society to include the term "Consumers Co-operative" and to put "Consumers Co-operative" over each shop as well as the symbol.

The final question at issue is "will it all succeed?" The difficulties will not be in obtaining reasonable publicity within the Movement: they will be two-fold—first to persuade the general public that the Movement means to take the exercise seriously and that in turn will involve admitting deficiencies in the existing set-up. The second is to persuade the Movement to live up to the fairly modest expectations of the Report.

Here healthy cynicism cannot be dismissed too readily. In 1966 the Co-operative Party resolved at Dunoon that thereafter the conduct of branch business by local party units was to be markedly different. Six years on the answer is that it is not.

I am reminded in all this of some of my technological and scientific based colleagues who appear to believe more investment in technology and science is necessary to get more growth in G.N.P. and if one asks why the answer is that thereby one gets more money for research in technology and science in order that one can get greater growth in G.N.P. . . .

The question here is why a Retail Co-operative Movement in contemporary Britain. For years to many folk a great deal of the acceptable answer has been "for the consumer", whereas to others the answer has been "survival—because my job (or my pension) depends on it".

To some the question at issue will be whether the former is going to trump the latter whereas with real zeal and imagination an energetic pursuit of the former would achieve the second.

In short, implementation of the Working Party Report could resolve the Co-operative Consumer Affairs Dilemma—but if the Report is rejected or nominally accepted and ignored or nominally implemented the British Co-operative Movement will be seen as children playing a children's game—Blind Man's Bluff.