

CO-OPERATION IN 1980

by

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(In November last year, Jim Craigen, the Industrial Liaison Officer of the Scottish Business Education Council and Prospective Labour & Co-operative Candidate for Glasgow Maryhill, was invited by the Scottish Society for Co-operative Studies to speak on Co-operation in 1980. This is an abbreviated account of his address.)

The title certainly denotes a reassuring confidence in the future of the co-operative movement. It is of course impossible, in these times of crises, to say what will happen tomorrow, far less in 1980. The one common denominator in surveying the past, present and future of the co-operative movement is that the goals remain valid and relevant to the times. What is not so obvious these days is whether co-operators themselves are willing to come to terms with the future and to use it to the movement's advantage.

As a community organisation early co-operatives committed the individual a good deal more than today's membership. Admission was not so easily or so cheaply obtained. The co-ops were in many respects ahead of their time in being 'a business with a social purpose'. But they also lived too much on their own. Nowadays it is the exponents of capitalism, which according to Mr. Peter Walker is no longer a dirty word, who talk about the 'social responsibilities of business.'

The inevitable diversification of co-operative enterprise into production, service and wholesaling activities in many ways strengthened the movement's insularism. It also brought the co-ops into conflict with the unions at times, although unlike private employers in the last century there were efforts to achieve conciliation. In post World War II years, the co-ops have ignored the very success of many of their own objectives. By raising retailing and service standards which were emulated and surpassed by their larger rivals, they had in fact raised consumer expectations. Young people benefiting from improved educational opportunities and from the overall improvement in the standard of living naturally expected more than their parents. Urban renewal in almost every town and city in Britain was more disruptive of co-operative loyalties and enterprise while at the same time affording an opportunity for vigorous penetration by the multiples.

Co-operation as a form of enterprise and organisation presents a national image. Paradoxically just when we are nearer a fully integrated retail and wholesale co-operative organisation in Britain there are signs that society as a whole is seeking new ways of decentralising wherever possible. The co-ops having been lacking in growth may now be well placed to respond to the greater diversity which will be looked for by 1980. Marks and Spencer with all its standardised stores and identical frontages may be on the same preasepole as Woolworths and in 1980 a rather tired reminder of its success in the sixties and early seventies.

### A Task for Management

The imagination required in the co-ops will not come from layism on retail boards. It can only come from co-op management which must break through the egg shell of the past. The great test of management will be how successfully it exploits change. Co-operative consultancy services should be available to stimulate new ventures in co-operation, whether in services, housing or in retailing.

Possibly our attitude to politics holds some lessons. The Co-operative Party is usually seen as a defence mechanism, a form of insurance, instead of the political force it ought to be. Co-operatives in the past generated new communities all over the country, but the movement as a whole failed to change the overall environment in which the co-ops are only one sector, alongside private and public. While the unions have influenced the Labour Party, the Co-ops have not. Yet what we are witnessing at the moment is a challenge from the public sector workers against the Conservatives' policy of public sector deprivation. When miners, railwaymen, ambulancemen and firemen are in dispute, every strike is 'a political strike'. How could it be otherwise?

It is symptomatic of the academic respectability of the Co-ops that we actually have a 'Society for Co-operative Studies'. What is really wanted is a 'Society for Future Co-operators' - Co-operators who are prepared to see co-operation in new settings; who recognise the present danger signals in our industrial relations system and are more interested in maximising industrial relations satisfaction than in minimising industrial relations discontent.

By 1980 there will certainly be a growth in state controls if not in state ownership. Adapting the institutions to the needs of those who serve and work in them will be the foremost task of personnel managers. The prospects for those working in co-operative organisations ought to be made, and be seen to be, more attractive and satisfying than just working for a large scale organisation which happens to be in the public and not the private sector.