

Central Co-operative Organisation: Next Steps?

A FOREWORD

"This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but with a whimper."

To apply the quotation to the Movement's recent handling of the question of "a single national federation" is inaccurate: the question is not ending, the problems are not going away. It is also unfair: there has been courageous and constructive thought on all sides of the debate and in providing one forum for this the Society for Co-operative Studies has given a very useful service. And yet, and yet: there is some justice and some warning in applying these words from T.S. Eliot to our discussions.

The Present Situation

The outcome of these discussions so far is insubstantial confused and uncertain.

Bulletin 25 and, in particular, the article by B.J. Rose outlined the background to "the integration of the federations" and the decisions heavily in favour of it by Congress in recent years. It brought the long-running serial to the establishment of the Special Committee by Congress 1975 with these terms of reference:-

"This Congress authorises the Central Executive to establish a Special Committee comprising three representatives of the Central Executive, other than representatives appointed by the CWS, three representatives of the CWS Board and three elected representatives of Retail Societies to consider and report to the 1976 Congress on the advisability and if found to be desirable on ways and means by

which a single national federation could be created to replace the Co-operative Union Ltd. and Co-operative Wholesale Society Ltd.

"In the course of preparing its report the Committee should invite interested Co-operative organisations to present written evidence and interview the representatives of such organisations as it thinks fit."

Since then the Special Committee has submitted a short note to Congress 1976, offering the prospects of a Final Report to a future Congress; and then for Congress 1977 prepared its "Interim Report in the form of a Discussion Paper". The latter did deal to some extent with objectives and possible structure but did not include the detailed analysis of options of organisation which professional service must have provided for the Committee and which would have greatly helped to inform and clarify judgement of the issues.

Confusion, present at various stages and in various forms throughout the Movement's preoccupation with the question showed up in the Interim Report itself. While this maintained an uneasy facade of unity, it was really two competing contentions. Thus in paragraph 7, it records that "The Committee is of the opinion that the formation of an S.N.F. is advisable in order to secure a unified national structure and thereby, co-ordination of activities at a national level." In paragraph 9, it acknowledges that "Some members of the Committee took the view that the proposal for a merger of the C.W.S. and the C.U. in the foreseeable future was inadvisable . . ." Two reports clearly distinguishable and documenting their different proposals would have served better to define the choices and elicit a clear response.

In the event Congress 1977 adopted a proposal from the Central Executive that a referendum should be undertaken among societies on the acceptance or rejection of the "broad concept" of a S.N.F. That vote showed just under 51% of the total votes cast to be in favour and, also, on a count of individual societies 85 for the "broad concept" and 163 against. In response to that the Special Committee has decided that it will not continue its work though it will make a report to Congress 1978: and the Central Executive has noted that decision.

At this stage therefore, some uncertainty persists. In general and still, what should be done about central organisation? In the discussions, inside and outside Congress, there has been wide agreement that change is needed - an advocacy strongly made by some who opposed a S.N.F. More specifically there is the uncertainty whether the Central Executive, or indeed any other agency, will take proposals to Congress 1978.

### Design of the Bulletin

While waiting for that future to show itself, we may take this warning from the experience so far: that both our success and our self-confidence require that we handle our big issues with more expedition and certainty. As a **service towards** that capacity this Bulletin is designed both to take stock of the present situation and to argue constructively about the future action needed. The contributors are varied both in their experience and in their views of an S.N.F. but each was asked to address himself to two main points of reference: first, the central services needed by retail societies in present and future conditions and, secondly, in the light of the experience of the Special Committee, the most effective way of organising them. Professor Branton was invited to make his approach in terms of general business organisation; Mr. Gay, Mr. Harrison and

Mr. Stephenson in the specific context of the British Movement; and Mr. Derrick in terms of the practice of some other comparable Movements.

### Some Guidelines?

So now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the problem and perhaps some of the general guidelines for action in the immediate future are:-

1. Two federations will be maintained for that period - whatever changes may be made in their roles and relationships.
2. Initiative for further exploration and action on such changes is expected from the Union and from the C.W.S. - perhaps, best of all, from them jointly.
3. The exploration needs to be pursued not as a confrontation of faiths but initially as an exercise in professional analysis of the objectives and services of the central organisations. The decisions on any change rest, of course, with the democratic agencies of the Union, the C.W.S. and the Movement but the basic task of making the analysis, defining the options and offering recommendations begins with the officials.

And paradoxically perhaps, a sound relationship between the two federations is more likely if each begins from a firm view of its own role, present and future. Unless an organisation (or, for that matter, an individual) has an identity made up of clear objectives and functions, it will lack not only true self-confidence but also

a real capacity for stable relations with other organisations. In the Union, as in the C.W.S., its senior officials, operating as a management executive team could achieve a positive as well as a balanced definition of strategy and structure for the development of the Union as a whole.

4. A central purpose should be the closest possible relation between the economic power exercised by the C.W.S. and the social principles and advisory responsibilities which are the special charge of the Union. The search for that should proceed on the assumption that if effective co-ordination is not achieved there is danger, of course, on both sides. Economic power may be less governed by consideration of Co-operative principle than it should be. The danger, however, for some of the functions of the Union is more imminent and more serious: that they become peripheral when they should be central and wither from lack of connection with the national economic thrust and resources of the Movement.
5. And the explorations should lead urgently to specific proposals which the democracy of the Movement can clearly appreciate and decide.

What is under scrutiny and judgement in not only our national organisation: it is also our capacity as a Movement to make important decisions with a pace and quality worthy of the issues.

And a Happy New Year to us all!

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R.L.M.