

Co-operation and the ConsumerTHE CO-OPERATIVE AND 'CONSUMER' MOVEMENTS

by

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The British Co-operative Movement has a long and honorable even if occasionally confused track record on consumer affairs. Thus for a long-haul period in the latter years in the 19th Century and through most, but not quite all the first half of the 20th century it was to all intents and purposes the only advocate of consumer rights and greater consumer protection.

The growth of consumer affairs in the post-war period could have been expected to make things easier for the consumer faction within the Co-operative Movement but, sad to relate, it did not. Similarly, the sweetly naive, and the Co-operative Movement abounds in such, thought that the 'new' non-Co-operative consumer activists might have been prepared to give utterance to some expressions of gratitude towards the Co-operatives for a good fight well-fought. Yet such commendation was gey thin on the ground: not many "Brownie-points" were allotted to the Co-operatives for their earlier endeavours. Indeed it went further than that in that far from being gracious towards the Co-operatives many consumer bodies and activists were churlishly ungracious. That, in turn, led to some consumer bodies arguing that the Co-operative Movement, agencies and auxiliaries as much as trading organisations, could not be regarded as "genuine" or "true" consumer bodies because "they are involved in trade". The inference here was that any connection with Trade

trumped all track records however commendable.

That said it needs qualification. There were occasions when consumer activists were helpful. The most noticeable was Mrs Jennifer Jenkins, the wife of Roy Jenkins, who when she was President of the Consumer Association did what she could to have her colleagues and others in the non-Co-operative voluntary movement, the appropriate civil servants and the public at large, recognise, acknowledge and indeed respect if not honour the Co-operative tradition and contribution.

Relations with Consumerist Agencies

Since the departure of Jennifer Jenkins from the Presidency of the Consumer Association the relationship between the "recognised" consumerist network and the Co-operative based consumer movement has been patchy.

Thus while impressions can be dreadfully misleading what comes through is a spotty picture. In some parts of the country each is operating almost totally ignorant of what the other is doing while in other areas, notably Scotland, relations between the two are good and are getting better. Nor is this latter situation entirely attributable to Co-operative activity and personalities; not infrequently the good relationship is attributable to the ready response of individuals from the "consumerist" side.

Moreover much has been achieved at national level and to some extent regional/provincial level by the appointment by Government ministers with Co-operative sympathies, be they sponsored or otherwise, of Co-operative based people to a great variety of consumer bodies. Thus to take one committee as an example, the Central Transport User's Consultative Committee which three years ago had no co-operators on it, now has four members with a Co-operative background, one of them being Frank Higgins the former

Nottingham Labour and Co-operative councillor. Indeed it would be possible to go further here and argue that so much good has come of this spate of appointments - good for the Committee and good for Co-op. and non-Co-op consumer relations - that in its impact it surpasses by far that which was achieved at the time of the Jennifer Jenkins rapport.

Still Grounds for Concern

However, notwithstanding the achievements there are, as indicated above, grounds for concern.

One area of concern is the continuing existence of Co-operative and non-Co-operative consumer-interest bases; there is the continuing occasional hostility of the latter towards the former; there is the occasional ignorance on the part of some of the newer younger recruits to the non-Co-operative consumer bodies of the Co-operative contribution; there is the growing tendency for bodies of doubtful genuine "consumer" interest to become involved in the non-Co-operative Consumer Movement and now within the last few months two other areas of concern have emerged - or emerged with greater clarity.

The first of these is the enormity of the problems which confront the wider consumer movement or particular agencies within it when they try to acquire with almost ridiculous expedition, a genuine or even an apparently-genuine democracy. Inevitably they confront, collectively or severally the question: who or what gives you the right to speak for consumers? And their efforts to find a convincing basis and process of democratic justification are still far short of success.

The other matter is that both sides, the Co-operatives and the broader consumer movement, are questioning their own arrangements for consumer conferences. As I understand it

the Educational Executive of the Co-operative Union is planning to abandon its Annual Consumer Conference and go for one such Conference every three years. Meanwhile the National Consumer Council has been receiving views from its allied Councils expressing serious reservations about the arrangements at its Annual Consumer Congress. Reservations were expressed after the London Conferences of 1976 and 1977 but yet more misgivings were experienced at the 1978 Edinburgh Conference. What is fascinating in all this is that while the Education Executive has apparently decided to abandon its format external consumer activists are expressing considerable admiration for what the Co-operatives have achieved both at national level, and in the case of Rita Rhoads and the Scottish Co-operative Education Association, at Scottish level. Mrs Joan MacIntosh Deputy Chairman of the National Consumer Council and Chairman of the Scottish Consumer Council is particularly eloquent and generous in her praise of the Co-operative arrangements and anxious they should not be abandoned.

In one sense then there is nothing new in the Co-operative and non-Co-operative relationship within the wider consumer field. Yet although the situation is not new it is more critical than ever. More particularly the wider Movement needs the Co-operative experience and contribution more than ever before and parts of it are ready to respond to and learn from it.

In short this is no time for the Co-operative Movement to diminish its consumer interest.