

Politics and the Co-operative MovementPARTY POLITICS: REASONS AND CONSEQUENCES

by

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"Political parties in this country do not exist as the outcome of a wave of political feeling, which might sweep through any organisation or section of the people when particular interests of theirs are adversely affected for a limited period. Such a wave of opinion may, and does, affect political parties and temporarily influence legislation, but political parties of necessity spring from deep and abiding causes. They represent opposing principles and ideals, conflicts of economic interests, differences in conception of social progress and they must be sufficiently deep-rooted to claim the adherence of great masses of people for a considerable period. The continued existence of the Co-operative Party and its place and function in British politics will be determined by the extent to which in principle, in economic interest, and in its ideas of social progress it differs from the existing parties of today." ("The Political Aspect of Co-operation", by Alfred Barnes, M.P., Chairman, Co-operative Party, published in 1926 - one year before the first formal "Agreement" with the Labour Party).

"The Co-operative Movement could never consent to becoming politically subservient to another body."

"The State Socialist thinks mostly of the parliamentary and local government machines. He has for this reason

attached more importance to political work than to the creation of forms of social ownership." ("Co-operation and Modern Socialism," by Jack Bailey, National Secretary of the Co-operative Party, published in 1957).

It is doubtful whether many would argue with these penetrating analyses (with my underlinings) except, perhaps, to add - as implied by Jack Bailey - that the politician's driving ambition is to occupy the legislative chamber and control the executive, in order to impose upon the whole of the electorate his special theory of social and economic organisation.

So, if Alf Barnes and Jack Bailey have succeeded in properly presenting the frame of reference against which to measure the integrity and credibility of any organisation seeking recognition as an authentic political party, there is surely an obligation upon Co-operative societies to make an assessment of their own "party", with a view to determining its validity and place within the general spectrum of political organisations? How did it come into being? Why? What is its role and relevance today? Is it there merely because it's there?

Among the general public, there can be few who, were the question put to them, would not disclose a disposition to believe that consumer Co-operatives are in some manner closely associated with the Labour Party; and even fewer who would be aware of an organisation bearing the title "Co-operative Party". And this after sixty years of that organisation's normal existence! Again, so deeply implanted has become the notion of association, that only the tiniest minority can be aware that one of the Rochdale Principles is "Political Neutrality."

Towards Political Representation

It must be abundantly clear that, whether by intuition or reasoning, the early Co-operators identified their's as a limited, even though highly important role in society. They had, not a dream of taking over the State apparatus, but an intention to develop a powerfully beneficent place within the community. Their's was not to be a sectarian role; but an all-embracing one, based upon the principles of equity, liberty and voluntarism - qualities anathema to and wholly incompatible with the functioning of a political party. Yet, given its universality; its emphasis upon social ownership and its structure for the prevention of exploitation through the ownership of property; it was inevitable that it recruit to its ranks many who saw the State as the ultimate weapon in the securing of those same ends.

Nor, as their Movement developed and became a significant alternative social and economic force in society, could it fail to attract the interest and opposition of those elements it sought to supplant: elements who, in the 19th century, wielded great influence within the legislative chambers of the country. In 1880, without abandoning its political neutrality, but as a response to increasing evidence of this hostility, the Co-operative Union created the first Parliamentary Committee (subsequently, in 1892, the Joint Parliamentary Committee), for the purpose of monitoring legislation impinging upon Co-operative societies and making representations to government and M.P.'s on matters pertaining to the Movement.

It was not until the Congress of 1897, that, by unanimous support to a motion submitted by the Norwich Society, assent was given to the idea of direct representation in Parliament. Two things emerged from that Congress resolution

1. It was completely vague about the form the "direct representation" should take; although it is equally evident that there was no intention of setting-up a separate and independent political party.
2. As subsequent events revealed, and not untypically, the hot-house of Congress debate was totally unrepresentative of the true feelings of individual societies - let alone their individual members. (When societies were requested for their opinion, only 160 of the existing 1,659 bothered to reply and, of those, only one half favoured the implementation of Congress decision! So much for the parliament of the movement!).

Coincidentally with this and several successive attempts to thrust societies into the field of "direct political representation", the Trade Unions were similarly stirred to action, forming the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 which became the Labour Party in 1906. Since there was by then so much over-lapping of membership of the three movements, it is scarcely surprising that the agitation to commit Co-operative societies to direct participation in party politics should become an annual feature of Congress proceedings.

Despite the fact that it did not then, nor to this day, decide its objectives as a political party, nor in what way it represented aspirations and policies "differing from existing parties" (Alf Barnes), eventually, in 1917, societies capitulated to continuous pressure and agreed, at a national "Emergency Political Conference" held in London, to the formation of a National Co-operative Representation Committee, and the establishment of local Co-operative Political Councils. The "Committee" was, in the event, the embryonic Co-operative Party, and was so christened after the 1918 Congress.

Even more than the sheer ennui of those opposing the abandonment of "political neutrality", although that common phenomenon within "democratic organisations" no doubt played its part, the eventual victory of the protagonists of "direct political representation", owed most to the real and alleged discrimination against Co-operative societies, during and following the first world war, in the areas of taxation, allocation of scarce goods and conscription of key personnel for service in the armed forces. The justifiable resentment of societies against these measures overcame all previous scruples against and objections to the abandonment of a basic "Principle".

Relations with the Labour Party

Reference to events consequent upon that historic decision serves to emphasise how right was Alf Barnes in his insistence upon the basic qualities distinguishing a credible political party - and how misplaced was Jack Bailey's faith that "the Co-operative Movement could never consent to becoming subservient to another body."

Lacking distinctive programmes, policies and objective giving it a "difference", the Co-operative Party has failed completely and comprehensively to arouse the mass passions and sense of identity inseparable from a sustained and successful appeal to the electorate. The "leadership" seems to have been totally unaware that mass political parties are not the products of an appeal to reason, and that their support stems from an address to prejudice and a prospect of power.

Following a brief period of mutual and informal accommodation to avoid electoral confrontations, a formal "Agreement" was reached with the Labour Party, in 1927. The pattern of the future emerged. The idea of "independence" was set aside: the era of subservience and tutelage had arrived in a trice.

That the new relationship held real and substantial benefits for the Labour Party, cannot be questioned. Financial support, sponsored candidates, the unquantifiable but certain accrual of votes and support consequent upon the goodwill generated among "Co-operators" - these were the more obvious and tangible gains - in exchange for what? From the viewpoint of Co-operative societies, it is difficult to see what advantage has been garnered. For instance, a great agitation was promoted and much political thunder generated when Neville Chamberlain, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, imposed the "Penal Tax" (the taxation of that portion of Co-operative society surpluses placed to reserve) in 1933. "A vicious political tax"; "a discriminating tax"; "an attack upon the working classes"; and so on. No less than 2,343,654 signatures were obtained for a national petition against the tax. In 1947, after two years of post-war Labour Government, a letter was addressed to the "Co-operative Party", asking when the Penal Tax was to be repealed. It brought forth a lecture on the virtues of political expediency! (We all have our lapses into naivete). Forty-six years and several Labour Governments after, societies still pay the dreaded, inequitable, class orientated, diabolical Penal Tax!

For a better understanding of what political partnership has meant for Co-operative societies, read those chapters headed, "Co-operative Union and the Labour Government", in Arnold Bonner's, "British Co-operation". For instance; ". . . the Co-operative Movement made frequent complaints of non-consultation whilst the Labour Government was in power, the issue arising at Congress after Congress. One of the complaints was the failure to include Co-operative representatives on important committees, or to consult the Movement, although employers' associations, such as the Federation of British Industries, and the trade unions through the Trade Union Congress were so consulted . . . it insisted it was as important a unit as the F.B.I. or the T.U.C., and demanded to be regarded as equal partner with the Labour Party and the

trade unions in building a new order. It was unpleasantly aware that it was not always so regarded."

Arnold Bonner was writing of the period 1945-51 (not today, as might have been supposed), when the Labour Government enjoyed an overwhelming majority in parliament; when the Co-operative Party had 23 M.P.'s, and the added distinction of representation in the Cabinet! It was also the period when the Co-operative Party reached the apogee of its influence, its support from the "rank and file" and the range of its activities. (Even the mass media regularly referred to "Labour and Co-operative" M.P.'s, at that time

The Present Situation

Nor have the succeeding 30 years brought evidence of any greater respect for the role of the Co-operative Party, nor any discernible increase in its influence over events. On the contrary, as a political force it is non-existent, unrecognised and has passed into limbo. Of course, it still retains a value to the Labour Party - in the forms previously indicated - but, for societies, it is no more than a potential embarrassment, something they tolerate and tend to apologise for as an unfortunate aberration.

To the extent its existence is acknowledged its sole contribution to the welfare of consumer Co-operative societies is to convey a distorted notion of their purpose and objectives and, at best, inhibit some prospective consideration of membership and association.

At worst, this direct involvement in party politics a subservience to the Labour Party - which derives its philosophical outlook from its paymaster, the trade unions, and displays the strongest possible preference for the State and collectivism, as opposed to voluntarism and persuasion, as the instruments for the implementation of its policies - has led to the dissemination of extremely confused ideas a

to the true nature of consumer Co-operation.

The depth and extent of this malady has been vividly illustrated by recent events. As reported in the "Co-operative News" of August 16, 1978; addressing the Co-operative Party's annual summer school on the possible implications for consumer societies of the Bullock Report; the Co-operative Union Parliamentary Secretary stated:

"The whole character of the Co-operatives has changed from what the original concept was.

Today most retail societies resemble more of a co-partnership movement, which periodically makes noises on behalf of the consumer."

He suggested "that in this time of changing circumstances it might be preferable for the movement if retail societies were changed into workers co-operatives."

Even more dramatic than Mr. Gallacher's challenging remarks, was the total lack of response from the general body of "Co-operators".

The Rochdale Pioneers, J. T. W. Mitchell, Beatrice Webb, Alf Barnes, Jack Bailey, Arnold Bonner, and all, must be burning in their graves!