

Co-operation in the 1980'sPROSPECTS AND CHOICES

by

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An invitation to don the mantle of seer has, I suppose, its attraction. The imagination can be allowed free rein; an ego trip is there, without constraint. Who will recall the fantasies and the follies when the decade has expired?

History is patterned by people proclaiming their possession of the power of prophecy. Whole populations have been moved by them. The consequent disasters remain on record to remind us of their passing. But we set our face against history.

Nor has the consumer Co-operative movement been denied its quota of crystal ball gazers. As one might express it; we have an abundance of gross prophets and a dearth of net profits!

Defying my own dictum, I project!

Since consumer Co-operation is a product of and tends to reflect the environment in which it has its being, one must first embark upon some speculative attempt to assess the probable socio-economic evolution over the next decade. And here, two quite contrasting possibilities emerge, each, in turn, being infested by such a plague of "ifs" as to

make a mockery of any degree of certainty.

I refer, of course, to the two socio-political philosophies currently offered as the only likely alternatives - increasingly hardening and diverging. These will determine our attitude to and interpretation of the country's policies towards the underlying economic realities.

The Economic Context

It is self-evident that, even to maintain the present levels of global "prosperity", there must exist an international access to fossil fuels and grain crops - in constantly increasing volume. Is there anyone so optimistic as to believe this will happen? Is it not more likely that the politicians' need for survival, as well as common prudence, will shape policies directed towards conceived national advantage? And because those policies will, of themselves, create for other nations acute problems incapable of short-term solution, the very real possibility of armed conflict emerges. With what consequences for our own nation?

During the 1980's we shall enjoy the "dole" provided by the fortuitous discovery of oil and gas on our shoreline. (The product, despite all warnings of the consequences, inevitably being exploited for revenue, and not for capital renewal). Given that the European Economic Community survives, we are likely to escape the major hazard of a food shortage - so long as we are prepared to surrender a portion of our fossil fuels.

On first sight, the overall scenario seems set in our favour. Except that, of recent years,

a new industrial phenomena has emerged; a recognition that, consequent upon the increasing centralisation and mechanisation of our principal industries and services, it is possible for a mere handful of determined men to paralyze our economy. With passions fanned by new-style "leaders", we now face the equivalent of industrial banditry and guerrilla warfare.

Fortified by the achievements of the past generation, which, despite all the hypocritical humbug of those seeking political advantage, have transformed the material welfare of the vast majority of the population, that same population has been and is being encouraged to believe there is no limit to the onward economic march - and all with less and less application and endeavour on their part.

Management, apparently deceived by the seemingly endless surge towards increasing material wealth, has now a deeply developed tendency to temporise and, all too frequently, connive with those believing the economy and the generality of the community were created for their personal wanton and wilful exploitation. Such elements are temperamentally and professionally ill-equipped to assert their intended role, as the responsible custodians of economic resources, as reality tops the horizon.

Choices among Politicians and Policies

All of which throws the nation back upon their last resort - the politicians, and my "two quite contrasting possibilities". And time not being available for the logical evolution of an alternative format, one is thrown back upon the

artificiality of the traditional two-party system. (It would pose less problems in the U.S.A., where there exists a broad area of agreement between the two main parties; together within a system of government which permits the "grey area" to be inhabited, without the necessary downfall of the "governing party").

Because of the current, and seemingly irreversible developments within the Labour Party, the electorate is to be faced with irreconcilable choices in the determination of the shape of society in the 1980's. In that situation, the big "if" is, for which choice will the country finally opt? And how can and will the consumer Co-operative movement react to either possibility?

For the country, the historical problems are clear: we inhabit an over-populated island, with very limited natural resources; we have a steadily declining proportion of the population within the employment age range; our urban areas and manufacturing units display all the defects consequent upon our being the pioneers of the industrial revolution - with the first, even more than the second element presenting huge problems of renewal; and yet we depend for our continuing prosperity upon our ability to secure essential imports of food and raw materials, by means of our capacity to compete for world trade through the medium of our manufactures and financial institutions.

The only insurance against the steady decline of our economic strength is our legacy of skills and a will to work. What are our chances of success? Current trends and events can only arouse scepticism.

Reference to the industrial climate produces a forecast of persistent gales, rain and depression in all areas. Power over the minds and actions of the mass of those conscripted into "unions", appears increasingly to pass into the hands of those who pervert their persuasive talents; convincing millions previously reasonably contented in their work and industrial environment, that they should violently rebel against their circumstances; that their jobs are boring; that they work "unsocial hours"; that what they'd once regarded as a vocation and a source of dignity and pride, is a state of exploitation; that what had once sustained their sense of skill and satisfaction, should be the object of hate and derision - an incitement to conflict and discontent.

Nor does the new industrial leadership lack for allies. In their pursuit of power privilege and placement, a significant proportion of (self-styled) "social democrats" deface that traditional political image by promising Utopia, via the route of dissipating scarce resources in a pandering to preposterous demands for prodigality and improvidence in their application.

As they lead their legions of unsuspecting lemmings to a land of permanent pauperism, one seeks, it seems in vain, on their side of the great divide for an alternative, positive leadership. Their nominal associates, linked by political label, if not by sympathy, seem to have opted for short-term security, rather than political integrity.

There remains, unless we are to witness an early, radical change within the social democratic groups, only a faith in the innate commonsense

of the mass of ordinary people who, in general, prefer the peace and quiet of their home and work environment, rather than the turbulence of direct industrial and political involvement. It does not seem a secure territory upon which to muster a countervailing force.

Or, we can rely upon management to "make a stand". The history of the recent past fails to provide re-assurance. With the advent of far more readily accessible higher education, most of those possessing the innate ability have surveyed the industrial battlefield and fled - to the professions; to academic life; to the bureaucracy. Their exposed compatriots have tended, especially in the larger industrial units, to construct their own bureaucracy and thus cushion themselves against the stress and strain of shop-floor realities. (The only "workshops" they know are the products of academic fantasy!).

The true entrepreneurs increasingly wander in the wilderness; a despised and endangered species.

Politically, since time is so short, we are left with Margaret Thatcher and her few devoted friends (she'll soon be deserted should she fail in her objectives, only to watch her nominal supporters run for cover), struggling to find salvation through the implementation of their conception of Friedman monetarism.

Whichever trend prevails, one thing we can project with a high degree of certainty, that there is going to be no march forward to any significantly higher level of general prosperity during the coming decade. The real choices before the

country, following this analysis, are those of the preservation of a social organisation retaining and promoting the ideals of liberalism, voluntaryism and free choice; or a decline to a form of society based upon a gross extension of State control; centralisation, constraint by edict of the ruling clique, and an expanding bureaucracy.

The Prospect for the Movement

Since it cannot escape the influences and actualities of its environment, where stands, or falls, our Co-operative Movement? Philosophically, if it is to retain its special identity, it has no alternative but to resist the second choice by all the means within its power. Should it lose its faith in "voluntaryism", it ceases to exist as a distinctive social organisation - and discards every last shred of credibility. The future remains very much in doubt.

In the Co-operative Gazette 34/79, one reads, "The National Health Service is of prime importance to us both as socialists and co-operators." An innocuous juxtaposition of two identities? Is it not rather an invitation to accept the terms as being synonymous, and that by embracing one philosophy we unreservedly assume the mantle of the other?

Of course, as Co-operators, we'd fight to the end to preserve a National Health Service. It is a simple matter of compassion and social morality. But, why "socialist"? Has the assumption of that much abused and wholly indefinable appellation become a condition of acceptance into the ranks of "Co-operators"?

Is it not a rejection - and subtly intended to be so - of the basic Co-operative principle of Open Membership?

How long before we descend to the level of the "Co-operative Movement" as it exists in the U.S.S.R.; a mere instrument of State power; wholly subservient; incapable of independent decision and action; functioning only when and where the State dictates?

And economically? How well equipped are we to meet the stresses of the next 10 years? What sustenance and encouragement can we draw from the past 10 years? What faith in the future, when the only significant current response to the problems confronting the Movement is a further plunge into phantasmagoria - Co-op Great Britain! (The poor chumps are even deficient in geography. Try U.K., please!).

And yet, the solution to the Movement's problems is set right before them. Just take a walk around the premises; talk with the employees and the customers; inspect the "paper", the transport, the stocks, the manning levels and the superfluity of supernumeraries; and if the answer is not obvious, please make room for some other! There is no mystery. There is no need for flights into the realms of fantasy. There is a need to master simple arithmetic; to apply acceptable standards of judgement and operation; to comprehend the limits of communication and of human capability. And, above all else, to accept and propagate the simple, verifiable, readily ascertainable truth.

As Shakespeare put it into the mouth of his Julius Caesar, "Men at some time are masters of their fates; the fault dear Brutus is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings."

When we have grasped the portent of that message, we shall look forward with confidence and a high measure of serenity to the next ten years. Alternatively, we face an inexorable erosion by the ever-beating waves of competition, and become merely a memory buried in the sands of time.