

LETTERS

The editors will be glad to consider for publication in whole or in part, letters on the material of the Bulletin or indeed on any aspect of Co-operation.

from Dr Stephen Lawrence, University of Evansville  
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"This is a rather belated response to Bulletin No. 37 of the Society for Co-operative Studies.

The first point I would like to make is that the bulletin, like the others before it, proved to be both informative and stimulating. It is the latter aspect, however, which has provoked this letter and brings me to the second point. Jean McKinlay, in discussing the Co-op's devotion to the creation of "a new system of economic organisation," claims that;

"However idealistically desirable these aims may be, in practice the survival of retail outlets is dependent upon their ability to attract customers who exercise effective demand, for without customer support any possibility of making a surplus or profit vanishes and, therefore, finance cannot be available for the implementation of ideals." (p.44)

- A massive programme of capital development to gear our societies to those needs, with short-term cosmetic balance sheet considerations giving way to policies which will result in real growth in market share, and real growth in the asset value of our societies. This programme would have to include, where required, refurbishment and making good neglected maintenance of existing units which had a future with the society. We would eliminate the dowdy image wherever it existed.

- Build a well trained and highly motivated staff, aware of what was happening and why, and enthusiastic about Co-operation, its progress and its future.

- Have a C.W.S. which was effectively monitored, and whose role was meaningful service to retail societies at minimum cost. An organisation which was as flexible and responsive to the needs of retail societies as retail societies themselves would have to be to the challenge and opportunities of the 80's.

Real success in the 80's for the Movement as a whole need not be a pipe dream. It can happen. Within the Movement the resources still exist to make it happen.

This statement echoes very clearly a sentiment often voiced, in the 1960's, that Co-operative attempts to 're-establish' the Movement's position as an effective 'alternative' mode of economic organisation could never be self-financing. Conversely it pays lip-service to the view that the only path to be taken, to ensure the continuation of the Co-op as a major retailer is the one which has been carefully trodden by the Movement's private competitors. A sentiment which I do not feel has ever been totally justified by the evidence.

In terms of the 1980's, I believe that the question to ask, is not whether the Co-op will survive as one of the retailing giants, but whether it is too late to reverse the tide which has taken the Movement to the verge of becoming 'just another organisation'.

Over a decade ago in the U.S.A., Aaron Yohalem indicated that the ultimate challenge of Consumerism is "toward alleviating pollution of the air and water . . . toward ending hunger and malnutrition . . . toward educating and training the disadvantaged . . . toward solving these and other problems of a society rather than strictly of a commercial nature."

("Consumerism's ultimate challenge: is business equal to the task?", New York, 1969.)

So far the Co-op has failed to effectively rise to this type of challenge, but can it afford to do so for much longer? Is there any reason why the Movement could not

encourage greater customer commitment by showing itself to be interested and able, to protect and help the consumer? Would this not, in itself, be self-financing if it increased the number of people shopping at Co-op outlets, while it has the added advantage of transcending class boundaries, and would not be limited simply to the 'working class'.

The Co-op needs, in the 1980's to be positive in its attempts to demonstrate to the public that it is different from its competitors, in that it cares for the well being of the community. Immediately one field which lays itself wide open to Co-operative influence is that of the conservation of natural resources. And if people within the Movement are worried that a single handed attempt to move in, for instance, the recycling business, would increase costs relative to the Co-ops' competitors, then the obvious approach would be to join with other like-minded groups in a campaign to improve the likelihood of government legislative action in the appropriate field.

However, energy is just one of many areas in which the Co-op could fly the community flag, for I believe that a positive campaign to impress on the public, that the Movement has its own distinctive operations, which exist for their benefit, will do more good for its future development than the mimicking of private retailers.

Some commentators would argue that a passive stance would remove a heavy burden from

Co-operative Managers; but I would say to them that the Co-operative Movement like a socialist government cannot afford non-interventionalist policies.

The Bulletin, as a forum for new ideas, has a vital role to play in the future of Co-operation. But as you stressed in issue No. 36, the need is for greater resources. A possible avenue for exploration in this respect involves a concerted attempt to obtain subscriptions from a) Libraries in institutes of higher education, and b) Economics and Business Departments in these institutions. The benefits of this action could be twofold i) as a source of revenue, and ii) as a stimulant to academics to pursue their own research into aspects of the Co-op. In this latter respect, Mr. Kershaw and the other members of the C.L.E.A.R. unit might be able to provide a significant back-up service.

In conclusion, I wish the Bulletin and the Society the best of health for the coming decade, and may it continue to stimulate people, both within the Movement and outside it, to think carefully about the future of Co-operation in this country."

from Mr Martin Kirkman, 12 Park Road, Birstall,  
Leicester 3 February 1980

"I read with interest David Hutton's article in Bulletin 37 and agree broadly with his exposure of some of the Movement's myths.

However under "Turnover" he attacks the use of the Index of Retail Prices as a corrective,

and urges us to stick to "current prices".

This may be useful advice to persons who have statistics available and the expertise to use them but in my experience "current prices" can be most misleading and the IRP far from a will-o-the-wisp to an active but lay member.

May I give an example?

When I arrived here in 1967 and joined the old Leicester Society I obtained the turnover figures for previous years. Between 1960 and 1966 the sales rose from £11.8 million to £15.5 million, an increase of 31%. On current prices a satisfactory position.

However the Retail Price Index had risen by 21%, giving an "actual" figure of 10% over 6 years, and the figures so adjusted for 1965 and 1966 showed decreases of 1% and 1½%. From this I concluded that far from being healthy the Society was in real trouble. I was right. In 1967 the sales nosedived by £1 million.

Some will-o-the-wisp!"