

Member Participation in Retail Societies

RESEARCH ON MEMBER PARTICIPATION

by

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It is a reflection of the level of meaningful research into member participation in retail Co-operative societies in Britain, that although we have a few enquiries into local societies, such as the North Eastern, London, Enfield or the midland societies, there has not been any scientific attempt to put each into a general context since Carr Saunders and his colleagues, Banks and Ostergaard, and Ostergaard and Halsey in 1938, 1955 and 1967. (1) At the annual meeting of the Society for Co-operative Studies on September 25 and 26th, however, there will be an opportunity for each of the contributors to what recent research there has been, to cross-fertilize their work, following the warming up session at the well-attended Co-operative researchers' seminar held on 26th June.

The long awaited Plunkett Foundation list of ongoing Co-operative research (inherited from the ambitiously titled Co-operative Research Unit's earlier effort) includes barely half a dozen authors in the British retail Co-operative sector, of which only two are concerned with member participation. Some current work, such as Mark Craig's, was omitted, and the Banks/Mears study was regarded as complete and therefore outside the purview of ongoing research.

When Victor Pestoff's research on member participation in Sweden (2) was made available in this country, barely two dozen copies were cir-

culated. This must be regarded as some measure of the extent of serious interest in the subject. Apart from analysing the Swedish Organisational Life Archive (S.I.F.O. - the equivalent of the British General Household Survey) showing the age, sex, occupational structure etc. of those participating in each kind of voluntary activity, Pestoff included a theoretical analysis of the principles of participation and a statistical analysis of different kinds of participatory indices in the 30 largest retail Co-operatives in Sweden. Why has no comparable theoretical work been attempted in recent times in this country?

Research into Enfield Society -

In his research recently sponsored by the S.S.R.C. Professor Banks complained of the suspicion which the Co-operative movement has for academic outsiders. The purpose of the launching of the Society for Co-operative Studies was to bridge the work of the retail activists and the academics. (3) But the academics are still the people most obviously absent from the S.C.S. ranks. Membership of the Society for Co-operative Studies has increased over the years, but the new recruits are more the product of such people as the chairman elect, Rita Rhodes involving old and new co-operative activists in discussion groups, than any inflow of academics.

Professor Banks' recent study has been dogged by misfortune. His professional reputation was sufficient to obtain a Social Science Research Council grant to undertake a project before the agreement of the retail society to be investigated had been finalised - and a change of chief officials in Leicestershire Society at a crucial stage made his original project abortive. Professor Banks was able to exploit his grant and

his long-standing association with Enfield Highway Society, and here fortune smiled because this was the time when Enfield started discussing an amalgamation with the neighbouring Luton Society. Exciting times, particularly because - as we now know - Enfield members ultimately rejected the merger. (4) Professor Banks exploited the entrée into two other Societies, Luton and Northampton. Enfield is an exceptional Co-operative - it has the reputation for attracting and developing ambitious activists, and the "Enfield connection" has long proved an invaluable asset to those seeking high office via what might be described as the more political ladder in the Co-operative ascent. Professor Banks modestly calls his work a "feasibility study" : but can you test feasibility for general application when working on so exceptional a society?

His early enquiries were dogged by non-response from those he sought to survey. He suggests that his experience is so consistent that all enquiries will suffer from the same deficiency - an 11% response rate to an earlier postal enquiry, a 59% response to Board and education committee members (but including, for some unexplained reason, 1 possible recruit to office, and a few past board members, to yield 42 interviews of which only 3 responded to a subsequent request for comment and correction). Not all Co-operative enquiries meet such a level of response - as Dr. Mary Mellor showed in her researches, when she got 89 respondents with very few failures. In the end Professor Banks analysed 23 results, a hodge-podge of board and committee members from three very different societies, asked to put in order of importance seven not mutually exclusive "influences" which they said had prompted their activity. The fact that a result which was not statistically significant was secured does not, of course, mean that the

results were useless.

- into Nottingham Society

Mark Craig, in his M.A. thesis, has successfully undertaken research dealing with Midland Co-operative societies, and in particular the Nottingham Society on which Banks and Ostergaard had previously shone the spotlight. Mark Craig attempts a useful follow up, and produces a number of down-to-earth statistics on attendance at members meetings. The strength of this work lies in its repetition of a number of snapshots of the same societies at different times - a survey design which does not take on the longitudinal analysis of the members and voters in my own studies of London voting patterns (5), but is better than a once-and-for-all approach more usually made. Not enough is, perhaps, made of the meaninglessness of many membership rolls if they are not regularly purged of dead wood (6). In some societies, attendance at meetings is supplemented by policy meetings attended by those belonging to electoral organisations - the blues and whites of Plymouth, "1960" and C.M.A. of London, or the Progressive Co-operators of South-Western C.R.S.

Mr. Craig's work leans fairly heavily on the Nottingham Society. These in-depth studies of a single society over time are useful, but any conclusions must be qualified by the particular characteristics of the society chosen. The Nottingham Society was first dominated by Cyril Forsyth, who stood no nonsense from intervention by the directors. The great majority of the directors of the Society are managers, and as they have to obtain the permission of the chief executive officer before they can stand for the

board, their complete independence must be open to question. If Greater Nottingham Society has now reached the stage where the main purpose of democracy is to elect directors who could be trusted to know best "what is good for the society", this is not true everywhere. In London Society, for instance, the ordinary members expected to have a fairly direct say on such issues as stamps, retention of small shops, and even transfer of engagements - at least to the limited extent that they could be got to the meetings.

Mr. Craig is very uncertain about the possibility of retaining democracy in a C.R.S./Co-op Great Britain kind of structure - but there is evidence in some regions of C.R.S. that democracy can be maintained - there is for instance a better attendance at meetings and better voting for committees in Bristol Region of C.R.S. than in many independent societies. Their local elections have just (June 1981) overturned a long-established power structure on the committee of that region.

- And into North Eastern Society

Dr. Mary Mellor provides the third contribution to recent research on member participation, in her doctoral thesis on the North Eastern societies. She covers ground similar to Mr. Craig's and bases her work on the examination of some of the smaller societies which gave birth to the N.E.C.S.. The weakness of some of this work derives from its long period of gestation, and in the summary too much is made of averages (average sales per member, average shareholding) and other estimates for which we now have figures showing variations about the average and precise figures. (8) It would have been helpful if a more detailed (and, albeit,

subjective) analysis could have been made between the policy making by the Board and the professional management of the officials. Service on the Board shows that the layman has a contribution to make, and it does no harm for a chief officer to have to think about some of his problems so as to be able to present a convincing argument for the action which he proposes. (9) That is the way both national and local government work, with effectiveness not to be despised - although it is fashionable to do so.

Dr. Mary Mellor's fieldwork was undertaken as long ago as 1973, and in recent times member participation has reached a low ebb, despite the efforts being made in difficult terrain. Attendance at meetings, the minimum criterion for participation in the decision making process. Attendances of less than 300 are really not acceptable in Britain's second largest retail society with a membership approaching half a million. (10) But it is the timing which is the main problem - the study would have been so much more useful if facilities had been available to get it out earlier.

On the positive side, Dr. Mellor does at least attempt to allow for the time dimension - the period between joining a Co-operative society and achieving high office in it, for instance; the concept of joining and dropping out, rather than holding office at a particular time. She also distinguishes the crucial difference between the expressed reason for activation, and the real one. Like Professor Banks', her enquiries were launched at an interesting stage in the local Co-operative society's history - just after the North Eastern Society was going through the trauma of picking itself up from an amalgamation of a multitude of tiny, mostly nearly bankrupt, Co-operative societies.

The Next Stage?

Where do we go from here? All these studies are interesting stories of Co-operatives at a particular time and place. We now need a more rigorously scientific enquiry based on a carefully framed pre-tested survey, with specifically delimited boundaries, a sample large enough to provide a statistically significant validation of particular hypotheses, yet small enough to be effectively followed up, so that an uncertain (and therefore biased) response rate is avoided: non-response being the bugbear of work in this area.

If we put these enquiries into their proper setting, they will help Co-operators to respond to the challenge which Hedley Whitehead made to Congress this year - to involve our membership, if the Co-operative difference is not to be submerged. We must develop new cohorts of Co-operators, weaning them from the addictions of "the box".

We most of us know the risks of small samples: if you toss a coin five times in a row, you have a 3% chance of getting all heads, without a double-headed coin. But the risks of results made useless by bias in response rates are not so readily appreciated: activists are not coins; those with a particular point of view may be least likely to respond, and thereby escape analysis.

Of course, we must not be pedantic. I am reminded of the first visit of a sociologist, a statistician and an actuary to the Lake District. Looking out of the train window, the sociologist exclaimed "Look at those sheep! Half the sheep

in the Lake District are black!" "Come, come" said the statistician, "all you can say is that there are some black sheep in the Lake District, and some fields as many as half". The actuary said that such comments were reckless: all one could say was that in one field, half the sheep were black, at least on one side. We should seek the middle way, the statistical approach.

References

1. A.M. Carr-Saunders, P. Sargant, Florence & Robert Peers "Consumers' Co-operation in Great Britain", Allen & Unwin 1938; J.A. Banks and G.N. Ostergaard "Co-operative Democracy", Co-operative College Papers 1955; G.N. Ostergaard and A.H. Halsey "Power in Co-operatives", 1965 Basil Blackwood.
2. Dr. V. Pestoff "Membership Participation in Swedish Consumer Co-operatives" 1979 circulated by London CRS Education Committee 54 Maryland St., E15.
3. "The Society for Co-operative Studies has been formed, it will be a systematic link between the Co-operative Movement and the Universities and colleges for the exchange of information and experience on Co-operative studies and research" Bulletin 1, June 1967
4. Rejected, on the face of it, because of the order in which the names of the two societies were to be listed in the merged society; but in reality perhaps for deeper reasons.
5. Series in "Co-operative News" e.g. "Latest Trends in membership" 2.3.1979 "Measuring the difference" 5.3.1980.

