

# Conservatism and Co-operation

## by Iain Wilton

*Since 1979 there has been rapid growth in various areas of Co-operative and near-Co-operative organisation: for example, among consumers in Housing Co-operatives and Housing Associations and in Worker Co-operatives whose numbers have increased five-fold, with gains being made across all sectors of the economy.*

*In this article I argue that the decline of class consciousness has resulted in the revival rather than the destruction of co-operative ethics in British society.*

The renaissance of the Co-operative movement under this Government will have surprised many of its critics. The revitalisation of co-operative ethics, and their manifestation in both new and revived forms, would appear to rest uneasily with a Government that is condemned at one end of the scale for encouraging a 'materialistic individualism' and, at the other, for permitting - indeed facilitating - the expansion of multinational companies, so hated by the Left. Little credit has been given to our attempts to revivify intermediary forms of organisation, or to our emphasis on the responsibilities that are commensurate with rights at all levels of society.

### Conservatism and Co-operative Values

Such criticism of Conservative intent has been as unimaginative as it has been unconstructive. Critics have conveniently - and lazily - resorted to deliberate inversions of Conservative intent and to inevitable rejoinders of class consciousness. The co-operative ethic was seized upon as one of those out-dated 'Victorian values', apparently irrelevant to the late twentieth century, that survived to the embarrassment of a Government committed to modernisation, and a party identified with the interests of 'big business'. Typically the issue was seen in terms of a value that was out-dated, rather than one which was of enduring relevance. Arguments of class were introduced in order to substantiate the claim that the Co-operative movement would meet its executioner in the form of the Thatcher government. Would not 'the party of the bosses' administer the final blows to a form of organisation that seemed to demonstrate their dispensability?

Such assumptions misjudged Conservatism in both its most traditional and its most modern guises, and attempted to attribute to it the flaws of its opponents. Conservatism by its very nature entails the preservation of what is best in life,

of which the co-operative ethics of self-help and mutual assistance are a major part. It does, moreover, deny the existence of stark class-based divisions within society; in this respect all Conservatives are indeed of the 'One Nation' variety. To this, the 'new Conservatism' has added the confidence not only to preserve the best instincts and institutions within society, but to recapture them where they have been lost. Procedural Conservatism has indeed been replaced by a Conservatism that is simultaneously both substantive and innovative. Nowhere has this been clearer than in its attempts to convince the whole spectrum of society of its common objectives, and of the benefits of co-operating in order to better attain them.

### **Failure of Mr Benn's Intervention**

It was the denial of these realities that left the Co-operative Movement and, indeed the British economy of which it is a microcosm, in such a perilous state by the late 1970s. Tony Benn's attempts to inject new vitality into the Co-operative Movement had failed, and done so on both an economic and political level. Its economic failure was unsurprising and consistent with the course of Labour's overall economic policy; its political failure was more significant for, whilst an act of intervention itself, it represented an attempt to add a new dimension and a new sense of purpose to this interventionist policy.

Benn intended it to be a means of breaking from the constraints of an industrial policy that hardly broke new ground and, indeed, represented merely a more willing implementation of the policies followed by Heath's Conservative Government. It was grounded in oppositional as much as in radical politics, and as a consequence, its failure further relegated co-operative ethics to the periphery of British politics. Benn's goal of a more participative political economy had received the first of its many defeats.

### **Common Objectives and Co-operation towards Them**

It was against this background of failure that, far from burying the goal of economic participation, the Conservative Party sought to give it new life, imparting to it the kind of populism that its very nature requires. One of Benn's errors had been to appeal over the heads only of existing elites to a newly-emerging and self-appointed 'elite' - the shop stewards. Conservative populism has gone further: it has bypassed *all* elites and imparted the values of economic and social participation and co-operation to those people who have to make them work. Indeed it has not so much imparted a new value as revitalised an old virtue. It has helped it emerge in new forms and adapt to changed circumstances, but its principles have been the same: those of common purpose, and of responsibility to others as well as to oneself. Concern for dependants and independence have triumphed over a paralysing dependence

on the State. The State is still there as a platform and a partner, but not as a panacea.

### **In the Economic Sphere -**

The Government has, however, been keen to promote co-operation rather than impose it. Indeed, one of the Left's fundamental errors is to believe that co-operation can be successfully imposed from above; it cannot, as the failure of the Social Contract made so abundantly clear. Companies, like communities, differ widely in terms of what they can afford and what they can implement successfully. Hence Conservatives have opposed the introduction of universalised and statutory systems of employee participation on either a national or an international basis. This is not to say that the Government has not encouraged such participation: eight of the last nine budgets have included measures to encourage people to purchase shares in the company in which they work. Small businesses, too, have received more help from this Government than from any other, and the dramatic growth of this sector of the economy has justified the Government's faith in more active forms of economic participation.

### **- And the Social**

Not that the co-operative ethic is or should be applied only to the economic sphere: Conservatism believes in a more wide-ranging diffusion of responsibilities. Parents, for example, have never enjoyed such an important role in the educational system. Information, participation and representation have never been more freely available to them. The Education Reform Act will take this process further. Industry too is more actively involved in education: 'compacts' and City Technology Colleges are fine examples of the two co-operating to mutual advantage. New housing legislation will give further support to housing associations and encourage the co-operation of public and private sectors. Council tenants will be able to take over the management of their own estates by forming Co-operatives with their neighbours.

The privatisation programme has recognised and responded to the benefits of employee participation: the example of the former National Freight Corporation is a source of particular pride. More than four-fifths of the issued share capital is now in the hands of the company's employees, pensioners or their families. Fifty thousand Neighbourhood Watch schemes involve people in the fight against crime. 'Active citizenship' is merely one of the latest labels to be applied to the policies of a government that has always emphasised the need to balance rights with responsibilities.

## **The Co-operative Ethic Flourishes**

The co-operative ethic is indeed flourishing in the late 1980s and importantly is doing so as a matter of public preference rather than last resort. The regard in which the self-employed are held is infinitely higher than just ten years ago. Co-operation is viewed positively and seen in terms of its benefits rather than as a temporary betrayal of an imaginary 'class struggle'. There is indeed a natural and growing 'identity of interest' in the country as a whole: values are being shared across a wider spectrum of society than at any time in the post war period. The values of business have, for example, been imparted to those who are dependent upon it: 'business unionism' is a growth industry. There should be nothing surprising about this, only that it hasn't happened before.

It is this Government's achievement to have fostered co-operation and participation in society to economic and social advantage, and it has done so by the only means possible - by encouragement and inducement rather than by legislation. The Left's fundamental flaw is that its electoral strategy depends on a class consciousness that is declining, and its political strategy upon threats and compulsion that have been shown to create precisely that antagonism and conflict of interest that makes co-operation ineffective or even impossible.

In interpreting past (and present) in terms of class and class conflict, the Left has been guilty of propounding a vision of society that has been self-fulfilling when it has been in office. In so doing it increasingly condemns itself to impotence. The sooner it actually confronts questions of co-operation and participation in its own affairs, the sooner it will truly be able to adjust to the new realism about such questions in society outside.

### **The Author**

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