



Reviews *By Jonathan Hill*

Political Decisions

“A Short History of the London Co-op Society Political Committee” is the subtitle of a 61 page account by Stan Newens. It concerns political initiatives taken by groups of London Co-operators. The booklet is published by CRS (London) Political Committee, price £1.95, and its main title is “Working Together”.

The story spans the period from the birth of the Co-operative Party and the formation of London Co-op through both wars into the post war era. It continues with the period of the Wilson Government and its “aftermath” into the 1970’s and 1980’s. Alf Barnes, Percy Hanwell, Sybil White, Percy Bell, Frank Beswick and Alf Lomas are among the figures whose background and careers are featured in special “boxed” sections of the text.

Decline in Mass Appeal

A high point in the efforts to achieve mass mobilisation was the Wembley Pageant held in July 1938 to celebrate International Co-operative Day at which 65,000 people were present. As the author points out, this was a measure of the impact of the London Co-operative Society on pre-Second World War Londoners. Yet there had been early struggles. For example, some members of the former Stratford Co-operative Reform Society attacked leaders of the new London Society not only for the “folly of amalgamation” but also for “offending potential customers by their political commitments”. Moreover, in the 1930’s there was rivalry between the London Co-operative Members’ Organisation and the LCS Electoral Organisation. However, it was the relative affluence of the late 1960’s which saw a decline in mass appeal, and this was accompanied by infighting between the left and the right. For example in 1967 at the Annual Conference of the London Co-operative Party, Leyton’s resolution congratulated the Wilson Government on its good work. An amendment from Bow regretted “the traditional capitalist method of deflation and calculated unemployment”. This amendment was defeated by 67 votes to 57, and the original motion carried.

Broader Issues

On a broader front there were many large scale campaigns against Common Market membership, and against American intervention in Vietnam. Efforts were made to encourage the development of good relations with Eastern Europe. A specific example mentioned is the publication of an interview between the author and President Ceausescu of Romania.

Despite setbacks, such as the abolition of the GLC, a good record had been achieved in consistent support for Peace issues and the Women's Movement. In his concluding lines Stan Newens acknowledges that "in some respects the Labour Party and Trade Unions have been insensitive to the concerns of ordinary people as the consumers and users of publicly provided services".

Sensitivity to consumer attitudes and needs, implies Newens, is a quality which the Co-operative Movement could help spread through the rest of the Labour Movement. The unanswered question is which policy to pursue when consumer attitudes differ from traditional socialist values: confrontation, education, or accommodation?

In a "**Handbook for Secretaries of Co-operatives**" by Peter Cockerton about 78 pages are devoted to the administrative specifics which are involved in registering, running, changing and, if necessary, winding up Co-operatives. A further 20 pages provide information on references, useful addresses and the index. The whole is published by ICOM Co-publications, price £4.95.

There are decision points at every turn of the page, and numerous opportunities are provided incidentally for students of algorithmic techniques to practice their skills. For example:

"If the members of a management committee allow a Co-op to continue trading when they know it to be insolvent they risk losing their personal limited liability and may be required to make a contribution to the debts and liabilities of the Co-op.

To safeguard themselves the members of a management committee should seek urgent professional advice if they suspect that their Co-op may be insolvent. If they are advised to cease trading they should take immediate steps to do so".

Types of Constitution

Helpfully the author has summarised at the outset the main differences between the different types of ICOM Model constitution. These are colour coded for easy identification: the white rules, the blue and the yellow. The

selection of suitable rules is perhaps the first political decision erstwhile members of a new Co-operative are likely to make. At any rate it is the first instance where political choice is expressed in small, cold, print.

Under the White Rules registration is the I and P Societies Acts. Whereas under the Blue and Yellow Rules the Companies Act applies. There are many subsequent important differences in structure and decision making.

Cockerton's book is notable for the useful range of specimen documentation, and impressive in the thorough attention given to ICOM procedures. Questions drawn from the 5 short chapters would create a challenging checklist to vet candidates for jobs in CDA's', or prospective Parliamentary candidates!

The Author

Dr. JONATHAN HILL is Director of Studies at the Co-operative College.