
Where Have Co-operative Values Gone?

by T.N. Bottomley

Where have all the flowers gone? And for that matter the values that nourished them?

This past Christmas I was given a gem of a present: a book of old photographs of Trowbridge – my home town. A book capable of evoking much nostalgic recollection and sharply stimulating a faltering memory. Trowbridge was not only the place where I grew up; it was also where, at the age of 14, I got my first job – with the local Co-op. In those days, for a working class lad, it was a proud distinction to work for the Co-op, you had a good secure job for life. Or so we thought. After the war my employers sent me to the Co-operative College for two years to help me pursue a life-time Co-operative career. Trowbridge in old photos had to include the Co-op.

Co-operation in Trowbridge: Then

And sure enough it did. One had a caption full of poignant accuracy, despite the fact that the authors got a date wrong. It was of the old central premises. A grand, if utilitarian, building in Bath stone which for half-a-century had housed the main departments of the leading commercial enterprise in the town. The caption said: "When the picture was taken it still had its proud description in projecting stone letters, cut when the store was built in 1865: Trowbridge Co-operative Industrial and Provident Society Ltd. This was laboriously scraped off by the then Co-op authorities in the 1960's as representing an image they wanted to be rid of." (Actually 1865 was the year the society was founded. The store was built early this century.)

The Dominance of the Society –

"Wanted to be rid of"? Whatever the intentions of the scraping vandals they certainly succeeded in destroying the "image". Unfortunately the reality went with it. Right up to the 1960's the Trowbridge Co-op had dominated the commercial life of the town and district. Five modern stone-built branches, as well as the central emporium served the local population. Other branches served the local villages. For the working people of Trowbridge and district the Co-op was the universal – and for many the only considered – provider. Its grocery, bread, milk, and coal delivery vehicles were familiar visitors in every street. In many every house would be served.

On the old castle site in the centre of town the Co-op had its productive and servicing complex: dairy, bakery, buildings maintenance unit, stables, garage and vehicle servicing, warehouses, boot and shoe repair workshop, cold stores, and slaughterhouse. (This site is currently being developed as a major shopping complex.) On the fringes of the town two farms owned by the society sent milk into the dairy and produce to the shops. The society's head office was a gracious Georgian mansion occupying a prestigious site just off the town centre. In its well-kept gardens, adjacent to the town park, the annual Co-operative Day fetes and picnics were held. Another photograph in the book was of the children – including me – at the picnic in 1930.

– *And its Efficiency*

Altogether a proud and (note it please) efficient commercial enterprise founded and funded by Trowbridge working people – and controlled by them. It was not, of course, unique. One of the best obviously (Trowbridge is after all in Wiltshire) but not unique. A thousand other flowers more or less flourished in the Co-op garden up and down the land. Symbols of the people's capacity and will to do things for themselves, to do them well, and to build for the future.

Generations before Margaret Thatcher and her version of a "property-owning democracy" were ever heard of, Co-ops like Trowbridge were successful practitioners of democratic people's enterprise. An enterprise in which the members raised their own capital. In Trowbridge in 1936 the average shareholding was £30 – the equivalent of £650 at today's prices!

Co-operation in Trowbridge: Now

But there came a time of which we are all too well aware. A time of rapid and drastic change in the distributive economy. The Co-operative Movement sought to respond to that situation and appointed the Independent Inquiry Commission to recommend on future policy development. What flowed from that decision, the erroneous conclusions reached, and the policy attitudes they created sounded the death knell for local Co-ops like Trowbridge. Because what was advocated and what became, and still is, official national policy was merger. The creation of great regional Co-operatives capable (it was said) of ensuring the future development of the movement. Community-based Co-ops had no place in this vision; size, turnover, centralised management, were to become the guiding rules.

Independent Commission – and Policy of Mergers

Merge or die became the watch-word. Amalgamation, transfer of engagements, economies of scale, professional management were the panaceas preached. The pundits (of doom for the "small" societies and of a glorious future for the

great monoliths to be created) harassed and harangued local Co-op leaders. National officials, as they do to this day ("When will they ever learn?"), occupied themselves full-time in arguing and working for ever larger societies. The dream of many is one national Co-operative – a project still actively pursued.

But the result is that, in Trowbridge, the Co-op has virtually disappeared. There remains but one concrete-built dry-goods store with a cracked fascia (owned by whom and managed from where?) which is something of a local joke since it appears to be in a permanent condition of "sale". The rest has gone. Not just the business, the shops, the service – the presence, the ethos, the reality of a peoples' enterprise, and the work of a century, all is lost. Was it inevitable? Perhaps: we shall never know. What is irrefutable is that Trowbridge Co-op – like so many others – was merged and merged again and merged again and is gone. It merged AND died and with it died Co-operative enterprise in one Wiltshire town. The flower died, the desert, as in so many other places, has taken over.

Contrast in Radstock –

Though just 12 miles away, over the Somerset border, a bloom persists. The Radstock Co-op with eight thousand plus members and sales approaching nine million pounds a year still proudly serves the local community. Co-operative membership, Co-operative service, Co-operative democracy remain a reality in Radstock. The committee and members of that society have kept their identity and with it their own community enterprise. No one has scraped the proud designation of Radstock Co-op from the portals of their premises. Throughout all the difficult years they have resisted the advocacies of those who would have urged them to a different destiny. And, unlike Trowbridge, survived. They even still have their own farm, and sell their own milk!

– And Similarity in Hitchin

In the late 1960's I came to live in Hitchin. By that time the old local Co-op had already disappeared into the embrace of Co-operative Retail Services and dismemberment was well underway. But there was still plenty of evidence around of the past achievements of Co-operative enterprise. There was still a Co-op grocery supermarket and a furnishing store in the town centre though the branches and other property had been sold off. You could still get Co-op milk and use the Co-op bank.

Today there is nothing left – except memory in the minds of a few old timers. This prosperous market town has become another Co-op desert. You would have to travel many miles to search out a Co-operative foodstore.

Fate of the Co-operative Assets?

That is one side of this unhappy story. The flowers have died. But were they – or some of them – killed? And what has happened to the collectively-owned assets built up over a century of Co-operative enterprise? Well, let me be cautious. Murder is a serious allegation. It assumes malicious intent. Folly not wickedness, error not intention, obsession not calculation are more sustainable explanations. But what of theft and embezzlement?

While I was in Trowbridge at Xmas an old ex-Co-operative Women's Guild member asked me what had become of the valuable assets which were once the property of the members of the Trowbridge Co-op. I had no answer – in the coffers of Co-operative Retail Services perhaps? Lost in some vainglorious enterprise in a distant town? Invested in a hyper-market on the fringes of some northern city? I don't know. But it's a fair question.

In 1965 the Trowbridge Society had almost half a million pounds in share capital much of which has no doubt been withdrawn. But what of the property hugely and deliberately under-valued at just under a quarter of a million pounds which would be worth many tens of millions of pounds now? Where are the proceeds of its sale? Who owns it now? Who or what has had the good fortune to become the beneficiary of these collective savings it took Trowbridge Co-op members a century to accumulate? And likewise with the sale of property in Hitchin – and a hundred other places where the flowers have died. Wherever the act of merger has resulted, finally, in the total disappearance of Co-operative enterprise.

Again it's necessary to be cautious in these speculations. Theft? No, it's far too harsh a verdict. Embezzlement? Legally, of course not. But morally? I suppose it's a matter of how far you might consider the removal of assets would be justified by the acceptance of resolutions urged upon members' meetings, often made up of bare quorums, by the advocates of merger. In any event, we have witnessed (no, that's a weasel-word) – participated in – a "privatisation" programme of such subtlety, skill, and scale as would excite the envy and admiration of Mrs. Thatcher herself.

Loss of Community

It would certainly be understandable if many people thought they had been robbed. I do. And not only of property I once proudly shared. But of my opportunity to belong to, to share in, to participate in, to help direct and build a Co-operative I can identify with because it's part of my community. That I cannot feel about any regional, much less national, society. That is the error people made all those years ago when we first began to confront the changing

circumstances of the distributive economy and became frightened at the prospect of not being able to survive.

In our anxiety, and to our shame, we ignored a philosophy which had spoken to us in terms of democracy and equity, community and fellowship, self-help and self-reliance. We succumbed to the blandishments of those who, in the fashion of the day, favoured large-scale organisation, remote bureaucracy, "scientific" management, and paternal administration. We even forgot that while economies of scale and national-level action were, and are, undoubtedly necessary objectives, the Co-operative device of federation made these attainable without loss of local autonomy. Or so I was taught.

Foundation of Co-operation

We forgot or ignored that Co-ops are founded in community, in neighbourhoods, and draw their strength from the solidarity of community and a common sense of purpose between neighbours. That a people's enterprise, by definition, has to belong, and be felt to belong, to the people engaged in it. Membership has to be sustained by the reality of ownership and the consequent ability to control. Caring and sharing has to be a direct and meaningful communal experience – not an advertising slogan.

In fright, if not ignorance, the Co-operative leadership searched for and selected a commercial solution instead of a Co-operative solution. For some it carried the comforting undertones of socialist paternalism – doing things FOR people through a form of social ownership based on the concepts of "providing" and "leadership". For others it simply, and sensibly, gave the managers control. For many, in the event, it ended their participation in Co-operative enterprise. That, perhaps is why, if not where, the flowers have gone. Though it is no explanation of the disappearance of the material and moral assets which once sustained them.

Any Way Forward?

There is no road back. But is there a way forward? If there is, it is not on the path we presently follow. There is something to be said for living dangerously; but the precipice is not an attractive destination. Perhaps the time has come when we should seek some new guides. But be more cautious about choosing them.

The Society for Co-operative Studies – despite its so far uncritical support for "official" policy – is where speculation should begin. In one way or another both people as members (in the fullest sense of ownership and control) and

community as focus – not to say Co-operation – have to be restored to Co-operative enterprise. Perhaps something useful could be learned in Radstock.

The Author

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