

Plaid Cymru and Co-operation

by Dafydd Wigley M.P.

Members of Plaid Cymru have been involved in many Co-operative ventures over the years. Most of them have been producer Co-operatives – in farming, the dairy industry and manufacturing. At one stage the party secured the agreement of the miners in Cwmllynfell, West Glamorgan, to run their pit – earmarked for closure – as a Co-operative, but the plans were unfortunately scuppered by the Coal Board. Other members of the party have been involved in consumer – mostly housing – Co-operatives.

This practical involvement goes hand in hand with party policy which firmly supports Co-operatives of all kinds.

Plaid Cymru Policy

Scores of Conference resolutions have supported various aspects of the Co-operative movement. The most comprehensive policy statement on the subject was a Resolution on Industrial Democracy accepted at the party conference in 1980. This advocated a system under which any enterprise employing 100 people or more would be required to transform itself into a Co-operative.

The main emphasis again was on producer Co-operatives but the need for a partnership between producer and consumer – and the community at large – was recognised. Consumer safeguards were built into the scheme by insisting that consumer and local community interests must be represented on the Co-operative's management board. Additional measures to safeguard the general public interest were built in with regard to industries or services vital to the national economy or generally accepted social policy.

Control by People not Money

The thrust of our argument is a rejection of the capitalist system in which money controls people – their livelihoods, their lives. In our view, people should control and use money rather than be controlled by it. This involves moving away from the system of stocks and shares – a system which can so easily become a gamble or a lottery in which the players have no real interest in the success of the venture in which they invest their money. Their only concern so often is to make a fat profit for themselves.

Enterprises, of course, will need to raise capital and those prepared to lend it should be given a fair return – which may vary according to the level of risk

involved. That, however, should not give the lenders ownership and control of a company. That elevates the financial gain of the investor above the needs of people whose livelihood is directly involved as workers in the enterprise and above the interests of the consumers who may depend on the product or service concerned. It is they, not the investor, who pay for the product – by their labour or their purchasing power. It is they, too, who pay the investor, possibly at the expense of inflated prices and/or depressed wages.

The Small Man

It would be wrong to squeeze out personal inventiveness and initiative. We recognise that individual initiators or entrepreneurs can help create employment and improve the economy. They can have a significant impact, however, only on relatively small enterprises, which is why we suggest that only those employing 100 people or more should be required to transform themselves into Co-operatives. It may, of course, be desirable to vary the figure or take other criteria into consideration.

Even in these smaller enterprises we would want to see a statutory requirement to ensure that worker and consumer representatives sit on management boards and that workers participate in profits.

It may be asked whether such a system would be acceptable to foreign investors or multi-national companies. My experience leads me to believe that it would, as they would see the advantage of letting out franchises, for an appropriate return, to Co-operatives to manufacture products or provide services to their specification and subject to their quality control. By withdrawing from direct involvement in the manufacturing process or provision of service they would be relieved of the industrial relations problems with which many find difficulty in coping in an unfamiliar environment.

Traditions of Wales

Plaid Cymru's commitment to Co-operatives is not surprising as it is an important part of our national heritage in Wales. Welshman Robert Owen was one of the pioneers of the Co-operative movement, our University was created by the co-operative effort of manual workers rather than by state or private patronage and the South Wales Miners Federation supported a Co-operative type of syndicalism before it was swallowed by the NUM.

The Co-operative ideal – indeed the Co-operative imperative – lies much deeper in Welsh history than Robert Owen. Welsh laws, codified by Hywel Dda over 1,000 years ago, laid down that on his death a man's possessions were divided equally among all his children (female as well as male). If he died

without heirs his possessions were divided amongst his “tylwyth” – his tribe or extended family.

This led to the wide diffusion of wealth and power in Wales in stark contrast to the concentration of wealth and power which took place in England under the Norman French practice of primogeniture. Under such a system substantial enterprises could be undertaken by the decree of a wealthy landowner. In Welsh society, such enterprises could be undertaken only by co-operation between free men of roughly equal standing.

It was the kings of England who waged war against the Welsh. It was an agglomeration of local Welsh tribal units who waged war against England. The irony, of course, is that when Wales eventually won that centuries-old battle – in Bosworth in 1485 – a Welshman became King of England and soon tried to supplant Welsh traditions with English ones. Take note, Neil Kinnock!

Synthesis of Individual and Community Needs

Perhaps it is because of our history, therefore, that we regard co-operation as the most acceptable form of social endeavour. A society based solely on the rights of the individual leads to greed and aggression, domination by the few at the expense of the many. Alternatively, society which denies individual rights and freedoms leads to a bureaucratic form of domination which sets in train a dehumanising process. The only way to synthesise the needs of the individual and those of the community is through the medium of co-operation. To be effective, that co-operation should be in relatively small units where the individual can actually influence the society in which he lives and by doing so enrich both himself and society as a whole.

The same principles apply to the life of nations. There must be a balance between the rights and freedoms of individual nations and the society of nations throughout the world. Without such a balance the more powerful nations seek to dominate others – in political, economic or cultural terms. Love of country becomes distorted into jingoism or imperialism, and that is a warning nationalists, in particular, must heed.

The antithesis to that, the creation of an international bureaucracy which seeks to make life easy for itself by eradicating national differences and identities, thus producing a drab uniformity, is also unacceptable. The only sensible way of arranging international affairs is by means of co-operation among free nations, sharing equal rights and respecting each other's differences. In such a world nationalism and internationalism are interdependent, as the individual and the society in which he lives are interdependent.

A small nation like Wales has no option but to support co-operation. Without it we go to the wall, whether under the pressure of dominant individual nations or that of some form of international bureaucracy, or of supra-national corporations.

Co-operation and the practice of co-operation within living Co-operatives is not only a deeply-rooted tradition which we have inherited in Wales, not only a policy statement emanating from political and social idealism, it is an imperative without which Wales cannot survive.

The Author

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