

A Co-operative Policy Unit

by Gladys Bunn

Emerging from the sidelines of Co-operative involvement for a rare brief foray into public discussion, unbelievably raises the heartbeat - sets the adrenalin racing and causes a nervous clutching of Roget's masterpiece - just in case!

Compulsory removal from the centre scene of Co-operative affairs has resulted in at least one blessed relief - from the avalanche of Co-operative words, repetitive agendas, committee minutes (some I swear written before meetings are convened!) and Reports on every conceivable Co-operative topic under the sun, each uncannily resembling the others, both in layout and content.

The jumble ensuing from Co-operative involvement can jangle the nerves and deaden sweet reasoning. Freedom from it allows a modicum of free thinking and a widening of ideas.

What the reader may ask has any of this to do with National Services for Retail Societies?

Well, it has this to do with it.

The Present Condition

Historically, within the ranks of the national agencies there have been tensions and misconceptions. There have been divisions and clashes of personalities mostly springing from the use or misuse of words, from understanding and misunderstanding of objectives and from apprehensions and misapprehensions of discussions. In the Co-operative sector central services are intertwined with democratic structures and after a century and a half the organisation has been strangled by committees and its development restricted by democratic contortions. Consequently current national services have become mundane, static and to some extent irrelevant.

There is the need, of course, for basic services to retail societies on a regular basis in a number of areas.

There is the need for specialist review and assessment of current national and European legislation - legislation which impacts upon the wide scope of retailing. There is the need for intervention and representation on behalf of

Co-operative retailing within the Parliamentary arena. There is the need for assistance in legal and economic affairs. There is the need for specialist attention to industrial relations, to staff training and to member services. There is also the need for cohesive publicity and advertising.

But it must be questioned whether the Movement - structured as it is with 80% of the total business being conducted by a few very large autonomous societies, mostly able to provide such services from within their own administration - will continue to sustain the luxury of a complex, committee-based organisation to provide these overall services.

It might be suggested that a compact, well-briefed trade association could undertake a similar service function just as effectively at a fraction of the cost.

The Prospect of 1993

It is time then for a radical rethink about how best to serve the needs of the Co-operative retail movement - whether, on the one hand, it is to persist in operating within the framework of fragmented autonomous components or, on the other hand, will develop coherent practical, realistic services to match the current range of requirements within the rapidly changing retail environment.

The timely intervention of Albrecht Schöne in the January 1990 Journal (No. 67), underlines the challenge facing consumer Co-operatives, not only in the UK but right across Europe with the prospect of the 1993 Internal Market. His vivid description of the two-way thrust by UK and European multi-national enterprises already poised to pluck the rich retailing pickings, will leave the UK Co-op 'starkers' unless some devilishly quick thinking and action is taken within the Co-operative sector.

We have been whistling in the wind for two or three decades with our interminable wrangling about how best to create the muscle to combat local and national competition within the industry - we won't stand an earthly in the enlarged arena.

We won't stand an earthly chance because we are small - small in stature, small in practice and small in vision. We boast of membership numbers and of democracy - yet only about .01% of the membership takes any part in the democratic procedures and I doubt if half of that flimsy number knows or cares what makes the business tick. Most of the staff think of their role as counterpart to those working for the 'other' multiples and management is so

immersed in producing the best figures and marking out potential market share that the Co-operative difference might just as well not exist.

Challenge - and Response

Albrecht Schöne got it right when he says '... local and national markets will no longer be protected by geographical borders . . . private competitors on a multinational level are already organised to inflict ruinous competition and those who do not recognise this reality will soon have a painful awakening.'

The asset base of our fragmented organisation is still enormous - the collective strength of capital and management skills is incalculable. Together they equate to a potential force capable of matching the tenacity of any competition.

And yet there has been a determination to resist national development strategies almost at any price. What development has taken place has mostly been achieved on a hit-and-miss basis. We have no overall marketing strategy and we compete in a haphazard fashion. We have no national shop strategy and there is no link to attract membership into a national entity. There is no cohesion in our mode of operation.

A central agency to co-ordinate national marketing policies still appeals to me as the most effective method of maximising our trading strength and ensuring the survival of Co-operative consumer enterprise into the 2000's and onwards.

If private competitors within the retailing industry see unmistakable potential within the global arena, so must the Co-operative sector widen its horizons and abilities to harvest some of the benefits and so the need for immediate *strategic thinking* is imperative. Not through the usual channels culminating in inertia. Not through long winded wearisome committees which straitjacket development and stifle bright ideas.

A Co-operative Policy Unit?

A completely new formula has to be devised - something entirely radical and from where I stand, impartial and unvested, I see the merit in the creation of a *Co-op Cabinet - a Policy Unit - a core Policy Group*, comprising some eight to ten people with expertise in policy areas.

It will have a wide ranging brief with an *Agenda for Change* to meet new conditions.

It will be highly aware of *Opposing Concepts* within the Movement and will be required to tease out solutions by challenging these.

It will examine what has been *Achieved* and *Future Expectations*.

It will restate *Co-operative Philosophy* in the 1990's.

It will *Challenge Attitudes* and *Scrutinise Practices*.

It will be aware of *Shrinking Resources* and *Complacency*.

It will require *Departmental Input* and react to *Market Signals*.

It will formulate *Clear Objectives* and *Performance Targets*.

It will undertake an *Assessment of Skills* and make provision for *Training Special Advisors*.

It will scrutinise current *Management Practice* and *Division of Services*.

It will create strategies for *Development, Marketing* and *Mode of Operation*.

It will co-ordinate *Publicity Programmes*.

It will initiate *Radical Reforms* and recommend *New Dimensions* for consumer Co-operatives.

It will fire the *Latent Potential*.

It will have *Direct Power*.

It will be *Accountable* either to Congress or a Special Conference of Societies.

Who will have the courage to initiate the establishment of the Co-operative Policy Unit?

Unless we move towards a national vertically integrated organisation, operating to high standards, pursuing a unified set of objectives aimed at maximising Co-operative trade penetration and profitability, we will miss the great

opportunity of 1993 and moreover the future of the UK consumer Co-operative movement will almost certainly be in jeopardy.

The Author

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