



Newsletter *By Peter Clarke*

The Co-operative Bank has won a prestigious 'equal opportunities' award from the Institute of Training and Development along with British Telecom and the BBC. The Institute was set up in 1964 to promote good practice in employee training. The judges from the Institute and the Equal Opportunities Commission said that the Co-operative Bank's Equal Opportunities Programme showed awareness and understanding among managers of the practices as well as the policies to support equal opportunities.

Terry Thomas, Managing Director, received the award from Lady Platt of Writtle. He commented "Equal opportunities are a major part of our Mission Statement. I personally believe that everyone, both men and women, should be encouraged to fulfil their potential."

New Moves at CRS

CRS is to become a "bona fide" Co-operative society. The changes are coming about on the instructions of the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies.

We have all read the headlines in the *Co-operative News* but what does it mean to the members and to other Co-operators? Three CWS board members are to give up their seats, if the rule changes are approved and three extra members will be elected from regional committees. The new rules should become operational in June. Whilst CRS says that this will make it the largest independent Co-operative society, with the stress on the word "independent" what has the CWS link given to CRS over the years?

The origins of CRS dictated that the CWS owned and controlled the society, but as independent societies were absorbed the individual members who became members of CRS as a result, were given a say. The current structure dates back to 1985 when 23 Sectional committees were created in CRS. From them 6 Directors were elected to the main board, and the other 6 places on that board were taken up by CWS nominees.

Sectional committees report to the members. The main board reports to a delegate meeting drawn partly from elected members' representatives, and partly from the Sectional committees. Members have no opportunity of directly electing directors; it is an indirect, delegate, system.

And the Prospects Now?

Harry Moore CEO of CRS was obviously delighted, and talked of a "coming of age". Sir Dennis Landau, CEO of the CWS, seemed more cautious. He said that merger would have been the better option, but in the absence of merger the best course was for the two Societies "to move in parallel, rather than CWS appearing to control CRS."

But will it? And what will it mean on the issue of control of CWS? And what mileage is there in the John Anderson plan (see Journal 70) for a rationalisation of trading operations?

Some rejected the CWS/CRS merger on the grounds of democracy. But others have argued that there is just as much democracy for individual members within CWS as within CRS.

Women and the Co-op

A new organisation has been set up to ginger up the Co-op movement in the interests of women. Called *Women and the Co-op* it had its origins at the CRS London Region fringe meeting at the Co-op Party conference. It is focused on getting younger women involved with the Co-operative Women's Guild, increasing representation by women on Co-op and Co-op Party committees, and getting more women Co-op Councils and women Co-op MPs and MEPs. Now the Co-op Party will be publishing a collection of articles written by members of *Women and the Co-op*.

For further information contact Liz Atkins at the Co-operative Union Parliamentary Office, 36 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP. (071-233 2355.)

Workers' Co-ops Policy

Moves are afoot to revise and update the policy of workers' Co-operatives with a view to submitting the final document to the Labour Party, as a possible future government. Representatives of the Co-operative Union Central Executive and Parliamentary Committee, Co-operative Party NEC, the Co-operative Parliamentary Group, CRS Political Committee, Industrial Common Ownership Finance (ICOF), Industrial Common Ownership Movement (ICOM) and Scottish Co-operatives Development Committee met twice recently to review policy.

The Parliamentary Secretary of the Co-operative Union, John Tilley, informed the meeting that following talks last year between ICOM and the Central Executive, the Co-operative Union now regarded ICOM as the lead organisation on workers' Co-ops. ICOM is also a member of the UK Co-operative Council.

The Scottish Co-operatives Development Committee, which is also a member of the UKCC, commented that there was a distinct Scottish point of view. They did not regard ICOM as representative of this point of view. Equally the Welsh workers' Co-ops had a distinct line.

Once a statement has been produced, endorsement will be sought from all the organisations involved before it is sent to the Labour Party.

Update on Hungary

I wrote about the position in Hungary in my *Newsletter* in Journal 70. Friends tell me that the Government's ambitious timetable for legislative change has not been met.

The Co-operatives and Land Act is still to be presented to the Hungarian Parliament. Last autumn the Hungarian government hoped to table the bill in November but ran into political problems. The Constitution Court ruled that the Government had first to consider the general issue of compensation for all property owners dispossessed following the Communist take over in 1949. This Bill is now being discussed by the Hungarian Parliament and the Co-operatives and Land Act should follow hard on its heels. Details of its likely contents remain sketchy. Apparently the text will only be released once it has been agreed by Parliament. Under our Parliamentary system the texts of Bills are public so that national debate can take place on their contents.

However the hard-line Minister of Agriculture and leader of the Smallholders Party, Mr Ferenc Joseph Najy, has been replaced by a more reasonable member of the Smallholders Party. This took place in a government reshuffle following the taxi-drivers' blockade of the Danube bridges in November. The blockade was a sign of growing discontent with the government's economic policies.

The Smallholders remain part of the ruling coalition government, but it is an open question as to whether they will bring down the government on the Co-operatives and Land Bill, if Mr Najy doesn't like its contents.

Co-operation in Housing

The Co-operative Party has made Co-operation in Housing its special topic for its 1991 annual conference. The aim is to "evangelise" on the topic and to

recruit housing Co-operators to the retail movement. It will become the keynote for Co-operative Party activities at Congress and at the Labour Party conference. A consultation document was issued in the autumn and will now be debated at the Co-operative Party annual conference. A final document will then be produced in line with the debate at conference and the submissions made.

This is a topic on which the Co-operative Party has a good deal of expertise and practical experience. It includes the development of housing Co-operatives, the promotion of tenants' participation in all its forms, more collective approaches to owner occupation and the democratisation of building societies. It also suggests ways in which housing policies can be adapted to take account of the increasing number of elderly in our society. Care in the community must be taken into account when framing housing policy.

The National Federation of Housing Co-operatives in its comprehensive response to the initiative asked, in effect, whether the Co-operative Party was a little wary of Co-operation. "The Co-operative housing movement needs vigorous political policy to make it a real social housing option in this country."

"Co-operation can only be a real choice if options exist and are understood. Many of us joined housing Co-ops because homelessness was the alternative. Many people are interested in Co-operatives but the resources are not there to support and develop them."

All-Party Housing Co-ops Group

The All-Party Housing Co-ops Group has been reconstituted under the chair of Co-op MP Dennis Turner. The group was founded three years ago to lobby for housing Co-ops. Of its officers, then, however, Labour member George Howarth, MP for Knowsley North, is now on the Labour Front bench as part of the housing team, and Sir George Young is now a Minister.

The Group is now working hard on a response to the Housing Corporation's "Strategy for Housing Co-ops". (see Keith Preston's report in Journal 70). It has noted, with disapproval that the Consultation document on the criteria for registration of housing associations was written without any reference to the Housing Corporation's Strategy. A response on the Corporation's Strategy proposals on Service Agencies, Tenant Participation and Co-operative Projects, is also likely.

The Housing Corporation is already implementing some aspects of its Strategy ahead of the completion of the consultation stage. One is to provide

funding, with the Department of the Environment, to the National Federation of Housing Co-ops, over the next three years, for the appointment of a director. The aim is to "strengthen policy formulation, achieve a more stable and clearly defined internal organisation and a higher organisational profile."

Ms Pauline Buchanan Black has now been appointed, and looks likely to prove every bit as dynamic as this specification requires. She has worked with housing Co-ops in Liverpool and was Director of the London Housing Association Training Scheme until early 1990.

Development of the National Federation of Housing Co-operatives

She aims to increase membership of the NFHC by housing Co-ops, improve the services provided to members and raise the organisation's profile by improving lobbying. Line management will be introduced at the NFHC office.

An increase in membership is now more pressing than ever. The London Boroughs Grant Scheme has just announced the withdrawal of its £30,000 grant to the NFHC. This money was used to support Co-ops in London.

Despite the financial ties with the Housing Corporation and the Department of Environment the new director will aim to be effective in changing the current grants regime in favour of Co-ops. "These are unavailable to Co-ops", she told me. "Many Co-ops started by improving a single block or group of homes. The funding regime doesn't help Co-ops because it presupposes a minimum number of dwellings in management which is way above that held by most Co-ops."

Her three months experience as a professional hot air balloonist should come in especially useful in carrying her safely across the ideological divides on these issues!

Will Watkins

Friends and members will be pleased to know that I had a long and chatty letter from Will Watkins recently, one of the Presidents of the Society. Will has now settled into to his new home in Chipping Norton and welcomes visitors. His letter reports a record number of cards and letters at Christmas. "I am keeping pretty well, although growing steadily older."

Indeed, his comments are as perspicacious as ever. On my last visit we discussed the ICA working party on Co-operative Values. "Values?" Will mused. "They seem to want to forget "principles" and replace them with "values".

Long may he flourish to remind the rest of us of the potential of the Co-operative Principles.

The United Kingdom Co-operative Council

Good progress is being made in transforming the Co-operative Forum into the "United Kingdom Co-operative Council". This is the name chosen for the committee which brings together the leaders of the Co-operative sectors in the UK under the chairmanship of Mr. Keith Brading, former Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies. It will be strictly non-political and hopes to attract funding from the Department of Employment. This much has been promised by the Minister Mr Eric Forth MP to Alun Michael MP and Dennis Turner MP, Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Parliamentary Co-operative Group. Indeed, the Group were congratulated by Lloyd Wilkinson Chief Executive and General Secretary of the Co-operative Union, recently for securing this general commitment when the CDA closed down last year.

The UKCC is important to all Co-operators, as it is the embodiment of the sixth ICA Co-operative Principle, *Co-operation between Co-operatives*. Once the constitutional framework is fixed, it is important for the Council to agree a relevant agenda in order to retain the interest of the leaders of the Co-operative Movement. Otherwise, in these troubled times, all are too likely to sink back into the recesses of the problems of their own sectors rather than celebrating and promoting the strength and benefit of the Co-operative Movement as whole.

The Author

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