

# Rochdale Reaffirmed?

by Dr. R.L. Marshall

The presentation of the ICA Project on "Basic Co-operative Values" by its Director, Sven Ake Bööck, in Journal 68 summarised the question to which he and it were devoted in these terms:

"The leading issue of the project can briefly be worded like this: what are the basic Co-operative values for the future and what are the basic Co-operative principles against that background?"

Earlier he indicated his historical approach to that leading issue: "What are the relevant values and principles after some 150 years of Co-operative development? Are the old ones still good or do we have to change them?"

From this formulation, I take it that the enquiry will proceed in some such sequence as the following:

- (a) What were the old "basic Co-operative values"?
- (b) What were the old "basic Co-operative principles" against that background?
- (c) What are the values and principles now?
- (d) What changes, if any, are needed for the future?

My preoccupation here, stimulated by the series of articles on the Project in Journals 68, 69 and 70 is with the first question and perhaps there is more than superficial aptness in beginning at the beginning. As the poet almost said, "In the beginning is the end" and definitions and assumptions about the original commitments of Co-operation will help to shape conclusions about its future development. Anyhow I am going to put myself through a short interrogation. The rigours, I know, will be uncomfortable and my answers may not be universally convincing. However let's see.

## 1. First, what do the words mean?

How do we define these terms - "old", "basic, Co-operative values" and "principles"?

This is not perhaps the kind of question that appeals very much to the British or at least the English mind, which tends to be pragmatic and impatient for

action. Confronted with a problem, it does not really want to spend much time on definition but prefers to assume that we know what we are talking about and asks urgently: what shall we *do* about it? Other nations and traditions, of course, take a different view and this adds to the variety and vigour of international discussion. There might indeed be some interesting clashes of culture in the Advisory Committee for the Project - except that M. Chomel of France, I am sure, adds to the Gallic insistence on precise definition a productive pragmatism, and Mr. Wilkinson of the UK, I know, adds to his native pragmatism an appreciation of the importance of precisely defining his terms.

Anyhow the question is still before me - and before Professor Fujisawa as he reported quite pressingly in his article in *Journal* 69 - what do the words mean?

Here are the meanings I attach to them, rooted, I think, not in private fancy but in general usage. Such a venture of definition can, I know, generate powerful differences and debate but it may also encourage the director and Advisory Committee of the Project authoritatively to tell us the meanings they follow.

- (a) "Co-operative" means "to be served by a Co-operative Society".
- (b) "Old" means "at the institution of the Rochdale model".
- (c) "Values" means "the ethical standards in human behaviour which the Society is to exemplify and encourage".
- (d) "Basic" means those values that are "the deepest foundation of the organisation".
- (e) "Principles" means "the general rules to guide action and service to these values".

## **2. Secondly, what are these values?**

What then do we identify as the old "basic Co-operative values"?

A convenient and, for me, acceptable source from which to derive them is the familiar statement which the Rochdale Society made in 1860 in its annual almanac:

"The present Co-operative Movement does not intend to meddle with the various religious or political differences which now exist in society but by a common bond, namely that of self-interest, to join together the means, the energies and the talents of all for the common benefit of each.

- (1) That capital should be of their own providing and bear a fixed rate of interest.
- (2) That only the purest provisions procurable should be supplied to members.
- (3) That full weight and measure should be given.
- (4) That market prices should be charged and no credit given nor asked.
- (5) That profits should be divided pro rata upon the amount of purchases made by each member.
- (6) That the principle of "one member one vote" should obtain in government and the equality of the sexes in membership.
- (7) That the management should be in the hands of officers and committee elected periodically.
- (8) That a definite percentage of profits should be allotted to education.
- (9) That frequent statements and balance sheets should be presented to members."

### *The Dangers of Interpretation*

I appreciate that such reliance on the interpretation of a text has at least two dangers. There is the possibility of reading too much into the text, something more than or something different from what the author intended. I was sensitive to this when my preoccupations were more literary and, in particular, when Shakespeare's tragedies were my subject of study. A high authority on what they meant was A.C. Bradley, and I gained then, and have never lost, a misgiving, a conviction that he was finding intentions in Shakespeare's text of which Shakespeare himself was quite unaware and might even have rejected. I found congenial the sceptical verse:

"I dreamt last night that Shakespeare's ghost  
 Sat for a civil service post  
 And in the papers for that year  
 There was a question on King Lear  
 Which Shakespeare answered very badly  
 Because he had not read his Bradley."

So in examining the precious texts of Rochdale, I have tried to avoid finding more than is contained in them.

There is the second danger of which Rita Rhodes properly warns us in her article in Journal 70 of "seeking to identify the Movement's values by examining Co-operative's operations and then deducing Co-operative principles from these". What I am seeking to do, however, is something different - to identify the original basic values from a careful summary by the founding fathers of their intentions in ends and means which is consistent with their general profession and practice.

What then are the basic values presented explicitly or implicitly in the statement? "My eyes are dim" or at least dimmer than they used to be but I can still discern the familiar elements.

**(a) Self-help**

The attachment to this value of self-help is both implicit and explicit. The statement assumes that the community has an area outside State requirements and provisions within which those who wish to take action voluntarily have the scope to do so. And a motivation for such action is explicitly identified as "self-interest". We do not always fully acknowledge this, whether on the assumption that it can be taken for granted or on some fear that the acknowledgement is a confession that a Co-operative society has an element of the old Adam in it. Yet this mainspring in the "activation of users", to take Professor Briscoe's phrase in Journal 70, is stated firmly and frontally. When the management of a consumer society concerns itself with the range, quality, prices and services it offers, it is responding not only to the requirements of the current market but to this early obligation to respect and serve individual "self-interest".

**(b) Mutual Help**

There is included secondly, with equal firmness, the commitment of a Co-operative Society to seek that the individual's pursuit of self-interest is balanced and harmonised with the pursuit of the interests of others, reconciled with the "common benefit" of which the statement speaks. The individual has not only a capacity for aggressiveness and acquisitiveness in his own interest but a capacity also for co-operation with others, and as some early Co-operators quoted with enviable confidence: "Self-interest and universal our system will make one - 'will bid self-love and social be the same'".

The system - of mutuality as Dr. Wilson writes in Journal 69 - which was to achieve that balance and harmony was the Co-operative Society owned and controlled by all its members, the institution for joining together "the means, the energies and the talents of all".

These then are the two basic and familiar values I discern within the 1860 statement. It has, of course, much more: supporting values and particularly the "rules of conduct, the points of organisation touching the business transactions of the society". These over the years since Rochdale have, of course, been somewhat modified under earlier ICA scrutinies, and consideration for further change could be a fruitful area of concentration for the present project. But change in the basic values?

### **The Author**

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### **In Passing**

*Myself when young did eagerly frequent  
Doctor and Saint and heard great argument  
About it and about: but evermore  
Did leave by that same door as in I went*

*Edward Fitzgerald – The Rubá iyat  
of Omar Khayyám*