

# A Cheer for Co-operators

## by Professor T.F. Carbery

Away back in the 'fifties when it took a lot more than an hour to read *The New Statesman*, it used to have a series of quotations which was always worth reading and which frequently gave rise to a rueful chuckle - or two. One I remember was that of a dock worker in Valetta in Malta. "I hope to live and die a good Catholic," he was quoted as saying, "despite the Cardinal-Archbishop of Malta". I have a variant thereon. "I hope to live and die a good Labour Party member, despite 95% of the folk in the Party". Nor is that all! As each year goes by, the percentage of those to whom I do not warm increases: it used to be 90%; it now races rapidly towards 98, 99 and 99.5%.

### The Risks of Running a Business

I know I am a carnaptious old fogey, so I readily admit that one of the many aspects of my 'comrades and friends' which gets right up my nose and gives me a pain in another item of the anatomy is the facile assumption that running a business is easy. They do not like capitalism. They decry what they, the capitalists, do and this rubbishing attitude they extend to all business people. The words and concept of the song is extended across the whole world of commerce:

"I'm the man, the very fat man  
Who waters the workers' beer.  
I've a car, a yacht and an aeroplane  
And I water the workers' beer".

Their criticisms suggest that the only decision to be taken by the occupants of the lush-carpeted corridors of power is whether they should each have three cars and two mistresses, or two cars and three mistresses.

I have known for some time that this is ridiculous. Much of commerce is not at all easy. Anyone who doubted the difficulties of running a business should have been listening to a recent Radio 4 programme on what went wrong with the Sock Shop venture. The founder of the business expounded on the arguments which led to their extension into the American market. They were all valid - but there were difficulties that were not foreseen. Even so, they could have circumnavigated the problems arising from the American scene, had it not been for the high cost of borrowing and the general recession, all of which was exacerbated by mild winters and an exceptionally good summer.

## **Making Glasgow Flourish?**

Recently, four full-time directors of Glasgow District Council departments, an author, an architect and I joined two others in the running of an exhibition on Glasgow's activities as a European City of Culture. We did our homework thoroughly; we commissioned a marketing survey; we engaged a leading firm of accountants to oversee the financial accounting; we engaged folk with track records of good arranging of exhibitions - and of managing them. We engaged a firm of consultants and took advice on advertising. In short, we did all that is recommended in management books and business schools - and we lost £4.6 million and had to be bailed out by a considerate and thoughtful Labour administration at local government level.

## **The Problems of Practice**

Some of my comrades in my constituency Labour party took me to task. Maybe their criticism was valid, but I do not think it was. Moreover, I know that they have never run anything. They have studiously avoided the world of risk-bearing and do not even take charge of the book stall at the occasional jumble sale.

It is against this background that I readily declare that I prefer Co-operators to theoretical Socialists, particularly the Marxists, whose fellow ideologists of Marxist Leninism did not do all that well anywhere in the Comecon bloc. At least, the Co-operators know about the difficulties in running a business and know how many beans make five.

## **The Author**

TOM CARBERY has recently retired from the University of Strathclyde where his teaching ranged over Economics, Public Administration, Government and Information Technology. Some of his wider areas of service are the Labour movement, consumer affairs (including his book *Consumers in Politics*), broadcasting and press and the Co-operative movement.

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## **In Conclusion**

*"People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices."*

*Adam Smith - The Wealth of Nations*