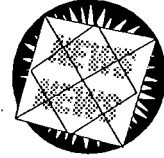


NEWSLETTER

by Peter Clarke



"Congress is dying", I was told quite confidently by a leading Co-operator at one of the many pleasant social events at this year's Co-operative Congress. He wasn't the only one to pass that remark, but yet we all seem obliged to turn up year after year.

I liked this Congress, not just because I made my maiden speech, or because the social side was enjoyable, but because it was a marvellous opportunity to meet key people within the movement. Congress displayed the same confident air as last year; the Co-op movement is weathering the recession.

But if it is the commonly held view that the formal element of Congress lacks content, shouldn't we start a debate in order to bring about the necessary improvements?

European Co-operative Statute

As I reported at some length in the last Newsletter (Journal 74), the European Parliament is now considering the European Commission's proposal for a European Co-operative law.

EuroCoop are lobbying for a number of amendments including the right of individuals to set up a European Co-operative with reduced requirement for initial capital. They also feel that 15% is too large an amount of surplus to be dedicated to the creation of a reserve and that 10% is more appropriate.

EuroCoop are pleased that the proposal also allows the merger of two Co-operatives from different member States and the setting up of new consumer Co-operatives in border regions to meet new and widely differing requirements.

In an explanatory memorandum the UK Government damn the proposal with faint praise. "There is no clear evidence to indicate that the relevant national bodies are experiencing any difficulties in operating in more than one member state of the Community. Formal consultation will reveal the degree of interest in the proposed new entities." Significantly the memorandum points out that the statute cannot be enacted in the UK without national legislation. This could well precipitate new domestic Co-operative law.

The Government also make plain that they are opposed to the "compulsory worker participation provisions" as they believe that such arrangements are contrary to the UK tradition of deciding these matters on a voluntary basis.

The European Parliament is expected to pass the law during its November plenary session.

Council for propagation of the truly marvellous . . .

Some "notes towards a national organisation for the housing Co-operative movement" arrived on my desk from an anonymous source recently. The self-styled Council for the propagation of the truly marvellous begins with Hegel and via a profusion of imaginative computer graphics arrives at a proposal for a democratic, representative and accountable new federal. Like others who received the notes I am left truly amazed.

Nearly nine months have elapsed since the National Federation of Housing Co-operatives disappeared. It is about time that a new body became a reality.

ICOM New Directions

ICOM, the worker Co-operative federal, looks set to take a dramatic new direction following a meeting in Edinburgh to consider its new corporate strategy. It was agreed that ICOM's mission would be to "represent, promote and support common ownership and democratic employee control of enterprises of every kind. To this end ICOM espouses and advocates the principles of Co-operation, work place democracy, equal opportunity and social justice."

The meeting also agreed that ICOM should aim to become self financing by 1996. This must mean an increase in income from member Co-ops. It was recognised that this depends on ICOM winning recognition that the worker Co-operative sector, and local CDAs, are distinct from TECs (Training and Enterprise Councils) and from the LECs (Local Enterprise Companies) which operate in Scotland.

The statement represents a welcome liberalisation of ICOM's approach. Whilst the worker Co-op sector was growing fastest during the late 1970s and early 1980s ICOM adopted a rigid definition of a worker Co-operative. It believed that the only Co-ops which should be set up would be those where all members were workers and all the workers were members. Others felt that different Co-operative solutions were applicable in different circumstances. It was impossible to lay down hard and fast rules.

Seikatsu Clubs in Britain?

An article in Journal 60 by Koichi Sato described the development of Joint Buying Groups in Japan - and I have felt a personal link and interest in an initiative that seeks to establish such a group in Britain.

About eighteen months ago I was asked to entertain a group of Japanese Co-operators in London who were interested in the care of the elderly. They were led by Mr Hisao Kozuka, managing director of the Seikatsu Club Consumers Co-operative of Yokohama. The Seikatsu Club started in 1965 when a Tokyo housewife organised 200 women to buy milk. The Co-op was set up as a legal entity in 1968. Membership expanded rapidly from 1000 in 1968 to over 150,000 in 1988. This ranked it ninth largest of Japan's 700 Co-ops. Today it provides environmentally friendly products and proclaims "political reform from the kitchen". It bases its success on collective buying and stocking only a limited range of products; some 400 products only are stocked.

Now the Seikatsu Club Consumers Co-operative has inspired *New Consumer* to launch the concept in Britain. Heralded in the press as "a new sort of Co-operative which aims to cut out the supermarkets and deliver cheap organic food to the door step" it will be called the Creative Consumers' Co-operative. The Co-op is supported by the Henry Doubleday Research Association and the Soil Association, a bastion of organic farming. This too duplicates Seikatsu, which has links with organic farmers.

The Co-op is raising £50,000 on interest bearing shares of £50 each. Consumers will be organised in groups of at least six households who will submit regular bulk orders and maintain contact with suppliers.

Experience teaches . . .

I hope that *New Consumer* has studied the experience of the Bulk Buy Clubs organised in the 1970s. They too were organised on the same principles but never fulfilled their early promise.

If they can learn from the past then the Creative Consumers' Co-operative should succeed. I hope that they will also duplicate Seikatsu's remarkable success in getting radical women elected to local Councils. This is the achievement of the Kanagawa Network, started in 1984. Activity on food safety, contamination of water supplies and the efficient use of resources prompted women Co-operators to fight city council elections in the Tokyo metropolitan area. The first women were elected in 1987 and by 1988 33 members were on City Councils.

No doubt this is something some visiting Co-operators can follow up during the ICA Congress in Japan.

The Author

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