

# Querying the Quangos

by Tom Carbery

“Getting one’s knickers in a twist” is not the most elegant or becoming phrase currently in vogue. Yet it is so very appropriate for those activists in the Labour movement and particularly those muddled, misguided souls in both the Labour and Co-operative Parties who have embarked on a crusade against Quangos. The Labour Party conference is fortunately not until October: the Co-operative Party conferences are held at Easter and such is the gestation period of this learned journal that although this is being written before Lent begins it will not appear until Easter is but a memory and Whitsun is round the corner.

As I write, the motions for the Co-operative Party conference are before me and some are critical of Quasi Non-Governmental Organisations which civil servants and ministerial teams prefer to call NDPBs - Non-Departmental Public Bodies.

Now I readily admit that on this subject I am far from impartiality personified. This arises from my experience of them, having served on 20 of them. Moreover before my actual experience of them I had a theoretical, academic knowledge of the case for and against them.

## **In Historical Perspective**

The totality of this experience and knowledge is that, as I see it, they are to delegated authority what the rates were to local government finance - fated to be criticised, but the ‘least-bad’ arrangement we can find. One thing for sure, they are, warts and all, better than the other-option arrangements advocated by those who denounce them.

First, then, let us set them in their historical perspective.

Quangos (or NDPBs) are a manifestation of the interventionist state. Their origins lay substantially with pre-war Conservative governments but the Labour government of 45-51 gave the trend a hike of continental shelf dimension. The most obvious of that administration’s impacts was its programme of nationalisation. This programme saw the emergence not only of the ensuing public corporations - all Quangos - but of the consumer consultative committees - and they too were Quangos. Labour created a lot more forby.

In the sixties and again in the seventies the main criticism of Quangos

came from the political right. The crusade was led by markedly right-wing organisations such as Aims of Industry which became Aims of Enterprise. As I recall, it was a body of that genre which produced a booklet which unfolded to a length of about 10 feet, the pages listing the Quangos then prevailing, many of them created by the post-war Labour government.

Mrs. Thatcher, as she then was, responded to this populist movement within the rank and file of the Tory Party, and had her 1979 election campaign include an intent - more, a firm resolve - to cut back dramatically on such bodies.

Here I invite anyone responsible for the anti-Quango motions for conference to dig out what the Conservatives were saying about Quangos in the run-up to and during the '79 campaign and to write a piece letting us all know in what respects their criticisms vary from those of the Conservatives fifteen years ago. The shrewed will not respond - instead they will squirm, fold their tents, put out their camp fires - and disappear or at least take a vow of silence!

Helpful as ever let me save them and others some time.

### **Objections from the Right -**

The Conservatives and the right-wing bodies had three objections.

First the Quango's were denounced as a manifestation of, an aspect of the socialist state.

The second criticism was a variant on the first. The Quangos were interventionist and spent money on mischievous activities and/or engaged in matters better left to entrepreneurs.

The third criticism was that over-the-piece they were the rolling stock of a Labour gravy-train, a means of putting portraits of Her Majesty on banknotes into the hip-pockets, purses and wallets of Labour Party members.

At that time I was on four such bodies so to that extent the third charge was valid. But wait! One met in London. There were 15/16 of us on it and all but two were men. One day as we broke for lunch the longer-serving lady grabbed my arm. The following conversation ensued.

"Tom" she opened "you are a not unreasonable man. Is it not disgraceful the way this Labour government is packing this body with Labour samurai?"

Every time that door opens and a new member enters it is yet another beard and a safari suit!" (She was correct - well almost correct.)

"Ah my dear" said I in placatory tones " I take your point and it grieves me to say it has a certain validity. But let us go back to when I joined the committee. At that time almost all the men wore dark grey suits, wore white shirts with cuff-links and wore regimental or golf-club ties. To a man they were, if not members of the Conservative party, then members of the local Conservative club, failing which they were members of Chambers of Commerce or Trade Associations. Was that not equally amiss - indeed perverse?"

"Oh no" she cried "that was quite different."

"In what respect?" I enquired gently. It took some time for the answer to emerge.

"That was quite different" she repeated "They were gentlemen and knew what they were talking about . . ."

Translated the first of these two points was that as 'gentlemen' they had risen when she came into the room and held chairs for her at meal-times. The second meant that they knew about commerce, about business and most importantly about money and certainly, in that we were exercising surveillance on a commercial undertaking, such attributes were an advantage.

Moreover the men concerned and the lady of the story were of the same social strata.

### **- And from the Left**

So what is it that gets up the noses of those responsible for the yeuchy motions? My experience of conversing with folk of similar views suggests there are two objections:

1. They are now packed with Tory samurai.
2. Some - it is said 'many'; in truth a few - have demonstrably wasted money.

More particularly, being aggrieved, what would these critics do about it?

It seems to me they are ambivalent. Thus some with a certain lack of

subtlety would re-pack them with Labour samurai - but that does not lie easily with denunciation of the concept.

Some would abolish selected Quangos and keep others - but are not generally very explicit about which they would destroy and which they would retain - and why.

A third school would democratise them, but is divided on the preferred form of democratisation. Indeed there are three possible routes the democratisers would travel: some would travel one and only one of these roads; some would go for two, but do not necessarily agree on which two; while some would use all three but are unclear on which to use or take in any given circumstance.

### **Difficulties of Democratising**

The first of the three democratic roads "is that we elect the people to sit on Quangos". The best one can say for this is that the appointment of well-nigh permanently-employed polling clerks and vote counters would alleviate unemployment. Ye gods, the Germans are appalled that they are to have 19 elections in 1994 but we would have 190 at least. Thus in broadcasting alone - on its own but one very small slice of the Quango cake - it would mean elections for: the governors of the BBC; the members of the ITC, the members of the Radio Authority, the members of the Broadcasting Complaints Commission and the members of the Broadcasting Standards Council and the Central Religious Advisory Council.

The second road favoured by democratisers is to appoint local government councillors to these bodies. Well comrades, I can report that some Quangos have been down that road in that some creations of the 70's had it that 25% of the members had to be local authority nominees. Now, in fairness, the enabling legislation did not stipulate that the authorities had to nominate councillors - they could have nominated other folk. However, such is the modesty of our councillors, not one authority in my patch nominated anyone other than councillors.

And, you ask - how did it work? Truth to tell the answer is "not very well". Some such members we never saw, though we did hear from them: they sent apologies for absence. Some came, drank the tea, ate the biscuits and never spoke. Some were very good but they were less than 10% of the L.A. participants. At the risk of over-simplification we can say that good councillors are already over-worked and bad councillors you do not want!

## **A Truly Populist Road?**

And so to the third and truly populist road. Here the proposal is that the membership should be extended and the posts filled by nominations from all our great democratic and/or mass-membership organisations.

Here I have another piece of anecdotage for you. In 1975 Lord Hill - the one-time Radio Doctor and later MP for Luton and (then) recently retired chairman of the BBC - and I conducted a one-week summer school on broadcasting. It was held at the Co-operative College. Most of the students were from the London Society. At one session towards the end of the week as we edged our way towards 'conclusions', the session chairman, a London board member pronounced that the BBC governorship should be scrapped and replaced by a 'democratic' body representative of all the important, broad-based organisations in British society (prolonged enthusiastic, sycophantic applause). Seeking elucidation I asked which bodies would nominate. The phrase was repeated. I persisted:

Would it include the political parties? Of course; the Labour Party? - Of course; the Communist Party? - Certainly; the Co-operative Party? - Yes; the Conservative Party? - Yes (but more slowly); the Liberal Party? - Yes; the National Front? Definitely not; why not? - Don't be stupid; but why not? - They are undemocratic; who says so? - Everyone.

Later in non-confrontational setting it transpired the churches were to nominate. The dialogue continued: the C. of E.? - Yes; the Methodists - Yes; the Baptists? - Yes; the Congregationlists? - he was not sure who they were but they too were "in"; the Presbyterians? - Yes; the Catholics? - yes; the Jews? - Definitely not; why not? - They are all Zionists; and the Moslems? - Of course!

One inferred that had the PLO been supported by the Americans and the Israelis by the Soviet Union, the order of the last two answers would have been reversed!

The list of "acceptable" organisations was so great we would have needed Central Hall Westminster for some Quango meetings and Wembley stadium for others.

## **What Action Then?**

Where does all this leave us?

For well over 70 years the British have used the Quangos. For almost all that time the broad sweep of the Labour movement has accepted them.

When in the 70's the Conservatives said they would review them and scrap many of them, many Labour spokesmen argued that what really annoyed the Conservatives was the interventionist policies of which the Quangos were but one instrument.

Quangos are not perfect but they are an effective way of getting certain jobs done. If we believe they need modification then let us tread carefully. Those who seek change, should -

- Enunciate the deficiencies.
- Provide evidence of these deficiencies.
- Submit responsible proposals for modification.
- Avoid vagueness.
- Show that their proposed remedies are practical.

With luck all the Co-operative Party conference motions will fail. Peter Clarke has enough with which to contend without being lumbered with the nonsense which appears in the draft agenda.

P.S. Since this column was written, the conference motions which irked the author have been composited.

### **The Author**

Professor Carbery recently retired from the University of Strathclyde where his teaching had ranged over Economics, Public Administration, Government - particularly British and American - and Information Technology. Some of his wider areas of service are the Labour movement, consumer affairs (including his book *Consumers in Politics* and chairmanship of the Southern Scotland Consumers' Committee of OFFER), broadcasting and the press and the Co-operative movement.