

The Zero Factor

by Tom Carbery

His Royal Highness, The Duke of Edinburgh, is but the most distinguished of after-dinner speakers and guest lecturers to observe that statistics are like a bikini - what they reveal is interesting but what they hide is vital!

There is seldom a day that passes in which one does not come across ample evidence that the barb is as valid as ever!

Lighten our Darkness?

Thus as I write I am mindful of an electricity supply company with which I am acquainted which used to report, with remarkable blandness, that it had in its area some 1100 or so cases of 'long-term disconnection'. I remember well telling them I did not believe it. For once the company's executives were doing themselves a dis-service by publishing such statistics. As the figure stood it suggested that in the company's area there were 1,100 households and/or businesses which had been off electricity supply for a very long time. The picture conveyed that the inhabitants were sitting shivering in the dark and cold, hoping and praying they would be re-connected to the electricity supply. It stretched credulity to its very limits. Common-sense told one that some of the businesses had gone into liquidation: some of the personal tenants had almost certainly died or gone into geriatric wards or hospices, failing which they had gone to live with relatives or were in prison or had gone to work abroad or had left to co-habit with someone else; or, always a possibility, the house was being used as a "giro drop" but no-one was living there. Some of the buildings would be unoccupied and boarded up while yet others would have been demolished or destroyed by fire.

I suggested to the executives that it might be no bad thing were they to check and ascertain exactly what was a-happening at all these addresses. So they did just that. And "what did it reveal?" you ask. Much as anticipated - anyway the 'long-term disconnection' figure was amended. The 'new' figure was - 1! Yes 'one'!

Among the Trade Unions -

Now, let us edge our way into the great world of the Labour movement, that great citadel of honesty and integrity, of probity and rectitude and, in particular, the world of trade unions and their statistics of membership.

There was a time when the large public sector organisations encouraged their employees to join a trade union; some employers operated a closed

shop; and there were some genuine voluntary trade unionists. All these sources helped towards the grand total of trade union membership, but it did not account for all of it. There were ghost members. It may come as a bit of a shock to some charming innocents but some unions actually inflated their membership figures even though this meant paying higher affiliation fees to both the Labour Party and the T.U.C. They did it, of course, because large numbers meant power, particularly when block votes were taken at conferences.

One man, one vote has had refreshing consequences. The recession and the disappearance of the closed shop contributed towards the reduction in the figures. In short, inflated figures have gone and a British trade union movement which, as I recall it, once claimed 'over 10 million' members, now claims 'about' - for which read 'almost' - 4 million members.

- and in the Co-operative Movement?

And what of our beloved Co-operative movement?

For more years than I care to remember we have prattled along about a movement with a massive number of members - currently claiming around 8 million.

It is not a nonsense of the dimension of 1,100 long-term disconnected, but it is a nonsense and an unbecoming nonsense at that!

Some are dead; some are long dead; some are in geriatric wards; some have migrated; some have gone away to work elsewhere. Many no doubt, are still alive but have no conscious involvement with the societies - or even the shops. Like membership of the Scouts, the Y.H.A., the Junior Cinema Club or the Sea Cadet Corps membership of the Co-op is, for many, a feature of yester-year and long out of mind. With the contraction in the number of Co-op shops many have no involvement whatsoever, far less have a consciousness of once-upon-a-time membership.

So why do we do it? Does the Central Executive of the Union or the Parliamentary Committee believe that H.M. Government or its civil servants or the press and the public are impressed by our citing the 8 million figure?

There is then a case for the Union 'encouraging' a re-assessment, a realistic reassessment, of our membership figures.

The Action Needed

To give this a kick-start the Union should take a motion to the next Congress. It would:

- (i) Outline the case for revision - and that for ceasing to live a lie!
- (ii) Urge the movement to agree to the quest for an authentic membership figure.
- (iii) Propose, that as an indicator of our resolve and good will, we should delete the last zero from our 'rounded' totals.

Like the French devaluation of some years ago, 10 becomes 1; 100 becomes 10 and 1,000 becomes 100!!

It follows, of course, that were it to come to pass, the rate of subscriptions to the Union, the Party et al would have to go up by a factor of 10. This would have to occur to ensure that such bodies receive the same revenue flow. Indeed there is a case for an increase by a factor of >10. This would be as an encouragement to societies to purge their lists even more realistically.

Eight hundred thousand is still a nonsense - but it is nearer the truth than 8 million.

We could then look at the faces in the shaving mirrors and powder compacts with clearer consciences than for many years - and press on in search of a truly reliable figure.

The Author

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