

A Radical Re-think?

by Harold Campbell

Here, in my Portuguese hideaway, I would have missed seeing this year's Co-operative Party Conference Agenda, with its spread of motions submitted by local party affiliates, had not my long-standing friend, Tom Carbery, sent me a copy of his commentary on some of them. Entitled "Querying the Quangos" it was published in this Journal's May 1994 edition, No. 80.

A Variety of Quangos

I suppose he thought I would be interested, since, like him, I served on a few Quangos after I left the office of the Party. No way near as many as him, of course: the Housing Corporation; a couple of new Town Development Corporations; and, very briefly, the Hearing Aid Council. This last was first set up by Parliament entirely through the persistent, unrelenting endeavours of dear Laurie Pavitt, who fought hard, year after year, despite mounting disappointments, to get first the House of Commons and, thereafter, the Lords, to accept his Private Members' bill designed to regulate the sale of hearing aids in the interests of those who suffer from hearing deficiencies and are too often at the mercy of unscrupulous advertisers and disreputable salesmen.

Tony Greenwood, when Minister of Housing in the Wilson Government, was initially responsible for placing me in the Housing Corporation, first as a member, later as Deputy Chairman, and on the Board of the Stevenage Development Corporation, again as a member and, latterly, as Deputy Chairman. It was a Tory Minister who renewed my appointment in each case. And it was Gwyneth Dunwoody, then the Minister responsible, who appointed me first chairman (unpaid) of the Hearing Aid Council.

The Housing Corporation

Tony was anxious - he told me - that my case for, and commitment to, housing Co-operatives, should be heard within the Corporation and, perhaps, be taken into account in the deliberations on housing strategy at New Town Board meetings. Protocol necessitated my giving up my position as Secretary of the Co-operative Party to fulfil the appointments. In consequence I did not gain financially in the short, or long, run.

I remained with the Housing Corporation for a couple of terms, and with Stevenage for 13 years, until the Transfer and Dissolution Order of 1980

put an end to its development as a new Town. By that time I was obliged to find employment in the Housing Association movement.

Reflecting Political Affiliations?

I can only hope that I was able to make a worthwhile contribution to each of the bodies on which I served. I think I can say, without self-deception, that most of the discussions that took place reflected, justifiably, the broad-based political affiliations of those who served, at least implicitly. Of course, our individual philosophical approaches were often evident when controversial decisions had to be made. Rarely, in my experience however, (and you see how limited that was) did Party political prejudices overly intrude. On occasion they did. Then I would myself play a spirited part. In the main, however, we managed by consensus (which, I believe, is a dirty word in some quarters!).

This, however, has to be said, that, like local authorities, we could only work within the tram-lines laid down by the government (which, in practice, meant the Ministry under which we operated) and these could (and did) shift with a change in the Ministry; sometimes exasperating everyone, officers and appointees, sponsored by whomsoever.

Need for Re-examination

In recent years the number of Quangos has leapt phenomenally. The Tories, having at one time denounced them as a form of back-door Socialism creeping in when they, the Tories, were nodding, came to embrace them paradoxically as useful instruments of their policy of delegating responsibilities away from Whitehall, and the civil servants there, and from despised local authorities; and as providing very useful opportunities for rewarding long-serving Party colleagues and hangers-on outside Parliament (or, at least, outside the Commons). Hence what, in my view, was a good idea has been abused. I can see that this needs us to re-think our policy concerning Quangos. A radical re-think, please. Not wholesale condemnation.

Quangos operate, week in, week out, month in, month out, without the spotlight of the media upon them. Their meetings are in private. That needs a new approach. Much of what they do requires to be confidential - at least initially. However the public, in whose interests they are supposed to be working, must be satisfied that this is so. We learn everyday that the cloak of privacy in government, locally as well as nationally, can be menacing. Appointments to serve on the boards that manage functions of government are often at the arbitrary whim of an individual temporarily

holding a Ministerial post, without too much consideration, it seems, of the suitability of the proposed appointee for the particular job.

An examination in depth of how all this works, by a genuinely disinterested person (or persons) backed up with adequate research, should serve to clear the air and help us all to decide whether Quangos are an acceptable form of devolution of power and responsibility in the coming 21st century. And if, so, in what form. And how regulated. Then we can take an informed view.

The Author

HAROLD CAMPBELL's deep Co-operative involvement started with the old Enfield society. As a youth he joined the old Co-operative Comrades Circle and saw the evolution through the British Federation of Co-operative Youth (BFCY) to the British Federation of Young Co-operators (BFYC) of which he was national secretary and for a while editor of its magazine.

He is remembered best in Co-operative circles for his years as Assistant Secretary and then Secretary of the Co-op Party. As he reports, he developed a great interest in housing Co-operatives and Associations.