

The Co-operative College debate

Hughie Todner

When I look back over my five years as chairman of the Co-operative Union, the one area which has dominated that period is undoubtedly the Co-operative College and its relationship with Co-operative education. I believe it would be fair to state that at nearly every meeting of the Central Executive more than 60% of the time would be spent on the College and its financial implications for the future of the Union. Whilst this part of the Union's activities was obviously very important, some members held the view that it was out of all proportion to the demanding duties and responsibilities of the Central Executive. As the newly appointed chairman, I very quickly identified the Co-operative College and the education situation as being one of my major priorities, one which must be resolved if the Union was to devote more of its time and energy and give its fullest support to retail societies in the fight to increase the Movement's market share and overall profitability.

From the early 1980s, the Co-operative College Trust, situated at Stanford Hall, had been a profit-making venture. The recruitment of large numbers of students from overseas had made a significant contribution towards the running expenses of the College. This was the position until about 1988. Then, with the economic problems facing the third world countries, this source of income began to dry up. The recruitment of overseas students at the same level as previous years was now not forthcoming, and the reduction in throughput had a dramatic effect on the profitability of the College. The end result was that the College Trust was no longer making a contribution to the overall running expenses of Stanford Hall; in less than three years the College had become a serious financial burden, one which the Union, with their limited resources, were not able to carry. New markets required to fill the shortfall were not available to the existing management, and because the College had placed all its eggs in one basket and was dependent on the overseas market, it did not have the management expertise capable of exploiting other channels of profitable ventures.

A number of meetings took place with representatives of the Education Committee and College officials in an attempt to resolve the situation. After much discussion, the Central Executive took the view that unless the financial position quickly improved, then it may be forced to look at alternative ways of providing Co-operative education which would meet the changing needs of retail societies. A number of forecasts were prepared in order to assess the long-term implications that this financial drain would

have on the finances of the Union. It became quite apparent from the information provided that, unless more profitable business was conducted by the College Trust, then the losses incurred would wipe out the slim resources of the Union in less than two, at the best three, years.

At meetings with the College and education representatives, it was made very clear to me that in their view the way to overcome and solve the situation was to make retail societies underwrite any shortfall. This was a solution to which the Central Executive was not prepared to agree. I did have some sympathy with the Education Committee, for it was for them a 'no win' situation. When the College had been trading profitably, instead of using any surplus to build up the reserves of the College Trust the Central Executive of that time had placed any surplus into a central fund and used it for other Union activities. Then, when the College was not performing profitably, the Union was not able to give any financial support, for the money had been spent on other areas of Union service. No matter how sympathetic I was to their view, it would not alter the situation; one had to face the reality of the time. The money had gone and nothing was going to bring it back.

After a number of meetings it was obvious that we were not making any progress. The losses were starting to mount and very little action was being taken to reduce them. At one such meeting, I suggested that there was a need to have a total fresh look at the whole field of Co-operative education and the role that Stanford Hall would play in the long-term future of the Co-operative Movement's education and staff training requirements. I proposed that we invite a number of prominent officials within our Movement to carry out a detailed review and present this to a joint working party of the Central Executive and Education Committee. It was quite obvious from the comments which were forthcoming that this suggestion was not going to find favour. It was about this time that I was writing my notes for the chairman's report to the 1993 Annual Congress. I resolved that I would inform Congress of my deep disquiet and concern over the long-term future of education based at Stanford Hall, and request that an independent review committee be set up which would be asked to present a report not to the Central Executive or the Education Committee, but to the 1994 Congress which was to be held at Rochdale.

It is history now that this recommendation was accepted by Congress, and Lord Graham as chairman duly presented his report which suggested that a new body be given the task of being responsible for overseeing the duties and responsibilities of the Co-operative College Trust. Congress agreed that a new board of management be introduced which would have full powers to develop and plan the future requirements of Co-operative education and staff training. For the first time, we now had a group of individuals whose sole purpose was to devote their time and energy to the

important task of reviewing and planning the education and staff training needs of the Movement, and whether that need should be based at Stanford Hall or some other location. The independent report demanded that a three year business plan be introduced which would identify areas of growth as well as loss-making activities, and recommend the necessary action to be taken. A mission statement was also considered an important requirement, as was a full review of the staffing levels of personnel who constituted the Education Department of the Co-operative Union, and the Co-operative College Trust.

The task which this new Board of Management has should not be underestimated. It is quite a challenge, but one which I believe will give the Co-operative Movement a new vision in education and staff training. Under the capable chairmanship of John Beishon it has certainly made a truly impressive start. Whilst it is still early days, I am firmly of the opinion that more has been achieved in the field of Co-operative education and the planning of education in the last six months than in the previous six years. The improvements within the College itself, with more teaching rooms being made available and the re-location of the bar facilities into the Turnbull Room, will I believe prove to be a good long-term investment. Staff morale is at its highest level; the enthusiasm is refreshing and invigorating for anyone to see who visits the College. The business plan proposed that there was a need to upgrade fifteen bedrooms with en-suite facilities in order to meet a demand for this type of requirement. As I announced in my closing remarks at the 1995 Edinburgh Congress, I intend to launch a College Refurbishment Appeal in order that the upgrading of those fifteen bedrooms be completed.

Providing the Movement and the Central Executive give John Beishon and his new Board a little more time, as well as their fullest support, I am confident that the Movement will be well pleased with the decision to introduce a Board of Management to oversee the function of Co-operative education and the requirements for a Co-operative College. If some time in the foreseeable future it is considered necessary to move the College to another location away from Stanford Hall, then we can all be assured that the reason for doing so has been well thought out and thoroughly investigated, with a decision based on factual information which is in the best long-term interests of the Co-operative Movement's needs. The Movement certainly owes a debt of gratitude to those four individuals who made up the Independent Review Committee for, without their report and the vision of what was required in order to progress further, we would still be talking, whereas now we are seeing action.

Hughie Todner is retired chairman of the Co-operative Union