

SCS Conference 1995

The Conference had three themes. The third, a 'Proposal for a Co-operatives Act for the United Kingdom', was introduced by Ian Snaith, and is to be the subject of an extended article by him in the next issue of the Journal. The first two, 'Neither public nor private: the co-operative third way', and 'The future role of the Society for Co-operative Studies' were linked together; members were asked to consider the future role of the Society in relation to our understanding of the contemporary significance of the co-operative sector. Both themes were introduced by Johnston Birchall and then discussed by an expert panel and then by the members in workshops. Dr Birchall's conference paper is published in full on the pages immediately preceding this report, and so the report will consist of summaries of the panel contributions and notes from the workshops.

Panel discussion

The members of the panel were:

Roger Spear, Open University

Edgar Parnell, Plunkett Foundation

Peter Davis, Leicester University

Mervyn Wilson, Co-operative College

Jean Whitehead, Co-operative Party

Roger Spear outlined the work of the Co-operatives Research Unit (CRU) at the Open University, of which he is chair, and pointed out the increasing relevance of the Unit's areas of study to the Society: worker co-ops; community businesses; employee ownership; and the new co-ops, some of which have user participation (eg the new social co-ops, providing care and jobs for people with disabilities). The Unit is working on themes such as social co-ops, ethical markets and social audit, all of which he believes have increasing relevance to the SCS. Roger has also this year become chair of the ICA Research Forum; he wants to broaden the range of people involved, to increase the visibility of the research, and increase access to findings via the internet as well as by publishing more widely. CRU has also been involved with Ciriec, the international social economy organisation; Roger suggested that CRU and the SCS combine to act as a research and information node for Ciriec, collaborating with a new Social Economy Forum if and when it becomes formally established (NB this relates to Birchall's suggestion that SCS become the member for Ciriec in the UK, just as the Swedish SCS is for Sweden).

Roger pointed out that the UK Co-operative Council (UKCC) has no representation for researchers, a major omission which the SCS should rectify by seeking a place for itself on the Board; it is important to have links at all levels. There are numerous university researchers who are not well networked, and considerable potential to link these with the SCS. The Society should also increase its visibility by assisting the work of the Social Economy Forum by putting on more specialist seminars. There is a clear niche for the Journal; it could have a much stronger and more visible presence as a national publication. It is important to keep one of its strengths, which is the 'reflections on practice' aspect; this can be strengthened by links with the main educational training organisations, in particular the Co-operative College, but also with other academics and researchers, and institutions which provide training for different parts of the Co-operative sector.

These measures would help clarify and strengthen the role of the SCS, resulting in a better linked society and a strengthened network of members. In summary, the SCS should increase its status by membership of the UKCC, and by establishing links with Ciriec and the Social Economy Forum. It should strengthen its network of researchers and reflective practitioners and increase its visibility through publicity, publications and seminars.

Edgar Parnell began by asking 'What role can consumer co-ops be expected to play in the next millenium?'. Today's consumers are more interested in benefits than organisational form, in performance rather than promises. The apparent obsession with democratic processes and structures does not address the fundamental question of member benefits. In order to have any real impact, national scale operations are required, and we should be turning our attention to a Euro-wide organisation. This would not preclude the scope for small local community co-ops, which could operate under the umbrella of a large, central organisation. On the debate about co-operative principles, Edgar said democracy is not an end in itself, but only the means of securing an organisation responsive to the wishes of its members. He challenged the assumption that co-operatives need to own and control the productive process, while competing with other retailers who have used their power in the market to get the best deal from manufacturers. There is little advantage to be gained for members through food retailing; the real opportunities are in other trades such as the travel, funeral and financial services, where co-operatives have opportunity to demonstrate what they can do for consumers. Unfortunately, many of these services are not associated in the public mind as being co-operative because they are isolated by separate trade names, and by managers who are not interested in providing benefits to members.

The Co-operative Bank has demonstrated that the public is ready to respond to organisations taking an ethical stance. But only if a range of services are provided to members as part of a total package of benefits will there be sufficient impact on the public perception of retail co-operation. Co-ops should be looking to achieve a minimum 10% share of food retailing; a well run national society could achieve this in a short time. The more exciting co-operative opportunity lies in the non-food areas where tangible benefits can be provided to members. The out of town superstore phase has reached saturation point; consumer co-operatives should now be looking to 'leapfrog' to the next revolution based on information technology, and an intimate knowledge of customers' needs, gained from the relationship between a member and his or her co-operative. Edgar suggested the Journal report on research into member benefits, and how these might best be provided. Historical research is not really a priority; the only thing we learn from history is that we don't! The Journal should undertake the task of spelling out a vision for the future and how it might be achieved; there are people who can produce the vision and the leadership required, and the members of the SCS should grasp this challenge and play their part in the change process.

Peter Davis began by acknowledging the important role of the SCS in creating the links between the diverse segments of the wider co-operative movement in the UK, notably in the development of the UKCC. With the decline of member education and loss of other avenues for co-operative membership, the SCS continues to be an important forum for lay members to exchange experience and renew their commitment. We should call upon all consumer societies to insist that member relations officers become active in the SCS, at regional and national level, as part of their job description. We urgently need to conduct a market research exercise as to why so few co-operative directors support our Society. The rising level of complexity and professionalism in businesses has meant managerial impact has increased, and that of lay directors decreased. We must have managers who accept the added responsibility for co-operative leadership that the new conditions impose. The Society has addressed the needs of co-operative management but we must do more to encourage research and to involve more managers in the SCS.

We need to establish a more formal network to promote study and research into Co-operation. We need to build on the linkages we already have (eg through the SCS research register). The Journal remains crucial in developing the Society's credibility as a learned society. There is now a clear need to develop the Journal into one with an international readership which carries refereed articles of a high academic calibre; Peter welcomed the new editor's initiative in this direction. The globalisation of capital and

the breakdown of community are related phenomena - the Society has an important role in helping co-operatives of all types to respond to this challenge and help those searching for new solutions to the social, environmental and economic crisis which has resulted from the unchecked advance of the capital-based organisation in the free market. Central to this is an analysis of why co-operatives have failed so dismally to innovate. The role of the SCS is to alert the movement to the failures of the past and present, and the lessons they bear if there is to be any co-operative future. We need to attract the attention not only of enthusiasts but of sceptics, to enable more people to see the importance of the co-operative idea for the development of individuals and their communities, if co-operation is to be a mainstream success again.

Mervyn Wilson identified the key question as being not what are the ideas of those on the panel, but what are the needs of the members, individual and corporate. The SCS has provided a more informed, in-depth debate on key issues facing the Movement, not only through the Journal and Conference but, where they managed to develop, through the regional groups. These provide a useful role in raising informed debate on movement (as opposed to society) issues, as a forum for activists. The SCS is unique: not exclusively a body of academics, but an alliance of practitioners, lay and professional and academic members interested in Co-operation. This has provided a richness and diversity, and an accessibility for the Journal, which would not be found in an academic body. Mervyn criticised some of JB's suggestions, particularly the idea of involving historians more in the Journal: They are already catered for by the History Workshop Trust and other related projects. Beware of ignoring the consumer movement and moving to other areas of the wider social economy, just because it has become more fashionable.

Jean Whitehead's main concern, coming to the co-operative movement as a new activist, was to see a clear statement of what the SCS seeks to achieve, and allied to that who it considers to be its audience. Co-operative ideas have no credibility outside the Movement, and should have with decision-makers and particularly politicians. Given a clear objective and identified target audiences, the SCS and its Journal has an important role in raising the intellectual credibility of Co-operation. This would be valued by the Co-operative Party, the SCS and ultimately Co-operation itself. Increased links with the Co-operative Party would be most welcome.

Some conclusions from the workshops

On the meaning of Co-operation:

1. Co-ops cannot develop in isolation, cannot be dominant but should be

seen as a significant part of the social economy, part of a project to change society.

2. To this end, societies should be people-centred businesses with a management that is prepared to lead, recognise, address and learn from past mistakes, combatting parochial attitudes and respecting the assets built up by previous generations of co-operators.
3. Managers should remember that mergers are not for their benefit but for that of the members, who originally came together to address the balance of power against them acting as individuals.
4. The political economy approach, whereby Co-operation was seen as being influenced by various 'isms' should be the other way round; Co-operation should be influencing them.
5. The three models presented by JB were each too narrow, and were not necessarily mutually exclusive.

On the future of the SCS:

1. The specialist forums idea is not an alternative to regional groupings - the two can work together with the forums travelling round the regions. There is a need for active, working regional organisers.
2. Once charitable status is achieved, this could be used to launch an appeal for funds
3. The idea of including refereed articles in the Journal is ambitious and change the Journal's nature. It may have more difficulty in maintaining its present strength.
4. The value of the Journal could be much enhanced. Those who read it may be seen as an elite, though when good quotations appear in Co-operative News the contents reach a much wider audience. Subscribers should pass on photocopies of articles
5. There should be closer links with the Co-operative College and the Plunkett Foundation, particularly in research initiatives.