

Ted Stephenson - His Contribution

Lily Howe

Ted Stephenson's contribution to the consumer co-operative movement was outstanding for its quality, its depth and its constancy over 40 years. It spanned his time at the University of Leeds where he was deputy head and senior lecturer in the Department of Management Studies, continuing throughout his retirement until he died early in June. In his writings, his consultancies, his conference addresses, his group meetings and in more private discussions he took us with him on the road to a searching self-examination before going on to probe future strategy and all that flowed from it.

"Survival", he recently wrote, "depends upon rethinking many long held assumptions and upon a reappraisal of every aspect of co-operative retailing activity." He clearly believed, as Abraham Lincoln once said, "If we could first know where we are and whither we are tending we could better judge what to do and how to do it."

This continuing exercise was far more than the intellectual journey of an academic. Ted had the knowledge and experience not only to advocate apposite strategy but also to advise on operational plans to carry it through effectively with co-operative distinction. He *knew* the complex consumer movement - some societies intimately through his consultancy work - and was concerned for both its commercial success and its distinctive democratic values. At once an independent critic and a loyal advocate, he looked to the twin aims of economic efficiency and social responsibility between which he saw no conflict, recognising both as aspects of a common purpose. While he underlined the need for the right rate of net profit he warned against the economic emperor with no co-operative clothes.

Much of his counsel was timeless. With his wide-ranging mind, his wisdom, his judgement and his - all too uncommon - commonsense he consistently underlined the 'art of the possible' believing the gap between rhetoric and reality should be closed.

The grand strategy, as an apparent panacea, never beguiled him. This was significant, for he was consulting, writing and

speaking over the years spanning the UK Movement's Regional Plan, the Single National Federation debate, the Tripartite approach to a CWS/CRS merger and other major strategic initiatives. "National plans", he once wrote, "do not sit comfortably on the disparate organisations that make up the co-operative movement."

He called for innovative thinking within the broad framework of co-operative ideas. More than a decade ago he was writing of an alternative method of merger: the phased merger whose limited joint activities are entered into with agreed full merger as the final product. But he was quick to warn "Combining inefficient, ineffective societies will not produce efficient ones - only failure on a wider scale."

A realist, he was careful in analysis to place consumer co-operative results in the context of the wider retail trade recognising that co-operatives cannot - or should not - be examined in isolation either for market share or for profitability. One such analysis in a major piece currently circulating in the international movement concludes "The emerging message is that the movement has to seek, both individually and collectively, a distinctive role. Differentiation is essential in a crowded market with a static or weak demand."

In an age of rapid change he maintained that whatever the technology, whatever the structures "nothing can replace human judgement". And he would return to the theme that we may travel too far along some wrong or over-narrow road before we discover costly errors entered into through not taking the broad or long term view. "The problem with short term thinking is that it concentrates attention on means, such as structure, at the expense of ends", he averred.

Ted was as much concerned with member involvement, lay leadership and directoral control as with executive management. Themes to which he frequently returned were the critical nature of the relationship between the board and the chief executive, the accountability of management, the supply of information to members and employees and an active membership base as a prerequisite for healthy governance. This broad canvas led to a rich profusion of writings and other involvements.

Co-operative education and training much concerned him. To the Institute of Co-operative Directors he gave unstinting support

and practical help, recognising on its formation a decade ago the value of the innovation which came, with hindsight, surprisingly late. He developed a section for the Institute's manual dealing with "Functions, authority and roles of the board of directors" and became a regular contributor to the Institute's 'Director Briefing'. In earlier years when he was at the University of Leeds his discussion groups for society officials formed the basis on which much of their management style and thinking is still based.

He was, among others, a faithful president of the society for Co-operative Studies and it followed that the 'Journal' Editor frequently called upon him to contribute. The 'Co-operative News', 'Co-operative Marketing and Management', the Plunkett Foundation 'World of Co-operative Enterprise' and other publications regularly benefited from his thought stimulating articles. "Stirring dull roots with spring rain" was ever his art.

In all this and his related work Ted needed his quiet, wry sense of humour, never waspish, never unkind, always understanding, though sometimes - eyebrows up, eyes widening - almost incredulous. But the steel was there and so was the courage. Whatever the controversy, he stood fast to his fundamental beliefs. He recognised that compromise is an integral part of management but he never compromised on co-operative values and saw no reason to do so. Combining top quality management with effective directoral control he saw as the route to both commercial success and the co-operative difference.

Ted was to me, as to so many others, more than a professional colleague, for he quickly became a staunch and valued friend. From time to time we would meet in Manchester when I was at the Co-operative Press. We wandered the movement, lingering along the way to pinpoint and analyse current issues, problems and opportunities, then going on to discuss future commissioned contributions. Invariably, I returned to my desk refreshed, enlivened and not a little comforted to have again been reassured through our exchanges that we had many common thoughts on the movement.

To an Editor Ted Stephenson was the 'complete' commissioned contributor: clear, concise, orderly and with an elegant turn of phrase. His theme was always relevant to the current co-operative environment and tailored to each individual publication. A bonus

- so crucial for an Editor - he never missed a deadline.

Publishers outside the co-operative movement recognised his quality. In 1963 Heinemann published his 'Management of Co-operative Societies' and in 1985 Macmillan his 'Management: a Political Activity'. The movement was fortunate to have a friend of such high standing in the broad management field.

Ted went too soon for all of us, but quickly as he would have wished. Happily, he embraced life to the last - writing and, with Margery who had been his wife and close companion for so long, walking the lovely Northumbrian countryside around Wooler where he savoured his busy retirement.

We shall miss him: do miss him. But as we approach the 21st century the challenges to co-operative enterprise he explored with informed perception are waiting to be grasped. To take hold of those challenges - the problems and the opportunities - to ensure a significant role for co-operatives in the future is the finest tribute we can now pay to him and to his contribution to co-operative development.

Lily Howe was Editor of the 'Co-operative News' and 'Co-operative Marketing and Management' from 1972 to 1984. Over many years she has been associated with the UK Society for Co-operative Studies and the Plunkett Foundation.