

Editorial

In this issue we introduce the timely and important subject of government and co-operatives; timely because after 18 years of not-too-generous Conservative rule in the UK a new Labour government promises a much more sympathetic stance towards co-ops, and important because several issues are queuing for the new government's attention, including a Co-operatives Act. Peter Clarke, who, when he was General Secretary of the Co-operative Party, worked hard for a Labour victory, writes from a personal viewpoint about all the opportunities the change of government opens up, including that for new co-operative legislation. Ted Graham, a Labour member of the House of Lords and one of the leading figures in the UK co-operative scene, reflects on the recent attacks on mutuality and co-operation by people concerned only with making a quick, and totally undeserved, profit. Though the government is sympathetic, it also has a very full legislative timetable and is also sceptical as to whether the building societies are serious about their newly-rediscovered mutual credentials. (One recent development we have to report since Lord Graham's article went to press is a rule change to raise the voting threshold for building society conversions; if societies wish to convert to shareholder companies the turnout for investor-members has to be 50 per cent - previously 20 per cent - and three-quarters have to vote in favour. This should buy the remaining mutuals more time to prepare their defences against attacks from within, though it does not improve their chances against external takeover bids).

As a background to the subject of government and co-operatives, we publish an informative article by Alain Roy on the ways in which co-operative sectors are represented on, and supported by, government bodies in Canada. We hope soon to publish a similar article from Garry Cronan on the Australian experience. These will raise the important but contentious question of whether the rather odd British experience - of having a Co-operative Party, allied to the Labour Party, actually sponsoring members of parliament - is more or less effective than the more usual methods of seeking representation on government committees, lobbying parliament, and so on. In the UK we have these as well, in the shape of the Co-operative Union's Parliamentary Committee (mainly representing the

consumer interest) the UK Co-operative Council (representing all co-operative sectors), and all-party groups of MPs who are interested in the different co-operative sectors. It would be interesting to receive articles from researchers both inside and outside the UK, commenting on the relative merits of these approaches. However, these are sensitive times for those trying to influence a very busy Labour government, and on some issues we may have to wait until 'the dust settles'. We intend, when the time is right, to publish an update on the new Co-operatives Bill.

Also in this issue, we publish an article by a leading Australian co-operator, Race Matthews, on the need for a 'new mutualism' in Australia. His examples, ranging from housing co-ops and the Desjardins credit movement in Canada to the Mondragon co-operative system, are of great importance not just to Australian credit unions but to co-ops and mutuals around the world. Basil Loveridge draws on a lifetime's experience to argue for a broad, adult-education based view of co-operative education, which should provoke replies from proponents of a narrower, 'member-relations' based approach. There is no room in this issue for our longer, refereed section, because we publish the Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies. These do not contain all that 'proceeded' - one of the speakers, Peter Couchman, has already published in the September issue - but Simon Blackley provides a worker co-operative perspective on the concept of stakeholding, and argues that the opportunities opened up by the new Labour government should allow worker co-ops to make a significant contribution to local economic development. Roger Spear provides a summary of a research proposal for the study of the 'Co-operative Difference' which was tested out among Society members at the Conference. This research project will form a major part of the work of the Society over the next few years, and it was very helpful to have the views of the members before work begins. Finally, we publish an update of the Journal index, produced by our deputy editor, Gillian Lonergan. We have decided to publish it as an integral part of the Journal rather than in loose leaf form, so that researchers can find it more easily when they need it.