

**The Co-operative Movement in  
Greater Nottingham:  
*a journey towards political  
representation***

Ninety years ago the British Co-operative Movement took a historic decision to seek direct representation in Parliament and on local authorities. In October 1917 they adopted a Political Programme and set up a Central Co-operative Parliamentary Representation Committee, which in 1919 was renamed 'The Co-operative Party'.

This is the story of the journey towards political representation during World War One by 14 Co-operative Societies in Greater Nottingham, a journey marked by frustration, anger, hope, determination, and a belief that in Co-operation they could build a better society in the aftermath of war.

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**Christopher Richardson**

Foreword by Professor Stephen Yeo



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# **The Co-operative Movement in Greater Nottingham: a Journey Towards Political Representation**

**Christopher Richardson**



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## Foreword

Christopher Richardson has made a meticulous, readable and politically useful contribution to this year's Co-operative Party 90th anniversary celebrations.

For the social history of socialisms and of working people's politics, historical studies which grow from a single place are often the most vivid and revealing. This is particularly true of the Co-operative Movement in Britain. This was an intensely local social movement. Almost every community in Britain generated its own Society which federated with others, joined larger Societies, dreamed of a single Society capable of replacing competitive capitalism and knew that – in order to realise the dream – structures would have to be created which allowed members in localities to retain a sense of ownership and self-governance.

At the same time members knew that, if their Societies were to survive capitalist competition and the demands of an ever-enlarging State, they needed a national presence politically as well as economically. Co-operators knew that the wider world they wanted to change was not of their own making. The wider world also became more and more intrusive: the First World War being the most obvious example. Commercial survival has been one achievement; a continuing political presence nationally as well as locally has been another.

Chris uses records of Societies in Greater Nottingham to trace the criss-crossing journeys of fourteen Societies towards the Central Co-operative Parliamentary Representation Committee (1917) and 'The Co-operative Party' (1919). The detail he has patiently put together is invaluable. Such detail needs assembling from as many places as possible. It enables us to bring a number of things into focus. These include: the fierceness with which the Movement has always been attacked by local and national private traders; the conscripting power of the modern state; the efficiency and rationality of co-operation and mutuality during times of crisis; the capacity of Co-operators to see that 'market' and 'state' both needed wholesale reconstruction on a daily basis rather than all at once; the key role of



women in the story; the remarkable survival of late-eighteenth century ideas of 'moral economy' (the genesis of the CWS) ; the difference between a national parliamentary presence which protected the *organisational* interests of the Movement and a national social/political presence capable of maturing the *associational* power of the Movement (among other Co-operative and Mutual Enterprises), with which to build a *different kind* of politics for a different kind of society – a co-operative commonwealth. Thank you Chris!

## **Stephen Yeo**

Professor Stephen Yeo was Principal of Ruskin College Oxford from 1989 to 1997, then Chair of the Board of the Co-operative College for five years. He is a social historian, writer and consultant with a special interest in Co-operative and Mutual Enterprises. For many years he taught at the University of Sussex and was active in the community politics/ community publishing movement.

# **The Co-operative Movement in Greater Nottingham: a Journey Towards Political Representation**

*Ninety years ago the British Co-operative Movement took a historic decision to seek direct representation in Parliament and on local authorities. In October 1917 they adopted a Political Programme and set up a Central Co-operative Parliamentary Representation Committee, which in 1919 was renamed 'The Co-operative Party'.*

## **Preface**

This is the story of the journey towards political representation during World War One by 14 Co-operative Societies in Greater Nottingham<sup>1</sup>. There were many more than this in existence at the time but the records of many are lost or incomplete. These 14 include the 3 largest – Mansfield, Nottingham and Long Eaton – and 11 others covering an area from Clowne in the north west to Skegness in the east, including Societies large and small, new and old, with urban and rural memberships. There are widespread similarities in the terrain, common milestones and also some very different adventures along the way, but almost all reached the same destination in a relatively short period of just three years.

## **Introduction**

The history of the Co-operative Movement – one of the great working class achievements of the 19th and 20th centuries – has been routinely passed over by historians. Fortunately the Co-operative Movement produced its own historians, just as it eventually produced almost everything else, from wheat on its farms to houses for its members. Among Co-operative historians there is

1. Greater Nottingham: the area currently covered by the Greater Nottingham Co-operative Party Council.



general agreement that it was the conditions of the Great War, and the discrimination that Co-operative Societies experienced as a result of it, which were to cause the Movement to set aside 70 years of political neutrality and adopt a policy of 'direct political representation' at the Swansea Congress of the Co-operative Union in June 1917.

From the written records of the time there is no doubt that almost all of the local Societies surveyed here did experience considerable disadvantages and humiliations in their treatment by government agencies national and local. However, the relative significance of food shortages and controls, military service orders, and attempts to tax Co-operatives and Co-operators, varied from one Society to another, and although the entry into politics proved to be relatively uncontroversial when it happened, relations with the Labour Party proved to be more problematic. Also, what few observers have recorded is the growing sense of power that Societies believed they could wield on behalf of their members, and the desire to use it, not just for short term amelioration of injustices, but for a radical change in the kind of society they wanted after the War. Had the conditions of war been the sole factor, the momentum for political representation would have been halted by the rapid dismantling of war controls after November 1918. Instead the momentum was maintained and there was no general or sustained objection to it at the time, or indeed in the following ninety years.

## **Food Shortages**

The pressures on Societies resulting from the War and the disruption to imports of food from the German naval blockade, which began in February 1915, did not come into being immediately. It was in 1916 that they began to feature for the first time, and then with increasing regularity, in the discussions in Boardrooms of local Co-operative Societies. The first grievances surfaced as a result of food shortages. Both the Boston and Long Eaton Societies noted shortages of sugar, flour and coal in February. As the situation worsened through the summer of 1916, Long Eaton arranged a public meeting at the Peoples Hall in their central premises in September, which resulted in a resolution calling on the Government

to control the price and distribution of food. By December of that year Clowne's Board would "view with alarm the extreme shortage and irregular consignments of essential foodstuffs now being experienced by the Society". Numerous local conferences of Societies were held to discuss the food situation and call for Government action. Even Calverton, a small Society not affiliated to the Co-operative Union and seldom present at meetings of local Societies, was represented at a meeting in Hucknall in October.

Effective food controls and consumer rationing by the State were still a long way off and most Societies were not willing to wait for a reluctant Government to act. The Netherfield Society introduced its own card rationing system for sugar for its 2,800 members as early as January 1916. The Mansfield Society introduced a system of sugar rationing in May. As stocks fell, the Long Eaton Society stopped selling sugar to non-members, and experimented by restricting the sale of sugar to members making purchases of tea, but was forced to stop the practice after objections were made to the newly established Food Control Board. They were permitted to ration sugar by relating allocations to grocery purchases, allowing a 2lb bag to be purchased with every 4/- spent.

By November 1916 sugar supplies locally were down to 65% of pre-War levels, and by December to 50%. Skegness, the youngest of local Societies, having formed as recently as 1909, was the only Society without apparent supply problems. They had noted sugar shortages as early as 1914 before the blockade even began, but then proceeded to pass through the War with scarcely a reference to it, though it must be said that they were a very small Society of 280 members and static sales. As inflation was increasing, their static sales represented a decrease in volume so they were relatively immune, as were many private traders, from the effects of the 1915 datum line on which supplies were calculated and which was the basis of most Societies' early objections to control when it was eventually introduced. As Mr Dickinson, the President of the Nottingham Society, declared at the January 1917 Quarterly Meeting of Members, "sugar supplies based on the 1915 level of sales is good for private traders as their trade is declining while Co-operative trade is increasing in an ever ascending scale".



Whilst Societies were doing their best to introduce equity into the distribution of commodities in short supply, they were unable to influence the volume or price of supplies received. Most had been in the business of procurement for more than half a century and were not easily deceived by some apparent shortages. In May 1917 the Long Eaton Society's Board passed a resolution for consideration at the CWS Quarterly Meeting: "That this meeting of delegates from Co-operative Societies in the Midlands strongly protests at the action of the Liverpool Bacon Merchants in holding up stocks of bacon in cold storage to the value of £2m, thereby creating an artificial shortage and inflation of price to the great detriment of the people. And further calls on the Government in the interests of the nation to liberate these stocks and take measures to prevent such holding and extortion in the future."

## Food Controls

The Government was not enthusiastic about introducing controls, but growing discontent forced their hand. In late 1916 Lord Davenport, head of the Provision Merchants Kearley and Tongue, was appointed national Food Controller. A network of national Commodity, and local Food, Control Committees began to emerge. But these only exacerbated the problems under which local Co-operative Societies laboured. It very soon became clear that despite the example which Co-operative Societies had already set in supply, price control and rationing, the new control committees would exclude them and be used against their members' interests.

In May 1917 the Long Eaton Society's Board recorded that "Attention was drawn to the Government's action in appointing a Flour Control Committee upon which no Co-operative Representative had been selected ... It was decided that the following protest be sent to the Food Controller, Parliamentary Committee of the Co-operative Union, W. Anderson MP and others ... 'That this Board of Directors strongly protests against the Government's action in continually ignoring Co-operative organisations in this country, consisting of 3.5m consumers, and being also the largest Millers in the UK, and further press for adequate representation on the Flour Control Committee' ".

Whether Lord Davenport had a telepathic notion of the Long Eaton Society's wrath, or whether it was coincidence, the following day the Government announced that two nominees from the Co-operative Wholesale Society were to be appointed to the Flour Control Committee, and the Board withdrew its letter. However, a week later on the 25th May the Long Eaton Board was again taking the offensive, protesting at the lack of Co-operative representation on the national Milk Control Committee "which is composed of Producers and Retailers and ignored consumers entirely". Perhaps emboldened by the coincidental outcome of the previous week's despatch, another letter was sent, this time to the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, "asking for the withdrawal of Lord Davenport from his office as Food Controller as in our opinion he is not a fit person to control the National Food Supply and fix the prices of same".

With a sense of timing that served the Long Eaton Society well on many occasions, it was no sooner said, than done. Lord Davenport resigned and Lord Rhondda took his place.

Meanwhile the local Food Control Committees were exercising the minds of many a Co-op Board and for most were the primary source of their irritation and discontent. The Government had intended that these committees should be kept free of local tradesmen but, given the prominence of grocers and other private traders on so many local Councils which made the appointments, it was soon apparent that they would become a dominant force on the Food Control Committees. Co-operative Societies frequently found themselves excluded altogether, despite a wish to the contrary voiced by Lord Rhondda under pressure from the Co-operative Union. In November 1917 it was estimated that 15% of the members of these Committees were farmers, 12% private traders, and only 2.5% were co-operative representatives.

The frustration of Co-operative Boards is clear from the changing language in which their grievances were expressed. In June 1915 the Netherfield Board had written to their MP and the Prime Minister "regarding the very high price of Goods, asking that they will do their utmost to get reduction in prices". By August 1917 they had become more forthright: "that we appeal to the Local Food Committee in view



of the fact that we are supplying thousands of people in this district with the necessities of life and as consumers they should be represented". In September they nominated a member for a place on the local Food Committee and supported a request from the Netherfield Women's Co-operative Guild for an additional place for a woman. Neither were accepted. They wrote a letter of protest and received no reply. In October they recorded "that we write to the Local Food Committee asking for a reply to our letter of protest at not having secured a seat on the Committee". The humility of 1915 had evaporated and a justifiable sense of righteous anger now permeated their dialogue.

### **Representation on Local Food Committees**

Throughout 1917 and 1918 Societies sought representation on Food Committees. In Mansfield the Co-operative Society wrote in July 1917 seeking places on the town's Food Committee commensurate with its local membership "representing 12,000 families in the Mansfield District". A month later they submitted a list of twelve nominations to the Council. The Clowne Society decided that "a letter be forwarded to Clowne Rural District Council pressing the Society's claim for representation on the local Food Committee shortly to be appointed, and that Bolsover Society be recommended to take similar steps". Lack of success led them to arrange a meeting with the Barlborough and Cresswell Societies to make a joint approach in December. In August 1917 the Hucknall Society's Board instructed its General Manager to "do whatever possible to get the Society well represented on the local Food Control Committee". The Nottingham Society was seeking representation on the Coal Supplies Committee for Nottingham and the Food Control Committees for Beeston, Arnold and West Bridgford, but with no success, and a complaint was soon on its way to Lord Rhonda concerning the constitution of the Beeston Committee. In the City of Nottingham the Nottingham Society's most belligerent utterances on Food Control were expressed rather later than most, at Quarterly Meetings of members in 1918. Two resolutions on food distribution and the inequalities of representation on Food Control Committees were passed in March 1918: a month later the Town Clerk made a

gesture of appeasement by announcing that two additional places would be allocated to the Trades Council, a response that failed to mollify Nottingham Co-operators who wanted to be directly recognised as representatives of consumers and not to be subsumed in the 'Labour Interest'.

The ire of Cinderhill Co-operators was raised in January 1918 when they discovered that the Nottingham Food Committee had allocated an unscheduled quantity of margarine to the Maypole stores in Basford. Maypole were serious multiple competitors to the Co-operative Movement. A letter of complaint was sent to the Food Committee. Meanwhile the Quarterly Meeting of Members in February resolved "That this meeting of Co-operators protest against the inequalities of food distribution and call upon the Food Control Board to install a national rationing scheme immediately". In March the Society learned from the Bulwell Society that there were three vacancies to be filled on the Nottingham Food Committee and the Board agreed to "do whatever possible to get the Society well represented". A "Mass Meeting" of members at the Albert Hall with the Bulwell and Nottingham Societies was called to discuss supply and food control problems, and "that should no notice be taken of our protests that we make ourselves heard in the Market Place, Nottingham at the May Day Celebrations". The well attended mass meeting and the prospect of being denounced in the Market Place evoked no immediate comment from the Food Control Committee but in mid-April the appointment of Mr Hapgood of the Bulwell Society and Mr Walter Halls of the Nottingham Society was announced. As at the Nottingham Society the news was not entirely welcome, perhaps partly because the Bulwell Society with fewer members (but greater sales) had been offered a place in preference to themselves, but also because the offer was made through the Trades Council and the Co-operative nominees were appointed to represent not Co-operators but "the Labour Interest". A letter of protest was duly sent off to the Town Clerk.

The Nottingham Society had by far the largest membership of any in the Nottingham District but began the War behind Mansfield in terms of sales. Long Eaton had been experiencing the most rapid rate of sales growth of any in the District during wartime and was a



Society of great strength. It was also probably the only Society that could eventually claim that its campaign for representation on the local Food Committee had been largely successful. It was a success that came as a result of frustration and anger, and good working relationships with the Society's auxiliary bodies and with the local labour movement. And, as at Cinderhill, it was margarine that greased the wheels of popular protest.

## The Margarine Outrage

In December 1917 the Long Eaton Board recorded that the Local Food Controller had applied for the use of the Peoples Hall, the Society's own meeting hall and the largest in the town, situated on the first floor of their Central Premises, for the sale of margarine by the Maypole Dairy Company. This was required, they were told, to relieve people of the need to queue in the streets. Not surprisingly the Directors were outraged at this monstrous impertinence: not that they were in favour of queues, but that one of their principal capitalist competitors should occupy the heart of their own building to sell Maypole margarine to non-Co-operators and lure their own members away from the Co-operative stores. "A lengthy discussion was given to the request and it was eventually decided that we refuse the request ... on the grounds that if the Margarine was equitably distributed there would be no necessity for queues".

They might have stopped there, but fortunately they did not. They wrote to the national Food Control Board intimating that should their protest be ignored, the town would be gripped by a general strike. Given that Long Eaton and neighbouring Chilwell had become important centres of the wartime munitions industry, they probably felt it was a threat that could not be ignored: "Unless the controlled commodities are more equally distributed in the town, there is a probability of the organised workers such as Railwaymen, Trade Unionists and others abandoning their work and taking the place of their wives and children in the queues". Within a week news had spread that the local Food Committee had commandeered the margarine and allocated it to local shopkeepers. The Co-operative Society had been allocated 4cwt. The Board decided to ration it equitably amongst their 12,000 members, an average of about 1½



**Long Eaton Co-operative Society Central Premises and People's Hall**

ounces each. A Special General Meeting of members called to discuss the margarine on 4th January 1918 was unanimous in approving the actions of the Board.

Meanwhile the Food Control Board in London took note of the situation. It was only weeks since a mere handful of Bolsheviks had stormed the Winter Palace and thrown out the Provisional Government of Russia. Petrograd yesterday, Long Eaton tomorrow? A Commissioner was despatched with due haste to the offices of the Long Eaton Urban District Council where a deputation from the local Trades and Labour Council was meeting UDC Officials. The Trades and Labour delegation demanded that the Food Control Committee should resign immediately, the 12 vacancies to be split equally between the UDC and the Trades and Labour Council, with the latter offering 3 of their 6 places to the Long Eaton Co-operative Society. They left believing that the ultimatum had been accepted, but there was no public announcement, only silence from the authorities.

In the meantime Mrs Lucy Sprittles, a member of the Society's Educational Committee and Secretary of the Long Eaton Women's



Co-operative Guild, was busy mobilising the women of Long Eaton and a "Mass Meeting of Women" assembled four days later in the Market Place. Around three hundred women rallied to the call and concluded by passing unanimously a resolution "That this meeting of Long Eaton Women demands the immediate dissolution of the Local Food Committee on the grounds that it has not executed to the full the powers conferred on it, and has made no attempt at equal distribution". Their timing could not have been better. No sooner had the demand been made than the Committee resigned. The UDC adopted the proposals of the Trades and Labour Council and the Long Eaton Working Men's Co-operative Society took up three places on the new Committee.

An incident took place two months later that was perversely reminiscent of the so-called 'food riots' of the 18th century in which the crowd spontaneously asserted the rights of the 'moral economy' against the activities of hoarders and speculators. The incident confirmed that the Long Eaton Board had not been fanciful in suggesting that workers would down tools for margarine: at Mansfield a crowd gathered at the Society's central grocery when a quantity of unconditioned bacon was delivered. The bacon was considered to be unfit for immediate consumption and sale but "owing to the menacing attitude of the people" the President and Manager decided that the safety of the Society's staff would be better served if the bacon were brought out and sold.

The triumph of the Long Eaton Co-operators was highly unusual and other Societies continued to appeal for representation on Food Control Committees for many months to come. The Bulwell Society was still seeking representation on the Nottingham Food Control Committee as late as February 1919, three months after the War had ended.

## **Military Service**

The problems of running what were in many cases the largest food retailing business in the locality were made more difficult by the demands of the Military who issued conscription orders to men of military service age, and by the Tribunals which heard their appeals. Cases were described of Societies losing almost all their male

employees, including senior Officials and Managers, to the armed forces whilst local private traders enjoyed immunity.

Surprisingly the Minutes of some Societies fail to record any significant concern over military service, including Nottingham, Bulwell, Hucknall, Stapleford & Sandiacre and Calverton, but for others it was one of the most serious threats to their business. The Boston Society was severely disadvantaged by military service orders. In the summer of 1916 they lost two men from their bakery, one from the office and the Manager of the Boot Department. In December they lost three more men and the Society made appeals on their behalf. The Skegness, a young and struggling Society, could ill afford to lose their General Manager, Mr Kelsey, in April 1916. Whether they appealed or not is unclear, but they were reluctant to accept his resignation. Desperate appeals were made to four neighbouring Societies for help, and some assistance was forthcoming until they made an internal appointment to replace him in November. The Ruddington Society lost three men in May 1916, another in January 1917 and their Butchery Manager in June 1918. At Clowne, the Society's Drapery Manager and two other men were called up. In December 1916 they lost more appeals and in March 1917 resorted to using a local Solicitor to conduct the appeals on their behalf, starting with three men and another three in June. In May 1918 their General Manager, Mr Calow, was called up and another Manager, Mr Renshaw. Their appeal for Calow on medical grounds was successful, but Renshaw was granted only a week's extension to clear his work and report for duty. The Board was still seeking his release from the army in early 1919. The Mansfield Society's failures at Tribunals led them to appoint Berryman Solicitors to conduct appeals after they had been forced to close two grocery branches in October 1916 when the Managers were called up. The Netherfield Board decided to make a general appeal for "the whole of the Mens Employees to be exempted from service" in January 1916. In October when they were faced with the loss of six men simultaneously they tried another approach, hoping that a show of strength would influence the Tribunal: "That we appeal for all six men before Military Tribunal and as many members of the Committee as possible attend".



The Long Eaton Society's General Manager appealed on behalf of fifty four men at his first appearance at an Appeal. In 1916 the Society appeared to make an uncharacteristic retreat on the matter of military service. In November Branch Managers were withdrawn from the list of exempted occupations and they were faced with the threat of large numbers of men being taken from their employment. They were also losing men to better paid work at the Chilwell Ordnance factory which entitled the men to exemption from military service overseas. Having been castigated by the Chairman of the local Military Service Tribunal in December for attempting to gain a block exemption for all single men, they decided that in future they would appeal only for Branch Managers "as they thought it would be useless appealing for others". But their retreat proved temporary and in response to new regulations, in March of 1917 they issued an ebullient challenge to the Government, conferring on the military service orders a clear class perspective: "That we delegate our representative Mr Hallam for the Committee appointed by the Council to carry out the proposed scheme of National Service, and at the same time we send a letter to Mr Neville Chamberlain protesting against the system, when large numbers are still occupied in horse racing, hunting and other pleasures of the rich". Altogether the Society lost one hundred and sixty men to the military before the War came to an end.

## **The Threat of Taxation**

After food control and military service, the third major element of concern for Co-operative Societies during the War was the threat of taxation. Those who were opposed to Co-operation, or simply did not understand it, would assert that Co-operative Societies were being unpatriotic by failing to share the added burdens being placed on private traders by the taxation of their profits. The Nottingham Society responded typically in a letter to local MPs: "From Mr Gladstone downwards, all Chancellors of the Exchequer have frankly admitted such Societies do NOT come under the purview of these Acts ... We do not profit as understood by private traders". As it was accepted that Co-ops did not make 'profits', they could not be making 'excess profits'. The strength of the Co-operative case was tacitly admitted when, after a year of subjecting Industrial and

Provident Societies to the full extent of the Excess Profits Tax, the Government retreated and proposed to tax only the profits derived from trade with non-members and contracts with external organisations such as Government departments i.e. the non-mutual element of their trade. Although this was estimated to be no more than 1% of the total Co-operative trade, Co-operators were not placated. Meanwhile, private traders' organisations such as the National Chamber of Trade were campaigning for Co-operative Society dividends to be subjected to Income Tax, a separate proposal which, in the short term, would harm individual Co-operators rather than the Societies. The injustice of the Income Tax threat was based on the fact that most Co-operators would fall below the Income Tax thresholds if their total incomes were to be assessed for tax, so it would be unjust to reduce their Co-operative dividends by taxing it at source.

Local Societies began to organise against the taxation threats in 1916. Clowne and others in the Northern Region attended a Conference in Sheffield in April and another in Doncaster two days later. They followed this up by arranging a public meeting in August and having a guest speaker on the subject at the December Quarterly Meeting. The following March the General Manager and Secretary were instructed to use "every legitimate means to guard against the Society becoming liable for Excess Profits Duty". At Mansfield the matter was first raised in a question from the floor at a Quarterly Meeting in April 1916. A conference of local Societies in the Parliamentary Division of Mansfield was arranged for December, to discuss both the Excess Profits Tax and the Income Tax threat. The Stapleford & Sandiacre Society wrote to their MP in June and the Hucknall Society wrote to their MP and the MP for Mansfield in July. The Ruddington Society, not routinely taken to expressions of dissent, resolved at a Board meeting in October "that we protest against the unjust proposals to tax co-operative dividends".

For Cinderhill, taxation was second only to food supplies in the attention they gave to it. Theirs was one of the first Societies, in January 1916, to realise the effects of the Excess Profits Tax on their business. In June they agreed to lobby MPs according to Co-operative Union guidelines. The Women's Guild asked to be



involved. The Educational Committee printed 8,000 leaflets. A meeting of members was held on a Saturday in September with one hundred people present, followed by a ham tea. Another public meeting was arranged for January 1917.



**Mr H A Dickinson**

At the Nottingham Society's January 1917 Quarterly Meeting, the President, Mr Dickinson, spoke about the entire range of grievances held by the Society and the Movement. A resolution was passed on pensions to war wounded and children's allowances for forces' wives, and then the meeting passed on to taxation. "This meeting of members, representing 17,000 Co-operators, enters its emphatic protest against misrepresentations by private traders against the

Co-op and in favour of assessment to Income Tax ... dictated by either ignorance of the facts and the law, or by a hatred of working class collaboration ... and asserts the undoubted rights of Co-operators to equal treatment with all other citizens before the law". The resolution was passed without dissent. The conclusions that were being drawn from these hostilities becomes clear in 1918 when the Quarterly Balance Sheets contained this exhortation: "Working Men and Women Co-operators support your Society and maintain your independence by collective action, and be prepared at the proper moment to use your power as citizens (through Parliamentary representation) to resist the attacks of interested trade rivals".

Long Eaton's liability to Excess Profits Tax had been estimated to be £3,084 in March 1916, around 5% of their net profits. The *Long Eaton Co-operative Record*, a journal freely available with a quarterly circulation of 6,800 copies, and read by the most

committed Co-operators, made the consequences clear in an editorial the following January. Pursuing the case for taxes to be applied equally to all classes, the Editor wrote "It may be that this can only be accomplished through direct representation in Parliament: I am inclined to think this is the only solution, but great foresight and thoughtful tact are necessary to its achievement".

The taxation issue was particularly important to the debate about securing direct Co-operative representation in Parliament because the Government deferred discussion on Income Tax to a Royal Commission after the War. The threat was therefore a continuing one which outlasted those other issues related directly to the War.

### **Quite Able to Manage Our Own Business**

The tremendous growth in the value of Co-operative Societies' sales during the War was exaggerated by levels of inflation which Societies had never before experienced, as the Co-operative Union observed at the time, but it did also represent growth in volume and market share. Co-operative members knew that they would not be overcharged for articles in short supply and, with their own rationing schemes in place, would receive a fair share of essential foodstuffs while housewives buying from private traders would have to rely on the goodwill and favouritism of the shopkeeper. There was also the bonus of the dividend but although Societies did try to maintain levels of dividend on purchases, many actively reduced prices and margins to reduce their liability to Excess Profits Tax. By doing so, Societies helped to squeeze the margins of private traders and weaken their ability to compete. There was also good propaganda value in holding prices down and exposing the machinations of private traders. In March 1916 the Derby and District Bakers Association complained that the Long Eaton Society was selling bread at 9½d per quarter loaf when the Associations' members had agreed to charge 10d, shortly to rise to 10½d. They asked for permission to send a deputation to the Board to persuade them to raise their bread prices. The Board rejected their interference. "We as Co-operators are not out for profit but to supply our members at fair prices with the necessities of life", they responded, "We are quite able to manage our own business".



It was occasions such as this which fuelled the perception of private traders, large and small, as speculators. In January 1918, at the height of the skirmishes over margarine, the Long Eaton Society Board received a verbal report from a delegate to the Annual Conference of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, who reported that food from the United States was being sent back to sea to force a shortage and raise retail prices in the UK. Dockers and other workers were downing tools to obtain supplies and the majority of the Conference delegates supported them. In Nottingham, at the Quarterly Meeting the previous July, the President had referred to Mr Bonar Law, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who had made his fortune as an iron merchant, profiting from his investments in shipping Bonds whilst ships were being sunk and merchant seamen were being drowned. "We must wake up. Some of these profiteers ought to be put in the pillory, or as one local official put it to me, 'These devils should be shot' ". The meeting erupted with cheers and shouts of 'hear hear' and the President's comment was published with obvious relish by the Editor in the next edition of the *Nottingham Co-operative Record*. In November the *Co-operative News* provided a full page to report an address by Mr Howard Marlow of the Oldham Society at a Kettering & Wellingborough District Conference in which he said: "The average House of Commons is a mere chance combination of landlords, brewers, lawyers, captains, stockbrokers, distillers and gambling men, animated by every class prejudice imaginable ...." Mr Marlow was not alone in believing so, and the changing language and sentiments were widely shared throughout the Co-operative Movement.

### **The Debt Owed to the Movement**

Co-operators could be proud that their own Wholesale Society had not speculated from War conditions and had acted ethically in its dealings with retail Societies, and with departments of a Government that showed precious little appreciation in return. At the start of the War the CWS held large stocks of flour, which were sold on to Societies at stable prices despite other flour merchants raising the market price as stocks dwindled. The CWS also sold flour to the

Army at pre-war prices when it could have made truly 'excessive profits' from an external contract as so many other suppliers were doing. Sugar and Danish butter imported by the CWS were sold at prices lower than the official maximum price, until private importation was prohibited, and tea was sold to members at ½d per lb less than the imposed price until threatened with legal action to stop the practice.

CWS nominees were also drafted in to advise on food rationing and by the time that Co-operative delegates were assembled at the Co-operative Congress at Whitsun 1918, the debt owed by the Government to the CWS and the Co-operative Movement was clear. Since Mr Henry J May, the Secretary to the Parliamentary Committee of the Co-operative Union, had been appointed to a Government Committee to look at the manufacture and distribution of sugar after Lord Davenport's resignation as Food Controller in 1916, the number of Co-operative appointees to committees had increased dramatically. The 1918 Congress heard that besides Mr T W Allan and Mr Thomas Killon, Chairman of the CWS, who were appointees at the Ministry of Food, there were some twenty seven Co-operative Union nominees on Consumers Council commodity committees such as those for vegetables, wheat, oils and fats, and others on advisory committees at the Ministry of Reconstruction which was looking at post-War affairs.

### **The Political Role Played by Women**

Membership of the Women's Co-operative Guild had grown during the War by around 50% to more than 40,000 in 1917. Under the determined and radical leadership of its General Secretary, Margaret Llewelyn Davies, the Guild worked at national level with other working class women's organisations such as the Women's Labour League, the Women Trade Unionists and the Railway Women's Guild, to expand women's representation on elected and appointed bodies, and by 1918 had succeeded in filling places on 56 Boards of Poor Law Guardians, 119 health insurance committees, 44 public health maternity committees, and had secured the nomination and election of their first City Councillor, Mrs Cottrell, to the Birmingham City Council, firm evidence that large numbers of Co-operators,



whether they had the vote or not, had been ready to seek places and serve on official bodies when the formal decisions on direct entry into politics were taken by the Movement in 1917.



Miss Margaret Llewelyn Davies

Local Societies were involving women members to a greater extent than ever before, not only as employees in jobs formerly entrusted only to men. Guilds were enjoying a growth in membership: even the struggling Skegness Society supported the setting up of a new branch of the Women's Guild in April 1917. Where Guilds already existed they took an important role in the discussions on food shortages and political representation. At Cinderhill they asked to be involved in

organising a special members' meeting on Income Tax in July 1916 and were allocated places on the new Committee with the Bulwell and Nottingham Societies for the selection of local Council candidates. One of the Society's two delegates to the 1918 Congress had reported on the dispute between the Guild and the Co-operative Union which, under pressure from the Catholic Church, had been trying to "control the attitudes of the Women's Guild" on divorce law reform in particular. The Cinderhill Guild had asked the Society to mandate its delegates to vote for the restoration of the annual Co-operative Union grant to the Guild and they did so. The Cinderhill Society was not prepared to accept the Union's position since "the Government had given women Freedom of Choice and a vote in the Nation's Welfare" in legislation which had recently extended the vote to all men over 21 and all women over 30. In

1919 one of their members, Mrs Wallis, was nominated for a place on the Basford Board of Guardians.

Netherfield had nominated a Guild member, Mrs King, to the Food Committee. Its Guild, and those at Clowne, Stapleford, Nottingham and Mansfield were all involved in the local representation Committees to select candidates. The Guild at Long Eaton had been an active participant in the campaigns by the Society over food controls and margarine. The Long Eaton Society took the same position as Cinderhill on the national dispute with the Co-operative Union, instructing its six Congress delegates to support the Guild "to keep its independency". The Nottingham Society welcomed its first woman Director, Mrs Bennett, a Guild nominee elected at her first attempt, in 1918. Mrs Sprittles, who had organised the "Mass Meeting of Women", was adopted as a sponsored candidate for Long Eaton South Ward in the County Council elections in 1919.

The Long Eaton Society was unusual in having successfully nominated candidates to represent Co-operators on local authorities as long ago as 1887 when the Board resolved "to take steps to put a working Co-operator on the Local Board" (of Health) at Long Eaton". A Special General Meeting agreed that the General Manager, Samuel Butler, be selected and "That the Board be instructed to use all lawful means, and efforts, to secure his return". In early 1894 six names were put forward for Parish Council elections and in September of that year two more candidates were nominated and joined Samuel Butler on the newly established Urban District Council, which subsequently elected him as its first Chairman.

## **A Cautious Approach**

The most well known and respected opponent of Co-operative Societies securing direct representation in Parliament and on local administrative bodies was Edward Owen Greening who opposed the proposals at the Swansea Congress in 1917. In his youth he had been persuaded to stand as a Radical candidate in the 1868 General Election in Halifax. He polled well but was still soundly beaten by the Official Liberals. He also split the mighty Halifax Co-op Society, having the public support of its Secretary and one



section of the membership, whilst one of the Official Liberals was supported by the Society's President and a rival section of the Co-operative membership. This early experience of Parliamentary struggle probably had a lasting impact on his views, but he remained a favourite among the Co-operative Societies of Greater Nottingham for his support for agricultural reform, Co-operative education and international Co-operation. At the age of eighty one, he was invited to lay the foundation stone of the new central premises in Upper Parliament Street in June 1915.

Greening's caution on politics was not shared by delegates to the Whitsun Congress, who approved the resolution for direct political representation by 1,979 votes to 201. They also rejected negotiations with the Labour Party by 1,883 votes to 199.

## **The Emergency Conference**

In the months after Congress passed the historic resolution to seek direct political representation in local and national government, and before the Emergency Conference assembled to approve the details of the scheme for representation drawn up by the Co-operative Union, several events occurred which influenced the thinking of the 500 delegates who assembled in London in October.

Probably the most important factor to inflame opinions was the refusal of the Prime Minister David Lloyd George, a Liberal heading a coalition government, to meet a Co-operative Union delegation, authorised by the Swansea Congress to seek a hearing on all the Movement's grievances. In moving the Union's proposals for involvement in politics Mr W R Allan of the Scottish CWS referred to the "contempt" shown by Lloyd George "although he was greatly pleased to receive deputations from the farmers, the bakers, and the Jockey Club". Lloyd George claimed it was all a misunderstanding and offered to meet a delegation immediately, but his offer came too late to placate the delegates, two hundred of which descended on the House of Commons to lobby their MPs when the Conference closed, creating such a melée that the delegate from Glasgow Govan was asked by a journalist when he reached the lobby "whether the crowd was the beginning of a revolution".

A second factor to confirm the opinion of delegates that they were on the right track was the declaration from Greening that "after the great vote at Swansea he recognised that it was necessary that the experiment should be made in direct representation". The principal spokesman for the old guard of Co-operators opposed to political representation had graciously conceded defeat.

The Movement was also well aware of the momentous changes that were taking place elsewhere in Europe. The Swansea Congress had enthusiastically welcomed the February revolution in Russia and the Russian Co-operative visitors "shook hands with the President and others near him and left the Congress with the cheers of the risen delegates ringing in their ears". The old order was crumbling and Co-operators were in the vanguard of the new. There were some minor indicators of changing moods too as a result of all the difficulties with established authorities described earlier. In Long Eaton the Board asked the Educational Committee to remove 'God Save the King' from its concert programme in West Park and substitute 'Auld Lang Syne'. A request for financial support for the erection of memorials to Lord Roberts, Commander in Chief of the British Army in the Boer War and pre-War advocate of conscription, was rejected by the Boards of the Clowne, Hucknall and Bulwell Societies, and the Nottingham Society rejected a similar appeal for money for holiday homes as a memorial to Lord Kitchener.

When Arthur Henderson appeared on the platform on behalf of the Labour Party at the October Emergency Conference he was warmly greeted by the delegates but sought to reassure them that he represented no threat to the position they had taken on political alliances: "The question of affiliation was one to be considered after experience and organisation, but why should there be anything but the most friendly relations between the two organisations". He had, however, placed the question firmly on the agenda for future debate.

The 1918 Congress had little more to say on the mechanics of political representation and most of the activity took place within Societies, which set up local political committees, made alliances, and selected candidates for local and Parliamentary elections. Most of them did so in collaboration with the Labour Party despite the position they had taken on national affiliation.



## **Local Movement into Politics**

The Clowne Society appeared to move towards political activity without dissent, perhaps because they did not participate directly in the selection of a Co-operative/Labour candidate. In 1918 they put a series of questions drawn up by the National Co-operative Representation Committee to the four candidates for North East Derbyshire and "after very careful consideration" it was "unanimously agreed that the replies from Mr F Lee the Labour candidate were most in harmony with the aspirations and principles of the Co-operative Movement and have therefore no hesitation in recommending every Co-operator to give his candidature their wholehearted support". At the December General Election Mr Lee was defeated and the electorate returned a Coalition Liberal to Parliament. In January the Society mounted a campaign to register its members on constituency electoral rolls to improve their chances of success in future elections and in March resolved to put up a candidate for the local elections. A delegation of four from the Labour Party agreed to support the Co-op candidate if his views were satisfactory. A deputation from the Liberal Association let it be known that they disagreed with the decision to put up a candidate but "The deputation then stated, that if the Committee nominated a candidate who would stand as a Co-operator only, they would recommend their members to support him". The Board then went on to nominate their Secretary Mr Calow "as the direct Representative of this Society" and prepared to issue an election address on his behalf "in harmony with the Policy outlined in the general address which is being published by the Labour Party of the District". This was an interesting situation and one which reveals the influence of the Clowne Co-operative Society in its trading area. The Labour Party accepted the Society's candidate and did not put up a candidate of their own, knowing they would gain a supporter on the Council. The Liberal Party likewise did not field a candidate on the understanding that the Co-operative candidate would stand as a Co-operator without a 'Labour' tag. The Co-operative candidate got the votes of Labour and Liberal supporters by standing as a Co-operator whilst tacitly adopting the Labour Party manifesto.

The Hucknall Society appeared to have had an uncontroversial

entry into politics. In February 1918 they made a donation to the bye-election in Prestwich where Mr Henry May was a candidate, and subsequently affiliated to the Labour Party, prior to the election of Thomas Parks, a native of Hucknall who was the Cinderhill Society's Manager and Secretary, in Broxtowe Ward, and to the Mansfield Labour Party.

## **Cinderhill's First Electoral Success**

The Cinderhill Society supported political action but gave its two delegates to the October 1917 Conference a free vote on the matter. After receiving reports from the delegates they immediately resolved that "Parliamentary Representation money be paid". In September 1918 a motion to affiliate to the Nottingham Central Labour Party was deferred to the October Quarterly General Meeting, it being "such an important matter", to be followed by a "General Ballot of all members". These proposals were approved at the next Quarterly Meeting and the Special Meeting took place later in the month when fifty members attended. In the ballot of their 2,800 members 1,058 took part and the result was 741 in favour and 300 against, with 14 blank and 4 spoilt ballot papers. Affiliation to the Labour Party had been approved by a majority of around two thirds of those voting. The Society's members subsequently agreed to pay an affiliation fee on the basis of 741 members, the number who had cast their vote in favour of affiliation in the ballot, and two delegates were elected to the Central Labour Party. In January 1919 it was decided that "Mr T Parks be nominated for a seat on the City Council" for Broxtowe Ward and for a seat on the Poor Law Board of Guardians. A move to reverse the affiliation at the April Quarterly Meeting was rejected by 14 votes to 4. In October the Society secured its first electoral success and the Minutes recorded that "As a Board they heartily appreciated the honour confirmed upon Mr Parks by his election as a member of the City Council of Nottingham. Further that the Society's thanks were due to members of the staff and all outside workers who had worked so hard to bring about such a magnificent result". After being consistently snubbed by City Council Officers when trying to secure places on the local Food Control Committee, they could now celebrate having their Manager and Secretary on the



City Council itself. In the same year he was also appointed City Magistrate. Their political stance vindicated, they moved a stage further, seeking national affiliation and in May 1919 agreed that "Congress delegates are instructed to vote for joining up to the Labour Party".

If the processes in Clowne, Hucknall and Cinderhill were straightforward, in Bulwell they were chaotic. Bulwell Society had set up its Representation Committee in 1918 and the March 1919 Quarterly Meeting passed a resolution to affiliate to the West Nottingham Labour Party, but immediately notice was given of a motion to rescind the decision. The mover, Mr E Forsyth, also stood for election to the Board and was only marginally unsuccessful in his attempt, gaining 41 votes compared to the two elected members with 52 votes and 46 votes in a very low turnout. At the Half Yearly Meeting in June the attempt to rescind the affiliation was successful, though at an even smaller meeting of members, 11 voting for the motion and 8 against. The Directors, however, were determined to get the result they wanted and successfully moved that a ballot of members be held and this was agreed by 22 votes to 1 against. Ballot papers for all 2,750 members were prepared. The ballot approved the affiliation and affiliation fees were paid. The Board resolved "to give all possible support" to Mr Parks in the Broxtowe Ward election and even voted that the entire Board, plus the General Manager and Secretary, do an evening's canvassing for him! But the matter of affiliation was still not accepted by a body of members and the Half Yearly Meeting in September rejected the Minutes of the previous meeting, effectively cancelling the decisions that had been made there. A motion to reinstate the affiliation was made at the December half yearly Meeting: "That after taking a referendum and getting such a grand majority in favour of joining the Labour Party, we immediately take steps to affiliate to that body to the extent the members who voted in favour of political action" was defeated by 25 votes to 20, but the Board did manage to get a recommendation approved that would enable the Board to approve the Minutes of Members' Meetings, so avoiding the possibility that decisions might be rescinded at ensuing meetings.

At Mansfield there was an attempt to remove references to

"co-operation with the Trade Union Movement and local Labour Party" from the proposals for direct Co-operative representation proposed by the Board. Special Meetings were held in Mansfield and in five other districts of the Society in January 1918 where votes were taken separately on the proposition of taking political action and on the inclusion of "co-operation with the Trade unions and Labour Party". Four of the meetings approved the resolution and the amendment, but at Edwinstowe the amendment was defeated and at Forest Town it was agreed not to vote on either the resolution or the amendment. When the Quarterly Meeting was held at Mansfield Army Barracks approaching six hundred members were present "a large number being unable to get into the room" but the meeting proceeded and the aggregate results of the voting at the Special Meetings was announced: 291 votes for taking political action with 20 against, and 184 votes for "co-operation with the Trade Unions and the Labour Party" with 89 against. Here again, the desire of members was clearly in favour of seeking representation, by a ratio of more than 9:1 while the majority for working with the trade unions and Labour Party was much less at 2:1 in favour.

The Kirkby in Ashfield Society supported the moves towards political representation but began the process in February 1917 with a decision to support a policy "having as its object the keeping of the Co-op Movement as such, entirely free of any Political Party whether Labour, Liberal or Conservative". They had some anxious moments in May 1918, "A Memorial signed by upwards of 20 members having been received calling for a General Meeting of Members to consider the allotment of £50 set aside for political purposes ..." but weathered the storm and by November were making contributions to the local Labour Party.

The Ruddington Society sent a delegate to the Whitsun 1917 Conference to vote in favour of political representation, instructed its delegate to vote in favour of the scheme put to the October Conference, and recommended its members to subscribe to the national fund for political representation at their January 1918 Quarterly Meeting, which they did unanimously. Two weeks later the Board subscribed £2 2/- to the election fund for Henry May at Prestwich. But at the January 1919 Quarterly Meeting a resolution



"That the Society affiliate to the Labour Party" was defeated by 14 votes to 41 against.

## **Interchange of Fraternal Greetings**

The Stapleford and Sandiacre Society held a Special General Meeting of members to discuss politics. Two resolutions were passed, one approving the setting up of a "Joint Co-op Labour Board" by 24 votes to 7, and another approving the Joint Board but limiting it to "representatives from the Trade Unions and Co-op Movement" by 35 votes to 33. The result was confusion, and the matter was settled by the passing of a third resolution by 40 votes to 22: "That the Society does not approve of any joint action with any other outside organisation with the exception of the interchange of fraternal greetings as before". This was not the end of the matter, as the Board called a Special General Meeting in August 1918 which approved a resolution "to join the local Labour Party to form a working scheme for elections and to allocate ¼d per pound for the expenses of their Representation Committee and £2 per thousand members to the national Parliamentary election fund". An attempt to reject the Accounts and Balance Sheet at the Quarterly Meeting two months later in order to thwart the allocation of £39 5s 6d to the Parliamentary fund was rejected by 55 votes to 14. By October 1919 a dispute over the selection of a candidate for Rushcliffe constituency persuaded the Society's Quarterly Meeting "that we withdraw our affiliation from the Labour Party and that we adopt a direct Co-operative Candidate for the next Parliamentary election, a meeting for this purpose to be held to which all Co-operative Societies in the Rushcliffe Division be invited". This was agreed without a vote being necessary. As at Ruddington it is clear that the desire for direct representation was stronger than the ability to concur with the Labour Party to achieve it.

The Netherfield Society was initially enthusiastic in its determination to support direct Co-operative representation and engaged in a series of local meetings in the Rushcliffe constituency. Shortly after the 1918 Congress the Quarterly Meeting carried without dissent a resolution "That the meeting's feeling that it is only by the uniting into one body of the whole Progressive forces, that

justice can be obtained for the Co-operative Movement and democracy in general, authorises the Committee to appoint to the local Labour Party and pay such sums or money for affiliation as may be from time to time voted by members in General Meetings of the Society". Five delegates were appointed to the local Labour Party, and the Parliamentary candidature of Mr Harris for the Rushcliffe constituency, was endorsed. The December Quarterly Meeting approved a payment of £50 towards his election expenses in the General Election, but this was rescinded at a Special Meeting a week later. By January 1919 relations with the local Labour Party in Netherfield had become strained: "We protest against their action in selecting nominees for all vacancies despite the fact that we had nominated Mr Whitehead". They further resolved to support fully Mr Whitehead for a seat, presumably by nominating him as a Co-operative candidate in opposition to the Labour Party's candidate. The Netherfield Society was a small society based in a unionised railway town, vocal in its support of railway and land nationalisation, a strong supporter of national educational reform, suspicious of the motives of Liberal and Conservative supporters of a League of Nations, in favour of Irish Home Rule, and resolute in its support for revolution in Russia.

## **Controversy at Long Eaton**

The Long Eaton Society had been involved in local politics for several decades and so it is not surprising that the *Long Eaton Co-operative Record* was publishing debates on securing Parliamentary representation long before other local Societies. In July 1916 the General Manager, Mr Pattison, told the Society's General Meeting that "They should now have their own Co-operative representatives in Parliament". There was no significant opposition to the Congress resolutions of 1917 and in January 1918, when the Secretary of the newly established Political Committee, Mr Meads, reported that the local Trades and Labour Council had invited the Society to join them in the selection of candidates for the Urban District Council elections, they responded favourably. This was at a time when the two organisations were working closely together on the matter of the Food Control Committee and the Maypole margarine outrage.



The Board minuted in February, extending the debate from 'direct' to 'indirect' representation in advance of any debate at members' Meetings, that "in our opinion a working arrangement should be come to with the Officials of the Labour Party". In May the South Derbyshire Constituency Labour Party asked them to affiliate. The *Long Eaton Co-operative Record* ran a long article with the headings



**Mr Henry J May**

"Our Society's Politics", "Abandonment of Co-operative Union Policy" and "Affiliate with the Labour Party". At the Quarterly Meeting Mr Meads "begged them not to lose their identity ... because if they did they would be disintegrating the Movement, if they did not work with Trades Councils as before". Mr Hickling, also supporting their existing position of working with the Trade Union Movement and opposing affiliation to the Labour Party, observed that "a vast number of people are watching with considerable interest the progress of Co-operation ... but it was a very different thing asking them to join the Labour Party".

Mr Edinburgh, Secretary of the Society's Educational Committee, also opposed affiliation, fearing that the Labour Party would soon assume a dominant position over the Co-operative Society: "Were Co-operators to do their fighting from their own Hall or from the Labour Hall in Victoria Road?" he asked. But the meeting was taking place shortly after Mr H J May had suffered defeat as the first nationally endorsed Co-operative candidate in the Prestwich bye-election, and another Long Eaton member, Mr Preston, wanted "no more Prestwicks". In his view a go-it-alone mentality would ensure further defeats. He was supported by Lucy Sprittles, the Secretary of the Women's Guild. The opponents tried to block the

affiliation by moving an addendum to the resolution approving the recommendations of the 1917 Emergency Conference: "That whilst maintaining friendly relations as far as possible with the Political Parties, there should be no affiliation with any of them". They were not successful. All but 6 of the 120 members present voted for affiliation and the Society subsequently nominated three candidates for the County Council elections, supported the Parliamentary nomination of Mr Harris for Rushcliffe, and successfully nominated a member of the Long Eaton Independent Labour Party, and local Councillor for the past 12 years, Mr Sam Truman, for consideration as Labour candidate for South Derbyshire at the next General Election. When the Election came in December 1918 the *Long Eaton Co-operative Record* declared: "Co-operators - On Saturday 14 December you will have a great opportunity to vote for candidates who represent your true interests" without saying who they were and added ambiguously "Do not be tied to the wheels of any old Party Machine". Mr Truman was defeated in the Election, at which the Lloyd George coalition was returned with a large majority in what was known as the 'coupon' election.

A Members' Meeting in January 1919 renominated Truman by a large majority for the next General election, but some members requisitioned a Special Meeting to overturn that decision. It was convened in April and "the hall was crowded to excess", reported the *Long Eaton Advertiser*. The first sign of contention came when the Political Secretary Mr Meads was elected to chair the meeting in place of Mr Angrave, the Society's Chairman. Mr Truman was denounced as a pacifist and someone who did not want to win the War. The uproar was such that Mr Truman was unable to make himself heard and the son of a Director, "the most gifted of Long Eaton's sons", as the *Long Eaton Advertiser* described him, Major W E Bullock, who had failed to secure the nomination in January, was re-nominated to replace him. Seconding Bullock, a former member of the ILP, Mr Collins, claimed the previous meeting had "let the governing power of the Society go into the hands of a very few, the extreme section of the Labour Party". Sam Truman's nomination was rescinded by 277 votes to 129. Three names were accepted for consideration at a further selection meeting, Major Bullock, Mr



Truman and Sir Leo Chiozza Money, a former Liberal MP who had defected to the Labour Party the previous year. At that selection meeting it was reported that Sir Leo had refused nomination and Mr Truman declined to attend "another orgy such as was experienced" at the previous meeting. Major Bullock secured the nomination without a contest and with "less than a dozen dissentients". Scarcely a month later at the Quarterly Meeting in May members were surprised to learn of the withdrawal of Major Bullock "owing to being offered an important Government position".

Whether the Major ever intended to allow his name to go forward to the Labour Party for consideration, or was merely a means of blocking Sam Truman's nomination, is not clear but his temporary intervention ensured that it was now too late to make an alternative nomination and the Labour Party adopted a member of the Miners Association as their candidate. An attempt to distance further the Society from the Labour Party by disaffiliating from the South Derbyshire Labour Party in June failed by a large majority and the payment of the Society's fee of £45 16s on the affiliation of 5,500 members was approved, but the Society had lost the opportunity to be among the first Co-operative Societies in England to nominate a Co-operative candidate at a General Election.

## On Its Own Feet?

Meanwhile a report in the January 1918 edition of the *The Wheatsheaf*, written by the journal's national Editor (there were also local Society pages) assured readers that the effects of the Union's scheme for direct representation "will not commit us to any Party whatever". This was in line with the viewpoint being put out at Congresses and Conferences by the Co-operative Union. After the 'coupon' election the December edition of *The Wheatsheaf* included photographs of the ten candidates who had stood as Co-operative candidates and the Editor remarked "Our candidates have stood free from any alliance with any other Party", a claim that was not entirely truthful. Unfortunately only one of them won. The assertion of Co-operative political independence was still being peddled in 1919 after the local elections returned Co-operative sponsored candidates: "The November elections were not only a triumph for

Labour. The new Co-operative Party shared the victory ... The Movement moves on its own feet". Congress heard that, since the previous year, the Co-operative Party had secured representation by 27 County Councillors and 200 Urban District Councillors, and filled 100 places on the Boards of Guardians.

The Nottingham Society had supported the resolutions at the Whitsun 1917 Congress and agreed to present a Rule change to allow spending on political activity so that the Society could, in the words of Walter Halls, "take its share in the work of securing for the Movement, direct political representation". A Special Meeting in December approved a change to Rule 43 to allow grants "whether within the objects for which the Society was formed or not", clearing the way for spending on elections. There was a sparse attendance at this meeting but the vote was decisive, 58 of the 69 present voting in favour and 4 against.

A proposal was made to the Nottingham Society's April 1918 Quarterly Meeting "That this meeting instructs the Board of Directors to take steps at once to affiliate the Society with the local Labour Party", but the discussion was adjourned. A Special Meeting in June considered a motion to affiliate to the Labour Party from a Mr Leivers "who severely criticised the activities of all capitalists and middle men and declared that they must all go. We must join up at once". They did so by a vote of 45 votes to 24 against, at a poorly attended meeting where once again the majority for affiliating to the Labour Party proved to be much narrower than the earlier vote to allow expenditure on direct representation. The Board affiliated to the Nottingham Central Labour Party on the basis of £2 per thousand on 4,000 members. The July edition of the *Nottingham Co-operative Record* declared "Our country will never become a Co-operative Commonwealth unless Co-operators use their political power and their votes for co-operative principles ... A Co-operative Party is being formed to advance these principles. This is the Party which every Co-operative man and woman should join". There was still a certain coyness about mentioning the alliances that were being built up with the Labour Party but in the August edition there appeared an article in which "We find the Liberal Co-op Committee standing Romeo-like under the veranda twanging the political guitar



and sweetly crooning 'Rocks Ahead'. We are gravely warned of the danger of flirting with the Labour Party ... we must keep company with the Liberal Party. Well, judged by the words of certain Liberal and Tory MPs in the House in the last weeks, we have no friends or admirers in that direction".

## Walter Halls Wins Bridge Ward

In February 1919 the Nottingham Board exposed the Labour alliance to public view when they agreed that "nomination bills for the candidature of Mr Halls for Bridge Ward be displayed in our shops ... as 'Labour and Co-operative' candidate". Mr Halls won the election, securing two thirds of the votes cast, but the public displays of support proved controversial and an attempt was made to have them dependent in future on Special Meetings approving the candidates. The July Quarterly Meeting amended the motion to allow Special Meetings to extend these favours to Labour candidates who were not Co-operative sponsored, if they too received the endorsement of the Special Meeting. The attendance was similar to that at previous meetings but with a more substantial majority, 61 voting in favour and 14 against. A better indication of the way the wind was blowing came at the January 1920 Quarterly Meeting when Walter Halls, who had replaced Mr Dickinson as President the previous year by a vote of 151 to Dickinson's 147, was re-elected by a very large majority of 381 votes to Dickinson's 181. A resident of Nottingham for less than four years and a Director for only one, an Organiser for the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, he had stood as Labour candidate in Northampton in the 1918 General Election gaining 11,000 votes on a platform of "opposition to the terms of the Peace Treaty". An eloquent public speaker he had made a distinct impression on local Co-operators and remained President of the Society for more than twenty years. Dissent over the Society's political affiliations did not wither away, however. Politics was the cause of the largest attendance at a members' meeting in the Nottingham Society's history in January 1921 when so many members arrived that the meeting had to be adjourned to a larger hall in the Mechanics' Institute two weeks later. At this meeting more than 2,000 members attended and on a crucial



Mr Walter Halls

vote to approve the payment of £50 political affiliation to the Labour Party the vote was 1,054 in favour to 819 against, a clear majority of 235 but with the opposition taking 44% of the vote. The *Nottingham Guardian* had forecast wryly in 1917 after the Emergency Conference "The latest people to start an agitation against the government are the Co-operators. There are some millions of them in the country and if they were united would become a powerful political force. But they are not united in regard to politics and they never will be".

From 1916 onwards practically every Society in Greater Nottingham had been chastised and attacked and had moved from a fiercely defensive position to one where they were on the political offensive. There was scarcely a single local Society which did not support the direct representation of Co-operators by Co-operators on local authorities and in Parliament, but the affiliation of Societies to the Labour Party as the means of securing representation was less easily achieved and in some cases rejected, with the Boards



taking the lead in some Societies and the members leading the way in others. Nevertheless by 1920 five hundred and six Societies had affiliated to the Co-operative Party and the "resolution to get into closer touch with politics", as the President of Nottingham Society had put it in 1917, had been secured for the next eight decades.

## The Co-operative Charter

If the Movement was not entirely united in its support for political alliances, it demonstrated a remarkable unity in its support for a Co-operative political programme. Besides putting into place the arrangements for the organisation which became known as The Co-operative Party, the Emergency Conference in October 1917 approved without dissent what the *Co-operative News* dubbed the 'Co-operative Charter' setting out its policies for the future, a vision of radical change in post-war British society<sup>1</sup>.

Perhaps because it aroused no controversy, and comparatively little time was spent in discussion of it, the Charter has not been seen as a significant document. Arnold Bonner, in his 1961 *British Co-operation* said dismissively that of the eleven points "nine were not distinctly co-operative", and this view was repeated almost word for word by Sidney Pollard in 1971. Thomas Carbery, who wrote the most recent history of the Party, failed to mention it at all. Yet this Charter assembled a programme of which only two points related to wartime grievances and which reflected the scope of the Movement's political interests, from shopkeeping to international diplomacy, a breadth of interests that was shared by most Societies in Greater Nottingham. It was also approved eight months before a Labour Party Conference discussed the draft of its own new programme 'Labour and the New Social Order' which set out, in words that might have been lifted from the Co-operative Charter, a socialist intention for "production, distribution and exchange" for the first time.

The Co-operative Movement was well on the way to becoming a 'universal provider' and the CWS in particular was engaged in numerous new ventures and expansions of existing ones. The vision of a Movement represented in practically every productive activity, distributing and selling the products of its own farms, factories and

## POLICY

1. "To safeguard effectually the interests of voluntary co-operation, and to resist any legislative or administrative inequality which would hamper its progress.
2. "That eventually the processes of Production, Distribution, and Exchange (including the land) shall be organised on Co-operative lines in the interests of the whole community.
3. "That the profiteering of private speculators and the trading community generally shall be eliminated by legislative or administrative action.
4. "The scientific development of agriculture, and the provision of light railways for transport of produce, together with adequate housing and wages for the agricultural labourer.
5. "The abolition of all taxes upon foodstuffs to be replaced by the taxation of land values and the further increase of income tax and death duties upon large incomes and estates.
6. "That in order to facilitate the development of Trade, Commerce, and Manufacture after the War, the Government shall establish a National Credit Bank to assist local authorities, Co-operative Societies and others to finance their new undertakings as required.
7. "That adequate Housing of the People, financed by the National Exchequer, shall be compulsorily provided on lines which will secure healthy, decent, and suitable accommodation for the whole community.
8. "That the present Education system should be recast on National lines which will afford equal opportunity of the highest education to all, unhampered by the caste system now prevailing, which arbitrarily and unjustly limits the resources of the State in utilising the best capacities of the nation.
9. "The effective Parliamentary control of foreign policy and national services by Committees composed of representatives of all parties in the House of Commons.
10. "The gradual demobilisation of the soldiers and sailors from our Army and Navy to correspond with the needs of industry, in order to avoid unemployment.
11. "The breaking down of the caste and class systems, and the democratising of State services - civil, commercial, and diplomatic."

**Policy - the 'Co-operative Charter' - adopted in October 1917**



collieries must have seemed well on the way to fruition to readers of *The Wheatsheaf*, which ran regular news items on the latest CWS acquisitions and developments. In February 1918 alone there was news of a new clothing factory in Birmingham, a glass works in Worksop, a printing factory in Manchester, a vegetable oils processing plant in Liverpool, a preserves factory at Reading, a jam works in Hull, the purchase of land for the construction of a margarine factory on the banks of the Manchester ship canal, 1,800 acres of land in Lagos, and another 10,000 acres in Saskatchewan for growing wheat for the new large CWS flour mills being created at some of Britain's major ports. And as Mr W R Allan, seconding the resolution for direct representation on behalf of the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society, had said "We are financially interested in shipping, railways, land, barley, rice, wheat, tea and sugar ... and all these we cannot separate from politics".

Capital for these new ventures was being sought from within the Movement: the CWS was urging Societies to raise capital by increasing their interest rates, and offering Bonds direct to their members. The *Long Eaton Co-operative Record* ran regular full page adverts for CWS Bonds in 1918, while appealing to trade unions to use the CWS Bank as the repository for their surplus funds. It was not their ability to manage the new ventures profitably or find outlets for their products that was likely to put a brake on their expansion but the need for new capital for investment. A National Credit Bank, established by the Government to provide such capital, was another solution provided for in item 6 of the 'Co-operative Charter'.

The CWS was soon to become the biggest single farmer in Britain. Land farmed by Co-operative Societies, including the CWS, rose from 14,400 acres in 1914 to 40,400 in 1919. Many Societies had been developing their farms during the War to relieve their members of the shortage of imported foods: In 1917 Long Eaton, Nottingham, Hucknall, Mansfield and Kirkby-in-Ashfield Societies were farming 1,790 acres and other Societies including Cinderhill and Stapleford were considering farming for the first time. Cinderhill's Board noted that many private farmers believed Co-operative Societies to be motivated by short term gain and "out

to play with the business", despite the fact that many, like Nottingham and Long Eaton, had been farming for decades. The farms of the Long Eaton Society were a regular venue for delegations from Boards of other Societies, such as Walsall and Leeds in 1917 and 1918. So it is not surprising that farming should feature in the Co-operative Charter: farming was important to many Societies, especially in the Midland Section where 98 were engaged in farming, while the CWS farms were large scale enterprises capable of developing 'scientific agriculture' when most privately owned farms continued to rely on technologies inherited from the Middle Ages.

Land was regarded as a finite asset which ought not to be owned by private interests, often for "hunting and other pleasures of the rich". Land nationalisation had a great deal of support in the Movement. In Greater Nottingham several Societies were affiliated to the Land Nationalisation Society including Nottingham, Long Eaton, Hucknall, Bulwell, Clowne and Netherfield which held a Lantern Lecture on it in July 1918, ordered copies of a pamphlet *The Injustice and Impolity of Private Property in Land* for its members in September, sent delegates to a Nottinghamshire Land Nationalisation Society Conference in November and moved a successful resolution to Congress in 1919 "That we are of the opinion that the present system of private property in land is inimical to the best interests of the community and that the land ought to be made national property and under the administration of local authorities". The Congress resolution represented a step further than it had taken in 1916 when it called for land to be controlled by the Government.

The Movement was also concerned that the nation's industrial infrastructure should be modernised to cope with 20th century needs and for this reason many Societies supported nationalisation of the railways. The Co-operative Congress had called for nationalisation as long ago as 1901. Nottingham, Long Eaton, Boston, Bulwell and Netherfield Societies were affiliated to the Railway Nationalisation Society by 1918.

The February 1918 *Wheatsheaf* reported the acquisition of the CWS's first colliery, at Shilbottle in County Durham. It was intended



that this be the first of many, future mines to be on a much larger scale. These mines were to be part of the "processes of production .... organised on co-operative lines in the interests of the whole community". State ownership of the coal mines was also part of this pattern of community ownership and consequently the nationalisation of land values and minerals rights, and of the coal mines themselves, was also supported by many Societies.

Co-operative Societies were also showing interest in town planning and housing development. They had been building houses for their own members for many years. The Co-operative Union reported in 1900 that 224 Societies had built 24,000 houses during the previous 30 years and urged more Societies to set up their own house building departments. The Long Eaton Society thought that town planning was "of great national importance" and sent delegates to a Conference of the National Housing and Town Planning Association in May 1916 and a Labour Housing Conference in Leicester in 1918. In 1919 they put a proposal to their members to develop 100 new houses "on garden city lines". They had a large stock of houses let to their members and had acquired considerable amounts of land to build new housing estates after the War, which in the meantime they converted to wartime plots for their members to cultivate, a practice adopted by many Societies, including Boston and Clowne, which was not without its problems: in December 1916 sheep from the Long Eaton Society's neighbouring farm in Meadow Lane broke down the fence and ate the members' cabbages.

Education was an important subject for Co-operators. Almost all but the smallest Societies in Greater Nottingham had Education Committees of their own to organise educational and social activities for their members. The Long Eaton Society was one of the first locally to make clear the importance of education reform with an article in July 1916 seeking an immediate increase in the school leaving age and free secondary education for all, and drawing attention to the problem of child labour especially in rural areas where children were taken out of school at harvest times. Another article a year later related the work of Co-ops and the WEA in "endeavouring to bring about the rights of the workers so that a child might go from elementary school to university". This was published

just after the 1917 Swansea Congress had passed a resolution calling for the school leaving age to be raised to 15, and schooling to be free to the age of 18, for maintenance grants for all who needed them, for raising the status of teachers, and University entrance without expense or hindrance "because" said the mover "we are determined that the day of privilege in education shall be for ever over and when the day of privilege in education is over, the day of privilege in the State will be over". Several Boards expressed anger when the Government delayed educational reform shortly after. The Nottingham Society referred the matter to its Educational Committee for consideration. The Netherfield Society passed a resolution in November "That the Committee representing 3,000 members of the Netherfield Co-operative Society protest emphatically against the indifference to the wellbeing of the nation's children shown by the Government in refusing to find time for the discussion of the Education Bill ... and demands that the Government shall proceed immediately with Legislation". The resolution was duly sent to the President of the Board of Trade, the President of the Board of Education and the Leader of the House of Commons.

## **A History of Internationalism**

War had changed Co-operative attitudes to political representation and it was to be expected that Co-operators would have an opinion on war and its prevention. The British Co-operative Movement had a history of internationalism and had been a founder member of the International Co-operative Alliance in 1895, an organisation which had survived the war intact when other international associations, including the Socialist International, had been riven by chauvinism. The 1915 Congress had called for "an international tribunal to enforce the public law of nations and uphold the rights of small peoples". In 1917 Walter Halls had attended a conference of the League to Abolish War on behalf of the Nottingham Society. The Stapleford Society was an enthusiastic supporter of Mr Norman Angell a co-founder of the Union of Democratic Control, which opposed the 'balance of power' in international relations and sought peace by negotiation and lasting peace through an International Council. The Long Eaton and Netherfield Societies' Boards



discussed proposals for a League of Nations, which they supported, but both expressed suspicion of the motives and intentions of its establishment protagonists such as Mr Arthur Balfour.

The Co-operative Charter's inclusion of a declaration on diplomacy is indicative of, not only a commitment to peace and security through international co-operation, but also of antipathy to the class bound nature of the British diplomatic élite who had failed to prevent war and been unable to reach a negotiated settlement before millions of working class men and women had died during four years of hostilities.

### **Towards the Co-operative Commonwealth**

The Co-operative Charter of 1917 was not an all embracing statement of future political policy, and some important matters which might have been expected were not included such as reform of the Poor Law, health and social security, but it was nevertheless the first time that the Movement had shared such a common struggle, made such an enduring commitment to political objectives and done so with unanimity. It was an acknowledged step forward towards the creation of a new kind of society, the Co-operative Commonwealth.

The Co-operative Movement and the Co-operative Societies of Greater Nottingham had made a long journey in a very short space of time. By the end of 1917 they had established organisations at national and local levels to carry out the functions of a political party and adopted a political programme. In the ninetieth anniversary year since they founded the Co-operative Party their vision and commitment to a better society through Co-operation deserves our enduring admiration and respect.

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