

The Co-operative Party

Political neutrality amongst socialists, co-operators, trade unionists and Chartists was established in the days of the Rochdale Pioneers. This was a wise principle because it meant that all of these sections of the wider Movement for social emancipation could work together without creating un-necessary divisions.

Increasingly, the British Establishment represented by The Conservative Party, The Liberal Party and private commercial interests, pursued a policy of undermining the co-operative movement. Such was the disadvantage that co-operatives found themselves in that the future of the Movement began to look insecure. This came to a head around the time of the First World War. The Co-operative Congress (Swansea May 1917) took the decision that the time had come to establish a co-operative representation committee and to seek representation in Parliament. This was confirmed at a National Conference of the Co-operative Movement later that year.

W. T. Mercer includes in his book "Towards the Co-operative Commonwealth" a chapter in which he considers these matters. He writes "...in January 1918 the Movement for the first time flung down its gage of battle in a Parliamentary contest. The newly-formed Co-operative Representation Committee then nominated Mr. May as a candidate at the by-election in the Prestwich division of Lancashire; and although he failed to win the seat his place in the political history of Co-operative Democracy is evermore secure as the first standard-bearer of the then embryo Co-operative Party. The 2,832 votes he there obtained were convincing evidence that co-operators would in time support Co-operation as loyally at the polls as millions already supported the Movement in its retail stores.

And in November of the same year, when Mr. Lloyd George exploited the victory of the Allied Nations by forcing an unwanted General Election on the country, The National Co-operative Representation Committee put forward its own candidates in ten different constituencies, in each of which the Movement's demand for equal justice was made a living issue.

In the circumstances of that wild and confused election, it seemed impossible that any of the Co-operative candidates could be elected; but when the results of the polls were known, co-operators everywhere

rejoiced because Mr. A. E. Waterson had been returned as MP for Kettering, a Parliamentary Division which is one of the best known strongholds of Co-operation.

In a three-cornered contest Mr Waterson had a majority of 2,538; and when parliament reassembled he entered the House of Commons as the first Co-operative Member of Parliament. In a Parliament full to overflowing with “hard faced” profiteers and other pledged supporters of the capitalist system, he appeared as a “petition in boots,” as a living protest against injustices imposed upon the Co-operative Movement in the wartime, and as advance guard and herald of the new force in politics that today has for its spearhead the Co-operative Party, which derives its authority directly from the National Congress of the British Co-operative Movement”.

At the Co-operative Congress of 1927 in Cheltenham a formal alliance between the Co-operative and Labour Parties was agreed. From then onwards Co-op Party candidates standing for election to Parliament or local authorities stood on a joint Labour/Co-operative ticket. The two parties remained independent of each other having their own policies and structures, but had a harmonious relationship with each other. This agreement continues and has proved to be a good arrangement. It means that socialists and co-operators can remain united at election times and avoid splitting the vote. As a result there is a strong co-operative voice in Parliament. There are currently 26 Co-operative Party MPs in Parliament, 7 members of the Scottish Parliament, 11 members of the Welsh Assembly, and over 850 councillors across the UK. <https://party.coop/about/>

The purpose of the Co-operative Party then and now is to give political representation and support to the Co-operative Movement.

One of the most well known Co-operative MPs was A. V. Alexander, MP for Sheffield Hillsborough who served in the Labour governments of Ramsay MacDonald and Clement Attlee.

The biography of A. V. Alexander is in the Principle 5 library. ‘Churchill's Favourite Socialist – A Life of A. V. Alexander’ by John Tilley.