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Building the Co-operative Commonwealth in Sheffield: The *Sheffield Co-operator* and "Co-opolitics", 1922-1939

Christopher A. Olewicz

The *Sheffield Co-operator* was published every month from May 1922 to July 1939 by the Sheffield Co-operative Party in the UK. With a guaranteed circulation of 30,000 copies, it reported on issues which were of interest to people in Sheffield and refuted the negative reporting from the mainstream press towards co-operatives at that time. The complete collection of 170 editions bound in four volumes was donated to Sheffield Libraries (Local Studies) by the Sheffield Co-operative Party. Largely the work of one man — Albert Ballard, the Secretary of the Sheffield Co-operative Party — the *Sheffield Co-operator* survives as a unique example of a locally produced co-operative newspaper. This article provides an overview of its mission, purpose, content, and influence.

Introduction

> All good wishes to the Sheffield Co-operator for a useful and prosperous career in carrying the message of co-operation to the electors of Sheffield. The voters of this country have listened long enough to the voice of the capitalist preaching through press and Parliament the false doctrine of self-interest and profit-making, which is destroying the world. It is time for co-operation to speak in the home and the house.
> A. Honora Enfield, National Secretary, Women's Co-operative Guild (1922, June, p. 1)

In February 1922 the Sheffield Co-operative Party executive formed a subcommittee to explore the possibility of publishing a newspaper (Sheffield Co-operative Party, 1922, June). Just three months later, in May 1922, the first issue of the *Sheffield Co-operator* appeared, promising a "guaranteed circulation" of 30,000 copies. An eight-page monthly, the paper remained in print for the next 17 years, until wartime restrictions forced its conversion to a bulletin in 1939, which ran intermittently for thirteen editions until 1942.

The pages of the *Sheffield Co-operator* reveal the four separate ambitions of the Sheffield Co-operative Party. Firstly, to promote the candidacy of A. V. Alexander, first elected Co-operative and Labour MP for Hillsborough in 1922 and who served until 1950, with a break between 1931 and 1935 (Boughton, 1985). Secondly, to defend the co-operative movement both locally and nationally from those who viewed its success as a threat to the capitalist system. Thirdly, to defend the Co-operative Party from those inside and outside the movement who believed it should remain politically neutral. Finally, to propagate the values of a co-operative commonwealth as an alternative economic system to capitalism. "Co-operation is life" and "Competition is death", the *Co-operator*'s masthead proclaimed (Sheffield Co-operator,1922, June, p. 1).

Largely the work of one man — Albert Ballard, Secretary of Sheffield Co-operative Party — the *Sheffield Co-operator* was a unique example of a successful locally produced co-operative newspaper. As many contemporary writers promote co-operation to remedy social ills often resembling those of the inter-war years, an analysis of its contents is timely. Do co-operative media outlets exist in isolation to provide a vehicle for more "ethical" journalism, free from the influence of vested interests and commercial pressures? Or is there a higher collective social purpose? Should co-operative media propagandise for the creation of a co-operative commonwealth to replace free market capitalism? Should such a "commonwealth" be based on worker co-operatives, consumer co-operatives, mutualisation, profit sharing, or a combination? The pages of the *Sheffield Co-operator* can act as a guide in the exploration of these questions and more.

The Sheffield Co-operative Party

In October 1917, the Co-operative Congress officially voted to create the Co-operative Party to win representation in Parliament for the co-operative movement and counter the wartime coalition government's discrimination against co-operative retailers (Pollard, 1971). The vote was far from unanimous however, and society members' orientation towards politics far from certain. Many retail societies counted among their members Liberal and Conservative voters who opposed the abandonment of political neutrality — one of the original "Rochdale Principles" (Cole, 1944, pp. 64-74).

Even in Sheffield, where the Co-operative Party quickly gained a foothold, a significant minority of Society members opposed the speed with which the Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society shifted towards political engagement. The local Party grew out of the Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society Political Council, established in January 1918. A year later, in March 1919, a Liberal organised "coalition committee" launched a successful coup of the Society executive with the intent of removing it from politics. However, those who held a "whole-hearted commitment to political activity" (Adams, 1987, p. 61) soon regained control. It was only after the 1920 Budget proposed a Co-operation Profits Tax that the other major Sheffield Society, the Sheffield & Ecclesall Co-operative Society, rescinded the previous resolutions its executive had passed opposing political activity. By 1922, the *Sheffield Co-operator*'s inaugural year, both societies favoured political activity (Adams, 1987, p. 65).

Following its creation, the Sheffield Party executive immediately opened negotiations with the Sheffield Labour Party, who agreed not to stand candidates against the Co-operative Party in Neepsend, Walkley, and Hillsborough for Council elections, and the Hillsborough constituency for General elections (Mathers, 1979). In the 1918 General Election, the Labour Party endorsed the Co-operative candidate Arthur Lockwood, a Sheffield born patternmaker, who was not elected. The same year, the first Co-operative candidates were elected to Sheffield Council, including Eleanor Barton, the first woman councillor to be elected in Sheffield and a future President of the Co-operative Women's Guild (Gurden, 1999).

The Sheffield Party was driven by the "organisational genius" of its Secretary, Councillor Albert Ballard, Agent to A. V. Alexander, the Co-operative and Labour MP for Hillsborough. Opened in 1920, the Hillsborough Co-operative Institute was its hub. It hosted fellowship meetings, play-reading groups, children and adults' choirs and a successful Ramblers' Club which organised walks (rambles) in the countryside that attracted between 3,000 and 4,000 people annually (Boughton, 1985). *Sheffield Co-operator* events interspersed entertainments with distribution drives. The Hillsborough Institute thus became "a total social environment" and a "jewel in the crown of the political co-operative movement" (Boughton, 1985, p. 138). All attendees were encouraged to become active supporters of the Co-operative Party and Ballard organised a network of party workers with a "captain" and "lieutenant" covering every 200 houses in the Hillsborough constituency (Ballard, 1923, p. 1).

The success of the Hillsborough Branch was not entirely appreciated within the local Labour Party. In 1926, Tom Garnett, Secretary of the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council, complained to Egerton Wake, National Agent of the Labour Party. Garnett argued that the Hillsborough Labour Party was not functioning. He wrote that "… although the Co-operative Party is not an affiliated organisation … they [co-operators] are permitted at Hillsborough to dominate the situation" (Boughton, 1985 p. 352). Wake suggested the Co-operative Party should affiliate to the Labour Party, but possible opposition within the two retail societies made this inexpedient (Boughton, 1985). A joint committee decided future Co-operative candidates would go before Labour selection conferences. It was not until 1930, however, that divisional Co-operative Parties agreed to affiliate to the Trades and Labour Council.

The *Sheffield Co-operator*

Following the Co-operative Party's creation in 1917, press coverage towards co-operatives became increasingly hostile. According to the *Co-operator*, establishment press claimed societies were handing "money to wicked Labour organisations and evilly designing Socialists" and that the true aims of Society Directors were to "do away with ... personal freedom ... the freedom of our children" and eventually "exterminate" people (Sheffield Co-operator, 1923b, April, p. 4). It is not surprising therefore, that the *Sheffield Co-operator*'s arrival was greeted with optimism by the two city co-operative societies.

At a time when "materialistic selfishness" and the post-war trade depression tested the co-operative faith, the *Co-operator* could "fight the workers' cause from the Co-operative standpoint". As "yet another link in the chain of activities" it could strengthen the faith in the vision of the co-operative commonwealth (Rose, 1922, p. 1). The paper was an "effective medium" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1922a, May, p. 4) that enabled the local movement to fight against the "constant torpedoing" meted out by the anti-co-operators, who boomed "private trade against co-operation" and "the gospel of every man for himself … The capitalistic view of life, the capitalistic scheme of values, [and] the reiterated … assumption of the workers' unfitness to govern"(Sheffield Co-operator, 1923, August-September, p. 6).

This hostility extended towards the local press. In 1926, a "local Tory journal" launched a further campaign asking its readers to vote for a motion to withdraw Brightside and Carbrook Society from political action, on the basis that co-operation was well supported among members of Parliament (Ballard, 1926). If this were true, the *Co-operator* asked, why had the Co-operative Parliamentary Committee fought "for twenty years to secure equal treatment" for co-operative pharmaceutical chemists, auditors, and representation on various Government Committees, from a Parliament whose collective "principles and interests" were absolutely opposed to the co-operative system (Sheffield Co-operator, 1926, April, p. 1). These were the principles which the *Sheffield Co-operator* repeatedly advocated were needed in the House of Commons. They were only being heard now that the Movement had secured such representation. The *Co-operator* asked who were the "political adventurers" to whom J. J. Dale, the proposer of the motion, referred? "Does he mean anyone, or all, of our eight guardians who are giving their time and service free to the work of alleviating the terrible distress of the city? Does he say that of our splendid representative in the House of Commons?" (1926, April, p. 1). The "Tory motion" put forward by "a Tory organiser to secure a Tory result" ultimately failed (Sheffield Co-operator, 1926, April, p. 1).

Instances such as these convinced the editors of the *Sheffield Co-operator* that the Movement was right to have involved itself in politics (Sheffield Co-operator, 1923b, January-February; Sheffield Co-operator, 1925). Leaving the fate of the movement in the hands of private traders organised through the Associated Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of British Industries, and the ranks of the "anti-co-operators" (Penny, 1922, p. 5) — would leave co-operators as "the slaves and dupes" of a minority who wished to undo all that the movement had achieved to date to bring about a more "co-operative nation" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1923b, April, p. 4). Just as dangerous were the "professedly neutral people" who wished the co-operative movement to "stand aside" from politics (Sheffield Co-operator, 1923b, January-February, p. 4).

Why then, given the desire of many co-operators to remain neutral or independent, had the Co-operative Party decided to "coalesce" with the Labour Party? It had done so, the *Co-operator* stated, because many members agreed with Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald that the co-operative movement was a section of a "great working-class movement" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1923, March, p. 4). Macdonald's vision of a united "People's Party" could only be realised when consumers became "fully conversant with trade and commerce, production, and distribution — use, rather than profit" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1923, March, p. 4). Until then, the Co-operative Party and the trade unions "had to work on the same workers from different

angles" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1923, March, p. 4). Trade unionists "could preach against capitalism, they could organise to secure increased wages," but "both things were useless if they spent with capitalism and allowed the owners … to increase prices more rapidly … than wages." The working classes had to not only "preach against capitalism" but also to "spend against it" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1927, March, p. 3).

Who is Alexander?

Following A. V. Alexander's selection as the Co-operative and Labour candidate for Hillsborough, the first edition of the *Sheffield Co-operator* asked, "Who is Alexander?" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1922b, May, p. 1). He was, it was claimed, "an apostle of the Co-operative Commonwealth" who declared his faith in co-operation "for all producers and consumers for mutual benefit of the whole of the members of the community" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1922b, May, p. 1).

Alexander's political ascendency had been swift. Born in 1886, he left school to work in the offices of a Bristol leather merchant. In 1920, he was a local government clerk, working for the Bristol School Board and then Somerset County Council (Tilley, 1995, pp. 2-4). He became active in the co-operative movement serving as vice-President of the Weston Super-Mare Co-operative Society (Tilley, 1995, p. 5). In the same year, with no previous political experience, he beat 100 other applicants to be appointed full-time Secretary to the Co-operative Union Parliamentary Committee.

Based in the East End Offices of the Co-operative Wholesale Society, Alexander subsequently represented the co-operative view on various trade boards and led delegations to the President of the Board of Agriculture and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Tilley, 1995). He successfully lobbied to pass an amendment to the Government's 1921 Finance Bill, striking out a proposed Co-operation Profits Tax. This brought his name to the attention of the Sheffield Co-operative Party. They invited him to be their candidate at the next General Election after Arthur Lockwood moved to London to act as the electoral agent to Alfred Barnes, who subsequently won East Ham South as the joint Co-operative-Labour candidate at the 1922 Election.

In a speech to business leaders made soon after his adoption as candidate for Hillsborough, Alexander spoke of his belief in the co-operative commonwealth. He believed that "competition" had been shown to be a "curse" to humanity, based upon a false doctrine of "survival of the fittest and weakest to the wall" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1922, November, p. 1). Just as in the "Hungry Forties" when Rochdale had shown that "men and women of goodwill" could work to convert a competitive society to one based on consumer co-operation, the same could be proved during the post-war trade depression (Sheffield Co-operator, 1922, November, p. 6). Alexander was duly elected Member of Parliament for Hillsborough, and in 1924, became Under-Secretary to the Board of Trade in the first Labour government (Sheffield Co-operator, 1924, March).

"A far from average politician", Alexander's speeches over the next five years threw "a flood of light" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1928, p. 1) upon consumer exploitation and abject working conditions. A senior member of the Parliamentary Labour Party, he preached on the dangers of monopolisation (Alexander, 1936) and how the co-operative movement might combat the rationalisation of capital and the artificial restraints on trade that were "inevitable corollaries" of private enterprise at a time when prices had fallen to non-profitable levels. Alexander pleaded for a united co-operative response:

> In order to combat successfully the growing tendency of legislation to retard, and indeed, to limit the expansion of co-operation, it is necessary … to recognise that the political fight for the next few years will largely range around whether collectivism in industry and commerce is to be based upon ownership by, and service to the common people, or is it to be based upon the Corporate State, and with an ever expanding system of incorporated industry for private profit (Sheffield Co-operator, 1936, October, p. 1).

Of the three forms of co-operation — profit-sharing, co-partnership (workers' co-operatives) and consumers' co-operatives — Alexander believed that only consumer co-operation held the potential to genuinely transform society. Many a profit-sharing or co-partnership scheme had broken down, and their economic contribution was "infinitesimal". They were mere palliatives compared to consumer co-operation which provided "all the necessary commodities and services [required] for human existence and development" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1922, November, p. 6). It had potential to bring balance to the marketplace, maintaining consumption to protect working men and women from the "periodic gluts, stoppages … and unemployment" (Alexander, 1925). This was the system of co-operation, mutual and self-help which the landed classes had declared "a state within a state". Whether co-operation would ultimately prevail was unknown, but what was certain was that change was needed:

> Whether this should be State action, nationalisation, Guild Socialism, or co-operation was not for him to say, except that efficiency, experience, and perhaps, ultimately, expediency would govern our choice. He did, however, contend that democratic control of an evolutionary character working from the bottom was infinitely better than control from the top (Sheffield Co-operator, 1926, July, p. 7).

After the election of the second Labour Government in 1929, the *Co-operator* had expected Alexander to return to the Board of Trade. If the Rochdale Pioneers had known when they "formulated their comprehensive programme of future action" that one of their future representatives would be a member of the British Cabinet, "they would have gasped" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1929, July, p. 1). But as First Lord of the Admiralty, Alexander was an ideal candidate. As an editorial by T. W. Mercer explained, "For handling business issues, he has a natural flair … his mind … stored with economic facts … [he is] more than capable of managing the 'mighty business' of the British Navy", and overseeing the building of ships, the placing of contracts, "and enrolling boys and men ought to be conducted in the good co-operative way" (Mercer, 1929, p. 1). Indeed, a dose of co-operation would serve the Navy well if the Co-operative Party's policy of International Co-operation was ever to be introduced.

Alexander is one of the forgotten figures of Labour Party history, despite having served as Defence Secretary in the first Attlee Labour Government. In addition to his many Parliamentary commitments, he remained dutiful in his constituency appearances right up until his retirement as an MP in 1950. In 1948, when he was made an Honorary Freeman of the City of Sheffield he recalled conversations with Sheffield workmen, who "in the midst of their grumbles about what the City Council did not do for them" considered Sheffield to be "pre-eminent" in its "municipal progress compared to other centres" and in "its steadily built-up tradition of municipal ownership of public utilities" (Co-operative Home Magazine, 1948, p. i).

The Co-operative Commonwealth

The two decades following the end of the First World War were an era in which idealists determinedly pursued the beliefs of "community, co-operation and self-determination" to create a better world — a co-operative commonwealth (Neima, 2021, p. 6). The *Sheffield Co-operator* drew upon this idealism. It envisaged a massive co-operative society covering "*every* purchaser in the whole country", with *all* profits from shopkeeping and manufacturing being diverted to the members. "Nobody wants 'State Control' … we want control *by the people* … a nationwide co-operative society, making as well as selling" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1923a, April, p. 5). Science had converted the world into a neighbourhood. The movement had to ensure that that "neighbourhood" would evolve into "brotherhood" (sic) (Sheffield Co-operator, 1930, May, p. 3).

Without such a commitment to a more collective ownership of the means of life (Sheffield Co-operator, 1936, December, p. 3) it was expected that the movement would eventually "fall to pieces" (Patricia, 1925, p. 3). The founders, "ridiculously imaginative people", had "mingled much imagination with their dreams" but the "political struggle of the working class to get control of the political machine" had never been grasped (Sheffield Co-operator, 1924, August, p. 6).

Now that workers had the vote, however, this was possible. All that was needed was the will. It was one thing "to indulge in all sorts of imaginings about Labour associations for building up the new order, it was another matter 'when it came to the practical application of this gospel' to give every 'small-holder' a share" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1924, August, p. 6).

The *Co-operator* argued that the movement could be a "great social force, training men and women to look after their own trade, teaching them to overcome difficulties, proving to them that it is better to try to do things for themselves than to be always grumbling about adulteration, [and] high prices" (1922, October, p. 4). Opposing such developments were the rapidly increasing "trusts and combines", created by the late nineteenth century consolidation of capital begun in the United States. In 1919, the British Committee on Trusts reported that "no branch of British industry [was …] exempt from this trustification movement" (Smith, 1927, p. 4).

The *Co-operator* claimed co-operation could best defend communities against the trusts, by securing "democratic finance, democratic ownership, and democratic control". (Smith, 1927, p. 4). It was "opposed to the principle of serving the interests of the privileged few" and only "public regulation" was able to prevent exploitation of the consumer through high prices (Smith, 1927, p. 4). The real battle of the future would be the "broad issue of public versus private control of the trustified industries" and the conversion of the trusts into instruments of public good (Smith, 1927, p. 4).

The first step to developing society on these lines was at the municipal level, because it shared a "closer intimacy with our domestic lives than the State" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1924, October, p. 4). Municipalities had responsibility for housing, education, sanitation, recreation, public health considerations, roads, and hospitals. Co-operative representatives had also fought vigorously for local ownership of water and gas. The *Co-operator* (1927, October) claimed that co-operators were "ideal members of town and city councils" noting that a council was a "large Co-operative Society" and co-operators had already gained "practical business training" on the "management [and] education committees" of their local retail societies (Sheffield Co-operator, 1927, October, p. 2). The *Co-operator* (1930, November) further suggested that the example from Sheffield had demonstrated that co-operation did not only "do much for the individual" but also saved "much public expenditure" (p. 5):

> The movement is one of the greatest thrift agencies in the kingdom … It is no use bolstering up co-operative enterprise on the one hand, and sending private traders, or the representatives of vested interests, to the City Council on the other … Many a family has been saved from destitution during hard times by the store of accumulated dividends which stood to the credit of the family at the co-operative society, with the results that rates are lower in consequences of returns made to co-operators which have enabled them to keep the wolf from the door (Sheffield Co-operator, 1930, November, p. 5).

The progress made in Sheffield towards modernisation was swift. On the second anniversary of the election of the Labour Council, the *Co-operator* (1929, November) introduced the Co-operative and Labour Party's Manifesto. It celebrated that "the dire prophecies" of their political opponents had not materialised and that "civic affairs had been improved in all directions" (p. 4). The *Sheffield Citizen*, the organ of the Sheffield Citizen Association (a Conservative and Liberal anti-Labour coalition) had earlier denounced the Council's policies as "extravagant and extremist" (Barton, 1927, p. 1). J. G. Graves, the leader of the Independent Liberal Group of the Council, had agreed that it made sense for many public services to be owned by the municipality. However, there were limits to what the Council could do — it was not "a glorified Co-operative Society" (Mathers, 1979, p. 245). But the *Co-operator* stood steadfast. "Movement in the direction of collectivism and a higher standard of life", Councillor Alfred Barton argued would be won "not by wild outbursts, but by patient, intelligent, scientific, but relentless progress, growing out of the old", thus building up a new society (Barton, 1927, p. 1).

Britain Reborn

Following the collapse of the Labour Government in 1931 and the formation of the National Government, the *Sheffield Co-operator* adopted a hostile stance to Ramsay MacDonald and his Conservative dominated Cabinet. The editors stated that it was the poor who had paid for the economic crisis of 1931. The Government had sought to broaden the tax base by "placing taxes upon practically every article of food, clothing, and household requisites used by the poorest of the poor in order to relieve the burden of the taxation of the rich" (Alexander, 1932, p. 1).

In the years after 1931, the co-operative movement was once again targeted by Government and private interests. They believed that retail societies had an unfair advantage over private traders (Alexander, 1932, p. 1). The 1933 Budget included a provision stating that co-operative societies were not paying their fair share of taxation. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Neville Chamberlain, appointed the Raeburn Committee to investigate (Sheffield Co-operator, 1933, p. 1). It included a director of the Columbia Gramophone Company, which had boycotted co-operatives "on the grounds that they were co-operative and gave dividends on purchases to their members" (Carbery, 1969, p. 38). Its report proposed exempting society dividends from taxation. However, remaining society surpluses would be taxed, which the *Co-operator* stated was "solely for the purposes of making an attack upon working-class co-operative savings in order to satisfy the trade opponents" (1933, March, p. 1). It pointed to the fact that the dividend would be taxed, because it followed that "there is a smaller sum available for distribution … if undistributed surplus is taxed" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1933, p. 1).

The announcement caused outrage in Sheffield. On 27 March,1933, 5,000 co-operators attended a protest demonstration at Sheffield City Hall, organised on behalf of the Brightside and Carbrook, Sheffield and Ecclesall, and Handsworth Woodhouse co-operative societies. With every room of the Hall filled, A. V. Alexander set out more clearly than ever the case of the co-operative movement:

> Friends, in this time of world and national crisis … nothing is showing the way out of our national crisis to the same extent as the mutual collective co-operative … efforts of the followers in our days of Owen, King, Kingsley, Hughes, and Holyoake, and all those who were out to teach men and women to save themselves from economic crisis by their own control and collective effort …
>
> … It is one of the greatest causes that has ever happened in the history of the world, and like all good causes have always incited — to use the words of the prayer book — envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness. That is the origin of the attack upon us … Here is a case where the workers have been thrifty and got together; where they have made progress towards their own collective ownership of the means of life, and when their opponents see this progress and the thousands of pounds which we gather for working-class independence and stability, they just think this is a good chance to get some of it back for the relief of the rich … If we do not resist this monstrous injustice we shall be false to the memory of all our Pioneers from Owen and the Chartists onwards … It helps men and women to hold their heads up; to be independent; to look even employers in the face. Let the nation continue to be built on a virile line of thrift and independence (Sheffield Co-operator, 1933, April, p. 1).

In 1932, the Co-operative Party issued its economic response to the National Government in the form of the seven-part *Britain Reborn* manifesto. The *Sheffield Co-operator* eagerly endorsed its platform, particularly the municipal programme endorsed by the Easter Conference at Southsea — outlined in *Britain Reborn Vol. 7: Civic Ideals* (Co-operative Party, 1932). The new policy was built on "democratic representative Government and control of municipal trading services as against government or control of such service by professional or expert bodies such as commissioners or corporations who are divorced from direct democratic influence" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1932, April, p. 1). As such the extension of powers of local authorities included:

> … provisions for ad hoc local authorities to federate for social services, trading services, and housing and town planning … that in the development of public or collective services, provision must be made for the consumers' co-operative movement to become an integral part of the national economy … In any development of a publicly and co-operatively controlled banking system provision should be made for municipal banks or a municipal corporations bank, the municipal bank to have the status of a

> clearing house bank … that the extension of co-operative trading in the State necessitates the removal of the legal disabilities upon co-operators in their capacity as public representatives in regard to voting upon public contracts (Sheffield Co-operator, 1932, April, p. 1).

Over the decades, many questioned the lack of a co-operative presence in the policies and rhetoric of the post-war Labour Government. Despite the close relationship between the two parties, it has been argued that the Labour Party "did not take the political ambitions of the co-operative movement seriously", causing "significant tensions" when Labour policy began to undermine co-operative business interests (Whitecross, 2016, p. 132). Some attributed this to the perceived weakness of the Movement, its opposition to state control as the only method of public ownership, and the relative decline of co-operative businesses in the post war era (Whitecross, 2016). Others argue the movement's inability to put forward a manifesto for socialist government distinct from Labour Party policy amounted to "wasted years" (Whitecross, 2016). More time should have been spent advancing "co-operative forms of social ownership to complement nationalisation following the publication of *Britain Reborn* (Sheffield Co-operator, 1932, April, p. 1).

Through the 1930s, the *Co-operator* continued to support A. V. Alexander, and propagandise for the movement, which in Sheffield appeared in good health. Persistently high unemployment and an unstable international outlook led to an increase in party membership over the next few years (Sheffield Co-operator, 1936, May, p. 5). In 1932, 3,000 co-operators gathered at the new City Hall for the Co-operative Party's autumn campaign meeting, where the failures of the Ramsay MacDonald's National Government took centre stage. J. A. Longden, Sheffield Co-operative Chair, claimed that the breakdown in capitalism in industry and finance necessitated "its replacement by a co-operative system of society" stimulated by the transferring of public utilities into public ownership (Sheffield Co-operator, 1932, October, p.1). Reporting on a speech made by Alfred Barnes MP in the mid-1930s the *Co-operator* (1936, May) further stated that capitalism had brought, "chaos, anxiety, alarms, insecurity, revolutions, dictatorships, poverty, and unemployment, and that only the introduction of a co-operative system in production, politics, publicity, and government could ensure peace (p. 5).

Barnes, the editors of the *Co-operator*, and many others within the Movement, were convinced that co-operation alone had the potential to bring stability to Europe. As early as 1923, it warned of the conditions of economic despair which bred fascism. As a Home Notes columnist suggested, "because there are a large number of people who have never troubled to think out the root causes of poverty and unemployment … the Fascisti idea … will cause untold suffering for brute force never advanced any righteous cause" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1923a, January-February, p. 1). Rennie Smith, Member of Parliament and frequent *Sheffield Co-operator* contributor, drew attention to Mussolini's destruction of the Italian co-operative societies and the confiscation of property from society members (Smith, 1926). British society members' interest in the plight of the Italian co-operators showed that "local co-operators realise that the co-operative movement all over the world," was a common cause (Smith, 1926, p. 3).

The deterioration of economic and material conditions in the 1930s was similarly lamented. The *Co-operator* published articles supporting the Co-operative Guild's boycott of goods from Nazi Germany (Sheffield Co-operator, 1939, p. 7). It denounced the forced closure and dispersion of the German Union and Wholesale Society in Prague, following the annexation of Sudetenland. As war became increasingly likely, the *Co-operator* railed against Hitler and the National Government for permitting such a likely tragedy to occur stating that never was it more necessary to "see the principles of co-operation applied … if there could be more mutual help, more trust, and more co-operation among nations, then the world would not be disordered as it is today" (Sheffield Co-operator, 1937, p. 7). Co-operation could lessen the chance of war, and boost peace and security; "Can we do that at the present time?" the paper asked rhetorically (Sheffield Co-operator, 1937, p. 7).

Seventeen Years

Alfred Barnes' vision did not hold and neither did that of the *Sheffield Co-operator*, the final edition of which appeared in July 1939. Three months later, when the first edition of the *Sheffield Co-operator Bulletin* appeared, Britain was at war. For nearly twenty years, the *Co-operator* had "played its part in the advocacy of co-operative principles and the promotion of co-operative trade" as "the organ of a political party". It had advanced "co-operation as a trading system", and criticised "the powers that be" putting forward "constructive suggestions … that the 'co-operative system' should be adopted in local and national affairs" (Sheffield Co-operator Bulletin, 1939, p. 1).

What would happen after the war, the editors of the *Bulletin* asked? High ideals could "easily be dimmed" or "permanently obscured in the applications of war tactics and the instinct of mere self-preservation", further demonstrating the need for the co-operative movement to continue to propagate "its articles of faith and its plan towards the Commonwealth" (Sheffield Co-operator Bulletin, 1940a, October, p. 1). "Never again", A. V. Alexander responded, "should the experience" of the War be repeated. It was the duty of the co-operative movement to keep the co-operative spirit alive and used for the purpose of creating a new State in which "no one truly desirous of serving the family and the community" would be prevented from doing so (Sheffield Co-operative Bulletin, 1940b, October, p. 1).

For all the perceived weaknesses of the Co-operative Party in the 1930s as a policy-making body, one cannot deny that in Sheffield, Party members succeeded in building an effective political machine with the *Sheffield Co-operator* as its mouthpiece. Almost 100 years after its first issue was printed, the arguments that it attempted to make — that true public ownership as advocated by co-operators did not equal top-down state ownership, that consumer co-operation were the key to unleashing the co-operative commonwealth — are still valid today. In 2017, the Labour Party issued a report entitled *Alternative Models of Ownership* (Barrott et al., 2017) which explicitly ruled out a return to "Morrisonian" style nationalisations (Bell, 2018, p. 4), instead promising a "co-operative economy" (Bell, 2018, p. 10). While Labour was defeated in the 2019 election, it certainly appears that any future discussions involving public ownership will take their cues from co-operative forms of ownership rather than those which characterised the British state in the post-war period.

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