

The Independent Co-operative Commission 1955 – 1958

Co-operative Commission 2001

The attempted takeover of the CWS by Andrew Regan 1997

NOTES

Until the 1950s, the CWS was unassailable. Not only was it the largest and most comprehensive business in Britain, it served the needs of the people who had not got the advantage of wealth and inheritance. Its strength lay in its ability to own and control the supply chain. See:

[Vertical Integration](#)

It was a Movement with purpose, supported by its millions of members. They were known as co-operators and many of them were active in what is sometimes known as ‘co-op auxiliaries’ such as the co-op guilds, youth movement, society educational councils etc. And the Societies were supported by the Co-op Union, College, Party, and the parent body, the CWS.

But change began to take place in the 1950s. The Co-op began to look old fashioned at the side of the new competitors on the scene, Tesco, Sainsbury et al. Everything which had been built up over the decades began to slip away.

Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh wrote a very good business history of the CWS/Co-operative Group in 2013. It is valuable reading for anyone who wants to know what happened. Tony Webster and the Co-operative College have put together a useful 38 page précis of the book which you can read **[HERE](#)**

The Movement consisted principally of the CWS, its retail wing, the CRS and the independent retail co-operative societies which were the CWS corporate members. The co-op movement was complacent and resistant to change. Executives and managers in many cases were concerned to look after their own jobs and to control their own ‘empires’ within the movement. Often one department would not communicate with another.

This was a sad state of affairs, considering the name of the Movement. And it threatened its future.

The 1955 Co-operative Congress resolved to set up an independent co-operative commission. Those who were called to be members of this commission were able to look at the Movement from a neutral position. The Preamble of the resolution is as follows:

“That this Congress notes the changing pattern in retail distribution in Great Britain with the continued growth of large scale retailing under national control, and having received the report of the Central Executive on the outcome of the joint discussion between the Co-operative Wholesale Society Ltd., the Scottish Wholesale Society Ltd., and the Co-operative Production Federation Ltd., on the subject of co-operative production and marketing agrees in principle that more decisive action is necessary if progress is to be made towards securing the utmost advantage from co-operative productive resources, RESOLVES:”

The Rt. Hon Hugh Gaitskell was appointed Chair. The secretary was Tony Crosland.

The Principle 5 Library has several copies of the The Independent Co-operative Commission 1955 – 1958.

It can also be downloaded [HERE](#)

See chapter 6.4 of Building Co-operation (page 225....) The Independent Co-operative Commission 1955 – 1958.

Co-operative Commission 2001

The Co-operative Commission was set up in February 2000 with the backing of Tony Blair, who asked John Monks to chair the Commission. This had been requested by:

Lord Graham of Edmonton (UK Co-operative Council)

Graham Melmoth (Chief Executive CWS)

Lord Fyfe (Chair CWS)

Pauline Green (Chief Executive and General Sec. Co-op Union)

It was published in 2001 with the title: “the co-operative advantage – creating a successful family of co-operative businesses”

There is a copy of this report in the Principle 5 Library and it can also be downloaded [HERE](#)

The Regan Debacle

One of the most traumatic events in the recent British co-operative history was the attempted takeover of the CWS by the Lanica Trust Ltd. Coming at a time when the CWS was struggling with substantial challenges, this represented a full scale assault on its independence, just when some of the equally old building societies were being converted into public limited companies by a wave of ‘carpetbaggers’. Building Co-operation page 325- 6

At this point, the Co-operative Movement could have been lost to a predatory takeover. I have scanned the relevant pages of Co-operative News as this story unfolded. The Co-op News index will take you to the relevant articles. We have the paper copy editions which cover this period.

Graham Melmoth, who was Chief Executive of the CWS at the time helped to avert the crisis.

Co-operative Movement Research Group

The history of the Co-operative Movement and the CWS is well researched and documented. Most of the classics are in the Principle 5 Library: Cole, Holyoake, Bonner, Birchall, Watkins, etc. It seems to me that there is little that our research group can add to that story.

I think that the books which will be of most use for our purposes are:

Gosling: The Fall of the Ethical Bank

(NOTE we have a copy of the autobiography of Terry Thomas, Chair of the bank when the ethical policy became part of its image. It’s a bit self indulgent, but could be useful).

Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh: Building Co-operation

Co-operative Commissions of 1958 and 2001.

Co-operative News reports about the Lanica debacle.

Steve Thompson
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