

THE UNITED KINGDOM CO-OPERATIVE COUNCIL

The Future

Introduction

The UKCC Council at its meeting on Friday 5th October 2001, instructed its officers to bring forward a paper to the next meeting setting out their thinking on the future of the UKCC. The decision to examine the future of the organisation was posited on a number of factors.

The Council had just completed its preparations for an event in celebration of the 10th anniversary of the UKCC. As part of the process of reviewing the last ten years, members acknowledged that during the decade of its existence, and particularly over the last three to four years, the co-operative world had changed.

Devolution in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and, to a lesser extent, in the English regions had led to the emergence of Regional Co-operative Councils (RCCs). The RCCs had done for the regions what the UKCC had done nationally i.e. they had been instrumental in bringing together the various co-operative sectors in the common cause of co-operative development. The spontaneous, needs driven approach of the RCCs had created a new atmosphere of co-operation between co-operatives, and had done much to lessen and sometimes even eliminate the latent suspicions and hostilities that had developed between the sectors in preceding decades.

The speed of change had accelerated when, at the end of 1999, the Co-operative Union had undergone a fundamental restructuring and taken a policy decision to reposition itself in support of its original aims as proclaimed in 1911 on the dedication of its Manchester headquarters i.e.:

'The Co-operative Union is a federation of co-operative societies in the United Kingdom for the purpose of propagandist and defensive action'

its objects were:

'to establish and organise co-operative societies; and to diffuse a knowledge of the principles of co-operation by advice and instruction - literary, legal and commercial'.

This led to a new relationship based on mutual respect and support between the Union, traditionally the home of the large consumer societies, and the other co-operative sectors. In the last two years a host of new partnerships have been created, joint projects established and common platforms elaborated. The establishment of the Co-ordination Unit is a good example of the new approach.

The ever closer relationship between the UKCC and the Co-operative Union has also paid dividends across sectors. The agreement in January 2001 for the Union to assume responsibility for the delivery of the policy agenda of the UKCC has not only been helpful for the UKCC itself, but has been useful for individual sectoral relationships as well. It did, for instance, play a part in bringing ICOM and the Union to a full merger on the 1st December 2001, it has facilitated a constructive working relationship with the CCH and allowed the services of the Union to be made available to support the co-ordination of the RCCs.

A further and major impetus for dynamic change early in 2000, had been the decision of the Prime Minister to sponsor the Co-operative Commission. The Commission, which reported in 2001, urged the Co-operative Union to seek a more cohesive, single strategic voice for the co-operative sector in order that that sector should more effectively punch its weight with government, in the economy and the media. Several of the Commission's recommendations were directed at just that agenda and recognised the role of the UKCC in helping to secure that end.

The 10th anniversary event for the UKCC - a targeted dinner discussion hosted by the Chairman, Lord Graham, in the House of Lords with five government ministers, really focused minds on just how far the changes had gone and demonstrated the future potential for each sector as a result of this constructive evolution.

Where Now?

The UKCC now has to consider just what its future should be?

- With the major sponsors of the UKCC ie the Co-operative Group, the Bank and the CIS, increasingly supporting new co-operative developments in a positive grass roots way;
- With UKCC membership now increasingly being represented on the Central Executive of the Co-operative Union;
- With Communicate Mutuality (Mutuo) providing a research and publication function for the movement;
- With the Co-operative Union offering increased links to its core services;
- With the Co-ordination Unit working between sectors and pulling representatives from all sectors into partnerships in procuring public money and establishing new venture working groups.

Is there a need for the UKCC to continue to exist in its present format?

In its 2001 paper 'A Review of the Architecture and Structure of the Co-operative Union', the Central Executive of the Union reached out a hand to the UKCC and offered to consider seats on the Central Executive for members of the UKCC. To some extent that has happened through the merger of the Union and ICOM. However, in working through the detail of the shape of the new merged organisation in the two months since the merger, the Central Executive and the Council of ICOM have been at pains to ensure that the door remains open for positive approaches for new relationships with other sectors in the future. The principles of the new merged organisation are to be put to the Congress of the Union in Belfast in May this year. If the UKCC is minded to consider a new way forward, there will never be a better time to do so.

A Way Forward

It is a fact, that many of the original roles and functions of the UKCC are now being effectively provided by other co-operative bodies. Perhaps the two fundamental roles that remain vital for the entire movement and where a job remains to be done are:

- providing a strategic priority setting space
- taking the priorities so established into senior decision-making levels.

The 10th anniversary dinner discussion offered a sound demonstration of the potential for that agenda to be carried forward.

After consideration, therefore, the Officers of the UKCC propose the following course of action for discussion and consideration by the UKCC Council:

- 1) The UKCC recognises that its future lies in joining with others under the parentage of the Co-operative Union, and that its operational functions should now be fully undertaken by the Co-operative Union.
- 2) The Co-operative Union should convene and service a national co-operative strategic forum, to be called the UKCC which would continue to bring together the individual sectors of the co-operative movement presently represented in the UKCC and be empowered to enlarge representation to other or new groups of a like mind and purpose.
- 3) This body would not have a public face and in fact should not have, as it would be the body that met discretely as required (up to four times a year) to hammer out the annual strategic priorities of the movement.
- 4) The services of the Co-operative Union, in conjunction with the sector organisations would then design the appropriate opportunities each year to move those priorities forward.
- 5) The events would take as a model the sectoral inclusion and participation that was demonstrated at the 10th anniversary dinner i.e. using the financial muscle of the consumer sector to bring senior government and other representatives into dialogue with the entire co-operative sector.
- 6) The Co-operative Union would ensure that the movement's parliamentary and political strengths would be available to secure the needs of the movement in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords.
- 7) The Co-operative Union should ensure that an annual event, to be called the Forum should continue to be held bringing together the entire co-operative family and offering the opportunity for presenting the face of the modern co-operative movement.

Conclusion

The above constitutes the view of the current members of the Council of the UKCC

It represents a recognition of the success of the UKCC agenda over the last decade, and the consequent acknowledgement that it is time to move on to a second phase in the reinvigoration of the co-operative ideal and the restoration of co-operative dynamism.

At the 10th Anniversary dinner, the Chairman of the Labour Party, Charles Clarke MP said that he was delighted that the Labour Party was at last engaging with the co-operative movement in a discussion on policy, and that this event was a first and valuable step in moving that debate on. This paper is an attempt to ensure that UKCC members continue to drive that agenda on behalf of co-operators across the country.

Signed
2002