

SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

Sidney Pollard

THE CO-OPERATIVE PARTY – REFLECTIONS ON A RE-CONSIDERATION

The appearance of a paper which has as its main theme the critique of an essay I wrote some sixteen years ago¹ both flattered and saddened me. The sadness arises because of the feeling that after all that time it is the subject-matter which ought to have been the focus of attention, and not one piece of literature about it.

Tony Adams takes me to task for emphasising, in my account of the foundation of the Co-operative Party, the “ideological” element, which in this context means the feeling of class solidarity of co-operative members with other members of the working class and their organisations, as against the practical issues facing co-operators as owners and managers of business enterprises. Worse still, he accuses me of having misrepresented the evidence. On a broad range of issues we agree, as he correctly states towards the end of his paper, but there are indeed wide areas of disagreement. I think, however, that he misunderstands the nature of our differences. He goes for one line of explanation, the immediate practical issues facing co-operators in 1917, and thinks that I go for another, the “ideology”; in fact, I believe that they were both significant, indeed that they were part of the same process.

His simple conjunctural history strikes me as quaintly old-fashioned. It seems to be a long time since political historians derived their explanations of political events merely from other political events immediately preceding, without delving more deeply into their social context, as if the social sciences and social scientists had never existed. Are we returning to a history limited to surface observations only?

It is surely more than a little odd, if not wholly implausible, to believe that people would react to a temporary misallocation of sugar and flour, to

¹ T. Adams, “The Formation of the Co-operative Party Re-considered”, above, pp. 48-68; S. Pollard, “The Foundation of the Co-operative Party”, in: *Essays in Labour History 1886-1923*, ed. by A. Briggs and J. Saville (London, 1971), pp. 185-210.

the imposition of a wartime tax, and to a handful of flagrantly unjust decisions on comb-out for the forces, by forming a party – in Britain of all places, where an undemocratic electoral system works viciously against small parties, unless they are territorially based. What an extraordinary thing to do! Who has ever heard of such a reaction before? Can Tony Adams point to another such event in British history? Even where something of the kind did occur abroad, as among the Poujadists, there was, we know, a great deal of fundamental ideology also involved.

Moreover, as I point out in my original paper,² if the objective of forming the Co-operative Party was really no more than to deal with immediate practical issues, the remedy was singularly inappropriate for the disease. How would such a party help with the misallocation of sugar, the comb-out, the Excess Profits Tax, which allegedly brought it into being? There would be no general election until after the war, by which time the immediate issues would have disappeared. Even if there had been elections, how many seats could the co-ops hope for? Would they form a fourth party? Or are we to believe that the hundreds of leading co-operators assembled at their conferences were too ignorant of the British electoral process to have thought of these things?

Not so, says Adams: the mere threat of entering elections and splitting votes (whose?) *may* have induced Lloyd George and Lord Rhondda to look again,³ and presumably this was the objective of the co-operative ploy. “It can be argued”, he says, that that was all it needed. It can indeed, but one is then still left with the question why the co-operators persisted with their party formation when, as we both agree, most of their grievances had been met early in 1918.

Now it is indeed true that the members of Lloyd George’s government were frightened into major concessions to their wage-earning citizens by the massive labour unrest which spread from the later months of 1917 onwards, and that these concessions related to wages, prices, food supplies, army recruitment and other issues dear to the hearts of co-operators also. But it was this widespread disillusionment and revolt, arising from the combined working-class experience, and reflected in the radicalisation of all organisations accessible to the victims, including the unions, the party and the co-operative societies, which led to the change of course – not the threat that sometime in the future, after the war had been won, there might appear some co-operative candidates taking votes from Liberals or Labour. By contrast, a political party would make complete sense in 1917-18 if it is

² Pollard, “The Foundation”, p. 209.

³ Adams, “The Formation”, p. 57.

conceived as part of a concerted drive to alter the political and social structures of the country in a post-war settlement, or indeed in the longer term.

There may, indeed, be one distant parallel to the foundation of a party as a result of a practical grievance: this was the formation of the Labour Representation Committee following the Taff Vale decision. But note the differences: Taff Vale was a judges' decision, the high point of a judicial attack on the trade unions,⁴ and judges, as everyone knows, unlike food controllers, cannot be influenced by delegations and representations, but only by new legislation. To have some MPs who favoured the unions was therefore a sensible solution in the circumstances. Secondly, the damage done to the effectiveness of the unions by Taff Vale was far more dangerous and fundamental than that done to the co-operative societies by the food and recruitment committees. Thirdly, even then, the first trade-union reaction was not to form a party, but a "Representation Committee" or, as the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants expressed it, to "elect as law makers and administrators those who have practical knowledge of industrial work".⁵ Some unions, including possibly some unskilled ones, took rapidly to involvement in labour politics, others, like the miners, took many years, and some, like the Sheffield trades, were convinced only at the end of the war.⁶ Yet the co-operative societies, or large numbers of them, fell for a party at once.

In any case, as is well known,⁷ many even of the leading trade unionists did not look upon the LRC and later the Labour Party as a party in the traditional sense, but as a pressure group which should leave their traditional political allegiance, usually to the Liberal Party, undisturbed. This

⁴ J. Saville, "Trade Unions and Free Labour: The Background to the Taff Vale Decision", in: *Essays in Labour History*, ed. by A. Briggs and J. Saville (London, 1960), pp. 317-50; Ph. S. Bagwell, *The Railwaymen* (London, 1963), ch. VIII; id., "The New Unionism in Britain: The Railway Industry", in: *The Development of Trade Unionism in Britain and Germany, 1880-1914*, ed. by W. J. Mommsen and H.-G. Husung (London, 1985), pp. 193-95.

⁵ Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, p. 225.

⁶ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men* (London, 1964), p. 182; R. Gregory, *The Miners and British Politics 1906-1914* (London, 1968); S. Pollard, "The New Unionism and the Formation of the Labour Party, 1889-1914", and "The Upheavals of War, 1914-1920", in: J. Mendelson et al., *Sheffield Trades & Labour Council 1858-1958* (Sheffield, n.d.), pp. 42-81.

⁷ F. Bealey and H. Pelling, *Labour and Politics* (London, 1958); R. I. McKibbin, "James Ramsay MacDonald and the Problem of the Independence of the Labour Party, 1910-1914", in: *Journal of Modern History*, XLII (1970), pp. 216-35; H. Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party* (London, 1954); P. Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: The Struggle for London 1885-1914* (London, 1967).

changed effectively only in the later war years. It was then that the Labour Party transformed itself and adopted a Socialist programme. And it was only at that time that the toe-hold it had electorally before the war, even in purely industrial constituencies and wards, ever threatened and often surviving only by agreement with the Liberals,⁸ turned into firm support that was strong enough after the war to elevate Labour to become the main opposition and ultimately the government. The trade unions, similarly, doubled their membership. These changes did affect not merely a few leaders as Adams alleges in relation to co-operators, but were the decisions of millions of voters and dues payers.

What was the cause of this accession of support to unions and party? Was it immediate wartime experience, or a slow growth of class-consciousness over the preceding decades? Surely it was both. There was a background of expanding political groupings, spreading their propaganda, listened to but perhaps not believed by the majority, leaving a seed-bed of later consciousness. There was the experience of the pre-war years, and then the experience of war which illuminated starkly the real constellation of forces in the country, while imposing oppressive hardships on soldiers and civilians alike. Both were necessary for the sea-change, and each reinforced the other.

Co-operators were the same sort of people: skilled workers, the more "respectable" semi-skilled and unskilled workers and their families, some poorly paid members of the lower middle classes. Frequently they were the same individuals. As one Lancashire co-operator told the Emergency Conference of October 1917:

I am a Socialist, a trade unionist, a co-operator. I am attending meetings one night as a Socialist, another as a trade unionist, and another as a member of a co-operative board,⁹

and he felt it was time they collaborated more closely. The experience, before the war and now, was the same. The Co-operative Party, also, was a product of a long "ideological" preparation and some immediate experience.

Adams's accuses me of having presented the voting figures of Co-operative Congresses in a misleading way, and that the consciousness of belonging to the labour movement was, contrary to my belief, not making any progress before 1916 or 1917. To some extent this is a matter of impression. For my part, I cannot see how anyone, reading the Congress Reports in

⁸ H. Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (London, 1968), p. 110; and above, note 7.

⁹ Pollard, "The Foundation", p. 202.

sequence, can fail to be struck by the growing feeling of solidarity with the other wings of the labour movement expressed in the annual sessions. The figures, it is true, do not rise smoothly. It is rather like watching the waves on a beach at the time of a rising tide: the waters rise and recede, and not every wave licks higher than the preceding one, yet the overall upward pressure is unmistakably there.

There is, moreover, a fatal flaw in Adams's mathematics of voting. He neglects to note that while in the late nineteenth and the first years of the twentieth century resolutions of political representation by the co-operatives were party-politically neutral, so that, among the objections, the cost and the danger of setting adherents of the two existing parties by the ears¹⁰ played a major part. In later years, particularly after the formation of the Labour Party in 1906, it became increasingly clear that what was being debated was co-operative politics as part of the Labour Party, or in alliance with it. Obviously, opposition to that would be much stronger than opposition to non-party representation on behalf of the Co-operatives. Thus, in 1905, while Congress voted 654/271 in favour of political representation, it voted against association with the LRC by an overwhelming 807/135. In other words, while 654 favoured political activity, only a fifth of that number, 135, favoured it in association with Labour. As in later years some collaboration or association with Labour was increasingly understood, the later votes for politics should be compared, not with the earlier votes simply for representation, but with the vote for Labour politics, and on this basis they showed a remarkable growth.

Adams believes that it was only activists who went to Congresses who had any wish for political involvement, and that the rank and file would have been even more hostile to it than the majority of Congress delegates before the war. I showed that it was sometimes the other way round,¹¹ and this was not unexpected. "Politics" for many still meant party politics, within one of the two old parties, and it was the committed Liberals who were likely to have been overrepresented in Congress, and it was certainly they who fought a bitter rearguard action against the decision of 1917 to form a Co-operative Party. It is true, and unfortunate, that even seventeen years after my article we still do not know what the membership thought, or even how the activists, who turned up at local meetings, reacted outside one or two centres.

¹⁰ G. W. Rhodes, *Co-operative-Labour Relations 1900-1962* (Loughborough, 1962); also Th. F. Carbery, *Consumers in Politics* (Manchester, 1969), pp. 7ff.

¹¹ Adams, "The Formation", p. 54; Pollard, "The Foundation", p. 192.

To sum up. I find it difficult to understand how anyone who knows the period and the various branches of the labour movement in it can fail to observe the steady growth of feeling of class solidarity, of belonging to a social group experiencing a common fate, slowly in the years before the war, very fast in the later years during the war,¹² and clinched by the practical experience of rationing allocations and the other injustices which Adams thinks alone responsible. The trend was first for a withdrawal from the two-party game into representation of an interest, what today might be called a pressure group, and this turned later into a willingness to form a third party. It was shared, in different measure and at different speeds, by all sections of the labour movement and of working-class organisations including to co-operative societies. Further, I fail to see how one can ignore the fact that in the first programme of the Co-operative Party only two of the eleven points had a practical co-operative business slant, the others dealing with foreign policy, education and a whole range of major social and political reforms,¹³ which fully represented the debates preceding it. This is simply not compatible with a pure business and immediately practical motivation of co-operators.

No doubt, there were even then co-operators who thought of their new party as nothing but a means of re-allocating sugar, reducing their tax, and keeping some co-operative bakers from the recruiting sergeant. But it is surely the duty of historians with the benefit of seventy years' hindsight to see a little farther and delve a little deeper, than the most short-sighted and shallow-minded of contemporaries.

¹² Adams, "The Formation", pp. 61-63; Pollard, "The Foundation", pp. 202-03.

¹³ Pollard, *ibid.*