

Tony Adams

CO-OPERATORS AND POLITICS – A REJOINER

Central to Professor Pollard's "Reflections on a Re-consideration" is the contention that in 1917 Britain's co-operators decided to enter electoral politics as a result of the acceleration of long-run economic and social change. This decision, it is argued, emerged naturally from the steady pre-war growth in class-consciousness established by secular shifts in the fabric of Britain's economy and society. We can agree that there is some evidence of a slow growth of class-consciousness before 1914, but not that this should have as its "natural" outcome the establishment of a political party by the British co-operative movement. It remains my contention that this departure was principally the result of the post-1914 experience of British co-operators.

A major weakness of Pollard's "Reflections" is his continued unwillingness to make the necessary distinction between the socialist activists, their Liberal opponents and the great bulk of co-operators who were not active in any party-political cause. It is too often assumed that selective reference to the testimony of committed individuals provides an accurate reflection of attitudes among broad layers of the working class. Much of Pollard's attempt to explain the 1917 decision by reference to the pre-war growth of class-consciousness relies upon this kind of evidence. Thus Pollard argues that pre-war socialists laid a "seed-bed of later consciousness".¹ Are we to believe that the Congress delegates in 1917 voted to enter electoral politics because they now endorsed a socialist vision of society suddenly swayed by the collectively triggered memory of a pre-war street-corner speaker or socialist pamphlet? If the socialist vision was so significant, why was any link with its party-political expression – the Labour Party – so strongly denied by the advocates of the motion? Pre-war agitations undoubtedly influenced the political view of some co-operators in so far as a number were persuaded to identify their activities with a broader labour movement. However, these remained a very small, and largely uninfluential, minority

¹ S. Pollard, "The Co-operative Party", above, p. 171.

of the activists and membership of the co-operative movement before the war.

Pollard also highlights the Congress delegate who as “a Socialist, a trade unionist [and] a co-operator” allegedly personified the shared experience of Britain’s labour-movement activists.² To suggest this was in any way typical ignores – among other things – the active support given to the Liberal Party by co-operators, active or otherwise, up to and beyond 1914. In its report to the 1913 Congress the Co-operative Parliamentary Committee made the unchallenged observation “that our Movement generally follows the policy of the Liberal Party. [. . .] Most of our members are supporters of the Government.”³ Even at the 1918 General Election the movement at local and national level gave support to several co-operators who stood as Liberal candidates.⁴ Since the foundation of the Independent Labour Party in 1893 – and probably earlier – there were those whose diaries revolved around a series of socialist, trade-union and co-operative meetings. However, Pollard presents no evidence that their numbers, or indeed their influence, had increased in pre-war co-operative circles.

Ultimately Pollard’s evidence – as he admits – relies upon an “impression” gained from a reading of the Co-operative Congress Reports.⁵ One can indeed create an impression of a natural forward march of Labour by highlighting the conference speeches of Labour activists – that is, if one also ignores the repeated defeats of such views by the floor of Congress. In his “Reflections” Pollard makes an unsuccessful attempt to re-establish his one piece of “hard” evidence – the pre-war Congress voting record. He argues that the changing political background renders my “mathematics of voting” fatally flawed.⁶ It is alleged that I ignore the difference between the earlier “party-politically neutral” motions, and the post-1906 debates, which necessarily implied an alliance with Labour. Pollard finds support for his case in the contrast between the fortunes of the two motions to the 1905 Congress, the first of which apparently endorsed direct political action. In fact, as I have already indicated (see above, p. 50), this resolution was carried very largely for debating purposes.

We might also consider whether the early-twentieth-century motions (i.e. 1900 and 1905) were truly “party-politically neutral”? In 1900 the Co-operative Congress debated political activity only months after the

² Ibid.

³ G. W. Rhodes, *Co-operative-Labour Relations 1900-1962* (1962), p. 13.

⁴ Co-operative Congress Report, 1919, pp. 520-21.

⁵ Pollard, “The Co-operative Party”, pp. 171-72.

⁶ Ibid., p. 172.

establishment of the Labour Representation Committee. This supposedly “party-politically neutral” resolution advocated “independent working class representation” as a means “to secure the possession of political power by the working classes”.⁷ Furthermore, the slightly higher votes for political representation, in 1900 and 1905, occurred during periods of Conservative government. Similar motions were less favourably received after the Liberal victory of 1906. A few of those who voted in 1900 and 1905 for political action may have been prepared to allow co-operative funds to be employed for the party-political purpose of ending a lengthy period of Tory rule.

Perhaps the fluctuations in the pre-war support for political action can be explained more by reference to the warmth or otherwise of co-operators’ relationship with the government of the day, than any rise in “class solidarity” with Labour. Thus support was apparently relatively high in 1900 and 1905 under Conservative rule. In 1906, following the election of a Liberal government, the vote to enter politics had fallen below the 1900 level. In 1908 a further attempt was defeated “overwhelmingly”.⁸ During 1913 relationships with the Liberal administration had soured slightly as a result of delays and alterations to the Industrial and Provident Societies’ Acts. When the co-operative movement’s political orientation was discussed in 1913 and 1914, support for change had recovered marginally above its 1908 nadir.⁹ Surely, co-operative-government relations warrant attention in any explanation of attitudes to political action. It should be re-emphasised, however, that any fluctuations in support for political action between 1900 and 1917 were very modest.

Pollard goes on to argue that “the later votes for politics should be compared, not with the earlier votes simply for representation, but with the vote for Labour politics”.¹⁰ Although Pollard neglects to state as much, this approach would compare only the recorded votes of 1913 and the second 1905 motion. Apparently these two episodes reveal a “remarkable” growth in support for Labour politics.¹¹ One might add that only by selecting these two votes, to the exclusion of any other combination, can such a result be achieved. Unfortunately the motions were in fact quite different. In 1905 Congress voted very heavily against a political alliance with Labour. In 1913 any political alliance with Labour was specifically denied. The resolution called only for co-operation with Labour on practical and educational issues

⁷ Co-operative Congress Report, 1900, p. 153.

⁸ Co-operative News, 1906, p. 657; Co-operative Congress Report, 1908, pp. 378-85.

⁹ Rhodes, *Co-operative-Labour Relations*, op. cit., pp. 12-13.

¹⁰ Pollard, “The Co-operative Party”, p. 172.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

and still received only 30% of the votes cast.¹² Clearly, supporters of Labour politics omitted reference to a political alliance precisely in order to secure more votes for their watered-down motion. There are simply no legitimate grounds for a direct comparison of the second 1905 motion with that of 1913. Moreover, this still ignores the votes of 1906 and 1908, which further undermine any attempt to establish an upward trend. As I have argued above (pp. 49-52), there was no “steady and natural growth” of support for Labour politics among co-operators before 1914.

The second major strand of Pollard’s reply is an attempt to play down the significance of wartime experience. Thus it is alleged that my explanations are derived “merely from other political events immediately preceding, without delving more deeply into their social context”.¹³ Not so, in my interpretation economic, social and political factors *all* played a significant role (see, for example, above, pp. 65-67). However, new political developments, particularly the formation of a party, cannot be explained solely, or perhaps even largely, by reference to a series of passive responses to exogenous economic and social forces. Pollard’s approach reduces political change to mere epiphenomenal reflexes of grander economic and social movements. To suggest that the establishment of the Co-operative Party can be explained as some automatic or natural response to long-term trends in economy and society is to ignore the reality of working-class experience and the rapidly altered economic, social *and political* circumstances of wartime Britain. A working-class consciousness grows rather more as a result of practical day-to-day experience than out of seeds sown by socialist speechmakers and pamphleteers. It was those changing practical day-to-day economic, social and political experiences of co-operators after 1914 which led them first to adopt direct political action, and subsequently, in increasing numbers, to seek an alliance with Labour.

This is not to argue that the birth of the Co-operative Party can be explained solely by reference to “immediate practical issues” – a view which, despite Professor Pollard’s contention to the contrary, I do not hold.¹⁴ Nevertheless, neither should we attempt to trivialise the significance of co-operators’ wartime experiences.¹⁵ The threat posed by the Excess Profits Duty was only partly an issue of higher taxes. Far more important was the denial of the whole essence of consumer co-operation as trade without profit. Pollard implies that wartime food supply was, similarly, a

¹² Co-operative Congress Report, 1913, pp. 488-503.

¹³ Pollard, “The Co-operative Party”, p. 168.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 168-69, 173.

matter of little consequence. On the contrary, it lay at the very heart of the growing perception amongst British working people of an unjust and class-biased economy and society. Co-operators, in common with many others, increasingly blamed government for the inequalities of food distribution and shortages of basic foodstuffs.¹⁶ The relationship between co-operation and government was transformed. Political decision-makers now directly and immediately conditioned and constrained co-operators' ability to perform their everyday business. Worse still, those decision-makers turned their backs on co-operative representations. Such dramatic and radical changes elicited an equally radical response. In the words of the successful motion to the 1917 Congress from the left-wing Manchester and Salford Society,

In view of the persistent attacks and misrepresentations made by the opponents of the Co-operative Movement in Parliament and on local administrative bodies, this Congress is of the opinion that the time has arrived when Co-operators should seek direct representation in Parliament and on all local administrative bodies.¹⁷

No mention here of the need to build a class-based alliance! The principal motivations for most co-operators were practical and short-term, but were viewed as nonetheless fundamental and vital to the success of the co-operative movement. The Co-operative Party did indeed become "part of a concerted drive to alter the political and social structures of the country",¹⁸ but it was not originally conceived as such by the majority of co-operators.

Why, Pollard asks, did the co-operative movement remain in politics after most of their immediate grievances had been met? Very largely because the central reason for the 1917 U turn remained in force, the State continued to exercise a controlling influence over co-operative trading. The removal of an incompetent food controller did not bring the influence of the private-business lobby to an end – as was demonstrated by renewed attempts to tax co-operative "profits" (see above, p. 65). Pollard thinks it "implausible" and "extraordinary" that the temporary exigencies of war could provoke the formation of a political party "in Britain of all places" and challenges me to find a parallel. At the 1918 General Election there were no fewer than six new political parties which fielded candidates for the

¹⁶ B. A. Waites, "The Government of the Home Front and the 'Moral Economy' of the Working Class", in: *Home Fires and Foreign Fields*, ed. by P. H. Liddle (1985), pp. 182, 185-86.

¹⁷ Co-operative Congress Report, 1917, pp. 561-62.

¹⁸ Pollard, "The Co-operative Party", pp. 169-70.

first time – among their number was the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers.¹⁹

In essence our debate concerns continuity *versus* discontinuity and the role of war. It is my contention that in relation to the experiences and actions of Britain's co-operators the First World War witnessed far more than the acceleration of previously established trends. Up to 1914 Labour achieved some consolidation of support amongst co-operators in certain industrial centres. However, what little progress there was proved manifestly insufficient to disturb the Liberal-neutralist domination of co-operative politics. Such continuity was eventually disrupted by the dramatic changes brought by war. Working people, rapidly, but far from universally, re-ordered their view of economy, society and politics, aligning class and political support for a socialist party. Very largely in step with these shifts, increasing numbers of co-operators moved towards an alliance with Labour. An alliance, it should be remembered, that was not formally established until 1927. Co-operators, in common with many of their class, only deserted the Liberals for Labour in any appreciable numbers during the later war years and beyond. They did so as the result of a combination of rapid – and, to an extent, novel – wartime economic, social and political change. Which, itself, generated a number of vital immediate practical grievances. This range of pressures first rendered political neutrality virtually untenable, and, subsequently, made an alliance with Labour the only effective and attractive option.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 167-68. Other parties fielding candidates for the first time in 1918 were the National Democratic and Labour Party, the National Party, the National Socialist Party, the Women's Party and, of course, the Co-operative Party. See F. W. S. Craig, *Minor Parties at British Parliamentary Elections, 1885-1974* (1975), pp. 32, 53, 57, 67, 71, 111.