



Trying to Make Democracy Work

May /22

1. Introduction

Democracy, rightly or wrongly, is considered by the bulk of the population to be a tedious, time consuming, and stultifying process. Many jokes are cracked at the expense of its sometimes complex procedures and mechanics. It is a rich playground for comedians, cynics, capitalists, and, let's face it, anti-democrats.

We know ourselves, from years of experience, that democracy is, at best, a very clumsy tool. We sit patiently through the procedures in the vague hope that something good will eventually come of it. We often watch as we see our good efforts creating a momentum over which we very quickly lose control; which are often usurped by opportunistic and "charismatic" leaders who may feel that they are the natural embodiment of all that we hold dear and that they need never again consult with us.

And as elected leaders become established, there tends to follow, depending on the nature of the leadership, a gradual centralisation of power. Rank and file "ordinary" Members very quickly feel left out of the programme.

The question is, does democracy have to be like this?

This paper focussed initially on The Co-operative Group in the UK as it was the loss of this entity* to the co-operative movement that prompted its writing. The paper arose largely out of the ultimate frustration of seeing The Co-operative Group humiliated and captured by management elites and the emphasis tends therefore to be on the AGMs and conferences of retail societies. However, very similar frustrations have been encountered in Labour, Co-op Party, and Trade Union settings and the same Problems and Solutions identified below could be said to apply in these other contexts as well.

1.1. "Member Engagement"

It is worth noting that the old Co-operative Group (before the overt 2014 "management capture") had a "Member Engagement Strategy" (now strangely unavailable on The Group's web site). This defined its Membership in terms of a gradient, up which, it was hoped, Members would slowly move; up which they would even, supposedly, be encouraged to move. The stages in this gradient were defined as:

1. Aware
2. Enrolled
3. Involved
4. Interacting, and
5. Influencing.

For all the then current failings of The Group, the work in developing this strategy was, it might be said, good and it seems a shame to lose it altogether.

Involved, Interacting, and Influencing Members would tend to be much more aware of and committed to co-operative Values & Principles. They would be much more in the forefront when it comes to defending the movement and celebrating its best examples.

It may be helpful to retain this gradient in mind as we consider how best we might improve the mechanics of democracy at work. In any and all democratic scenarios, we should all be trying to drive ourselves and our fellow Members up such a gradient.

2. Problems & Solutions for larger meetings

Assuming we are Involved, Interacting, and Influencing co-operators, what are the primary problems we face in trying to make democracy both more efficient and more enjoyable?

All formal meetings can be clumsy, slow, undisciplined, bureaucratic, uninspiring, and downright discouraging, but larger meetings can be even more so. They can also be very intimidating, especially for newcomers – the very people we may be wishing to encourage up the "gradient".

2.1. Problem – ineffective/frustrating General Meetings

"Questions from the floor" in large plenary sessions are a complete and utter waste of time. Some would say they are even anti-democratic. Any Board or executive's pandering to "open" General Meetings

where “any Member can raise any question” represents a cynical attempt to create an appearance of democracy where in fact a serious reduction of democratic recourse is taking place. Asking a single question of a gloriously staged panel is nerve wracking and intimidating enough, but it is also futile and frustrating because any half competent Executive can easily handle (not always the same as “answer”) any single question any ordinary Member could ever come up with.

2.1.1. Solution – more focus

General meetings should not be “educational” or informative. They should be exclusively about holding to account and the pursuit of detail. Education and information should be occurring elsewhere.

2.1.2. Solution – Supplementary Questions

The strength in questioning comes from supplementary questions. Top table shirking, missing the point, and generally being clever cannot be sustained where informed questioners are able to pursue their points.

2.1.3. Solution - Panels

Questions should be posed of specific Board Members/executives by Panels (see below) of two or three selected Members with specialised interests and expertise. These Members should be selected either by the fringe or “break out” workshops they have been attending at conference or by “select committees” or working parties (see below) already previously established and briefed by the Membership. Panels should be up on the glorious stage, alongside and on equal terms with the Board/executive respondent(s) and be seen by the assembled Membership to be pursuing the detailed and unequivocal answers to which they, the Members, have a constitutional right.

2.2. Problem – centralising authority/responsibility

Democratic organisations can very quickly be “lost” to elected leaders. Once in place, leaders can hold sway relatively easily and the best the electorate can hope for is that they will carry out promises they made (or implied). Once leaders are there, it becomes very difficult for ordinary Members to get close.

2.2.1. Solution – more effective General Meetings

See above.

2.2.2. Solution – more distributed Roles

There should be more elected “watchdog” offices in relation to the proposed Select Committees and Panels (see below).

2.2.3. Solution - Select Committees

A select or special committee of the US Congress is a committee appointed to perform a special function that is beyond the authority or capacity of a standing committee. Similarly, in the UK a select committee is made up of a small number of parliamentary Members appointed, often with special powers, to deal with particular areas or issues perhaps too detailed or technical for the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy as a whole. Rather than existing permanently, Select Committees rise and fall with demand as different aspects of business are deemed worthy of closer study.

In theory, any democratic organisation could call for and form special or select committees. They could be made up of shortlisted, interested/concerned, Involved, Interacting, and Influencing Members. In larger organisations they could be resourced sufficiently to call for expert researchers, investigators, and witnesses as required. They wouldn't be encumbered with routine business. They would focus exclusively within the parameters of their specified remit, see it to conclusion, and then disperse.

2.2.4. Solution – other (non-General Meeting) channels for holding to account

Personnel on the Select Committees and Panels (see below) should have direct, formal channels of access to respective officers.

2.2.5. Solution – “grading” motions from General Meetings

Guidance, recommendation, instruction
breaches of “contract”

2.3. Problem - Difficulty in Holding to Account

Never as easy as it sounds, proper Holding to Account takes a lot of time, patience, resources, and expertise. Most Memberships contain unacknowledged and under-utilised expertise which can and should be drawn upon in the interests of more diversified responsibility/authority and more effective checks and balances.

2.3.1. Solution - Standing Committees

In areas of ongoing technical detail, such as, for example, Finance or Constitutional matters, permanent committees can devote time and energy that ordinary Members may not have to spare. Standing Committees can also be a useful way to spread authority/responsibility such that authority/responsibility does not become overly centralised.

Standing Committees should be entitled to submit Panels (see below).

2.3.2. Solution - Select Committees / Working Parties

As touched upon above, Select Committees or formal “working parties” can be utilised to examine specific areas. For issues which pop up unexpectedly or outside the remit of any Standing Committees, short term committees can be empowered, with specific/time bound remits, to pursue specialised studies or investigations. Having fully addressed their remit (hopefully successfully), they disband.

Select Committees/Working Parties should be entitled to submit Panels (see below).

2.3.3. Solution - Optimal team/working group sizes

According to Wittenberg University and other studies, “while the research on optimal team numbers is not conclusive, it does tend to fall into the five to 12 range, though some say five to nine is best, and the number six has come up a few times.”

For what it’s worth, current military thinking suggests 9 person teams are optimal.

More research and consideration should go into optimal team sizes for democratic committees, but it certainly seems that 6 is good and that more than 9 becomes cumbersome.

2.3.4. Solution – on stage Panels

In order for Committees, Standing or Select, to be seen by the Membership as being diligent and having sufficient status and credibility, they should be empowered to form “Panels”. These Panels would be made up of one or two active Members of the relevant Committee and perhaps an expert witness or two. They would take the stage at General Meetings and raise questions on behalf of the Membership to the organisation’s leadership. They would be empowered not simply to ask pre-submitted questions, but would also be able to ask supplementary questions until they feel their concerns have been properly dealt with.

2.3.5. Solution - Democracy Audit

A Democracy Audit is a formal procedure whereby the quality of an organisation’s democracy can be assessed by a neutral external third party. It’s potential resides in the fact that it is a standardised procedure which can be launched by a simple resolution in even a large meeting.

2.4. Problem - “the Silent Majority” Syndrome

This is a process by which people in positions of power are able to dismiss the views of activists. For example, Alan Leighton, the appointed Chair of The Co-operative Group Board, took the trouble to state that the blame for The Group's then recent troubles could be placed firmly at the feet of “people engaged in politicking (sic)” (Co-op News 21/4/15).

By this one is led to assume he means anybody who engages with the Group's supposed democratic processes or speaks out at Group meetings or puts together any ideas (apart from filling in online consumer surveys) on how the organisation might be improved. In short, the Involved, Interacting, and Influencing Membership.

By trying to isolate this active Membership as being “those with a vested self interest” (his own “vested self-interest” being somehow different) he has been endeavouring to do what disgraced US president Richard Nixon did so successfully last century - define and appeal to “the silent majority”. This means that anybody who speaks up is immediately not of that righteous majority and, worse, may even be “politickal”. It also means that all those who never say a thing are magically tapped into and faithfully represented only by the likes of Mr Leighton/Nixon himself.

2.4.1. Solution - “the Silent Majority” Syndrome

It is difficult to counteract this stance. Within this context, as soon as you speak up you are in danger of being marginalised. But it is important to be aware of it and to recognise when it is being inappropriately applied.

It may be useful to cite The Group’s “gradient”, and emphasise the importance of having an active and vibrant Membership which seeks to encourage all to get on and scale that gradient.

2.5. Problem – general ignorance of Values & Principles and democratic processes

2.5.1. Solution - Education

We should focus our educative initiatives more widely (and not at all at General Meetings).

Rather than waiting for Members to be elected to office before offering training, such training should be made available much more widely to ordinary Members who may wish simply to know more about the organisation and about co-operative history.

Such channels should be centralised through the (enhanced) Co-operative College to avoid duplication and cut costs.

Clearly, many of these newly trained Members might still prefer not to be involved in the democratic processes, but they would begin at least to form a significant proportion of a more informed and aware wider Membership. Over time we would inevitably see a more pronounced drive from Aware upwards through Enrolled, and, hopefully, Involved.

2.5.2. Solution - Marketing

Much, if not all of the above could even be funded through shopping incentives such as vouchers and/or accumulated points and/or treated, perfectly legitimately, as “marketing”.

2.5.3. Solution – Recruitment

Posts should be filled with people already steeped in co-operative/democratic values; not with people “excited and keen to learn” about these things. These latter, once in post, rarely find, in practice, the time or space to prioritise such learning.

2.6. Problem – general lack of confidence and frustrated inarticulacy at meetings

2.6.1. Solution - Debating groups

It cannot be a coincidence that private schools place so much importance on debates and debating societies. The Commons is where they can ultimately demonstrate the fruits of their learning, including all the grunting and braying that seems to go with it.

Why is debating not at the top of the list of activities in state schools? One might be tempted to suspect that it’s all part of a plan to discourage generalised involvement and speaking out in political processes! We should be encouraging debate at all levels throughout the education system, but perhaps even more so within our own movement. Again, via the Co-operative College, we should develop modules for developing and expressing points of view. We should encourage a network of debating groups and events.

3. **Problems & Solutions for smaller meetings**

....in process.

4. **Problems & Solutions for both**

....in process.

- Martin Strube, 2016/22



* see also “Demise of The Co-operative Group”, same author