'The people's main defence against monopoly'? The Co-op, the Labour Party, and Resale Price Maintenance, 1918-1964

It is surprising that Resale Price Maintenance (RPM), the practice whereby a manufacturer set a minimum retail price at which its goods could be sold,[1] has attracted so little attention from political historians. Between 1900 and 1956 the percentage of British consumer expenditure on price-maintained goods rose from 3% to a peak of 55%, exercising a profound influence on the cost of living (Killingback, 1988: 211; Mercer, 2013a: 135). The small amount of literature published on the politics of RPM concentrates on Conservative Party divisions over its abolition (Findley, 2001: 327-353; Mitchell, 2005: 259-288). However, the labour movement's stance towards RPM remains largely neglected. This is a particularly telling oversight, as in her study of British anti-trust policies, Helen Mercer maintains that the strongest representative of public opinion on RPM 'was arguably the Co-operative Societies, supported by the Labour Party' (Mercer, 1995b: 149). The Co-op certainly had a genuine grievance against RPM. Manufacturers who upheld the practice either refused the Co-op supplies or asked it to forego the payment of dividend, undermining its principle of distributing profits via the dividend. The development of Co-op and Labour policy was, therefore, pivotal to the campaign against price-maintenance, and it was a Co-operative Party Private Members' Bill (PMB) that eventually initiated the abolition of RPM. Yet literature on RPM tends to either miss this crucial linkage or underplays its significance. For example, Matthew Hilton argues that 'the agenda of the Co-operative Party remained largely subservient to the direction of Labour', while Frank Trentmann surmises that co-operation merged into 'social-democratic consumer politics' (Hilton, 2003: 87; Trentmann, 2001, 153). Mercer is the only historian to acknowledge divisions between the Co-op and Labour over the most desirable type of intervention against RPM (Mercer b: 171). This chapter seeks to analyse those divisions through a case study of the Co-op-Labour debate over RPM policy during the period 1918-1964. In doing so the chapter offers wider insights into the contentious political alliance between the Co-op and the Labour Party.

Literature on the Co-op-Labour alliance is limited and characterises the relationship as being dominated by tensions over national affiliation and Labour's preference for state

[1] RPM took two forms: individual RPM enforced by individual manufacturers; and collective RPM enforced by groups of manufacturers.

ownership over co-operative association. Kevin Manton identifies the incompatibility of Labour's state socialism and the Co-op's voluntarist consumerism as the main source of conflict in the alliance (Manton, 2009a: 756). Although Peter Gurney qualifies this perspective by highlighting the withering of 'the previously widespread belief [within the Co-op], that politics and economics were domains which could and should be separated', he maintains that 'conflicting views of the role of the state continued to undermine unity' (Gurney, 1996a: 220, 224). All of these accounts tend to paint the Labour Party in a negative light, presenting Labour's treatment of the Co-op as nonchalant and dismissive. By contrast, Tom Carbery and Nicole Robertson, highlight the complexity and diversity of the alliance at both national and local level. Carbery argues that Co-op-Labour relations have been characterised by 'calculated vagueness, uncertainty and instability', while Robertson identifies the method of selecting candidates and the financial assistance that each party should provide as key sources of disagreement (Carbery, 1969: 763-765; Robertson, 2009: 228). She concludes optimistically that these tensions should not be allowed to disguise the benefits that the Co-op gleaned from the alliance in the form of access to government office and direct representation on governmental and departmental committees (Robertson: 229). Finally, Lawrence Black has sought to shift the debate away from organisational and state structures by emphasising the limits imposed on the Co-op's adaptability by its internal culture and inherited traditions of local autonomy and egalitarianism (Black, 2009a: 34, 36; Black, 2010b).

The following chapter tests the hypothesis that there was an inherent tension between the Co-op's voluntarism and Labour's state socialism, while scrutinising the balance of power between Labour, the Co-op and the trade unions in order to gauge the Co-op's agency within the alliance. How far organisational issues regarding forms of affiliation and decision-making structures inhibited the coordination of RPM policy is also analysed. The chapter qualifies interpretations of the alliance which perceive trade union domination by highlighting the extent to which Labour's dialogue with the Co-op and the unions over RPM was characterised by compromise. In arguing that the RPM debate contributed towards a significant revision of the Co-op's voluntarism, the research challenges and nuances existing interpretations of the Co-op-Labour alliance which privilege divisions over voluntarism and state action. It posits that by supporting state regulation of profiteering trusts, trade associations and cartels, the Co-op moderated its opposition towards state

action and channelled it into an anti-monopolist critique, which became a more prominent source of disagreement with Labour than has hitherto been recognised. This brings into focus profound internal Co-op differences over how to marry the defence of its trading interests with RPM prohibition, which manifested in rifts over state-set prices and economic planning during the formative and closing stages of the debate. Thereafter, the analysis builds upon the traditional emphasis on Co-op-Labour differences over democratic ownership by demonstrating how the Co-op's internal democratic decision-making undermined the coordination of RPM policy. The chapter contends that these tensions were exacerbated by the Co-op's adherence to voluntary local affiliation to the Labour Party, which denied the Co-op access to Labour's policymaking sub-committees. It concludes that these factors combined to generate a degree of dysfunctionality that rendered the coordination of RPM policy nearly impossible, reinforcing the Co-op's junior status in the alliance of consumer and producer democracy.

The Imperfect Compromise, 1917-1940

Although free trade and voluntarism were at the heart of consumer co-operation, the Co-op encountered organised boycotts by local shopkeepers and withholding of supplies by manufacturers from its inception in 1844. In order to circumvent manufacturers' boycotts the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) and Scottish CWS (SCWS) were established in 1863 and 1868 to procure and distribute manufactured goods to local co-operative retail societies throughout Britain.[2] The creation of the Wholesales represented a milestone in the Co-op's pursuit of a 'Co-operative Commonwealth' in which all trade would be co-operative and all consumers equal. The Co-op was not alone in pursuing a more integrated business structure. During the 1890s private manufacturers formed trade associations, collectivising the practice of resale price maintenance, and in the period 1900-1938 consumer spending on price-maintained goods rose from 3% to 30% (Killingback, 211). Although the Co-op's membership increased from 1.7 million to 8.4 million in the corresponding period, its share of retail trade was contained at 14% (*People's Year Book 1938*).

[2] The Co-op developed a loose federal structure built around autonomous local retail societies which collectively owned the Wholesales.

The First World War acted as a catalyst for the expansion of RPM with the Board of Trade and Ministry of Food routinely consulting manufacturers involved in the enforcement of RPM when negotiating bulk purchase agreements and fixing maximum prices. Labour movement concern regarding RPM emerged as part of a wider critique of profiteering trusts, cartels and trade associations (*Labour Party Conference Report 1919*: 61). The War Emergency: Workers' National Committee (WEWNC), of which Co-op representatives were active members, campaigned for the immediate introduction of rationing and closely monitored the prices of working class necessities (Harrison, 1971). By acting as a coordinating hub the WEWNC bolstered labour movement cohesion and formed a vehicle to facilitate the inclusion of the organised working class in the expanded wartime state's deliberations. Its activities influenced the government to establish an advisory Consumers' Council to uphold the rights of consumers. The creation of the Consumers' Council, on which Co-operators held 8 of the 20 places, was highly significant from the Co-op's perspective as it entailed state recognition of the consumer interest. The establishment of a Committee on Trusts in 1918 to consider measures necessary to safeguard the public interest against trade associations and combines, and its appointment of W. H. Watkins, a member of the Co-op Union Central Board and the Consumers' Council, entailed further recognition of this (Hilton: 66-74; *Report of the Committee on Trusts*, 1919: 1). Watkins and the labour movement representatives welcomed the Committee's recommendation that the Board of Trade should establish machinery to investigate monopolies, trusts and combines, as it strengthened the demand for a permanent Consumers' Council with enhanced powers.[3] However, in an addendum which proposed checking 'capitalist combinations' through the expansion of Co-op trade, state-set maximum prices and the transfer of private monopolies into public ownership, they challenged the Committee's conclusion that RPM restrained inflation and ensured the survival of the distributive and retail trades (*Report of the Committee on Trusts*: 13-14).[4] These attempts to merge the voluntarist belief in a 'Co-operative Commonwealth' with the statist vision of a 'Socialist Commonwealth' brought into question an integral facet of the Co-op's voluntarism, free trade, and combined with

[3] Watkins was a Plymouth Co-operator with first-hand experience of organised boycotts. The other representatives were Sidney Webb, Ernest Bevin and John Hobson.

[4] The addendum was heavily influenced by Webb's ambitions for an alliance between the Co-op and the state 'to secure the full advantages of collectivism'. See Manton, 'The Labour Party and the Co-op', p.758.

the initiation of decontrol during 1919 to spark a heated debate within the Co-op and the Consumers' Council about the most effective means of containing price rises.

The *Co-operative News* concluded that it was 'fraudulent' to propose returning to 'an "open" market when so many sources of supply are controlled in financial interests by various trusts and rings', while the Co-operative Union and Women's Co-op Guild (WCG) championed state-set maximum food prices (*Co-operative News*, 22 February 1919). However, the Wholesales and JPC maintained that the expansion of Co-op trade was the most effective means to reduce prices (Wilson, Webster, Vorberg-Rugh, 2013: 166-169; Hilton: 74-75).[5] The Wholesales were particularly insistent that the involvement of their private competitors in government price fixing had enabled trade associations and trusts to protect their profits and institutionalise anti-Co-op discrimination within the state. In contrast, advocates of state-set maximum prices contended that wartime controls had demonstrated the value of state intervention to defend working class living standards (*Annual Report of 1920 Co-operative Congress*: 550-551). This internal Co-op dissension reflected an unmistakable divide in the movement over the interpretation of voluntarism arising from the changed post-war trading and political environment. A truce was eventually brokered by the JPC at the 1920 Co-op Congress whereby the Co-op Union Central Board agreed to drop its opposition to decontrol and advocacy of state-set maximum prices on the proviso that the Wholesales supported a resolution favouring state regulation of the prices of trusts and cartels only (*ibid*: 187-189).[6] In reaching this compromise the Co-op incorporated state regulation as a facet of its voluntarism.

The way in which this debate played out within the Co-op and on the Consumers' Council had profound implications for the Co-op's relationship with the Labour Party, as if state action against RPM was to be initiated the movement required allies in Parliament. The Co-op's negative wartime experience of conscription, taxation and rationing had combined with Co-operators' activity within the labour movement to convince the Co-op to abandon political neutrality in 1917. Initial enthusiasm for a united working class party rapidly dissipated as supporters of political activity fragmented into two camps. A vocal

[5] The Co-op Union, formed in 1869, operated as a coordinating body for the local retail societies, undertaking research on their behalf, organising campaigns and developing educational materials.
[6] Annual Co-op Congress was the main democratic forum responsible for debating national strategy and policy, but its decisions were not binding on local retail societies.

minority, particularly within the Royal Arsenal Co-op Society (RACS), advocated national affiliation to the Labour Party to avoid splitting the working class vote, but the majority hoped to forge an alliance with the Labour Party which retained the Co-op's autonomy (Rhodes, 1998: 39-54).[7] Despite Co-op Congress' rejection of formal alliance with Labour in 1919 and 1921 (Pollard, 1971; Adams, 1987: 48-68), the Co-op Party's gradual evolution of local electoral alliances further redefined the Co-op's voluntarism as independent political action in voluntary alliance with the Labour Party.

The Co-op Party Secretary, Alf Barnes, described the relationship as an alliance between Co-op consumer and trade union producer democracy, and raised the possibility of future national affiliation to create a 'comprehensive party' once the Co-op Party had extended the number of societies affiliated to it and attained greater independence within the Co-op movement (Barnes, 1923: 18-19). However, the 1927 'Cheltenham agreement', which committed the Co-op Party and Labour Party to not contesting the same seats and allowed local Co-op Parties the autonomy to affiliate to Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs), enshrined the principle of independent voluntary alliance (Rosen, 2007: 9). The Co-op Party continued to operate as a department of the Co-op Union and thereby remained accountable to the movement, enabling the Co-op to retain a front of party political neutrality while avoiding incurring the additional cost of affiliation fees to Labour alongside the cost of running the Co-op Party (Wilson, Webster, Vorberg-Rugh: 186-188).

The imperfect compromise that emerged contained contradictions and constraints that would have longer-term implications for RPM policy. By not nationally affiliating to Labour, the Co-op Party was denied a block vote at the Labour Party conference and potential representation on Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC), both of which exerted influence over policymaking (Carbery: 28-34; Rhodes: 39-54). Although the 'Cheltenham agreement' sought to establish formal channels of communication regarding organisation and policymaking through the formation of the National Joint Committee of the Labour Party and the Co-op Party, it only met intermittently and was emasculated from the outset by the Co-op Party's lack of autonomy within the co-operative movement. This was encapsulated by the Co-op Union's decision to create the National Co-op Authority in

[7] RACS nationally affiliated to the Labour Party in 1921.

1932, which usurped the Co-op Party's role as a broker between the Co-operative movement and the Labour Party and included representatives from all wings of the movement. Barnes was alive to these problems, highlighting the need to find 'a place for [the Co-op Party] in the political system of the nation' rather than the existing structures of the movement if consumers were not to be 'subordinated to the particular interest of the producer' (Barnes: 18, 25). This period established the key dynamics of Co-op-Labour relations as the Co-op fought to retain the independent voluntary alliance, the Co-op Party strove to prove itself to the wider movement, while the Labour Party demanded national affiliation.

In the short-term both parties were committed to the reestablishment of a Consumers' Council with a remit to investigate and take action against price-maintenance agreements.[8] Co-op Party MPs, led by A.V. Alexander, who pressed for state regulation of the price and supply of food, openly acknowledged that co-operation required the support of the state if profiteering by trade associations and trusts was to be checked (Gurney a: 221). However, in warning that the Co-op would not support Labour's plans for a 'state monopoly of food', Alexander shifted the terms of debate over the Co-op's relationship with the state away from opposition to state action *per se* and towards an anti-monopolist position (*ibid*: 224). This moderated form of voluntarism won overwhelming approval amongst Co-operators as it corresponded with the Co-op's preferred role as a consumers' representative, its new-found advocacy of state regulated prices, and raised the possibility that the threat of state intervention might prompt the voluntary abandonment of RPM by manufacturers.

The election of the second minority Labour government in 1929, which was committed to establishing 'stringent control over monopolies and combines', further raised expectations. The JPC welcomed the introduction of a Consumers' Council Bill to enable the Board of Trade to regulate by order prices that the Council found to be excessive, and was further buoyed by the establishment of the Committee on the Restraint of Trade to investigate restrictive practices, such as RPM (*Annual Report of 1930 Co-operative Congress*: 71-72). However, this optimism was to be short-lived as the Consumers' Council Bill fell amid

[8] The Consumers' Council voted to dissolve itself in January 1921 in the wake of decontrol. It was replaced by an advisory Food Council in 1924, which did not contain any Co-op or organised consumer representation.

concessions to Liberal amendments, which prevented the Council from regulating prices unless it could prove that 'conditions exist which restrict the free play of competition' (*Annual Report of 1931 Co-operative Congress*: 78). Meanwhile, the Committee on the Restraint of Trade rejected legislation to prohibit RPM and opposed legal prohibition of refusal to supply, as the JPC's evidence had proposed, on the basis that this would interfere with the freedom to contract.

Gurney identifies this episode as a lost opportunity 'to regulate markets in favour of working-class consumers' (Gurney, 2012b: 909). The JPC's immediate response was to emphasise the voluntarist free trade perspective that societies and members needed 'to support CWS and co-operative production to break these boycotts' (*Annual Report of 1931 Co-operative Congress*: 78). In contrast, the WCG called 'for a system of price control which will safeguard the consumer so that those who have little to spend on food may obtain the utmost value' (Trentmann: 155). Meanwhile, in attacking collective RPM in 1938, Alexander demonstrated the extent to which the Co-op Party now interpreted voluntarism and state regulation as inter-dependent:

> the State represented the whole of the people and that if profit was made by a State organisation, all citizens entered into enjoyment of that profit. I have heard a different definition of private profit, where people gather together, not merely to carry on individual trade, but in order to buy for a particular combination in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest, and at the highest margin of profit which they can extract from the community. Are these the profiteers, or is the State the profiteer which conducts its business for the benefit of the whole community (*Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 10 February 1939: col.1317)?

Therefore, by the outbreak of the Second World War the debates over RPM policy and alliance with the Labour Party had led the Co-op to redefine its voluntarism in relation to political activity and free trade. An anti-monopolist consensus emerged in favour of independent political action in voluntary alliance with the Labour Party and state regulation of prices charged by 'profiteering' trusts, combines and trade associations. Although this

resulted in a gradual acceptance of state regulation, the situation was more complex than the fusion of co-operation into 'social-democratic consumer politics' suggested by Trentmann. In particular, divisions persisted over the extent to which the Co-op should embrace state-set prices and further integrate with the Labour Party. Indeed, when the Co-op Union was invited to join the newly established National Council of Labour (NCL) in 1935, the NCA rejected the offer as many of the items under discussion would be outside the Co-op's scope of interest (Whitecross, 2014: 100, 107). These nuanced differences were reconciled through the commitment to a Consumers' Council, but this imperfect compromise was shattered by the experience of the first majority Labour government between 1945 and 1951.

A Missed Opportunity, 1940-1951

Between 1938 and 1945 the Co-op increased its share of national grocery trade from 14% to 20%, as the Co-op's policy of limiting price rises and continuing to pay dividend on non-rationed goods proved attractive in a period of wartime austerity. The Co-op-Labour alliance became more integrated during the war as the NCA joined the NCL in a consultative capacity in 1939 and as a full member in 1941. NCA membership facilitated policy discussions with Labour and the TUC, while providing the opportunity to influence the coalition government. When the NCA expressed concerns that private firms' dominance of Commodity Control Boards was being used to create private monopolies, the Labour Party leader and Lord Privy Seal, Clement Attlee, initially infuriated the Co-op representatives by arguing that it would be difficult to recast the scheme as food control 'needed to be directed by persons familiar with production or distribution of the commodities' (NCL Minutes, 26 June 1940, 23 July 1940, 27 May 1941). However, his commitment to raise the matter with the War Cabinet had an effect as the Co-op secured representation on all of the Commodity Boards and the CWS came to play a pivotal role in procuring overseas food supplies and assisting the rationalisation of industrial production (Wilson, Webster, Vorberg-Rugh: 212-213).

The 1945 Co-op Party conference's rejection of direct affiliation prompted the Co-op Party Secretary, Jack Bailey, to reopen discussions on a new electoral agreement with Labour (Carbery: 122-123). The agreement that emerged in 1946 included the formation of a National Policy Committee (NPC) involving the Co-op Union and Labour Party NEC to facilitate the mutual adjustment of their programmes (Whitecross: 111-112). This was

deemed of particular significance by the Co-op as although the Co-op Party had returned a record 23 MPs at the 1945 general election, Labour's manifesto contained mixed messages regarding RPM. Despite promising to prohibit 'anti-social restrictive practices' which inflated 'profits at the cost of a lower standard of living for all', Labour dropped its commitment to a Consumers' Council and reoriented policy towards containing consumer spending and raising industrial production (*Let Us Face the Future*, 1945: 4-7). Speaking in a Labour Party general election broadcast, Alexander smoothed over these inconsistencies by identifying the Co-op as 'the people's main defence against monopoly' (Gurney, 2015c: 239).

During the economic crises of 1947 and 1948 the NCA negotiated voluntary price reductions with local retail societies to assist the government in suppressing prices (Report of the Co-operative Union to the NCL 26 October 1948; Report of the Co-operative Union to the NCL 25 January 1949; National Co-operative Authority minutes, 21 January 1949). Yet despite the urgent need to contain inflation Labour developed a convoluted strategy to tackle RPM, influenced by the TUC-Labour Party Joint Sub-Committee on Trusts and Cartels, which entailed the Board of Trade investigating restrictive practices on a case-by-case basis (TUC-Labour Party Joint Sub-Committee on Trusts and Cartels minutes, 29 May 1946). In order to address union concern that outright prohibition of RPM would result in job losses and wage reductions, the President of the Board of Trade, Stafford Cripps, agreed to establish a Committee of Inquiry on RPM to avoid 'condemning the system outright'.[9] Cripps' decision revealed one of the key limitations of the 1946 agreement as Labour was able to side-step the newly formed NPC by shifting emphasis towards its own sub-committees to maintain policymaking autonomy and pressure the Co-op to nationally affiliate. The leverage exerted by the TUC also highlighted the extent to which Labour-affiliated trade unions were able to use the sub-committee structure to influence Labour policymaking and position the TUC as the dominant working class partner of the state, marginalising the Co-op in the alliance of consumer and producer democracy.

Nonetheless, in an effort to balance competing Co-op and union interests, Cripps proposed a compromise intended to address RPM's negative effects on the Co-op without prohibiting the practice. Emphasising the need to give 'the co-operative method of

[9] Given that a high proportion of National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers members were Co-op employees its support for RPM was particularly damaging to the Co-op's case for outright prohibition.

trading…our fullest support', Cripps highlighted the Co-op as a 'special case' given that the 1930 Committee on the Restraint of Trade had already concluded that there was 'no justification in principle' for anti-Co-op discrimination (Memo by Stafford Cripps, 'Effect of RPM on Co-operative societies', 11 July 1946). Cripps proposed to issue, under Defence Regulations, orders requiring named manufacturers of specified goods to supply against demand from all sources. The proposal was predicated on the basis that the Co-op's primary objection to RPM stemmed from its interference with dividend, and Cripps envisaged 'proceeding first with those cases which are of most practical importance to the Co-operative Movement' (*ibid*). Although Mercer and Manton have both highlighted Cripps' memorandum, neither has considered the Co-op's response (Mercer b: 154). In fact, the JPC rejected Cripps' offer, citing the Committee on the Restraint of Trade's assertion that compulsion to supply was a legal impossibility (Memorandum for Mr Buckley prepared by Fred Lambert, undated; Report of the Co-operative Union to the NCL 27 July 1948). The CWS led on this issue, rejecting 'special pleading on dividend' while advocating general consumer legislation to establish a Monopolies Commission with the power to prohibit RPM (Co-operative Union Parliamentary Committee minutes, 20 July 1950).

This decision exposed fresh faultlines in Co-op-Labour relations regarding Labour's reluctance to recognise the Co-op as a consumers' representative and the Co-op's unwillingness to distinguish between state and private monopolies in its anti-monopolist critique. The Co-op was deeply frustrated by Labour's refusal to grant it equal representation on the Economic Planning Board, the inclusion of its undistributed surplus in the new Profits Tax, and the abortive proposal to nationalise the Co-op Insurance Services (Manton a: 772-773). As the bonds of the Co-op-Labour alliance became strained the Co-op Party, alienated by its marginalisation and anxious to prove its worth to the movement, challenged Labour's preference for universal state socialism. Bailey and his deputy Harold Campbell condemned Labour's nationalisation programme as 'undemocratic' and 'monopolistic' and championed consumer control as 'the only true [all embracing] classless control' (Campbell, 1947: 6, 16). In doing so, they articulated an anti-monopolist position, which unified the Co-op and galvanised the principle of independent Co-op political activity by underlining the Co-op Party's role in advancing the consumer interest.

Influencing the deliberations of the Committee of Inquiry on RPM became a test of the Co-op's agency as an independent consumers' movement. Underlining the need for outright prohibition, the JPC's written evidence emphasised that the worst cases of anti-Co-op discrimination were practised through individual RPM. It proposed empowering the Board of Trade to investigate price-maintenance agreements and impose fixed maximum prices on goods found to be generating excessive profits (Co-op Union Parliamentary Committee memorandum of evidence for submission to the Committee on Resale Price Maintenance, 14 November 1947). However, when the JPC gave oral evidence to the Committee their testimony was contradictory (Transcript of Resale Price Maintenance Committee meeting at the Board of Trade on 30 January 1948). The CWS was aghast at the JPC and SCWS representatives' use of 'fixed prices', 'nationally controlled prices' and 'maximum prices' when describing the Co-op's preferred position (CWS Sub-Committee on RPM minutes, 18 May 1948; CWS Sub-Committee on RPM report to the CWS Board). To compound matters the WCG informed the Committee that fixed retail prices offered 'marked advantages' because they made it 'easier to plan and check household expenditure' (*Report of the Committee on Resale Price Maintenance*, 1949: 10). When the Committee of Inquiry reported back in 1949 it recommended the outlawing of collective RPM and the retention of individual RPM to protect brands against loss-leaders. The Committee agreed that there was 'no reason why a retailer's right to distribute some of his profits [through deferred dividends] should be restrained or restricted' and proposed further consultations to find a voluntary solution (*ibid*: 20, 33-34). This outcome, which sought to legitimise the system of individual RPM that underpinned anti-Co-op discrimination, actually led the Co-op to campaign vociferously against voluntary self-regulation by private manufacturers. Moreover, the Committee's dismissal of the Co-op's principled case for outright abolition brought into question the JPC's decision to reject the Cripps' compromise, which could have created an advantageous holding position for the Co-op in relation to dividend-based trading prior to eventual RPM abolition.

Following fruitless negotiations over the voluntary modification of RPM, the 1950 Labour manifesto pledged that 'anti-social private agreements to keep prices too high will be dealt with' (*Let Us Win Through Together*, 1950). The President of the Board of Trade, Harold Wilson, responded by launching a full-scale review of consumer policy in the

aftermath of Labour's narrow victory. Emphasising the merits of regulated competition, Wilson plotted 'a middle path between wartime control and unfettered free market liberalism', which appeared to bridge some of the differences between Labour and the Co-op (Hilton: 154-155). The sense of convergence was reinforced by the Cabinet Committee on Distribution and Marketing, which concluded that increased competition and RPM prohibition represented the best methods of lowering prices (Manton, 2007b: 328). The Co-op was allocated a significant role in Wilson's plans as he envisaged the movement enhancing retailing efficiency and generating price competition through the expansion of self-service retailing, which it had pioneered since 1942 (Manton, 2008c: 281-282). However, despite the appearance of gathering consensus, Labour's conflation of RPM prohibition with price competition created the preconditions for future conflict with the Co-op, which believed that its low cost methods of distribution combined with self-service would be sufficient to reduce prices following RPM abolition (*The Producer*, December 1950: 20-21). Therefore, the Co-op's unrelenting campaign against RPM unintentionally aligned it with a rising strand of revisionist thought within Labour which sought to develop a model of competitive individual consumerism that threatened the pursuit of a 'Co-operative Commonwealth' as much, if not more so, than the expansion of the state.

Publication of a White Paper was delayed until June 1951 as RPM reform became enmeshed in internal Cabinet wrangling over the nationalisation of distribution and an alternative TUC proposal to retain individual RPM subject to oversight by a National Pricing Authority and special provision for Co-op dividend (Manton b: 329-331; Mercer b: 156, 162). The White Paper, which advocated prohibition of collective RPM and the modification of individual RPM to only allow the prescription of a maximum price, was abandoned by the Conservatives following their victory at the 1951 General Election (*A Statement of Resale Price Maintenance being a trade practice which prevents shopkeepers from reducing certain prices to the public*, 1951; Co-operative Union Parliamentary Committee minutes, 21 June 1951). Reflecting on this period Gurney has concluded that 'the potential of the Labour Party to radically restructure British society in the second half of the twentieth century was thus seriously undermined by its inability to properly integrate the interests of organised producers with those of consumers' (Gurney, 2005d: 985). By 1951 Co-op-Labour relations had become highly fractious as the Co-op developed a stringent anti-monopolist critique of universal

state socialism and the preferential corporatist role accorded to the trade unions. A cohesive corporatist relationship with the Labour government, akin to that of the TUC, failed to emerge due to Labour's reluctance to recognise the Co-op as a consumers' movement and the Co-op's exclusion from Labour's policymaking sub-committees. These issues resulted in a lack of coordination regarding RPM policy, which was exacerbated by the Co-op's difficulties in articulating a consistent policy position and the Labour Party's side-lining of the NPC, which effectively rendered that aspect of the 1946 agreement stillborn. Yet the Co-op suffered from some self-inflicted wounds. Its unbending principled emphasis on the outright abolition of RPM lacked pragmatism, denying the movement the opportunity to use the Cripps' compromise as a stepping stone towards RPM prohibition. Moreover, the eventual policy convergence around Labour's revised consumer strategy aligned the Co-op with a competitive vision of RPM abolition that was far less benevolent towards its trading interests than the regulatory sentiments that underpinned the Cripps' compromise.

Planning v Competition, 1951-1964

Following the 1951 general election defeat Labour's stance on RPM was challenged by the TUC and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW), which generated friction with the Co-op over the compatibility of RPM abolition and state economic planning. Citing concerns that 'unrestricted capitalist competition' would undermine wages while highlighting the risks posed to the Co-op by 'loss leaders' and 'price wars', USDAW presented individual RPM as an essential part of a planned economy. As a result of this union counter-attack Labour conceded that RPM would only be outlawed subject to 'satisfactory safeguards for workers in the distributive trades and productive industry' (*Labour Party Annual Report 1952*: 84-85). Wilson negotiated RPM policy in the midst of these tensions when chairing the Labour Party's Cost of Living Working Party during the build up to the 1955 General Election. The Working Party advocated the immediate imposition of a price freeze on essential commodities and the vetting of all future price rises by the Board of Trade to avoid profiteering (Cost of Living Working Party, R.496/March 1955, Report to Policy Committee). However, following a meeting with the TUC in March 1955 the Working Party agreed that 'definite proposals should be made only on those points where the party and the TUC were known to be in agreement' (Cost of Living Working Party minutes, 8 March 1955). This raised questions as to 'how far [Labour] should consult [the Co-op]…and at what stage',

especially as the Co-op Party had recently displayed its policymaking autonomy by developing plans for a Ministry of Consumers Welfare, which had not been approved by Labour, and was demanding its own party political broadcasts (Cost of Living Working Party, R.468/February 1955, Note by Chairman on Future Work and Timetable). Despite assuring the Co-op Union that its proposals would include legislation to prevent discrimination against the Co-op through RPM, the Working Party's final report fudged the issue by deferring a decision until the Committee of Investigation into Collective Discrimination had reported, further underlining how the Co-op's lack of access to Labour's policy sub-committees impeded the coordination of RPM policy (Cost of Living Working Party, Notes on Joint Discussions with Representatives of the Co-op Union, 10 March 1955; R.496/March 1955, Report to Policy Committee).

The Committee raised the Co-op's hopes by recommending prohibition of RPM, but although the 1956 Trade Restrictions Act abolished collective RPM it further strengthened individual RPM (*Collective Discrimination*, 1955: 81-84). In return for compulsorily registering existing agreements with a Restrictive Practices Court manufacturers could now enforce individual RPM through High Court injunctions. To compound matters, Clause 20 of the Act stated that deferred discounts, such as dividend, could be treated as a form of price cutting against which manufacturers could evoke the law. The Co-op Party MP, George Darling, described the legislation as a consciously 'anti-co-operative measure' implemented by the Conservatives on behalf of their 'business friends', and his words presaged growing labour movement unity on RPM (*Co-operative News*, 19 May 1956). The TUC's evidence to the Committee of Investigation had argued that providing there was a 'public check' on individually maintained prices, manufacturers should be empowered to take price-cutters to the courts (*TUC Annual Congress Report 1956*). However, following a meeting with the Labour Party NEC in November 1955 the TUC General Council agreed to oppose the legislation.

Labour supported a Co-op Party amendment in defence of dividend and insisted that manufacturers should only be permitted to use individual RPM if the High Court determined that it was in the public interest. A further proposal by Labour, which mirrored the Cripps' compromise, sought to empower the Board of Trade, on receipt of a recommendation from the Monopolies Commission to issue an order preventing discrimination against dividend. The Co-op's endorsement of this strategy, which the JPC had previously rejected as

unworkable, demonstrated the urgent need to coordinate RPM policy (The Labour Party and Resale Price Maintenance, 1964: 1; Letter from Jack Bailey to Carol Johnson, PLP Secretary, 18 June 1956). However, Labour simultaneously refused the Co-op prior consultation in policy development unless a reciprocal agreement could be reached (Letter from Morgan Phillips to Robert Southern, 2 July 1956). This reflected Labour's conviction that 'the extension of the Co-operative Party was giving rise to the danger of a party within a party' and resulted in a fundamental revision of their existing electoral agreement, which was terminated in 1957 (Policy and Publicity Sub-Committee minutes, 17 September 1953; Report of Labour Party-Co-operative movement meeting on 29 March 1957). Despite successfully resisting national affiliation by highlighting the importance of the Co-op Party's independent organisation and finance to targeted constituency campaigning, Labour imposed significant limitations on Co-op autonomy in the revised agreement reached in 1958, which limited the Co-operative Party to 30 candidacies per general election, including those seats already held by the party. Once again, the coordination of policymaking was neglected as the agreement dissolved the NPC, and only included a vague commitment to establishing 'such machinery as may be found convenient' (Carbery: 115-120).

Meanwhile, Labour edged towards a less ambiguous stance regarding the relationship between individual RPM and economic planning. *Plan for Progress*, published in 1958, raised the possibility of either removing selected commodities from the individual enforcement of RPM or subjecting them to government price control (*Plan for Progress*, 1958: 40-42). It also restated Labour's commitment to amend the 1956 Act to prevent discrimination against the Co-op and other traders which paid deferred discounts. Three years later *Fair Deal for the Shopper* pledged to only permit individual RPM when it could be shown to operate in the public interest (The Labour Party and Resale Price Maintenance: 2). The latter policy statement coincided with the TUC's conversion to opposing individual RPM due to its post-1956 experience that 'the stores which indulge in price cutting are the best payers, while those that are in favour of RPM are the most difficult in regard to wages' (*TUC Annual Congress Report 1961*: 276). Labour's rejection of individual RPM as an instrument of economic planning shifted emphasis towards price competition and represented a significant victory for its revisionist wing. The 1956-1958 Co-operative Independent Commission (CIC) chaired by the Labour Party leader, Hugh Gaitskell, offered the revisionists

an opportunity to apply their vision of consumerism to the Co-op. Administered by the leading revisionist intellectual, Anthony Crosland, the CIC questioned the merits of democratic consumer control and emphasised that the Co-op needed to be more responsive to market forces in order to meet new consumer demands (Black a: 35). The Co-op's reluctance to introduce the CIC's recommendations heightened revisionist disdain for the movement, further jaundicing Labour views of the Co-op (Black b: 54-57).

Price competition now emerged as a source of division between Labour and the Co-op, disturbing the alignment of labour movement policy on RPM. During 1960 a rebellion occurred amongst local co-op retail societies, alarmed by the intensified price competition with multiple stores that accompanied the rapid disappearance of RPM on most groceries after 1956 (Shaw and Alexander, 2008; Mercer a: 144). Divisions became apparent after the Board of Trade launched a private inquiry into individual RPM, which involved the JPC distributing a questionnaire to a sample of local retail societies (*Annual Report of 1961 Co-operative Congress*: 66). Although all of the societies were united in their condemnation of anti-dividend discrimination, price competition was rejected on the grounds that it produced diminished customer service and confusion amongst shoppers. A general consensus emerged in favour of fixed prices in order to prevent the use of loss leaders and 'wild price cutting' by multiples, while a number of societies advocated uniform national prices to shift competition towards customer service and exploit the trading advantage offered by dividend (Co-op Union Parliamentary Committee - Resale Price Maintenance, 28 September 1960). The JPC, however, opted to ignore the questionnaires and submitted a memorandum to the Board of Trade reiterating the movement's established policy on the grounds that too few societies (29 out of 84) had responded and the findings were contradictory and inconsistent (Co-operative Union Parliamentary Committee minutes, 28 July 1960, 22 September 1960, 27 October 1960).

A vocal minority on the Co-op Union Central Executive, led by the chairman of Nottingham Co-op Society, Cyril Forsyth, contested this decision, demanding separate legislation to prevent anti-Co-op discrimination instead (Co-operative Union Central Executive Committee minutes, 14 December 1960). However, the majority of the Central Executive maintained that while Co-op members might benefit from fixed prices through dividend, RPM ran contrary to the consumer interest as it enabled private traders to make excessive

profits. It was conveniently concluded that it 'would look ludicrous' to alter RPM policy two months after the JPC's submission of evidence. This internal debate revealed divergent interpretations of the Co-op's anti-monopoly strategy. In effect, many local retail societies now perceived unregulated price competition rather than individual RPM as the principal monopolist threat. Their support for state planning of prices should, therefore, be interpreted as a means to counteract the perceived instability of price competition and constrain the rise of monopoly multiple retailers. In advocating the extension of state power and seeking to realign the Co-op's role as a consumers' movement more closely with retail societies' trading interests, they anticipated a further revision of the Co-op's voluntarism.

While the Conservative government prevaricated on the Board of Trade's findings, the Co-op Party, intent on demonstrating its agency as an independent consumers' party, seized the initiative. Having won a place in the ballot for PMBs, the Co-op Party MP for Wednesbury, John Stonehouse, had initially intended to propose a Bill to regulate Trading Stamps. However, the Co-op Party Secretary, Campbell, Research Officer, David Wise, and Victor Blease advised him that this measure risked dividing the movement and suggested a Bill to prohibit individual RPM instead (Carbery: 192-193). The irony of this decision cannot be overstated. When Stonehouse introduced his Bill in December 1963 it exposed the divisions over RPM which had been suppressed in 1960. For the first time, fissures emerged within the Wholesales. The CWS Dry Goods Committee urged the main board to immediately review the movement's position only for the President of the CWS, Leonard Cooke, to retort that 'if you don't like it, you should have spoken when we were passing the resolution [in 1956]' (CWS Dry Goods Committee minutes, 7 January 1964). Tom Taylor, a director of SCWS, emerged as one of the foremost critics of the Bill, arguing that there was 'nothing wrong with national uniform prices' as part of a planned economy in which Co-op members could reap rewards through dividend (*Co-operative News*, 11 January 1964).

However, drawing on the CIC's emphasis on market forces, Stonehouse presented the Bill's opponents as intent on protecting inefficient business practices that ran contrary to the consumer interest: 'I am painfully aware of the trading difficulties of some retail societies today, but they have little chance of overcoming them if they have to rely on sheltering behind an already crumbling system of RPM' (Black a: 35-36; *Co-operative News*, 11 January 1964). The Conservative government responded by publishing its own Resale Prices

Bill in February 1964. Despite welcoming the repeal of clause 20 of the 1956 Act, the Co-op was not at the forefront of Labour's thinking, with Douglas Jay emphasising the need to proceed cautiously to avoid being linked 'with the large combines against the small shopkeepers' (Parliamentary Labour Party Minutes, 4 March 1964). Campbell optimistically concluded that through Stonehouse's Bill the Co-op Party had finally succeeded in 'giving a needed consumer orientation to the Labour Party', but in reality the reform had little effect on Labour's policy trajectory (Co-op Party Monthly Newsletter, April 1964). At the 1964 general election Labour dismissed RPM abolition as 'tinkering' (*Labour Party Annual Report 1964*: 75; *The New Britain*, 1964). Pledging to take the power to review unjustified price increases through the National Board for Prices and Incomes, price competition became central to its anti-inflationary strategy. Conversely, the warnings of Stonehouse's opponents proved prescient as the 1964 Act had a devastating effect on Co-op trade, contributing towards a 35% reduction in its share of retailing between 1966 and 1971 (Mercer a: 149).

The manner in which the RPM debate climaxed between 1951 and 1964 stemmed from the disorientating effect on the Co-op of rising competition from multiple retailers, which fed into divisions between the Co-op and Labour over the relationship between RPM and state economic planning. Organisational tensions with Labour over the coordination of policy, encapsulated by Labour's insistence that participation in its policy-committees should be linked to national affiliation, further complicated relations. However, the escalating price competition that accompanied the 1956 Act ruptured the Co-op's anti-monopolist consensus on RPM prohibition to such an extent that when Stonehouse introduced his PMB he was no longer articulating a unified Co-op position on RPM. This explanation partially reinforces Manton's argument that the Co-op's economic performance shaped its relationship with Labour (Manton a: 759-760). However, in contrast to Manton's emphasis on Labour's negative perception of the Co-op's trading efficiency, the events leading to RPM prohibition reveal that the Co-op's own interpretation of its deteriorating business performance proved an equally significant complicating factor in Co-op-Labour relations. Indeed, through its unrelenting campaign for RPM abolition, which aligned the Co-op with Labour revisionists who promoted a model of consumerism that measured retailing efficiency according to price and individual consumer demand, the movement reinforced its marginalisation.

A Dysfunctional Alliance?

In analysing the debate over RPM this chapter has challenged the prevailing perception that the Co-op-Labour alliance was defined by a simplistic binary divide between voluntarist and statist approaches. Manton's conclusion that Labour's preference for state power was 'anathema to a movement that remained committed to ideas of consumer orientated voluntarism', is not borne out by the Co-op's advocacy of state regulation of prices as a means to check monopolies in the consumer interest (*ibid*: 778). While both parties were united in their support for state regulation of the market, in the context of RPM, the main source of division over the role of the state stemmed from the Co-op's opposition to state monopoly. The form of the Co-op's opposition to monopoly was fiercely contested during the formative and final stages of the RPM debate, revealing conflicting perspectives amongst the Wholesales and local retail societies over free trade and state-set prices. Although the Co-op's entry to politics had entailed tacit acceptance that the movement required the support of the state to overcome forms of anti-Co-op discrimination, such as RPM, the Co-op's adherence to independent voluntary alliance with the Labour Party proved divisive. Labour was unwilling to utilise the machinery established by the 1927 or 1946 agreements to coordinate RPM policy with the Co-op, and instead developed the short-sighted strategy of seeking to force national affiliation by limiting Co-op candidacies and denying the Co-op access to its policymaking sub-committees unless a reciprocal arrangement could be reached. Such a belligerent approach proved counter-productive as it drove the Co-op to develop greater policymaking autonomy and to assert its role as an independent consumers' movement more forcefully, creating an impasse regarding RPM policy coordination.

Consequently, the Co-op Party came to play a crucial role in the RPM debate, performing a balancing act in maintaining the link with Labour while seeking to prove itself to a frequently sceptical Co-op movement. RPM emerged as the perfect issue for the Co-op Party to prove its credentials as an independent consumers' party. The agency that the party displayed in securing abolition of RPM in the midst of disintegrating Co-op unity, has been underrated by historians. The party's unity of purpose on RPM stemmed from the policymaking autonomy facilitated by the Co-op's independent voluntary alliance with Labour, its links with Labour revisionists, and the tightly controlled internal Co-op structures

which bound it to Congress policy. The Co-op Party's leading role in RPM abolition was particularly notable as the debate exposed profound differences with Labour over the Co-op's role as a consumers' movement. Throughout this period Labour addressed the Co-op as a business and measured the value of co-operative association according to its increasingly weakened trading performance. Yet by refusing to recognise the Co-op and TUC's roles as consumers' and workers' representatives on equal terms, Labour denied the Co-op a corporatist role commensurate to its mass membership. This has led Bill Lancaster and Paddy Maguire to interpret the preferential status granted to the trade unions within the Labour Party as evidence of union domination (Lancaster and Maguire, 1996: 12-13). However, that is an overstatement in relation to RPM. Labour did not capitulate to union opposition to RPM abolition and negotiated compromises that kept its options open. In effect Labour felt obliged to balance the competing interests of the Co-op and unions.

This brings into focus Gurney's assertion that 'any critical historical assessment of the movement must necessarily confront the fact that [it]…contributed in significant measure to its own defeat' (Gurney a: 231). Cripps' compromise proposal probably represented the best opportunity open to the movement during this period to advance its trading interests while weakening the RPM system. The Co-op's rejection of the proposal in favour of general consumer legislation was naïve and aligned the movement with Labour revisionists who advocated a model of competitive individual consumerism that ran contrary to the Co-op's anti-monopolist critique and trading interests. This highlights the weakness of the Co-op's internal democratic decision-making. By justifying the rejection of the Cripps' compromise and the subsequent dismissal of local retail societies' responses to the Board of Trade questionnaire on the basis of Congress decisions, the Co-op's leadership effectively closed down the possibility of pragmatic democratic policy development. The type of policymaking confusion that arose from this often poorly communicated form of decision-making was encapsulated by the Co-op Union's continuation of discussions with Labour's Distribution Sub-Committee over a near identical proposal to the rejected Cripps' compromise, and inconsistencies regarding fixed prices in the JPC's verbal evidence to the Committee of Inquiry on RPM. This heightened tensions with Labour as RPM policy was negotiated in the midst of these cross currents, and reveals the limitations of analysing the Co-op-Labour alliance on the premise that the Co-op was a cohesive, unified movement.

The chapter, therefore, reinforces John Wilson, Tony Webster and Rachael Vorberg-Rugh's analysis that the Co-op 'developed a highly dysfunctional character, with the leadership of both the CWS and the retail societies failing to navigate opinion towards a mutually agreeable consensus on the best way forward' (Wilson, Webster, Vorberg-Rugh: 389). Co-op-Labour relations were shaped by this dysfunctionality, helping to consign the Co-op to junior status in the alliance of consumer and producer democracy.

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