

# Ninety years of serving the People

by Greg Rosen

When Sam Perry, father of tennis star Fred, founded the first Co-operative Party headquarters ninety years ago in a London still suffering Zeppelin raids, few would have predicted that within thirty years it would be the third largest party in parliament, with more MPs than the Liberal Party, or that on its ninetieth anniversary, a Co-operative Party member would become Prime Minister.

It was his father's appointment as the first Co-operative Party national secretary that brought nine-year-old Fred Perry from Lancashire to London – and more precisely to the Brentham estate, a pioneering Edwardian co-operative housing scheme in Ealing which subsequently became an architectural model for the more famous Hampstead Garden Suburb. For Sam it was a good commute to where he was setting up a party head-office near Charing Cross Station. For Fred, Brentham was 'paradise after the bleak streets of the north because everyone in the garden village had use of the Brentham Institute and its cricket field, football pitch, tennis courts, bowling green and – an important thing to me – table tennis facilities. It was there that I first became interested in watching and playing sport, because it was all on the doorstep.'

Had his father's role in the Co-operative Party not brought Fred those opportunities, Britain might well have been denied the world-championship victories that he brought in table-tennis (1920) as well as his Wimbledon treble (1934-36). Indeed, had his father not had the opportunities afforded him through his involvement in the co-operative movement, first in Stockport and then in Birkenhead, Fred Perry might well have grown up a cotton-spinner. For that was what his father Sam had become at the age of ten, when the death of his own cotton-spinner father had required him to give up his scholarship to the five-hundred-year-old Stockport grammar school to help feed the family. It was his involvement with the Stockport Co-operative Society, of which he was elected president, which gave his talents as an organizer the opportunity to shine through.

By the turn of the century, the co-operative movement had built up trade of almost £50 million (which at today's prices works out at approximately £3.9 billion). Its investment was managed and profits distributed in the interests of nearly two million working-class members, all of whom had their own democratic voice within the enterprise. For Perry, the co-operative movement was a way of life, as much a part of him as Methodism, temperance and cornet playing. The co-operative movement's activities extended into almost every facet of life. Jim Craigen recalls 'as a boy of eight...going with my parents to whist drives organised by the co-op - it was a social

thing.' The co-operative insurance and funeral services meant that it even provided for the afterlife. Even James Bond was a co-op man: Sean Connery's first job was as a delivery boy aboard a co-op milk van from the Edinburgh depot at Fountainbridge. Writing in 1926, Labour's future deputy leader Herbert Morrison, an active member of south-east London's Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society (RACS), gives a flavour of the immense breadth of co-operative provision: 'so seriously do my wife and myself take our co-operative principles that not only are the bulk of our household needs purchased as far as possible from the co-op, but the house itself has been decorated and a new fireplace constructed by the RACS. We bank with the co-op and I am insured by the co-op.' It was to defend these activities from hostile legislation that the co-operative movement began to engage with the political process.

It was Sam Perry's world which Harold Campbell, Perry's successor-but-one as party secretary, evoked in a 1947 pamphlet:

'Force of circumstances was the father and the Co-operative Movement the mother of the Co-operative Party. The movement began as an experiment in self-help, by the simple expedient of a few people buying in bulk at wholesale prices, retailing to themselves at current market prices and disposing of the surplus, by retaining some of it collectively, as capital for development purposes, and distributing the bulk of the rest among themselves in proportion to the amount each had purchased from the common pool (the stock). Here was a genuinely co-operative effort in thrift, born of necessity; a device to stretch one's miserable weekly pittance as far as it would go. It was practical, it was canny, it was essentially realistic. An ideal, an ethic, a philosophy grew out of the main stem of realistic self-help.'

Though Herbert Morrison's RACS fireplace installation department has long since closed, the values of self-help, personal responsibility, democracy and solidarity that drew the Perrys and millions of others into the co-operative movement, and from which the Co-operative Party was forged, still fire the soul of the party. They are the values that transformed the Co-operative Party from the defensive pressure group that Perry founded in 1917 and that saved the CIS from nationalisation in 1949 into the campaigning consumer party of the 1960s. They remain for Gordon Brown to draw on today.

Only one proper history of the Co-operative Party has previously been written – and that was in the late 1960s. This new book brings the story up-to-date.