



ROBIN MURRAY ... Author of the report which produces a radical vision for co-ops to consider for the 21st century

Preserving the role of co-operation in the age of Google

Following the publication of Robin Murray's *Co-operation in the Age of Google* report, which discusses the future role of co-operatives, activist **David Smith** writes about the impact of the document . . .

CAN Robin Murray provide a compass as we respond to all the talk of a Big Society? His draft report is of equal significance to the neglected Gaitskell Commission (1956); or Dr Laidlow's *Co-operatives and the Year 2000* (1983) report. We would be foolish to ignore this one, written for a fundamentally different age.

At a recent National Federation of Progressive Co-operators meeting in London, Mr Murray spoke in a riveting conversational style for an hour capturing a new view of society for the 21st century and the crucial significance of new information technology.

It was a thought provoking analysis, based upon his wide-ranging industrial experience as Director of Industry at the former GLC.

Weaknesses

He addressed the weaknesses of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). These included poor management, inadequate working capital, poor design and the absence of sector strategy, which cried out for co-operative solutions.

He contrasted his problem solving manufacturing experience in London with highly competitive SME's in Italian regions, using cutting edge technology and excellent design, with highly flexible, innovative production and craft training systems, co-operation between co-operatives and other SME's with shared values, supported by regional and local co-operative banks.

What economists claimed to be old fashioned was in fact a highly competitive model; out-smarting large centrally driven organisations, based upon a completely different system. Co-operation and co-operatives were the order of the day in a range of sectors, including ceramics, footwear and clothing. Is this a pattern for the future?

Mr Murray says we are in the midst of an extraordinary revolution with opportunities for co-operation and co-ops. This could underpin a new view of society and one increasingly driven by the internet driving and controlling the relationship between consumers and producers enabling consumers to be part of the production process.

In his document, the chapters on 'Co-operative Boundaries', 'Open Retailing and Co-operative Development' and 'Co-operative Education in the Post Industrial Economy' give a new focus on co-operative development.

This develops the challenge the new information economy

poses to the current Co-operative Movement. His ten-point summary leads to ten key recommendations, and captures the explosion of informal co-operation with citizens by-passing old institutions and directly communicating with each other.

Aspects worth emphasis are how the Movement's emphasis upon active participation, co-op education and local community retailing enables the delivery of varied support services, could challenge the 'one giant roof' model of our competitors.

And the 'second industrial divide' is unfolding in varied sectors, such as energy, waste, food, finance, retail, broadband, housing, education, health and caring services

These present opportunities for innovation and growth in co-operation and co-operatives models of enterprise, whilst personalising access to an increasing range of locally delivered services. With different ways of organising such services, the new information economy can operate to consolidate existing, or alternative structures of economic and political power.

Participation

Active participation is a fundamental building block to future co-operative development. In Wales we are about to form a Welsh branch of the Progressive Co-operators.

Devolved government could present significant opportunities for experimentation, innovation and active membership related to local needs and circumstances.

With devolved powers and increasing policy divergence, and different structures in the four UK countries, we have more opportunity to communicate and work with local voluntary and community groups linked to our stores.

For sustainable success, accountable structures will be required to support knowledge transfer and engagement with voluntary and community organisations who share our values, but who do not have a co-operative legal form.

This is also a crucial time when questions are being posed about our unique contribution to the 'Big Society' debate and our vision of the future. The Murray report equips us with an intelligent and ethical roadmap to guide the future development of the Co-operative Movement.

Let us read and use the document when planning future work, and contribute to the development of *Co-operation in the Age of Google*.

• To read the report visit: www.uk.coop/ageofgoogle.