

## Editorial

This edition of the *Journal* is designed to coincide with the UK Society of Co-operative Studies conference, *New Views of Society, Robert Owen for the 21st Century*, held in September 2008, at New Lanark, Scotland. This conference marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Owen's death and brings together academics and co-operative practitioners from all over the world to engage in reflections and debate on the significance of Owen's ideas, for the future as well as in the past. The papers in this edition of the *Journal* fit well into that framework, as they all, in one way or other, analyse and critique the relevance of co-operation and of co-operative forms of governance within a twenty first century context.

Johnston Birchall's paper, *The Mutualisation of Public Services in Britain: a critical commentary*, addresses the relevance of co-operation and mutuality in contemporary society and the forms that this might take. This paper is particularly relevant to the *Journal* readership, in the context of the Owen conference, which focuses on the transformation of past models and forms of co-operation in relation to the issues of today. Birchall explores old mutualism, and the development of ideas behind a call for the new 'mutualisation' of public services in Britain. He gives concrete examples, particularly foundation hospitals, but he also clarifies and explains a number of terms which is useful for readers not familiar with the debates. This is a cutting edge critical commentary which asks important questions about the future of the concept of mutuality and whether it will deliver the improvements in public services that its advocates have promised.

In his paper, Cliff Mills also explores the relevance of co-operative ideas and forms of governance in a contemporary context. He explores the risks addressed by the nineteenth century co-operative governance model, which he sees as "lack of access, excessive price, poor quality, and contaminated or even dangerous goods and services". But then goes on to assess the different risks a contemporary business model needs to address which he identifies as "damage to economic, environmental, social and health

interests". His paper considers whether a co-operative ownership and governance structure has a place in the twenty first century, and whether co-operative retail societies can realistically expect to survive and compete with investor-owned businesses. He concludes:

that they can survive and compete if they challenge investor-owned businesses head-on, and structure and manage themselves in a way designed to meet contemporary needs.

But to do this, he stressed they will

need to adopt a clear cooperative business model; to ensure that their ownership structure is designed to support and deliver that model, and to modernise their governance to prove that democratically-owned businesses can provide a better model of business ownership than the conventional alternative.

All the papers bar one in this edition of the *Journal* are British. The *Journal* is proud of the large number of international contributors that write for the *Journal*, who have it a truly international publication. But the focus on the contemporary relevance of co-operation and mutuality in Britain, given the Owen conference, is timely. In the main papers, co-operation and mutuality are related to public services and the retail sector. In the shorter, non-peer reviewed contributions, they are related to financial services and, with workers co-operatives, to a much wider range of industries across the economy. The credit union movement is probably one of the fastest growing co-operative sectors in Britain today and is increasingly regarded as a significant player in the financial services industry, particularly serving lower and more moderate income communities. Worker co-operatives have a long and valued co-operative history and are characterised by a strong commitment to social welfare, sustainability and support for the community. Both the credit union and worker co-operative sectors have recently made moves, to respond to the challenge as articulated by Mills, to adopt a

clear co-operative business model and to ensure that the ownership structure is designed to support and deliver that model. In both sectors this has been done through the adoption of a co-operative code of governance which marks their respective steps forward to become increasingly relevant and sustainable within contemporary society. Chris Canham from the Association of British Credit Unions and Bob Cannell from Suma and the Employee Co-operatives Council, Co-operatives<sup>UK</sup>, discuss the introduction of the codes in their respective sectors.

The one international contribution in this edition also concerns co-operative governance. Rafael Chaves, Francisco Soler and Antonia Sajardo from IUDESCOOP at the University of Valencia discuss contemporary issues around governance in relation to the case of Spanish credit co-operatives. They argue that the greatest theoretical and business challenge is to conceive and implement corporate models of governance for co-operatives, in the form of new governance regulations and codes of conduct of good governance.

Further thoughts and reflections on the

relevance of co-operation and mutuality to contemporary society are to be found in the new Society of Co-operative Studies publication, *New Views of Society: Robert Owen for the 21st Century*, launched at the New Lanark Conference. This edition of collected papers, edited by Molly Scott Cato and Richard Bickle, is produced, in the words of the editors,

to inspire those people currently working for a society based upon the values of justice, peace and equality to reflect upon the experiences of their forebears and how this can influence their activities today.

The aim of this edition of the *Journal* is equally to encourage academics and practitioners to reflect on how the values of co-operation and mutuality can be transformed to be relevant, applicable and inspiring to modern day society.

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