



## THOUGHTS ON ICA'S 125<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY

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The International Cooperative Alliance formed in London in 1895 with approximately 200 representatives from a number of young cooperative movements. It would remain an alliance and never became a federation. Initially individual co-operators and cooperative associations could join although rule changes in 1919 limited it to the latter. The inaugural meeting elected a provisional Central Committee to facilitate the exchange of experiences between cooperatives throughout the world and to consider how to develop commercial relations between them.

A further aim was to make better known cooperative principles. It suggests that there was already a wide acceptance of what became known as the Rochdale principles reflecting self-help, mutuality, equality and democracy. In particular the ICA's first meeting adopted the principle of religious and political neutrality. In Britain as much as anything it was adopted to avoid controversy arising from the rather unusual religious views of Robert Owen but was closely linked to the further principle of open membership. No one applying for cooperative membership could be denied it on grounds of sex, race or creed. Given that ICA affiliates would come from different economies and political systems both principles were eminently practicable.

Celebrations for the ICA's 125 anniversary should thank the earlier leaders for overcoming crises. The ICA has been distinguished by its continuity and longevity. Few other international non-governmental organisations share these. Even the Socialist International and the International Federation of Trade Unions with which the alliance had affinity split under the pressures of total war and divisions of doctrine. Fortunately, the alliance did not affiliate to the Socialist International when urged to in 1910. The three organisations each avowed peace and the international brotherhood of man but two split.

The ICA passed its first peace resolution in 1902 and the pursuit of peace became one of its long held policies. It supported systems of mediation and arbitration, the League of Nations and the United Nations. The two World Wars and the Cold War gravely threatened it. In my book *The International Cooperative Alliance during War and Peace 1910-1950*<sup>1</sup> I suggested that the ICA's ideology and organisation were the main reasons why it overcame the crises they presented. Broadly its ideology can be traced through its review of cooperative principles undertaken in the 1930s, '60s and '90s while its periodic rule changes reflect its organisation which was also shaped by its ideology.

Each conflict aroused a different response. That to the first World War revealed the young ICA already had a clear identity in as much as it distanced itself from its capitalist and imperialist belligerents. Co-operators were not at war and sought peace between their countries. Indeed, cooperative leaders became an effective impromptu network. Despite national barriers, newspaper shortages and censorship, the ICA continued to produce its monthly *International Cooperative Bulletin*. Prepared and edited in the ICA's head office in London, a copy was sent to Dutch cooperative leaders who printed

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<sup>1</sup> Rita Rhodes (1995) *The International Co-operative Alliance During War and Peace 1910-1950*, Geneva: ICA

and distributed it to their members and transmitted the original to counterparts in France and Germany who then reproduced and distributed it. Personal messages, condolences and enquiries were also made through the same network.

After the war the ICA's General Secretary, Henry May, welcomed the creation of the League of Nations as a 'younger sister', the ICA itself being the real 'league of the people'.

Accountability was a strong feature of its organisation and its first post-war congress in neutral Switzerland received an account from each affiliate describing how the war had affected it and how it had responded. It is a notable document and should be considered an early example of truth and reconciliation. Frequent apologies were given where cooperative principles had been broken, as for example when governments decreed that consumer cooperative societies should trade with non members.

After the war, the ICA faced two immediate crises. New states had been formed by the Versailles Treaty. Did their original affiliates continue or were new ones to be appointed? Secondly Russia had revolted and its central consumer cooperative union Centrosoyuz which had joined ICA in 1903 was being replaced. Its existing delegates made emotional appeals to remain, claiming that they represented true cooperatives which those replacing them were not.

The first crisis was overcome by basing affiliation on new internationally state accepted boundaries; the other by fudge. It was a highly delicate, confidential and long sustained fudge that later helped the ICA survive the Second World War; then the Soviet Union became one of the allies. Moreover, the ICA was united in as much as its Italian, German, Austrian and Japanese movements had been withdrawn by their Fascist, Nazi and militaristic regimes.

Luck also entered the ICA's survival. From 1895, its head office had remained in London and although Britain was badly bombed during the war it was not occupied. By then the ICA's constitution provided for a President and two Vice Presidents. Both the President and a Vice President were unable to operate but the other Vice President was R.A. Palmer, General Secretary of the Cooperative Union in Manchester. He assumed the role of Acting President and the British delegation, the largest to the ICA became a de facto Central Committee. Sadly, Henry May, the General Secretary, had died unexpectedly in November 1939. His deputy, Miss Gertrude Polly, was appointed Acting General Secretary. A point to emphasise was that all this was reported to the first post war congress thus maintaining accountability.

There was much to report. The acting administration had been able to continue work with American and Canadian affiliates; also with the International Labour Organisation and its cooperative branch that had evacuated to Canada. Through these links the ICA was able to develop a relationship with the embryonic United Nations in New York. Officials from the Cooperative League of the USA, particularly Wally Campbell, represented the ICA in the development of post-war rehabilitation and development programmes. These undoubtedly helped the ICA gain category A consultative status with the UN's Social Committee in 1946, one of the first three international non governmental organisations to do so. Thereafter it developed working with UN agencies such as ILO, FAO and UNESCO etc.

The ICA's authority was boosted by its having become the guardian of cooperative principles. It reviewed them in the 1930s, '60s and '90s. The first was undertaken because they had not been listed and fears were growing of some deviation. Difficulties grew from their being heavily shaped by consumer co-operation and attempts were made to widen principles to be more inclusive of other kinds of cooperative. The question of inalienable assets also arose and would subsequently reappear.

The second review in the 1960s needed to take account of two kinds of cooperative movement in the Soviet bloc and elsewhere. It continued the earlier fudge but was providential. When the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union became Russia again, their cooperatives could once again be natural affiliates with the ICA. Those in the 1990s took these changes in international relations on board but also responded to the ICA's regionalisation and the decline of some movements and emergence of others. Its basis was also becoming less European.

Views were widely sought for the '90s review and I contributed. Yet I have since felt uneasy about the process and its result. Both appeared unwieldy. I recall that the two original sources of the Rochdale Principles (Law the First and the Pioneers' 1860 almanac) contain probably fewer than 500 words. Similarly, statements of belief such as the Ten Commandments and the Lords' Prayer are profound but succinct. I hope that any re-statement of cooperative identity will be brief and to the point.

In its 125 year history, the ICA has evolved. It has shown itself capable of taking on new situations as well as resolving crises. It has a good track record from which lessons can be drawn on how to help solve today's economic, social and political problems arising from the pandemic and climate crisis.