

**The Co-op-Labour Alliance: An electoral case study of the Attlee years, 1945-1951**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

The 1945-51 Labour governments have understandably been the subject of a vast amount of historical research given their reputation for radical reform and reconstruction of the British economy and society after the Second World War. Yet, the Attlee governments' relationship with the Co-operative Party is much less well understood. The Co-operative Party was formed following the Co-operative Union's decision to seek direct political representation following the First World War with the primary function of protecting the interests of the consumer Co-operative Movement and, despite standing as an independent party, from the outset its MPs aligned themselves with the Labour Party. A formal alliance was agreed in 1927 which henceforth entailed the fielding of joint candidates in conjunction with the Labour Party, an arrangement that was confirmed and further developed through the negotiation of an amended agreement in 1946. Whilst there have been several works which have discussed the Co-operative Party with some focussing directly on the period of Attlee government, they have tended to characterise relations as being tense due to the incompatibility of Labour's centralised party organisation and statist policies and the Co-operative movement's democratic, voluntary consumerism. However, there remains a general neglect of how the Co-op-Labour alliance functioned during this period with regards to electoral organisation and campaigning. This remains a grave oversight given that the Co-operative Party was formed to provide parliamentary representation for the Co-operative Movement, forged and maintained an alliance with Labour to secure this goal, and from 1945 was the third largest party in Parliament.

This thesis, therefore, aims to enhance understanding of Co-op-Labour relations during the period of the Attlee governments through a case study of the Co-operative Party's electoral organisation, campaigning, and performance between 1945 and 1951. By analysing the interconnected themes of candidate selection, policymaking and constituency campaigning, the thesis seeks to provide insights into the extent to which this alliance proved an effective way to secure parliamentary representation and protect the interests of the Co-operative Movement. Through the use of a combination of previously unused and neglected archival sources, the thesis aims to revise existing pessimistic interpretations of the alliance by arguing that this diverse, locally based, voluntary alliance did largely function as an effective medium by which the Co-operative Party could gain parliamentary representation for the Co-operative movement at a level which it was content with whilst still enabling the movement to retain sufficient independence and agency to defend its core business interests.

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## **Introduction**

This thesis will analyse the Co-op-Labour alliance through a case study of the Co-operative Party's electoral organisation, campaigning, and performance during the period of the Attlee government, 1945-51. By analysing the interconnected themes of candidate selection, policymaking and constituency campaigning, the thesis provides insights into the extent to which this alliance proved an effective way to secure parliamentary representation and protect the interests of the Co-operative Movement. The Co-operative Party was formed following the Co-operative Union's decision to seek direct political representation following First World War with the primary function of protecting the interests of the consumer Co-operative Movement and as such, general elections were crucial to it.<sup>1</sup> Whilst initially the party stood candidates independently, from 1927 it began to stand candidates in conjunction with the Labour Party under the Cheltenham Agreement, before a new agreement was reached in 1946 in the form of the Hastings Agreement.<sup>2</sup> The alliance with the Labour Party has endured to this day whereby the Co-operative Party, at the time of writing has 43 MPs in parliament.<sup>3</sup> Through the use of a combination of previously unused and neglected archival sources, the thesis aims to revise existing pessimistic interpretations of the alliance during the Attlee years by arguing that this diverse, locally based, voluntary alliance did largely function as an effective medium by which the Co-operative Party could gain parliamentary representation for the Co-operative movement at a level which it was content with whilst still enabling the movement to retain sufficient independence and agency to defend its core business interests.

## **The Co-operative Party and the Attlee governments**

The thesis will consider the electoral relationship specifically in the context of three post-war general elections of 1945, 1950 and 1951. The 1945 election not only resulted in the election of the first majority Labour Government, it saw a record number of 23 Co-operative Party MPs elected, which established the Co-operative Party as the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest party in parliament.<sup>4</sup> These MPs would go on to support and form part of one of the most significant reforming governments in British history, which, despite economic austerity, was responsible for the establishment of a

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Bailey, *The Co-operative Party – An Outline of an Organisation* (Manchester: Co-operative Party, 1944), p.1

<sup>2</sup> Jack Bailey, 'The Consumer in Politics', in N. Barou, *The Co-operative Movement in Labour Britain* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1948), p.106

<sup>3</sup> '43 MPS Thanks to You', The Co-operative Party, <https://party.coop/> [accessed: 5<sup>th</sup> July 2024]

<sup>4</sup> David Stewart, 'A Party within in party'? The Co-operative Party-Labour Party alliance and the formation of the Social Democratic Party, 1974-81', in, Anthony Webster, Alyson Brown, David Stewart, J.K Walton and Linda Shaw (eds.), *The Hidden Alternative: Co-operative values, past, present and future* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p.137

welfare state and a major expansion in public ownership of key industries and services.<sup>5</sup> Several Co-operative Party MPs would play key roles in this government, such as Alfred Barnes, who became the Minister for Transport and A.V. Alexander who served as the First Lord of the Admiralty. Finally, William Leonard, was appointed as the Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Supply and Aircraft production.<sup>6</sup> The number of Co-op Party MPs did decline to 18 in 1950 and 16 in 1951, however, this still represented a significant breakthrough moment for the party, which had not previously managed to secure the election of more than 9 MPs.<sup>7</sup>

### **Literature Review – the Labour Party and General Elections, 1945-51**

The current historiography has made scant reference to the Co-operative Party during the three election campaigns, with the focus being generally on the causes of the Labour Party victory. Two schools of thought have emerged. On the one hand, several historians point to anti-Conservatism as the central factor. This perspective, which was originally articulated by McCallum and Readman, has been built upon by Fielding, who highlights Conservative Party inflexibility surrounding social reform, particularly the Beveridge Report. Through using opinion poll evidence, Fielding suggests that because the Liberal and Communist parties were not viewed as potential election winners, the only way to prevent another Conservative government and ensure the implementation of Beveridge's recommendations was to vote Labour.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, this school of thought has been met with criticism. Pelling warns against over-exaggerating the extent to which anti-Conservatism constituted a leading factor in Labour's victory. Whilst he does not deny this played a role, Pelling argues that it is also important to stress the Labour Party's record in the wartime government in areas which were of utmost importance to voters in 1945, such as housing.<sup>9</sup> Sloman goes further in rejecting the idea that anti-Conservatism was a key factor in Labour's landslide and instead highlights evidence from Mass Observation that anti-Labour tactical voting could also have benefitted the Conservatives, thus limiting the salience of this explanation. In making this argument he points to the poor performance of the Liberal Party, and he notes that even where the Liberal candidates were best placed to win seats

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Pearce, 'The 1950 and 1951 General Elections in Britain', *History Today* 60 (2008), pp.21-25 and Henry Pelling, 'The 1945 General Election Reconsidered', *The Historical Journal* 23 (1980), p.408

<sup>6</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party, *23 At Westminster* (London: Co-operative Party, 1946), p.2

<sup>7</sup> Thomas F. Carbery, *Consumers in Politics: A History and General Review of the Co-operative Party* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969), p.128

<sup>8</sup> Ronald McCallum and Alison Readman, *The British General Election of 1945* (London: Cass, 1964), p.268 and Steven Fielding, 'What did 'the people' want? The meaning of the 1945 General Election' *The Historical Journal* 35 (1992), pp.624-639

<sup>9</sup> Pelling, 'The 1945 General Election Reconsidered', p.412



from Conservative candidates, voters did not rally around them, suggesting a lack of coordinated 'anti-Conservative tactical voting'. He instead emphasises voters' positive perception of the Labour Party's reform agenda, thus reinforcing Pelling's argument.<sup>10</sup>

Several historians have sought to account for the Labour Party's electoral appeal at the 1945 election. Beers focusses on the Labour's Party's use of new forms of communication to tap into the widespread public desire for social and economic reconstruction. Her work contrasts the success of Labour in this area with the ineptitude of the Conservative Party which she argued allowed their propaganda machine to 'fall into abeyance'.<sup>11</sup> Addison concurs that the Conservative election campaign worsened their already weak electoral position due to its negative focus on discrediting Labour.<sup>12</sup> Beers contends that Labour not only developed a highly effective campaigning and communications strategy, but that this was also complemented by considerable support from the press. This was especially so in the case of the *Daily Herald*, which was at this time the second-largest circulating UK newspaper, whilst Labour also received de facto support from the *News Chronicle*, a Liberal sympathising paper.<sup>13</sup>

There has been far less attention devoted by historians to the 1950 and 1951 elections than to 1945. Despite the Labour government elected in 1945 success in achieving many of its aims, the subsequent 1950 election saw the Labour Party re-elected on a much smaller majority, with the Conservatives being re-elected in 1951. These elections, which have often being characterised as a return to 2 party politics, also stand out as the only occasion when the party that won had gained a majority of seats, but the runner-up had won the majority of votes.<sup>14</sup> Yet there has been considerably less academic interest in the cause of the 1950 and 1951 results, with them generally being attributed to several distinct factors. Historians have, on the one hand, argued Labour's internal difficulties damaged its standing with the electorate. They highlight that not only was the cabinet ageing and suffering with health problems by 1950, but the party was also becoming increasingly divided over policy and ideological direction following the fulfilment of the 1945 manifesto.<sup>15</sup> The rapid recovery of the Conservative Party after 1945 is also linked to policy revisions, as they became increasingly accepting of Labour policies and

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Sloman, 'Rethinking a progressive moment: the Liberal and Labour parties in the 1945 general election', *Historical Research* 84 (2011), pp.722-730 and Pelling, 'The 1945 General Election Reconsidered', p.412

<sup>11</sup> Laura Beers, 'Labour's Britain: Fight for it now', *The Historical Journal* 52 (2009) pp.667

<sup>12</sup> Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British politics and the Second World War* (London: Pimlico, 1994), pp.264-265

<sup>13</sup> Beers, 'Labour's Britain: Fight for it now', pp.667-675

<sup>14</sup> Butler, *The 1951 General Election*, p.247 Pearce, 'The 1950 and 1951 General Elections in Britain', pp.21-23

<sup>15</sup> Pearce, 'The 1950 and 1951 General Election', pp.21-22

committed to not overturning the Labour government's most popular reforms if elected.<sup>16</sup> In addition to this, the nature of the electoral system has been noted by Morgan and Pearce, who argue that the impact of the redistribution of seats was significant.<sup>17</sup> By passing the Representation of the People Acts of 1948 and 1949, which abolished 2-member constituencies and redrew constituency boundaries, the Labour government undermined its electoral prospects. Whilst Labour won a majority of votes in 1951, Pearce notes how the first past the post voting system meant that those votes were concentrated in specific constituencies and consequently many votes were 'wasted'.<sup>18</sup>

### **Literature Review - The Co-operative Party and the Attlee governments**

Whilst several works have discussed the Co-operative Party, these have typically been critical of the alliance with Labour suggesting it proved an ineffective way to fulfil the party's aims. Craigen and Leonard for example, have suggested this period of government saw the party marginalised by the Attlee governments.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Gurney and Manton have contended that whilst the Co-operative Movement had hoped to benefit under the Attlee governments, that the Co-op became increasingly dismayed by the lack of consultation from the Labour government over policies which it had direct experience. He cites for example, the decision to exclude them from the Economic Planning Board as problematic. Gurney ties growing Co-op aggravation to the Labour government's decision to treat the Co-op like just another capitalist business, rather than as allies.<sup>20</sup> Manton highlights significant policy divergences between both parties, and places specific emphasis on disputes over nationalisation, which he argues brought Labour into conflict with the Co-op movement's voluntarist and consumerist ethos.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast, Whitecross argues that the approach adopted here, particularly in the case of Manton, is problematic because it overlooks the specifics of the alliance between the Co-operative and Labour Parties. She opts instead to place greater focus on the Co-operative

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.119 and Pearce, 'The 1950 and 1951 General Election', pp.22-23

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth O' Morgan, *Labour in Power, 1945-51* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984)

<sup>18</sup> Pearce, 'The 1950 and 1951 General Elections', p.23

<sup>19</sup> Jim Craigen, 'The Co-operative Party - Out of Labour's Shadow', in, Bill Lancaster and Paddy Maguire, *Towards the Co-operative Commonwealth: Essays in the History of Co-operation* (Manchester: Co-operative College), p.96 and R.L. Leonard, 'The Co-op's in Politics', in Gerald Kaufman (ed.), *The Left a Symposium* (London: Antony Bond, 1966), p.56

<sup>20</sup> Peter Gurney, 'A House Divided: The Organised Consumer and the British Labour Party, 1945-60', in Erika Rappaport, Sandra Trudgen Dawson and Mark J Crowley, *Consuming Behaviours: Identity, Politics and Pleasure in Twentieth-Century Britain*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), p.238-242

<sup>21</sup> Kevin Manton, 'The Labour Party and the Co-op, 1918-1958', *Historical Research* 82 (2009), pp.757-766

Party.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Whitecross, is able to offer a different perspective on this marginalisation by considering the organisational relationship between the Co-operative and Labour parties and how this intersected with their ideological aims.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, she notes how the Co-operative Party's wider relationship with the Co-operative Movement limited its autonomy and constrained its scope for political action as it lacked the authority to influence Labour Party policymaking. Whitecross links this lack of authority and policymaking influence to the Co-operative Party's refusal to affiliate nationally to the Labour Party.<sup>24</sup>

Robertson's work, which also considers the Co-operative Party-Labour Party alliance, is distinguished by its focus on local constituency relations between the parties in the Midlands: Birmingham, Kettering, Leicester and Nottingham.<sup>25</sup> Robertson argues that due to the stipulation in the 1927 Cheltenham Agreement that prior agreements reached between local parties should be respected, national level relations became intrinsically linked to the quality of those locally, and that those relations could vary significantly by area.<sup>26</sup> Acknowledging the increasingly strained Co-op-Labour relationship during the period of Attlee government, Robertson attributes this to the feeling within the Co-operative Party that the Labour Party was not taking its political ambitions seriously due to disagreements over social ownership and lack of Co-operative representation on the Economic Planning Board.<sup>27</sup>

### **Aims of the research project**

There is a significant gap in the historiography of the alliance with regards to how it functioned in the context of general elections, something which this thesis will begin to address. The thesis adopts a thematic approach comprising four main chapters, with the initial chapter being contextual and subsequent chapters focusing on a distinct part of Co-operative Party electoral organisation and campaigning.

In order to foreground and contextualise later analysis, the introductory chapter examines the reasons for the Co-operative Party's formation and its subsequent development before

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<sup>22</sup> Angela Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem? The Co-operative Party and the Labour Party, 1931-1951*, PhD Thesis, University of Central Lancashire 2015. Available at <http://clock.uclan.ac.uk/11485>, pp.2-20

<sup>23</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.2

<sup>24</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.193-199

<sup>25</sup> Nicole Robertson, 'A Union of Forces Marching in the Same Direction'? The Relationship between the Co-operative and Labour Parties, 1918-1919-39', in, Matthew Worley (ed.), *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: identities, cultures and perspectives, 1900-39* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp.213-214

<sup>26</sup> Nicole Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010), pp.167-170 and Robertson, 'A Union of Forces', pp.218-221

<sup>27</sup> Robertson, *Minding Their Own Business*, p.150

proceeding to analyse how it negotiated and adapted its formal alliance with the Labour Party. In doing so, the chapter reveals that the development of the Co-operative Party was heavily reactionary, localised and rooted in voluntarism and that these characteristics shaped the movement's alliance with the Labour Party.

Chapter 2 analyses the procedures and debates surrounding Co-operative Party candidate selection at the 1945, 1950 and 1951 general elections. In particular, it will scrutinise how far and in what ways the Co-operative Party sought to expand the number of candidates that it fielded at each general election, and the extent to which this was facilitated by the alliance with the Labour Party. The chapter demonstrates that following the election of a record number of MPs in 1945 the Co-operative Party was increasingly content with its parliamentary representation and opted not to attempt to field more joint candidates with Labour.

The following chapter moves on to consider policy development ahead of the 1945, 1950 and 1951 general elections. It focusses on the extent to which there was policy disagreements between the two parties and how far the Co-operative Party sought to influence Labour policy and the amount of agency it had to do so. This will bring into focus the extent to which there were policy overlaps, and why this occurred? The chapter will argue that historians such as Gurney have over-exaggerated policy differences which has distracted from evidence that the Co-operative Party exercised growing policy agency as the period of Attlee government progressed.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, the thesis will cut new ground by analysing the Co-operative Party campaign in the constituencies. Local general election campaigning has been entirely neglected by historians of the Co-operative Party. This chapter will build on the approach adopted by Robertson by showing how the quality of national relations was determined at local level. It examines the extent to which the Co-operative Party's own candidates prioritised Co-op issues within their own election literature, and the amount and nature of local press coverage received by Co-operative Party candidates. The chapter concludes by analysing how this local campaigning fed into the Co-operative Party's electoral performance.

The thesis concludes that the alliance was more than the 'workable compromise' it has been referred to as.<sup>29</sup> The Co-operative Party was increasingly content within the alliance as the

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<sup>28</sup> Gurney, 'A House Divided', pp.238-242 and Gurney, 'The Battle of the Consumer in Post-war Britain', pp.965-966

<sup>29</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.105 and Bailey, 'The Consumer in Politics', p.107 and Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.115-116.

autonomy that it offered enabled the party to expand its parliamentary representation whilst enabling it to operate as a pro-Co-operative movement pressure group lobbying the Labour Party on the movement's behalf. The effectiveness of this strategy was demonstrated through the resolution of significant policy disputes over nationalisation, the Co-operative Party's ability to maintain a voluntary, local alliance and resist full national affiliation to Labour and the extent to which the party was content with the number of parliamentary candidates that it was fielding by 1951.

### **Sources and Methods**

A case study approach has been adopted to facilitate focused and in-depth analysis of how the Co-op-Labour alliance functioned with regards to electoral organisation and campaigning. By analysing the alliance through a specific focus on the three 'cases' of the post-war general elections of 1945, 1950 and 1951, the research takes the form of a multi-site case study.<sup>30</sup> A case study approach has been adopted with a view to addressing contradictions in historical understanding of Co-op-Labour relations during this period relating to the apparent disconnect between the record expansion of the Co-operative Party's parliamentary representation at these elections and what the secondary literature highlights as an unsettled and tense period for Co-op-Labour relations. Therefore, there was a need to analyse in further depth how the alliance functioned during election periods in order to unravel those contradictions. One of the benefits of utilising a case study methodology is the focus and depth of understanding it can provide. It was therefore felt this methodology would be most appropriate to achieve the aims of the thesis.

There are of course some limitations to case study methodology. Creswell and Poth note how this methodology can be challenging due to the scale of work involved in conducting a case study. Researchers can also be limited by both time and financial resources. This is particularly so when multiple cases are selected as choosing too many cases can limit the depth of analysis. A further limitation associated with case study research pertains to the volume and quality of available source material. If sufficient source material cannot be obtained this can undermine the viability of a case study.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Corfield and Hitchcock note how case study research can be problematic if the focus is too specific and lacks 'framing context'.<sup>32</sup> This case

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<sup>30</sup> John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: choosing among five approaches* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2025), p.115

<sup>31</sup> Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, pp.121-122

<sup>32</sup> Penelope J. Corfield and Tim Hitchcock, *Becoming a Historian: An Informal Guide* (London: University of London, 2022), p.7

study has been designed in a way that addresses these potential challenges. By limiting its focus to three 'cases', the risk of an overextended focus and a resulting loss of depth has been negated whilst retaining the scope for a full analytical exploration of the topic. Despite concerns raised in the literature about the underpinning source base for case studies, the thesis has been built upon a wide range of primary source material. In order to fulfil the key aims of the thesis and provide original insights into an aspect of electoral campaigning which has been completely untouched by historians of the Co-operative Party, a considerable amount of archival and online newspaper research has been conducted.

The National Co-operative Archive in Manchester, where the Co-operative Party Papers are held, was the main archival base for the research. Private organisational records were the focal point of the research. These sources were able to provide insights into both external and internal discussions surrounding candidate selection and policy development. The minutes of both the Co-operative Party National Executive and Executive Committees were consulted in forensic detail. The Co-operative Party was part of the Co-operative Union, and the Party was governed by two committees. The National Committee comprised individuals from various sections of the Co-operative Movement, including the Co-operative Union, local Co-operative Parties and both Wholesale Societies, and was responsible for appointing an Executive Committee to manage the Co-operative Party.<sup>33</sup> Although these minutes tended to be brief, they contained details of important conversations regarding areas of policy conflict with the Labour Party and discussions regarding the selection of candidates. The minutes noted the constituencies where the Co-operative Party approached the Labour Party regarding a candidacy and whether these candidacies were ultimately approved.

In addition, Co-operative Party conference reports contained detailed discussions about party policy, policy differences with the Labour Party, and Co-operative Party ambitions regarding candidate selection and representation in parliament. Whilst most of the sources considered at this archive were nationally focussed, Co-operative Party Monthly Newsletters were used to gain insights into the national party leadership's communication with local Co-operative parties. In addition to considering Co-operative Party specific material, more wider movement focussed sources were harnessed. Because the Co-operative Party was a department of the Co-operative Union and therefore, policy decisions had to be ratified by this wider body instead of the Co-operative Party itself, it was important to utilise Co-operative Congress Reports in

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<sup>33</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Jack Bailey, *Co-operators in Politics* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1950)

order to set policy development in the wider context of movement priorities. Not all of the Co-operative Congress Reports were available at the National Co-operative Archive and as such it was necessary to consult the Congress Reports for 1950 and 1951 at the Working-Class Movement Library in Salford. Other public facing sources, such as Co-operative Party pamphlets and *Co-operative News* were considered. Whilst several of these pamphlets did prove to be very useful to the thesis, only a few references to *Co-operative News* were made. This decision was made in order to prioritise sources which were more integral to the thesis, such as those discussed above.

Sources held at the Labour History Archive and Study Centre, also in Manchester, proved crucial to the research as they enabled the incorporation of Labour Party and wider labour movement perspectives. Labour Party Conference Reports were used to ascertain Co-op input to the conference and establish how Labour presented its relationship with the Co-operative Party. In addition, the minutes of the National Council of Labour were consulted. The NCL was established in 1921 to co-ordinate the work of the Labour Movement.<sup>34</sup> The Co-operative Union would eventually join in 1941.<sup>35</sup> The NCL minutes proved particularly useful when exploring attempts by the Co-operative Movement to broach policy issues with the Labour Party.

The archive's collection of election addresses produced by Co-operative Party candidates were vital to enabling the almost completely untouched campaign in the constituencies to be analysed. The election addresses facilitated analysis of the types of policies championed and how far the Co-operative Party's own candidates pushed a Co-operative agenda in their constituency campaigning.

This research into the constituency level campaign was supplemented by online local newspaper research. It was important to consider these sources as both national and local press coverage in this period often contained large amounts of political material.<sup>36</sup> Local press coverage was especially important as Bates notes how by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, local press focused more specifically on local issues as technological developments enabled readers to gain national news from other sources.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, it was important to analyse these sources as they were an important consideration in the Co-operative Party's electoral campaigning

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<sup>34</sup> Jerry H. Brookshire, 'The National Council of Labour, 1921-1946' *The North American Conference on British Studies* 18 (1986), p.43 and Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.29

<sup>35</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.153

<sup>36</sup> Denise Bates, *Historical Research Using British Newspapers* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword History, 2016), pp.22-23

<sup>37</sup> Bates, *Historical Research Using British Newspapers*, p.23

following the Second World War and can help historians to understand how Co-op Party candidates were presented to the electorate.

Press coverage of Co-operative Party candidates is especially relevant given the key role newspapers could play in both shaping and reflecting public opinion. Vella and Ziemann suggest these sources played a key role in shaping the opinion of readers. They argue that press coverage cannot be viewed as simply a mirror by which to view public opinion, but they suggest that the press provided a 'framework' by which readers could understand both 'events and institutions'.<sup>38</sup> These are not the only historians who have adopted this line of thinking as several historians, with a particular focus on the relationship between press and politics have noted how the press could be used as a powerful political tool. Beers for example, has argued that during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the popular press played a crucial role in political communication particularly on the left of politics. She emphasises that the Labour Party appreciated how new forms of media communication could be used to bring its policy platform to national audiences, particularly outside of its core constituencies.<sup>39</sup>

Whilst it was not possible to gain online access to local newspapers in every constituency fought by the Co-operative Party in 1945, 1950 and 1951, a cross-section of local newspapers have been harnessed. These sources provide insights into the party's relationship with the press as well as once again providing insights into the types of issues prioritised by Co-operative Party candidates at constituency level. These sources have greatly enhanced the originality of the thesis by enabling both the national and local election campaigns ran by Co-operative Party between 1945 and 1951 to be analysed for the first time.

In order to interpret these sources several approaches were adopted. Corfield and Hitchcock. Note that the research methods deployed by historians usually fit into two categories, 'soft' qualitative techniques or 'hard' quantitative approaches. Both of these approaches were adopted in the thesis in order to enhance the analysis of how the alliance functioned during election periods. Indeed, the literature has been critical of research which does not seek to integrate these approaches whilst remaining cognisant of their differences.<sup>40</sup> Corfield and

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen Vella and Benjamin Ziemann, 'Newspapers', in Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century history* (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), p.217

<sup>39</sup> Laura Beers, 'Education or Manipulation? Labour, Democracy, and the Popular Press in Interwar Britain', *Journal of British Studies* 48 (2009), pp.129-131

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan W. Moses and Tobjørn L. Knutsen, *Ways of Knowing: Competing Methodologies in Social and Political Research* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), pp.296-300



Hitchcock emphasise that in order to ensure the 'rigour and accuracy of research', it is necessary to combine these methods as appropriate to the subject being studied.<sup>41</sup>

As many of the sources used in this research were document based, a qualitative approach predominated. This involved reading and extracting the relevant information in order to build up a picture of how the Co-operative Party ran its election campaigns at the same time as negotiating its alliance with Labour. This research demonstrates how despite several difficulties over policy, the Co-operative Party were content with the alliance in many respects.

Qualitative methods were combined with what was a significant element of quantitative research which enabled the thesis to demonstrate why the Co-operative Party were content within the alliance. Indeed, in addition to the significant numbers of documentary sources used, the thesis also draws on statistical evidence. This was done in order to understand the full depth of the Co-operative Party's electoral success and consequently provides insight into the effectiveness of the alliance. Whilst the literature considering this period of the elections, suggests a difficult relationship existed between both parties, the headline figures in terms of the number of Co-operative Party MPs suggests the alliance was functioning well. Combining these statistics with the qualitative research undertaken enabled the thesis to demonstrate why the Co-operative Party were so content within this alliance.

Finally, because the thesis is a multi-site case study of the alliance between two distinct political organisations, a comparative approach was also adopted in order to enable comparison of the policy positions adopted by both the parties. This comparative method complemented the quantitative research that was conducted as it enabled the thesis to convey in-depth understanding of the key trends in the Co-operative Party's electoral performance across a period of time, rather than just looking at a snapshot of one election.

Through the use of these sources and methods, the thesis offers unique insights into how the Co-op-Labour alliance functioned as a means by which to gain parliamentary representation for the Co-operative Movement, whilst challenging and revising overly negative interpretations of Co-op-Labour relations.

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<sup>41</sup> Corfield and Hitchcock, *Becoming a Historian*, pp.54-55



## **Chapter 1 – The formation of the Co-operative Party and development of the alliance with Labour, 1917-1945**

The issue of direct political representation was one of deep contention within the Co-operative Movement, something which was closely bound up with its relationship with the Labour Party. Whilst the Co-operative Movement had initially made tentative moves towards direct political involvement in 1897, it was not until 1917 that the Co-operative Party was formed.<sup>42</sup> Right from the first election contested in 1918, the Co-operative Party worked closely with the Labour Party when standing candidates for election with the relationship eventually being formalised in 1927 with a further amended agreement subsequently reached in 1946.<sup>43</sup> This chapter will consider the organisational development of the Co-operative Party and the evolution of its alliance with the Labour Party in order to provide context for the subsequent chapters.

The chapter demonstrates that during the period between 1917 and the election of the Attlee government in 1945, the Co-op-Labour alliance could also exhibit vast diversity and inequalities but this was not uniform as quality of the alliance shifted over time and according to local area due to its heavily localised organisational basis. Ultimately, the quality of the relationship was shaped by both parties' efforts to strike a balance between organisational autonomy and electoral expediency.

### **Entry to Politics**

In order to unpack the development of the Co-operative Party, it is first necessary to begin by considering the Movement that it was formed to represent.<sup>44</sup> The retail Co-operative Movement emerged during the mid-nineteenth century in order to protect the interests of its consumer members.<sup>45</sup> Co-op members not only owned their local retail societies, but they were directly involved in the running of those societies. By adhering to the principle of one member, one vote, local retail societies were run in a democratic way which ensured that management were accountable to the membership.<sup>46</sup> Robertson notes how the movement initially focused on providing its members with fairly priced food that was safe to eat, before expanding into the

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<sup>42</sup> Bailey, *The Co-operative Party – An Outline of an Organisation*, p.1 and Nicole Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain, 1914-60: Minding Their Own Business* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p.155

<sup>43</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, pp.168-169

<sup>44</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.65

<sup>45</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, p.1

<sup>46</sup> John F. Wilson, Anthony Webster and Rachael Vorberg-Rugh, *Building Co-operation: A Business History of The Co-operative Group, 1863-2013* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.37

provision of other necessities such as housing and clothing.<sup>47</sup> The movement's trading model was distinguished from that of its private competitors through the payment of a dividend on all member purchases in Co-operative shops.<sup>48</sup> This dividend consisted of the surplus made by retail societies and thus ensured that the profits made were re-distributed amongst members.<sup>49</sup> 'Divi' became an important part of working class life as Co-op members used it to enable them to afford necessities, such as shoes and winter clothing, whilst others used it to access luxuries, such as holidays.<sup>50</sup> During the first half of the twentieth century, the Co-op experienced impressive growth, expanding into areas in which it had hitherto struggled to gain presence. By 1945 the Movement had over 9 million members, largely made up of working-class people. Whilst this growth had initially been in industrial areas such as South Lancashire which had traditionally been a place of strength for the Co-operative Movement, this extended to areas where it had previously struggled, particularly in London and the south-east of England.<sup>51</sup>

However, the Co-operative Movement's egalitarian values did not crystallise into a firm Co-operative political identity as it adhered to the principle of religious and political neutrality.<sup>52</sup> On the one hand, this was something which had been enshrined within the Rochdale Principles,<sup>53</sup> and stemmed from a desire to accommodate the existing links which Co-operators had with other political organisations in order to avoid the development of internal divisions and factionalism.<sup>54</sup> Co-operators also remained convinced that engaging directly in political activities was an ineffective means by which to achieve progressive change.<sup>55</sup> Other practical concerns regarding the cost of contesting elections and sustaining a political party reinforced this position.<sup>56</sup> As such, the formation of the Co-operative Party in 1917 represented a significant shift in the attitude of Co-operators towards politics. A key factor which has often been cited for this entry into politics has been the defence of the Co-operative trading model and its own business interests. Whilst the Movement had felt as though its business interests

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<sup>47</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, pp.133-134

<sup>48</sup> Manton, 'The Labour Party and the Co-op, 1918-58', p.757

<sup>49</sup> Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, *Building Co-operation*, p.39

<sup>50</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, pp.53-54

<sup>51</sup> Peter Gurney, 'Co-operation and the 'new consumerism' in interwar England' *Business History* 54 (2012), p.906 and Gurney, 'The Battle of the Consumer in Post-war Britain', pp.960-961 and Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth and New Jerusalem*, p.149

<sup>52</sup> Adams, 'The formation of the Co-operative Party Reconsidered', p.48

<sup>53</sup> Sidney Pollard, 'The Foundation of the Co-operative Party', in Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds.) *Essays in Labour History, 1886-1923* (Hamden, Archon Books, 1971), p.185

<sup>54</sup> Manton, 'The Labour Party and the Co-op', pp.769-770

<sup>55</sup> Arnold Bonner, *British Co-operation: the history, principles, and organisation of the British Co-operative Movement* (Manchester: Co-operative Movement, 1961), p.130

<sup>56</sup> Greg Rosen, *Serving the People: Co-operative Party History From Fred Perry to Gordon Brown* (London: Co-operative Party, 2007), pp.3-4

had been threatened during the period of the First World War due to antagonistic government policy, it had lacked the means through which to defend itself as it lacked parliamentary representation of its own.<sup>57</sup> Adams has noted the way in which the war led to an increasingly difficult relationship between the movement and the state. Of foremost concern to the Movement was the state's growing involvement in economic management and a way in which it privileged private business concerns. In particular, the Excess Profits Duty was problematic for the Co-operative Movement as this resulted in the Co-op 'divi' being taxed as profit. Not only did this expose the movement to greater taxation, but it also threatened the main ideology of Co-operation grounded in the principle that trade should not involve profit making.<sup>58</sup> Given the way in which Co-op surplus was circulated back amongst its members, it is clear that legislation such as this posed a direct challenge to business workings of the Co-operative Movement.<sup>59</sup>

There were also similar concerns about the supply of food. At the outbreak of the First World War, many Co-operative Societies had sought greater government involvement in the supply of food. Concerns were raised that private business would be making considerable profits at the expense of the consumer by charging high prices on essential goods.<sup>60</sup> This not only offended the Movement's anti-private profit making principles, it also contradicted its commitment to making the necessities accessible to its vast working-class membership.<sup>61</sup> Rather than supporting the work of the Co-operative Movement, government food control often worked against it as the supply of food was often in the hands of private business. Additionally, many Co-operative Societies quotas were either below the requirement amount or were simply unbalanced when compared to those of private traders. Many Co-operators thus felt that should they engage in political action they would be able to ensure that the movement's trading model and business interests were defended from hostile government intervention.<sup>62</sup> Ultimately, it was local voluntarism which was used to negotiate these internal divisions over the merits over political activity and would go on to shape the highly localised character of the Co-operative Party's development.

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<sup>57</sup> Tony Adams, 'The formation of the Co-operative Party Reconsidered' *International Review of Social History* 31 (1987), pp.48-49 and Bailey, *The Co-operative Party*, pp.1-2

<sup>58</sup> Adams, 'The foundation of the Co-operative Party', pp.54-55 and Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, p.156

<sup>59</sup> Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, *Building Co-operation*, p.39

<sup>60</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, p.157

<sup>61</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, p.54 and Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.149

<sup>62</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, p.157

There was no uniform conversion towards direct political involvement. Instead, as various Co-operative organisations felt the strain of government action, they became more willing to engage in politics more directly.<sup>63</sup> Whilst in the initial years following the decision reached in 1917 many Co-op societies formed their own local party organisations, there was no unanimity about this. This can be demonstrated by considering affiliation statistics. By 1924, seven years after the party's initial formation, there were 393 out of a total 1,134 Co-operative Societies who were affiliated to the Co-operative Party, which translated into a membership of 1,835,671. However, by 1945 party membership had risen to 656 affiliated societies which equated to a total membership of 7,392,242 which the Co-operative Party stated equated to half of the total number of members.<sup>64</sup> Of the 8 societies which Robertson considers in her research just four would respond to the Congress decision by forming their own political organisations.<sup>65</sup> She notes how some societies such as Ewale Place, Deeside, were hesitant about directly engaging in politics. Whilst they had subscribed to the Co-operative Party fund in 1919, they did not do so again until 1922 and only did so intermittently after that. Similar trends were demonstrated by Queensferry, West Lothian, and Ton Society, Glamorgan, both of which had little involvement in political action.<sup>66</sup> Robertson attributes the uneven development of Co-operative Party organisation to the varied experiences and perspectives prevalent amongst local societies. She notes that St Cuthberts Co-operative Society, Edinburgh, did not affiliate to the Co-operative Party until the 1930s following the implementation of the purchase tax in 1933. Thereafter, concerns surrounding food rationing during the Second World War eventually led St Cuthberts to establish its own party organisation in 1944.<sup>67</sup> Thus, whilst there was a move nationally towards direct political representation in 1917, the localised nature of Co-op organisation meant that Co-operative political machinery developed at different times and at different places across the country. Thus, the Co-op's entry into politics was very much reactive to local circumstances and was as such, heavily based upon local agency.

### **Establishing relations with Labour and the 1927 agreement**

Whilst many Co-operators increasingly sought direct political representation, the Co-operative Party surmised that this would not be possible solely through its own political organisation and

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<sup>63</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, pp.162-165

<sup>64</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party, *The Political Consequence of Co-operative Progress*, CP PAMPHLETS 1, p.11 and Bonner, *British Co-operation*, p.194

<sup>65</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, pp.155-156

<sup>66</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, pp.160-161

<sup>67</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, pp.162-165

as such, sought to work with the Labour Party to protect its interests.<sup>68</sup> The Labour Party had been courting the Co-operative Movement since its inception. McKibbin notes how even prior to the formation of the Co-operative Party, the Labour Party had been attempting to form an alliance with the Co-operative Union. On the one hand, it was argued there were significant benefits in terms of the sections of the electorate it would allow the Labour Party to reach. He argues that Co-operators represented a third section of the working class alongside itself and the Trade Unions. It was therefore hoped that allying with the Co-operative Union would allow the Labour Party to draw on extra support from co-operators. It is also argued that the Labour Party also anticipated benefitting from extra financial resources.<sup>69</sup> This was one of the reasons why the prospect of alliance with Labour proved contentious within the Co-operative Movement. Supporters of political intervention tended to be sympathetic towards the Labour Party and were keen to develop links with it and the trade unions on equal terms.<sup>70</sup> For example, in 1919 the Co-operative Party Secretary, Sam Perry, suggested that the party ally with Labour and the unions in a 'New Democratic or People's Party'.<sup>71</sup> The party also had to consider the fact that many leading figures in Co-op Societies had pre-existing loyalties, and this could make an alliance with Labour problematic. Rosen notes for example, how in areas such as Leeds and Huddersfield, many senior level figures within Co-operative Societies could be active Liberals or Conservatives. Therefore, if all societies were to be compelled to support an alliance with the Labour Party through national affiliation, regardless of their pre-existing political complexion there was a real risk of splintering the movement.<sup>72</sup>

However, the question of affiliation proved a major stumbling block. On the one hand, whilst for the Labour Party, national affiliation was the ideal outcome in light of the financial benefits it would bring, for Co-operators, there was significant risks involved in this strategy.<sup>73</sup> There were financial concerns shared by both the Co-operative Union as well as individual societies about paying affiliation fees to Labour in addition to funding the Co-operative Party. Furthermore, there were concerns that even if the Co-op did affiliate to Labour, it would still occupy an inferior position to the Trade Unions due to the system of block voting. The Co-operative Party felt that by resisting national affiliation it would be better placed to protect the movement's interests.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Bailey, *An Outline of an Organisation*, p.74

<sup>69</sup> McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924*, pp.43-44

<sup>70</sup> Adams, 'The Foundation of the Co-operative Party', p.49 and Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.85

<sup>71</sup> Rosen, *Serving the People*, p.8

<sup>72</sup> Rosen, *Serving the People*, pp.9-10

<sup>73</sup> Kevin Manton, 'The Labour Party and the Co-op, 1918-1958', *Historical Research* 82 (2009), pp.768-769

<sup>74</sup> Stewart, 'A Party Within a Party', pp.138-139

National affiliation would not, therefore, greatly enhance Co-operative Party influence over the Labour Party but would result in it being bound to accept Labour's decisions.<sup>75</sup>

This hesitancy to enter into a national alliance led to local Co-operative Parties negotiating their own arrangements with local Labour Parties on an ad-hoc basis, which resulted in relations varying quite significantly according to local area.<sup>76</sup> On the one hand, societies such as the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society were quick to affiliate to the Labour Party. The society which was based in South-East London would sponsor candidates who were not part of the Co-operative Party and in this period of Attlee government sponsored several candidates such as Herbert Morrison who stood under the Labour Party label.<sup>77</sup> Similar examples of working together could be seen outside of these London constituencies. For example in the election of A.E Waterson.<sup>78</sup> The election of Waterson in Kettering predated a formal Co-op-Labour alliance, but despite this, Robertson has noted the crucial contribution made by local Labour Party organisation to Waterson's election as the first Co-operative Party MP in 1918.<sup>79</sup> As such, in the same way as local circumstances were crucial to the emergence and development of the Co-operative Party, this was mirrored by the development of the alliance with Labour. Kettering was not the only example of this as in the East Ham area of London Co-op-Labour collaboration had led to the election of Alfred Barnes in 1923. However, the picture was not uniform. In contrast to Kettering and East Ham, in Paisley, Renfrewshire, the absence of any formal national agreement led to both the Co-operative Party and Labour standing candidates in this constituency, which split the opposition vote and prevented either candidate from being elected.<sup>80</sup>

This is not to say, however, that even when a national agreement had been mapped out in the form of the 1927 Cheltenham Agreement that this resolved these local issues. The agreement stated that local Co-operative Parties would be able to affiliate to their equivalent Divisional Labour Parties and it also included arrangements on how these affiliation fees would be paid and how this would in turn affect the voting powers of these local parties. However, the agreement stipulated that neither party had the right to amend local agreements agreed prior to

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<sup>75</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, *Co-operative Party Monthly Letter*, October 1949, CP MONTHLY LETTER, pp.7-11

<sup>76</sup> Manton, 'The Labour Party and the Co-op', p.769-770

<sup>77</sup> Rita Rhodes, *An Arsenal for Labour: the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society and politics, 1896-1996* (Manchester: Holyoake Books, 1998), pp.1 and 146

<sup>78</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, pp.167-168 and Craigen, 'The Co-operative Party', p.96

<sup>79</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, pp.167-168

<sup>80</sup> Manton, 'The Labour Party and the Co-op', p.769-770



1927 without the consent of the local parties involved.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the agreement provided a broad framework for closer direct work between the two parties in the form of a Joint Sub-Committee which was to be comprised of representation from both parties' executive committees. The Sub-Committee was to meet regularly and make provision for joint campaigns on special subjects during election periods, underlining the importance of electoral organisation to Co-op-Labour relations. Both parties were to be made aware of the work of the other through the exchange of minutes between their executive committees.<sup>82</sup>

### **The erosion of the 1927 agreement**

Robertson's work has demonstrated how the provision made within the 1927 Agreement that existing local agreements would not be interfered with, could result in relations varying drastically between localities and over time. Whilst in Kettering and Birmingham relations between the two parties were often good, this was not the case in nearby Leicester where despite Labour Party pressure to affiliate, the local Co-operative Party persistently declined to do so.<sup>83</sup> As such, by operating an agreement which was based on local voluntarism due to its optional nature for local Co-operative Parties, there were significant difficulties in coordinating the alliance as in different localities different agreements operated.

Consequently, after 1927 the agreement was subject to several revisions. Carbery argues that the major sticking points over the 1927 agreement were affiliation, agents, finance and the extent to which Co-operative MPs should be loyal to the Parliamentary Labour Party.<sup>84</sup> Thus, as had been the case in the initial stages of forging this alliance, the issue of affiliation continued to be problematic as for the Labour Party. Labour sought national affiliation on the grounds of securing greater party coherence, but such a shift risked constraining the independence offered to the Co-operative Party by local affiliation. This issue became especially contentious after the 1931 MacDonald split and the disaffiliation of the Independent Labour Party in 1932.<sup>85</sup>

Labour Party concerns about Co-operative Party independence resulted in the negotiation of a temporary agreement in 1937, which focussed on candidates and agents as well as making

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<sup>81</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Copy of an agreement between the National Labour Party and the National Co-operative Party Adopted by the Labour Party Conference at Blackpool in 1927, GS/CO-OP/2

<sup>82</sup> LHASC, Copy of an agreement between the National Labour Party and the National Co-operative Party Adopted by the Labour Party Conference at Blackpool in 1927, GS/CO-OP/2

<sup>83</sup> Robertson, *Minding their own business*, p.167-170

<sup>84</sup> Carbery, *Consumers in politics*, p.41

<sup>85</sup> Stewart, "A Party within in party'?", p.139 and Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.95

provision for the establishment of a Joint Committee of both local parties should a Co-op candidate be given Labour Party nomination.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, it was agreed that henceforth Co-operative Party candidates standing for election both nationally as well as locally would be required to use the designation of 'Labour-Co-operative'.<sup>87</sup> As part of these negotiations around the electoral agreement, the Labour Party made its preference for national affiliation clear. Whilst provisions had been made for areas where the local Co-operative Party had not affiliated to the divisional Labour Party, Labour contended that this was always intended to be a temporary measure prior to local affiliation.<sup>88</sup>

### **The negotiation of the 1946 agreement**

The temporary revisions reached in 1937 set the agenda for the negotiation of a new comprehensive agreement. These discussions were put on hold in 1939 at the Labour Party's request, with the agreement in draft form, due to the outbreak of the Second World War, much to the consternation of the Co-operative movement.<sup>89</sup> The suspension of these negotiations provides insights into the unequal nature of the alliance at this point in time as it was by no means a unanimous decision between these bodies. The Co-operative Party had felt that the war provided an ideal opportunity to continue negotiations to resolve the difficulties which had previously blighted this alliance, but by unilaterally withdrawing from the discussions the Labour Party demonstrated its was dominant in this alliance.<sup>90</sup>

The agreement reached in 1946, which Whitecross notes how it marked a significant shift in the alliance with the Labour Party differed significantly from the previous Cheltenham Agreement of 1927. No longer was this alliance just one between the Co-operative and Labour Parties. Instead, it was one between the Co-operative Union and Labour Party.<sup>91</sup>

The historiography has been somewhat critical of this new agreement reached between the Co-operative and Labour Parties. Manton, for example, has argued that it changed little at a time when relations between both parties were at their lowest.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, Whitecross has

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<sup>86</sup> Jack Bailey, 'The Consumer in Politics', in N. Barou, *The Co-operative Movement in Labour Britain* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1948), p.107 and Carbery, *Consumers in Politics*, pp.40-43

<sup>87</sup> Stewart, 'A Party Within a Party', p.139

<sup>88</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, An Agreement Between the Labour Party and Co-operative Party to apply in certain places where the local Co-operative Party is unable to affiliate to its respective Labour Party, 24<sup>th</sup> November 1937, p.2

<sup>89</sup> Bailey, 'The Consumer in Politics', p.107 and National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Report of the 1940 Co-operative Party Conference, p.6

<sup>90</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Report of the 1940 Co-operative Party Conference, p.46 and Stewart, "A Party Within a Party", p.139

<sup>91</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.105

<sup>92</sup> Manton, 'The Labour Party and the Co-op', p.771

reinforced the argument expressed by Jack Bailey (who was general secretary of the Co-operative Party), at the time that this agreement represented a 'workable compromise'.<sup>93</sup> However, this new agreement was the product of a balancing act being performed by both parties. Both sought to reach a compromise between ensuring they retained autonomy whilst also ensuring electoral expediency and as such, both parties made significant concessions in reaching this revised electoral agreement. As had been the case with the 1927 Agreement, the new Hastings Agreement made provisions for the alliance nationally as well as locally. On this national level, it made the provisions for a National Policy Committee at which representatives from the Labour Party and National Co-operative Authority could consider matters which were of concern to both organisations.<sup>94</sup> One of the main concerns regarding policy from the perspective of Co-operators was ensuring that they did not lose their policymaking autonomy to the Labour Party and this comprised one of the main arguments against national affiliation.<sup>95</sup> However, crucially, the Labour Party did not attempt to compel the Co-operative Party to nationally affiliate as part of this agreement. Instead, the Co-op Party conceded that any potential Co-operative Party candidates would also be members of the Labour Party as part of the latter's attempts to ensure uniformity within its own organisation.<sup>96</sup> The fact though that the Labour Party did not force through affiliation here suggests they also made a significant degree of compromise. The agreement did encourage local affiliation; however, this was not forced and crucially neither was national level affiliation. This suggests a degree of acceptance on the part of the Labour Party that national affiliation was not an option that the Co-operative Party would contemplate and was reflective of Labour's desire to maintain a functioning electoral relationship with the Co-op. The Labour Party had reaped significant benefits out of the alliance with the Co-operative Party at the 1945 election and so the fact it did not force through suggests its appreciation for the electoral benefits the alliance could bring.<sup>97</sup>

The concerns the Co-op had regarding its autonomy were often shared by Labour as the Labour Party National Executive Committee wished to avoid losing its own autonomy.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, whilst the new National Policy Committee was to discuss matters of mutual policy concern,

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<sup>93</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.105 and Bailey, 'The Consumer in Politics', p.107 and Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.115-116.

<sup>94</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, The Co-operative Party, *The Co-op-Labour agreement (1946)*, (London: Co-operative Union, 1946), pp.1-2

<sup>95</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.114-115

<sup>96</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.112

<sup>97</sup> NCA, CPP, *Facing the Future Together*, pp.3-11

<sup>98</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.110-111

each organisation still retained ultimate control over its own policy.<sup>99</sup> However, the bodies which were responsible for negotiating and overseeing the agreement also changed from 1927. Whereas the 1927 agreement had been agreed between the Co-operative Party and Labour Party, the 1946 agreement broadened this out to also include the Co-operative Union. Consequently, the membership of the National Policy Committee provided for under the terms of this agreement were to consist of equal representation from both the Co-op Union and the Labour Party Executive Committee and was also to include the secretaries from both organisations.<sup>100</sup> These changes though, as the subsequent chapters of this thesis will demonstrate had a significant, beneficial impact upon the electoral relationship between the Co-op and Labour Parties.

Thus, this initial chapter has shown how in many ways, the alliance acted as a balancing act. Both parties were seeking to retain as much of their independence as possible whilst also pursuing electoral expediency. The chapter initially considered the development of the Co-operative Party and noted how its formation was heavily tied to protecting Co-op interests. But this was a heavily localised process. The Co-operative Party was reliant upon local voluntary action. As local Co-operative societies felt the strain of government action, they were increasingly willing to engage in political action and as such there was no wholesale move towards direct political representation.<sup>101</sup> This local voluntarism was something which, from the outset, reflected in the alliance with Labour. As the Co-operative Party nationally failed to reach an agreement with the Labour Party, at local level, links were forged on an ad-hoc basis, as was recognised in the eventual 1927 agreement. This did initially cause some problems for the alliance. On the one hand, the Co-operative Party, constrained by the Co-operative Union, sought to keep as much of its independence as possible on the basis that an independent Co-operative Party would be best placed to protect the movements interests. Yet, the Labour Party were deeply concerned about this independence and would be increasingly so following the split in 1931 and the disaffiliation of the ILP in 1932.<sup>102</sup> As such, it continued to encourage the

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<sup>99</sup> NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party, *The Co-op-Labour agreement, 1946* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1946), pp.1-2

<sup>100</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, pp.173-174, NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party, *The Co-op-Labour agreement*, pp.1-2 and National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Jack Bailey, *Facing the Future Together* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1946), pp.1-11

<sup>101</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, pp.162-165; National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party, *The Political Consequence of Co-operative Progress*, CP PAMPHLETS 1, p.11 and Bonner, *British Co-operation*, p.194

<sup>102</sup> Stewart, "A Party Within a Party", p.139; Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.95 and Manton, 'The Labour Party and the Co-op', p.769-770

Co-operative Party to affiliate nationally to it and this was highlighted in the temporary agreement reached in 1937.<sup>103</sup>

However, the Labour Party did itself make concessions in reaching the eventual 1946 Hastings Agreement. Demonstrating that this alliance had become more reciprocal following the 1945 election. Prior to the election, the Co-operative Party had struggled to have influence over the Labour Party when it came to this agreement. The Labour Party had ignored the Co-op in its decision to suspend negotiations.<sup>104</sup> However, following the eventual 1945 election, the Labour Party had continued to negotiate with the Co-operative Party and despite its preference for full affiliation, accepted local level affiliation as was reflected in the finalised agreement.<sup>105</sup> This can be seen as a product of the election result itself, once again, the alliance for the Labour Party was in many ways wrapped up in electoral expediency and the 1945 election had demonstrated the electoral benefits the alliance could bring, and therefore it became more willing to accept this localised approach to affiliation. As such, this chapter has demonstrated that this alliance was rarely static. This alliance was heavily localised and as such could vary in quality on an area-by-area basis, but crucially was one which would see relations improve significantly over time.

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<sup>103</sup> LHASC, An Agreement Between the Labour Party and Co-operative Party to apply in certain places where the local Co-operative Party is unable to affiliate to its respective Labour Party, 24<sup>th</sup> November 1937, p.2

<sup>104</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, *Report of the 1940 Co-operative Party Conference*, pp.6-46 and Stewart, 'A Party Within a Party', p.139 and Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.115-116

<sup>105</sup> NCA, CPP, *Facing the Future Together*, pp.3-11

## **Chapter 2 – Candidate selection procedures and the Co-op-Labour alliance, 1945-51**

This chapter will consider the highly neglected issue of candidate selection procedures ahead of the post-war Attlee elections. It concludes that the alliance with Labour acted as an effective medium through which the Co-operative Party could stand candidates for election in numbers which it was satisfied with, something the 1946 revised agreement played a crucial role in facilitating. The previous chapter has suggested, the central purpose of the alliance with Labour was to gain political representation for the Co-operative Movement. To do this, it was first necessary to negotiate Co-operative Party candidacies, something which was heavily intertwined with the Labour alliance as all Co-operative candidates would stand under the joint designation of Co-op-Labour. Consequently, understanding how candidate selection procedures operated, is crucial to analysing how effective the alliance was at enabling the Co-operative Party to fulfil its central aim.

But, whilst these procedures were crucial to the Co-operative Party and important to understanding how the alliance functioned electorally, they have suffered neglect as historians have instead prioritised policy debates. Where historians have considered the interplay between the Co-op-Labour alliance and the Co-operative Party's electoral prospects, there has often been a great deal of scepticism regarding the extent to which it benefitted the Co-operative movement. Whilst local level relations were crucial to Co-operative Party candidate selection, there has been a tendency for historians to argue national level disputes led to a decline in local level relations across several constituencies which would then hamper the effective operation of the alliance, weakening Co-op leverage. Both Robertson and Carbery have made connections between these two issues. Carbery notes how tensions nationally over affiliation led to constituency level difficulties in both London and Hull.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, Robertson has noted how the optional nature of the 1927 agreement generated significant tensions amongst the two parties, which she implies had ramifications for the selection of Co-operative Party candidates. Citing how the alliance functioned in the East Midlands, she notes diverging trends whereby in Kettering the two parties could work together effectively to secure the election of the first Co-operative MP in 1918, whilst in nearby Leicester the two parties struggled to co-operate at all.<sup>107</sup>

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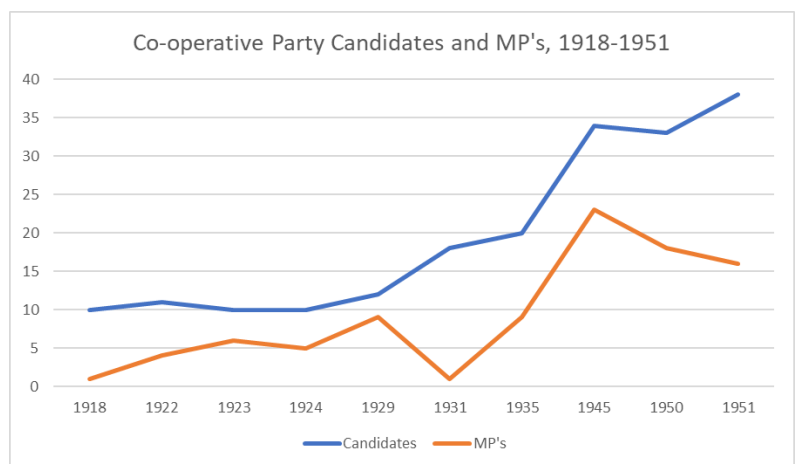
<sup>106</sup> Carbery, *Consumers in Politics*, p.42

<sup>107</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, pp.167-168 and Nicole Robertson, 'A Union of Forces Marching in the Same Direction'? The Relationship between the Co-operative and Labour Parties, 1918-1919-39', in, Matthew Worley (ed.), *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: identities, cultures and perspectives, 1900-39* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp.218-221

There has been no detailed consideration of the ways in which these difficulties impacted upon Co-operative Party electoral organisation. As such, this chapter will show how this alliance functioned specifically with regards to candidate selection for the 1945, 1950 and 1951 general elections. To do so it will consider several key questions. To what extent, and in what ways, were the Co-operative and Labour parties able to co-operate during election campaigns between 1945-51? This will bring into focus how far tensions over the 1927 agreement impacted upon the Co-operative Party's ability to stand candidates for election, and the extent to which these issues were addressed by the revised 1946 agreement? This in turn will raise questions over the extent of the Co-operative Party and the wider movement's ambition to expand the number of candidates fielded at general elections? Having considered this point, the chapter will analyse how far the Co-operative Party's ultimate accountability to the wider Co-operative Movement impacted upon its ability to stand candidates for election?<sup>108</sup> Through examination of these key but neglected issues, the chapter will argue that whilst elements of this alliance could be contentious, overall, in terms of electoral organisation the alliance was working well and largely suited the Co-operative Party's aims in this period. Indeed, by 1951 the main barrier to a sustained expansion of the Co-operative Party's political representation was not the Labour Party but the Co-operative Party's parent body, the Co-operative Union, which was content with the number of MPs already elected.<sup>109</sup>

### **Co-operative Party Candidatures, 1945-51**

Despite the negative way in which the Co-op-Labour alliance has been characterised, the Co-operative Party had built significantly on its number of candidacies by 1945. This had involved negotiating a complex candidate selection process whereby candidates had to be endorsed by both the Executive Committee of the Co-operative Party and the Labour Party National Executive Committee. Thus, in order for a Co-operative candidate to stand for



Graph 1 - Statistics from, Carbery, *Consumers in Politics*, p.128

<sup>108</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.96

<sup>109</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, *Report of the 1952 Co-operative Party Conference* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1952), pp.17-19

election, both bodies had to agree over the candidacy.<sup>110</sup> This was particularly multilayered for the Co-operative Party who had to, once they had selected their preferred candidate, persuade the Labour Party to endorse them too under both the Hastings and Cheltenham Agreements.<sup>111</sup>

This meant that there was a marked intersection between the quality of national Co-op-Labour relations and candidate selection, as the expansion of Co-operative political representation was dependent upon the movement's ability to reach a mutual agreement with the Labour Party. At an initial glance, the alliance was working well in this regard.<sup>112</sup> As the above graph shows, numerically, the Co-operative Party had made great progress in the fielding of candidates by the beginning of the period under direct consideration in this research. From the Co-operative Party's formation until the 1929 election the number of candidates fielded had remained relatively stable around 10. This had risen significantly in 1935 when it stood 20 candidates, and by 1945 the number of Co-operative Party candidacies had risen to 34 before falling back slightly to 33 candidates in 1950.<sup>113</sup> Whilst this may not seem significant at face value, the fact that the Co-operative Party had managed to largely maintain its share of candidacies in 1950 despite the redrawing of constituency boundaries in 1948 was a notable achievement. The decision to redraw constituency boundaries resulted from the Labour Government's decision to address concerns that urban areas did not have the representation they required.<sup>114</sup> Although the Co-operative Party lost 12 candidacies due to the ensuing redistribution of seats, it succeeded in gaining 10 candidates in new constituencies and in 7 more constituencies, Co-operative Party candidates replaced Labour ones.<sup>115</sup> It was, therefore, significant that the Co-operative Party had maintained this high number of candidacies despite these changes in the redrawing of constituency boundaries in a period which has been characterised as particularly difficult for Co-op-Labour relations. Further progress was made in 1951, as the party stood a record number of 38 candidates.<sup>116</sup> As such, despite difficulties regarding several aspects of Labour policy, in terms of raw figures, the Co-operative Party was

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<sup>110</sup> Bailey, *The Co-operative Party*, p.74

<sup>111</sup> NCA, CPP, *Facing the Future Together*, pp.1-11 and LHASC, Copy of an agreement between the National Labour Party and the National Co-operative Party Adopted by the Labour Party Conference at Blackpool in 1927, GS/CO-OP/2

<sup>112</sup> NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1952 Co-operative Party Conference*, p.6

<sup>113</sup> Carbery, *Consumers in Politics*, p.128

<sup>114</sup> David Butler, 'The redrawing of parliamentary boundaries in Britain', *British Elections and Parties Yearbook 2* (1992), p.5

<sup>115</sup> Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, pp.4, 7-8, 24, 81-82, 102, 107, 123, 130-132, 152, 182, 203, 209, 239, 257, 262, 280, 284, 402, 429-430, 438, 482, 506, 594, 596, 598-599, 621, 623 and 644 and Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1950-1973*, pp.5, 7, 20, 63, 76, 101, 126, 131, 133, 135-136, 167, 230, 264, 272, 290, 305, 317-318, 379, 399, 416, 453, 461, 474, 480, 504, 605, 618, 620-622, and 644

<sup>116</sup> Carbery, *Consumers in Politics*, p.128



able to grow significantly its number of candidates and then maintain these numbers across this period through the alliance with Labour.

### **The Cheltenham Agreement and Co-operative Party candidate selection ahead of the 1945 election**

Whilst numerically, the 1945 election saw the Co-operative Party stand record numbers of candidates for election, significant tensions did arise over candidate selection. It is these internal difficulties that this section of the chapter will unpack. As the revised Hastings Agreement was not concluded until 1946, the 1945 election was fought under the 1927 Cheltenham Agreement. Labour Party frustrations over the local diversity allowed by the 1927 agreement led to significant rifts at constituency level which resulted in the absence of Co-operative Party candidates in constituencies such as Kettering and North-West Hull.<sup>117</sup>

Both the Co-operative Party National Committee and National Executive Committee minutes detail several issues which arose during the 1945 election campaign surrounding candidate selection. On the one hand, Co-op and Labour opinion diverged over how candidate selection should be handled following the outbreak of the Second World War. The Labour Party's suspension of candidate selection procedures met with some criticism from the Co-operative Party who felt that overall preparedness for the next election would be hampered by not continuing with selection procedures. Whilst unable to cite specific examples of the difficulties it felt this would cause, the Co-operative Party National Committee insisted that not undertaking preparatory steps during this period would lead to local organisation becoming increasingly difficult.<sup>118</sup> Whilst this decision effectively put the Co-operative Party's own electoral organisation on hold, a survey of the Co-operative Party minutes reveals that the Labour Party did not consult the movement in reaching its decision. As such, this would suggest that the Labour Party did not view the alliance as a partnership of equals as the Co-operative Party had hoped it would at its inception.<sup>119</sup>

Once candidate selection was under way for the 1945 general election, in several areas there were distinct flash points where the Labour Party refused to allow a Co-operative Party

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<sup>117</sup> LHASC, Copy of an agreement between the National Labour Party and the National Co-operative Party Adopted by the Labour Party Conference at Blackpool in 1927, GS/CO-OP/2

<sup>118</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, January 8<sup>th</sup> 1942, CPY/2/10, p.2 and National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party National Committee Meeting Minutes, January 29<sup>th</sup> 1942, CPY/2/10, pp.1-2

<sup>119</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, February 26<sup>th</sup> 1942, CPY/2/10, p.2 and Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.85

candidate, such as Edmonton, Finsbury, Hull and Kettering. In certain areas where Co-operative MPs no longer sought election, Co-operative candidates were succeeded by other Co-op candidates. For example, at the 1950 election A.V. Alexander was replaced with another Co-op candidate, George Darling, in Sheffield Hillsborough. However, this was not always the case, and represented a particular point of contention in 1945.<sup>120</sup> In the case of Edmonton and Finsbury, for example, the Labour Party bypassed the alliance and overlooked the potential for a continued Co-op candidacy in both constituencies. With the knowledge both of these Co-op candidates were planning to retire, the Labour Party, without consulting the Co-operative Party, chose two of its own candidates as replacements.<sup>121</sup> Examples of this sort from 1945 have led Whitecross to argue that tensions over the optional nature of the 1927 agreement were costing the Co-operative Party candidatures.<sup>122</sup>

Conflict also emerged in constituencies where Co-op-Labour relations had previously been marked by goodwill, such as Kettering, where the Co-operative Party had gained its first MP in 1918.<sup>123</sup> Robertson has cited the example of Kettering to highlight how the Co-op-Labour alliance could function effectively to secure the election of Co-operative Party MPs. However, despite noting how during the 1940s the relationship between both local parties in Kettering became increasingly strained, she does not further unpack how this impacted on electoral organisation.<sup>124</sup> In fact, the 1945 election was the first general election since 1918 that the Co-operative Party did not contest Kettering constituency.<sup>125</sup> At this election, the Labour Party's desire to force through local affiliation as a way to ensure uniformity within its own party and the Co-operative Party's desire to ensure it retained its autonomy brought these parties into direct conflict over candidatures in certain constituencies.<sup>126</sup> This example reveals how frustrations over the 1927 agreement could significantly undermine the Co-operative Party's electoral prospects by preventing candidatures.<sup>127</sup> Here the Labour Party had used the agreement to its own advantage by utilising the technicality that that Co-operative Party candidatures had to be

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<sup>120</sup> Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1950-1973*, p.264 and John Tilley, *Churchill's Favourite Socialist: A Life of A.V. Alexander* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1995), p.75

<sup>121</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party Monthly letter, January 1945, CPY/CP MONTHLY LETTER, p.3 and Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1950-1973*, p.264 and John Tilley, *Churchill's Favourite Socialist: A Life of A.V. Alexander* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1995), p.75

<sup>122</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.90

<sup>123</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, p.167

<sup>124</sup> Robertson, 'A Union of Forces Marching in the Same Direction?', pp.216-221

<sup>125</sup> Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, p.437

<sup>126</sup> Stewart, 'A party within a party', p.139

<sup>127</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.90-91 and Stewart, 'A party within a party', p.139

endorsed by its own executive committee to prevent a Co-operative candidate on account of the Co-operative Party's refusal to affiliate.<sup>128</sup> The Kettering Constituency Labour Party, in an attempt to secure this affiliation, had selected one of its own candidates to stand in the constituency and this was in spite of the agreement reached nationally between the two parties. Indeed, something of an ultimatum was provided to the local Co-operative Party that should they continue to refuse to affiliate, the Labour Party would ignore this national agreement and proceed with their own candidate selection. When the Co-operative Party raised its concerns, the Labour Party's response suggested was for the Mid-Northants Co-operative Council to affiliate.<sup>129</sup> Whilst this sheds light on the difficult relationship at local level, it also brings into focus how this could generate national acrimony between the two parties. The local Labour Party had not acted here without the backing of the party nationally as the Labour Party National Executive had permitted the standing of the candidate despite the Co-operative Party's protests.<sup>130</sup> This would suggest the Labour Party nationally was just as disillusioned with the 1927 agreement as many Constituency Labour Parties were.

Whilst the Labour Party's frustrations surrounding the optional nature of the 1927 agreement could cause rifts in several constituencies, there were also more limited concerns raised within the Labour Party about the potential downsides of standing candidates under a joint label with the Co-operative Party. This perspective was particularly prominent in North-West Hull. Although the local Co-operative Party was already affiliated at local level to the North-West Hull Constituency Labour Party, it was blocked from standing a candidate.<sup>131</sup> The local Labour Party raised specific concerns about the use of the label, 'Co-op and Labour' on the grounds that should the candidate stand under this designation, the chances of a candidate being successfully elected would be reduced significantly due to the intrusion of unspecified, problematic Co-operative issues.<sup>132</sup> The impacts of this conflict were not just limited to the electoral prospects of the Co-operative Party but also had drastic ramifications for Co-op-

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<sup>128</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1944, CPY/2/10, p.1, National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative News, March 31<sup>st</sup> 1945, p.1 and Bailey, *The Co-operative Party*, p.74

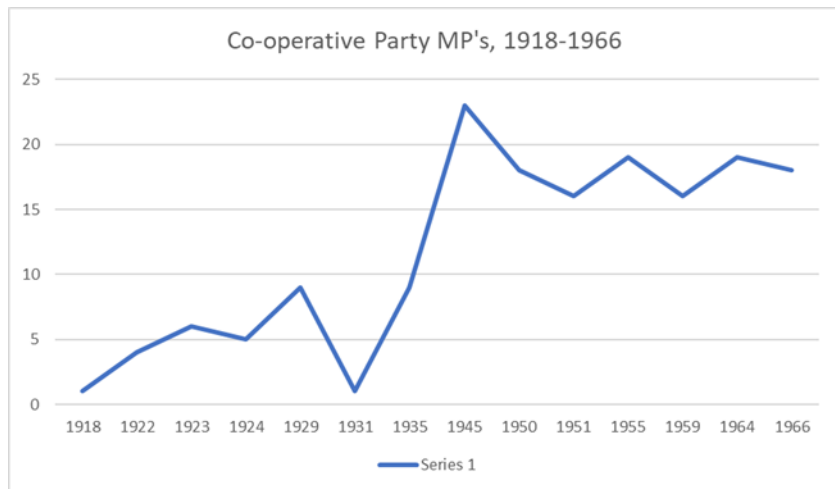
<sup>129</sup> NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, May 11<sup>th</sup> 1944, CPY/2/10, p.1 and NCA, *Co-operative News*, March 31<sup>st</sup> 1945, p.1 and National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party National Committee Meeting Minutes, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1945, CPY/2/10, p.2

<sup>130</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party, Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1945, CPY/2/10, p.2

<sup>131</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, May 16<sup>th</sup> 1945, CPY/2/10, p.2

<sup>132</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, February 15<sup>th</sup> 1945, CPY/2/10, pp.2-3 and National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party Executive Committee Minutes, March 9<sup>th</sup> 1945, CPY/2/10, p.3

Labour relations in Hull as the Hull Co-operative Party subsequently opted to disaffiliate from the local CLP there.<sup>133</sup> Thus, a mixed picture emerges of the effect of the Co-op-Labour alliance's impact on the Co-operative Party's ability to stand candidates for election. The Co-op Party



Graph 2 - Statistics taken from - Carbery, *Consumers in Politics*, p.128

had made significant progress when it came to standing candidates for election. But, as the cases of Hull and Kettering demonstrate, where the 1927 agreement was not adhered to, the Labour Party could prevent Co-op candidacies.

### **The 1946 agreement and the 1950 and 1951 general election campaigns**

However, as the 1927 agreement was superseded by the Hastings agreement in 1946, the issues which had impeded the selection of Co-operative Party candidates began to ease. Indeed, by the 1950 and 1951 elections, a close reading of the Co-operative Party national and executive committee minutes reveals no significant concerns were raised about candidate selection.

The general elections in 1950 and 1951 were contested under the revised Hastings Agreement, which acted a catalyst for a shift in the electoral relationship between the Co-operative and Labour Parties. On the one hand, the new agreement made several provisions regarding the standing of candidates for election, several of which strengthened the Labour Party's sway over the alliance, but in accepting these trade-offs the alliance became increasingly smooth. To stand for election, Co-operative candidates now had to be individual members of the Labour Party. In addition, if Co-operative Party candidates were elected, they were required to join the Parliamentary Labour Party and abide by its Standing Orders. This issue of Standing Orders represented a particular infringement upon the autonomy previously enjoyed by Co-operative Party candidates as through agreeing to these standing orders, Co-operative candidates,

<sup>133</sup> NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, May 16<sup>th</sup> 1945, CPY/2/10, p.2

despite their membership of the Co-operative Party requiring ultimate responsibility to Co-operative Congress, had to pledge loyalty to decisions taken by the Labour Party.<sup>134</sup>

Nevertheless, having made these concessions in reaching the 1946 agreement, the Co-operative Party found that the new arrangements smoothed tensions over candidate selection. Whereas at the 1945 election under the previous agreement there had been tensions in several constituencies leading to the absence of Co-operative candidatures, this was not the case under the new Hastings Agreement. A detailed consideration of both national and executive committee minutes as well as party Conference and Co-operative Union reports suggests that where the Co-operative Party put forward a candidate it did not encounter nearly as much resistance from the Labour Party as in 1945. Therefore, the tensions present at the 1945 election, were not sufficiently entrenched to shape Co-op-Labour relations regarding electoral organisation during this period, as once the Labour Party's grievances over the 1927 agreement were addressed candidate selection ran much more smoothly. Due to this, the Co-operative Party made progress in fielding candidates in areas which had previously been characterised by difficult Co-op-Labour relations. For example, whilst Robertson has noted the difficulties which could occur between the local Co-op and Labour Parties in Leicester, at the 1951 election, a joint Co-op-Labour candidate stood in the city for the first time. Whilst the candidate, who stood in Leicester South-East was unsuccessful, the fact the seat had been contested in the first instance shows how progress had been made in the alliance. To have stood a joint candidate, relations between these local parties must have improved significantly.<sup>135</sup>

Despite this, there were some concerns within the Co-operative Party that this new agreement did not go far enough. At the Co-operative Party Conference in 1950, several local Co-operative Parties felt that provisions should be made to ensure that seats contested by Co-op candidates should be safeguarded so that should those candidates step down, these candidates would be replaced by a Co-op candidate rather than one from the Labour Party. These concerns were particularly voiced by the Abersychan and Pontypool Party as well as the London Society Party. Whilst the Co-operative Party as will be further explored in Chapter 4 secured a high concentration of candidates in the London area, it was argued at this conference that whilst the Hastings agreement had had a beneficial impact, without the provision to safeguard currently contested constituencies, the Co-operative Party would lose constituencies where it had

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<sup>134</sup> NCA, CPP, Bailey, *Facing the Future Together*, pp.1-12 and Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.99

<sup>135</sup> Robertson, "A Union of Forces Marching in the Same Direction", pp.218-220 and NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1952 Co-operative Party Conference* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1952), p.20 and Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1919-1949*, pp.166-168

MPs.<sup>136</sup> However, this proposal was ultimately rejected, and was opposed by several local parties, including by the Manchester Party as well as the National Committee on the grounds that agreement reached was in fact appropriate.<sup>137</sup>

Indeed, this suggests that the Co-operative Party valued the opportunity offered by the new agreement to consolidate its position rather than seeking to further expand upon it. The Co-operative Party's preference was to defend its position as it was largely content with the representation it was gaining out of the alliance with Labour. There were some calls to expand upon the political activities of the Co-operative Party including further candidatures. Concerns raised by the Bristol Co-operative Party about the numerical strength of the Co-operative Party in the House of Commons were shared by delegates from London and Liverpool, which prompted calls for further Movement funding to expand political activity in order to increase the number of Co-operative Party MPs. However, outside of these three cities, calls for Co-operative Party expansion were limited.<sup>138</sup> Consequently, whilst there may be a tendency amongst the existing literature to argue that the alliance with the Labour Party was constraining further Co-operative Party development, this case study of candidate selection has clearly demonstrated that this was not the case as by 1951 it was largely content with its lot.

The wider Co-operative movement response to the limited calls for further funding from Co-operative Party activists played a key role in shaping the party's decision to concentrate on consolidating its post-1945 gains. It was the wider Co-operative Movement which ruled out investing any further funds in pursuit of increased Co-operative Party representation. Far from being the product of the alliance with the Labour Party, the fact that it did not build further on its number of candidacies, was partially the result of a lack of desire to, but additionally reinforced by Co-operative Union restrictions. Indeed, when devoting more funding to expanding the number of candidates and thus MPs was discussed, it was the stance of the Co-operative Union that proved decisive. The Union categorically refused requests to tap into its funds for this purpose. Instead, the party was reliant upon voluntary funding from within its own organisation to fund any expansion of its political activities, which greatly restricted the scope for expansion.<sup>139</sup> As such, this suggests two things. On the one hand, that the Co-operative Party was financially hemmed in by the Co-operative Union. Whilst there was not a groundswell of opinion in favour of building on its candidacies due to widespread contentment with the party's

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<sup>136</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, *Report of the 1950 Co-operative Party Conference* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1950), pp.76-78

<sup>137</sup> NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1950 Co-operative Party Conference*, pp.77-78

<sup>138</sup> NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1952 Co-operative Party Conference*, pp.17-19

<sup>139</sup> NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1952 Co-operative Party Conference*, pp.17-19

post-1945 gains, when activists did raise the possibility, this was vetoed by the Co-operative Union. However, it also suggests that the Co-operative Union like the Co-operative Party felt that the representation gained out of this alliance in its current format was enough to safeguard the movement's interests.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has demonstrated that the tensions which led to rifts both nationally and locally within the Co-op-Labour alliance, could, on occasion lead to the absence of Co-operative candidatures, particularly at the 1945 election. Issues over both affiliation and the optional nature of the 1927 agreement led the Labour Party in several constituencies, such as Kettering, to refuse to endorse candidatures.<sup>140</sup> Viewed in isolation, the candidate selection process for the 1945 general election would thus suggest that Carbery and Robertson are justified in identifying national issues as the source of tensions at local level.<sup>141</sup> However, this chapter has demonstrated that the negative impact these national issues had on electoral organisation should not be overplayed. These issues were limited to set constituencies, and as such did not lead to widespread difficulty in standing candidates for election, as in 1945 the party still managed to field its highest number of candidates to date.<sup>142</sup> Furthermore, the tensions surrounding candidate selection were limited to the 1945 election, as following the shift to the 1946 agreement, the national issues which had proved problematic previously and led to local level disputes, no longer appeared to be so problematic. Candidate selection at both the 1950 and 1951 elections occurred without any significant constituency level disputes. Not only that, but the Co-operative Party also managed to secure candidacies in constituencies, such as Leicester South East, which had previously seen particularly strained Co-op-Labour relations.<sup>143</sup>

In contrast with Whitecross who has argued that the 1946 agreement involved a significant degree of compromise for the Co-operative Party, this chapter contends that with regards to candidate selection the Hastings agreement was slightly better than a 'workable

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<sup>140</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, March 23rd 1944, CPY/2/10, p.2; National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party Executive Committee Minutes, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1945, CP/2/10, p.2; Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, May 11<sup>th</sup> 1944, CPY/2/10 (NCA), p.1 and Co-operative News, March 31<sup>st</sup> 1945, p.1

<sup>141</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, pp.167-168 and Nicole Robertson, 'A Union of Forces Marching in the Same Direction? The Relationship between the Co-operative and Labour Parties, 1918-1919-39', in, Matthew Worley (ed.), *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: identities, cultures and perspectives, 1900-39* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp.218-221 and Carbery, *Consumers in Politics*, p.42

<sup>142</sup> Carbery, *Consumers in Politics*, p.128

<sup>143</sup> Robertson, 'A Union of Forces Marching in the Same Direction?', pp.218-220

compromise'.<sup>144</sup> Indeed, the chapter has demonstrated that the agreement negotiated in 1946 largely suited the Co-operative Party's aims in this period. Following the very successful 1945 election, rather than seeking to build significantly upon its electoral position, the Co-operative Party opted to consolidate its gains. This was highlighted by the wider party's unenthusiastic response to calls for further funding for political activities, which would suggest that expansionist arguments held limited sway within the party as a whole.<sup>145</sup> The fact that the expansion of Co-operative Party representation was only occasionally mentioned in comparison to policy issues which would frequently dominate discussions at national party level further lends support to the argument that overall, the Co-operative Party was less concerned about expanding its political activities than it was about retaining the enhanced representation that it had secured at the 1945 general election. Equally, when local Co-operative Parties raised the possibility of expanding the movement's political representation, they were prevented from doing so, not by the Labour Party, but by the party's parent body the Co-operative Union. Indeed, this body had limited any attempts to raise further funds to expand the number of candidates fielded by the Co-operative Party to local party voluntary funding.<sup>146</sup> As such, the Co-operative Party was politically and financially hemmed in not by the Labour Party but by its accountability to the Co-operative Union.

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<sup>144</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.105-114

<sup>145</sup> NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1952 Co-operative Party Conference*, pp.17-19

<sup>146</sup> NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1952 Co-operative Party Conference*, pp.17-19



### **Chapter 3 – Co-operative Party policy development and the alliance with the Labour Party,**

#### **1945-51**

This chapter will consider Co-operative Party policy development ahead of the 1945, 1950 and 1951 elections. Policymaking was another influential factor which shaped the Co-op's management of its alliance with Labour. The Co-operative Party had been formed to protect the interests of the Co-operative movement and over time became more proactive in pursuing the movement's policy priorities.<sup>147</sup> Yet, the process through which the Co-operative Party reached policy decisions was complicated. Whilst on the one hand policy matters were debated at annual Co-operative Party Conference, it was ultimately the Co-operative Congress which ratified policy and thus had ultimate responsibility for it.<sup>148</sup>

Despite this, the historiography has often posited this policy relationship between the Co-operative and Labour Parties as being difficult. Manton and Gurney, in particular, have painted a negative picture of this alliance. Gurney states that there was considerable frustration on the part of the Movement over the Labour Party's attitude towards nationalisation, especially with regards to the Labour Party's plan to nationalise the Co-operative Insurance Society.<sup>149</sup> Manton has further argued that whilst the 1946 agreement made provision for joint policy discussion, these joint discussions did not occur. Where the Labour Party had considered matters of policy which overlapped with the workings of the Co-operative Movement during the 1945-51 period, the Labour Party would not consult the Co-operative Party in these matters.<sup>150</sup> This is concurred with by Gurney who argues that the Co-op became increasingly dismayed by the lack of consultation from the Labour government, but he also argues that the Co-op became increasingly infuriated by the way they were treated like any other business under the Attlee governments, rather than as allies.<sup>151</sup> More recently, Whitecross has suggested that in spite of these tensions there remained significant policy overlaps between the Co-operative and Labour Parties in the case of the 1945 election. However, she is somewhat vague as to why this was the

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<sup>147</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.65

<sup>148</sup> Bailey, *An Outline of an Organisation*, p.6

<sup>149</sup> Gurney, 'The Battle of the Post-war Consumer', p.963 and Peter Gurney, 'A House Divided: The Organised Consumer and the British Labour Party, 1945-60', in Erika Rappaport, Sandra Trudgen Dawson and Mark J Crowley, *Consuming Behaviours: Identity, Politics and Pleasure in Twentieth Century Britain*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), p.238-242 and Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.168-169

<sup>150</sup> Kevin Manton, 'The Labour Party and Retail Distribution, 1919-1951' *Labour History Review* 73, 3 (2008), pp.263-274

<sup>151</sup> Peter Gurney, 'A House Divided: The Organised Consumer and the British Labour Party, 1945-60', in Erika Rappaport, Sandra Trudgen Dawson and Mark J Crowley, *Consuming Behaviours: Identity, Politics and Pleasure in Twentieth-Century Britain*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), p.238-242

case and whether this entailed pragmatic concessions by the Co-operative Party to avoid destabilising the alliance or whether there was genuine agreement with much of Labour policy.<sup>152</sup> There is, therefore, a disconnect between what has been characterised as a difficult period of policy conflict within the Co-op-Labour alliance and the existence of policy overlap at each of the general elections examined in this thesis which warrants further scrutiny.<sup>153</sup>

This chapter intends to bridge this gap in the historiography by first considering how far there were similarities between the manifestos of the Co-operative and Labour Parties. It will then consider how far when there was agreement with regards to policy this was the result of genuine agreement on the part of the Co-operative Party and how far some of the similarities between these manifestos resulted from increased policy agency on the part of the Co-operative Party. The chapter will then turn to consider policy disagreements at these elections and the extent to which these issues destabilised the alliance. This will bring into focus the Co-operative Party's desire to influence Labour policy and the methods that it deployed to do so in this period. In particular, the revised electoral agreement of 1946 and improved electoral position of the Co-operative Party will form key analytical reference points. The chapter concludes that whilst there were important areas of policy dispute these did not define the Co-op-Labour electoral relationship during this period. Instead, contrary to Craigen and Leonard's assertion that the Co-operative Party was marginalised under the Attlee governments, the period saw the Co-operative Party significantly increase its policy agency, whilst simultaneously projecting an increasingly distinctive policy programme.<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, despite Whitecross's prevarication over whether the policy overlaps in 1945 were the result of genuine policy agreement or electoral expediency, by comparing this election alongside the 1950 and 1951 elections, the chapter will show much of this agreement was related to the way in which Labour policy aligned with the workings of the Co-operative Movement.

### **The 1945 Election and the nationalisation of food wholesaling**

The election manifestos produced for the 1945 general election certainly reveal a considerable degree of alignment between both parties' policy programmes.<sup>155</sup> There has been, however, some ambiguity within the historiography about why this was the case. For example, Whitecross

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<sup>152</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.165-166

<sup>153</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.165-166

<sup>154</sup> Craigen, 'The Co-operative Party', p.7 and Leonard, 'The Co-op's in Politics', p.56

<sup>155</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party, *General Election Manifesto: We Make Tomorrow – Guard his Future* (Co-operative Party: Manchester, 1945), NCA/CP Publications, 1944-1947 and Labour History Archive and Study Centre, *Let us Face the Future: A declaration of Labour policy for the consideration of the nation* (London: Labour Party, 1945)

has suggested that the similarities between these public facing policy documents could have been the result of electoral expediency. Co-operative Party candidates had to stand in alliance with Labour and the party may have been anxious to avoid destabilising the alliance by advocating policies which radically differed from those of Labour. Equally, she posits that these similarities could have been borne out of genuine agreement. Furthermore, she suggests policymaking was complex for the Co-operative Party as it had to balance appeasing the wider movement as well as managing the alliance with Labour. However, her research remains indecisive and somewhat inconclusive in accounting for these policy similarities. Furthermore, as the latter stages of this chapter will show Whitecross overlooks the Co-operative Party's growing ability to exert policy agency during the immediate post-war period.<sup>156</sup>

Ultimately, whilst some of this stemmed from electoral expediency, for the most part, this was the result of genuine agreement as much of Labour Party policy in 1945 was supportive of the work of the Co-operative Movement. The Labour Party's manifesto focussed on the key issues of housing, health and schools, whilst promoting Labour as the party of full employment.<sup>157</sup> In all of these areas they were fully supported by the Co-operative Party.<sup>158</sup> Many of these policies stemmed from the Beveridge Report's recommendations, which were very popular amongst voters. Fielding notes how 55% of people surveyed for a Gallup poll stated their support for a health system free at the point of delivery. He goes on to state that the Labour Party's most popular proposals during its early years in office were those directly concerned with the Beveridge Report.<sup>159</sup> Thus it would appear that there was an element of electoral expediency on the Co-operative Party's behalf in advocating such policies in order to ensure its candidates were elected. However, the Co-operative Party's reasons for advocating them ran deeper than electoral expediency, as in addition to being popular with voters, many of these policies supported the work of the Co-operative Movement. Policies such as full employment and public housing were understandably of chief concern to the Co-operative Party. Its membership following the end of the Second World War sat at 9.7 million and was typically made up of working-class people.<sup>160</sup> Thus, in periods of widespread unemployment such as the 1930s, the Co-operative Movement members and businesses struggled as a consequence of under-

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<sup>156</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.164-166

<sup>157</sup> LHASC, *Let us Face the Future: A declaration of Labour policy for the consideration of the nation* (London: Labour Party, 1945) and Pelling, '1945 General Election Reconsidered', p.411

<sup>158</sup> NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party, *General Election Manifesto: We Make Tomorrow – Guard his Future* (Co-operative Party: Manchester, 1945), NCA/CP Publications, 1944-1947 and National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party, *The World We Want – Co-operative Party Policy* (Co-operative Union, Manchester, 1943)

<sup>159</sup> Fielding, 'The Meaning of the 1945 General Election', pp.633-635

<sup>160</sup> Gurney, 'Battle of the Consumer in Post-war Britain', pp.960-961

consumption generated by economic depression.<sup>161</sup> Indeed, when considering this interwar period Purvis highlights the direct correlation between the difficult economic situation and what was a difficult retail environment.<sup>162</sup> This was compounded by the fact that membership was concentrated heavily in industrial regions such as Lancashire, the West Riding of Yorkshire and West Central Scotland where unemployment and poverty levels were at their worst.<sup>163</sup> Thus, the Co-operative Party had both principled and pragmatic reasons for supporting Labour policies in this area, as they were popular with voters in the Co-operative heartlands and coincided with Co-operative business interests.

There were also similar overlaps between Labour Party and Co-operative Party policy due to the long-standing interest the Movement had in the welfare of its members. Robertson has noted the way by which the Co-operative Movement extended its reach to the health and welfare of Co-op members by providing convalescent funding to support members who were recovering from ill-health or surgery which made a profound difference to its membership prior to the formation of the National Health Service.<sup>164</sup> The Co-op dividend was similarly supportive of members welfare. This financial incentive to Co-op membership had numerous benefits for members as dividend could be used by families to acquire luxuries which otherwise would have been unattainable, such as holidays. However, for others, dividend became a vital supplement to incomes, enabling families to purchase essential items such as shoes for their children.<sup>165</sup> Thus, despite Whitecross' prevarication over the reasons for the close alignment of Co-operative Party and Labour Party policy in their public facing campaigns at the 1945 general election, it becomes apparent that this was the result of genuine agreement as opposed to electoral opportunism. It was in the best interests of Co-operative Movement members and businesses for the Co-operative Party to support such policies.<sup>166</sup>

These policy overlaps also extended to areas of policy which historians such as Manton and Gurney have argued proved problematic within the Co-op-Labour alliance, namely the issue of nationalisation. Whilst both of these historians cite nationalisation policy as a contentious issue for both parties, the Co-operative Party advocated the nationalisation of several industries

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<sup>161</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.149 and Keith Laybourn, *Britain on the breadline: a social and political history of Britain, 1918-1939* (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), p.62

<sup>162</sup> Martin Purvis, 'Retailing and economic uncertainty in interwar Britain: co-operative (mis)fortunes in north-west England', in Elizabeth Baigent and Robert J. Mayhew (eds.) *English Geographies, 1600-1950. Historical Essays on English Cultures, Customs and Communities in Honour of Jack Langton* (Oxford: St John College Research Centre, 2009), p.143

<sup>163</sup> Gurney, 'Battle of the Consumer in Post-war Britain', pp.960-961

<sup>164</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, pp.33-34

<sup>165</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement Communities in Britain*, pp.52-54

<sup>166</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.164-169

earmarked by the Labour Party for state ownership within its election manifesto. The Labour Party's election manifesto pledged to nationalise fuel, power, iron and steel, the food industry, agriculture and housing as well as the Bank of England, whereas the Co-operative Party advocated the nationalisation of several of these industries, including the Bank of England, the transport and coal industry.<sup>167</sup> However, whilst the Labour Party proposed the nationalisation of fuel and power as a whole, the Co-operative Party, by contrast sought to nationalise just the coal mines.<sup>168</sup> However, these divergences occurred in areas which were not central to Co-op business. Furthermore, the fact that the Co-operative Party was advocating different priorities to those of Labour in such a pivotal policy area suggests that other areas of policy overlap stemmed from genuine agreement as the Co-operative Party was willing to diverge from Labour Party policy when it saw necessary.

When there was disagreement over policies which the Co-operative Movement deemed to challenge its interests, this tended to remain unmentioned by the Co-operative Party in its public pronouncements during the 1945 election campaign so as to avoid contention in the alliance. Whilst the Co-operative Party sought policy revisions when this occurred, the Labour Party was able to draw on support from the Trade Unions to prevent this from happening. This was particularly the case over the Labour Party's food policy. The Labour Party had proposed that the Ministry of Food should become a permanent organisation following the conclusion of the Second World War.<sup>169</sup> However, the Co-operative Party was concerned that should this occur, and a subsequent Food Commission be appointed, this would permanently restrict the trading autonomy of the Co-operative Movement through the continued operation of a Food Import Board acting as a national wholesaler and as such, usurping the role of the Co-operative Wholesale Societies.<sup>170</sup> The formation of the CWS in 1863 was rooted in concerns to ensure security for Co-op stores following the difficulties of supply which had riddled the 1850s. Not only had there been difficulties in transporting goods but there were also concerns about how attitudes towards the Co-operative Movement would impact supply. It was argued that because

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<sup>167</sup> LHASC, *Let us Face the Future: A declaration of Labour policy for the consideration of the nation* (London: Labour Party, 1945) And NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party, *General Election Manifesto: We Make Tomorrow – Guard his Future* (Co-operative Party: Manchester, 1945), NCA/CP Publications, 1944-1947

<sup>168</sup> NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party, *General Election Manifesto: We Make Tomorrow – Guard his Future* (Co-operative Party: Manchester, 1945), NCA/CP Publications, 1944-1947 and LHASC, *Let us Face the Future: A declaration of Labour policy for the consideration of the nation* (London: Labour Party, 1945) and Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.165

<sup>169</sup> LHASC, *Let us Face the Future: A declaration of Labour policy for the consideration of the nation* (London: Labour Party, 1945)

<sup>170</sup> National Co-operative Archive, *Report of the 1944 Co-operative Congress* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1944), p.63

there were suspicions and resentment directed at the Co-operative Movement over Co-op practices, namely the dividend, that access to goods would be restricted. Finally, there was also the desire to ensure that the quality of goods were maintained as this was generally not regulated and the Co-op had aimed to ensure it provided its members with good quality products. It was therefore viewed by Co-operators that if they were to take control of the goods supplied to its stores, they would be able to avoid such issues by ensuring that not only did they have supplies in the first instance, but that the supplies it did have would be of higher-quality than could be sourced privately.<sup>171</sup> The CWS and SCWS became staple elements of the Co-operative business model. In terms of the CWS, its surplus had risen from £306 in 1864 to £126,979 in 1890. Whilst the CWS would go on to struggle somewhat during the 1920s, and despite difficult overall economic conditions during the 1930s, it would still see growth.<sup>172</sup> By the 1940s, the net surplus of the CWS (prior to taxation) had risen to 4,740,388 and by 1950, this figure stood at 8,498,123.<sup>173</sup> However, during the period of the Second World War, the government had increased the role it played in the supply of food. The Ministry of Food had been set up initially during the First World War to ensure that both the consumption and supply of food was regulated. Whilst it was dissolved in 1921, it was again set up in 1939, again to ensure that the food supply was regulated in order to ensure food supplies could be obtained and that this could be done at an affordable price. As such, it played a direct role in rationing and food subsidies.<sup>174</sup> Therefore, the continuation of the Ministry of Food stood as a direct challenge to a central business function of the Co-operative Movement and as such it is unsurprising that the Co-operative Party sought revisions to this aspect of Labour Party policy given the challenge that it posed to Co-op business interests.

However, despite Co-op concerns about the continuation of the Ministry of Food, and the Co-operative Party's assertion that such issues could be avoided if the Labour Party were to consult the Co-operative Movement over issues it has expertise in, as was provided for under the 1927 agreement, the Labour Party was completely unwilling to reconsider its policy.<sup>175</sup> When the issue was broached by the Co-operative Party's parent body the Co-operative Union at the National Council of Labour in March 1944, the Labour Party avoided the issue and was assisted

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<sup>171</sup> Wilson, *Building Co-operation*, pp.53-54

<sup>172</sup> Wilson, *Building Co-operation*, pp.68-181

<sup>173</sup> Co-operative Wholesale Society, *All about the C.W.S: the world's largest co-operative organisation* (London: CWS, 1966), p.16

<sup>174</sup> 'Records of the Ministry of Food – Administrative/biographical background', The National Archives, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C786> [18th January 2024], (para.1-9)

<sup>175</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, May 16<sup>th</sup> 1945, p.2

in doing so by the Trade Union representatives on the grounds that the NCL was an inappropriate forum to discuss the issue and that it should be instead discussed between the two bodies away from the NCL.<sup>176</sup> The National Co-operative Authority, did enter into discussions with the Labour Party National Executive Committee, but to no effect as when the Labour manifesto was published the policy remained unaltered, pledging that the party would continue the Ministry of Food's work, including the bulk purchase of food, to which the Co-op was so vehemently opposed.<sup>177</sup> Therefore, when significant elements of policy disagreement arose during the build up to the 1945 general election, the Labour Party proved adept at utilising its relationship with the trade union movement to suppress Co-op opposition to their food policy. Consequently, whilst there was a considerable degree of overlap between the Co-operative and Labour parties regarding policy at the 1945 election, where there was not, the Co-operative Party lacked the ability to persuade Labour to amend its policy along the lines desired by the Co-op movement as it had been established to do so.<sup>178</sup> Thus, when analysed in isolation, the 1945 election campaign appears to confirm the dominant perspectives within the historiography that whilst there could be similarities in the general policy programmes of the Co-op and Labour Parties, the Co-operative Party struggled to make any distinct contribution to the shared policies of both parties.

### **The 1950 election and Labour Believes in Britain**

This was something which was again demonstrated heading into the 1950 election. By the time this election had occurred, with a new electoral agreement in place and the Co-operative Party having significantly expanded its cohort of MPs, there was a shift in the Co-op-Labour alliance. Whilst serious policy disputes still arose pre-election, some of which ultimately remained unresolved by the time of manifesto publication, however, the Co-operative Party now possessed greater bargaining power which it was able to use to successfully secure policy compromises with the Labour Party.

The publication of the Labour Party policy document, *Labour Believes in Britain* in 1949 initially generated significant concern for both the Co-operative Party and Co-operative Union as it

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<sup>176</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, National Council of Labour Minutes, March 21<sup>st</sup> 1944.

<sup>177</sup> NCA, *Report of the 1944 Co-operative Congress* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1944), p.63; National Co-operative Archive, *Report of the 1945 Co-operative Congress* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1945), p.64 and LHASC, *A declaration of Labour policy for the consideration of the nation* (London: Labour Party, 1945)

<sup>178</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.65

committed the Labour Party to the nationalisation of several areas of Co-op business.<sup>179</sup> On the one hand, the Labour Party had made the case for the nationalisation of the meat industry on the grounds that the industry had functioned well under the Ministry of Food and that this work should be continued. Whilst the nationalisation of wholesaling was dropped, similar arguments were made for taking cold storage under public ownership.<sup>180</sup> The Co-operative Movement did make the case that there could be benefits to public health if these industries were taken under public ownership. Centralised control of the meat industry for example, it was argued would ensure the government could take an active role in the inspection of both meat and fatstock and that this would provide the public with greater certainty that the food they bought was fit for human consumption. However, it also felt that the choice over meat and fatstock purchased should be in the hands of consumer, and by nationalising the industry, this would take this element of control out of Co-op and consumer hands.<sup>181</sup> These were not the only proposals in this document which directly challenged the work of the Co-operative Movement as this pamphlet also made the case for the nationalisation of the fruit and vegetable industry in order to allow consumers to access 'good quality' fruit and vegetables at 'reasonable prices'. For this to be achieved it was suggested that this industry should be taken under municipal ownership. In addition to reducing the cost to the consumer, it was hoped this would allow for more storage of these goods which would be useful in times of shortage.<sup>182</sup> Finally, the Labour Party sought to take under public ownership the sugar industry as a way of breaking up the 'sugar monopoly'.<sup>183</sup> However, whilst the Co-operative Party were concerned about these aspects of Labour policy, by far the greatest concern was the Labour Party's plan to nationalise industrial insurance, which threatened to eradicate a long-established Co-op business activity.<sup>184</sup> The Co-operative Insurance Society had been part of the Co-operative Movement since 1867, and the Co-operative Party were keen to ensure that this crucial part of the Movement was not taken out of its own hands.<sup>185</sup> Thus, the Labour Party's willingness to make such a proposal in quick succession to the proposal to nationalise wholesaling and the

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<sup>179</sup> The Labour Party Archive and Study Centre, The Labour Party, *Labour Believes in Britain* (Labour Party: London, 1949), pp.16-17 and National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, *Report of the 1950 Co-operative Party Conference* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1950), p.75

<sup>180</sup> LHASC, The Labour Party, *Labour Believes in Britain*, p.16

<sup>181</sup> Working Class Movement Library, *Report of the 1951 Co-operative Congress* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1951), p.108

<sup>182</sup> LHASC, The Labour Party, *Labour Believes in Britain*, p.16

<sup>183</sup> LHASC, The Labour Party, *Labour Believes in Britain*, pp.16-17

<sup>184</sup> LHASC, The Labour Party, *Labour Believes in Britain*. NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1950 Co-operative Party Conference* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1950), p.75 and Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.168-169

<sup>185</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.168-169



proposals outlined above from ‘Labour Believes in Britain’, which the Co-op deemed to be so detrimental to its business interests, does appear to vindicate Craigen and Leonard’s contention that the Labour Party were marginalising the Co-op.<sup>186</sup>

Ultimately, the Labour Party did compromise on the issue of insurance as its manifesto advocated the mutualisation of the industry instead.<sup>187</sup> Despite this, historians have tended to emphasise the negative effects exerted by the Labour Party’s nationalisation proposals on Co-op-Labour relations whilst playing down the Co-operative contribution to the revision of Labour policy. For example, despite the compromise made, Gurney has argued that the damage to the alliance had already been done. He argues that the Co-operative movement had become deeply concerned for its own business operations, as it felt as though its own form of economic organisation was at risk due to Labour’s preference for ‘bureaucratic and statist alternatives’.<sup>188</sup> Whitecross nuances this perspective. Whilst she states that this policy shift had an overall positive impact on Co-op-Labour relations as it gave the Co-operative Party hope for further policy collaboration, she is sceptical about the degree of influence exerted by the Co-operative Party over Labour’s decision to revise this policy.<sup>189</sup>

Prior to the resolution of this policy conflict, there were some voices raised from within the party which asserted that the alliance in its current format was unable to meet the needs of the Co-operative Party. Following the publication of *Labour Believes in Britain*, an article was published within *Co-operative News* by H.W. Franklin which explored the industrial insurance issue. Franklin had previously been a member of the Co-operative Party’s Executive Committee and was also a member of the Co-operative Union Central Board and as such was not an insignificant figure in either organisation. Within his article, he made several suggestions regarding the alliance with Labour, particularly regarding the potential benefits of affiliation. On the one hand, he argued that because the party remained unaffiliated, at national level to the Labour Party, it lacked the representation at Labour Party Conference it otherwise would have had if the party had affiliated directly. He also cited the Co-operative Party’s lack of MPs as problematic when trying to influence Labour policy, as it could easily be ignored by the Labour Party.<sup>190</sup> These issues over policy led Franklin to recommend that the Co-operative Party should

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<sup>186</sup> Craigen, ‘The Co-operative Party’, p.7 and Leonard, ‘The Co-op’s in Politics’, p.56

<sup>187</sup> Labour Party, *Let Us Win Through Together: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation*. Available at: [1950 Labour Party Manifesto - \(labour-party.org.uk\)](https://www.labour-party.org.uk) [accessed: 5<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

<sup>188</sup> Gurney, ‘A House Divided’, pp.238-242 and Gurney, ‘The Battle of the Consumer in Post-war Britain’, pp.965-966

<sup>189</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.172-174

<sup>190</sup> National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Press, Co-operative Party Monthly Letter, October 1949, pp.7-11 and *Co-operative News*, September 10<sup>th</sup> 1949, p.10

affiliate to Labour as this would facilitate greater levels of representation at Labour Party Conference and the inclusion of co-operative members within the Labour Party National Executive Committee, and on its policy sub-committees. He concluded that this would give the Co-operative Party greater opportunity to influence Labour Party policy, prior to it being finalised.<sup>191</sup> However, the response from the Co-op Party was antagonistic as it sought to defend its existing position with regards to the alliance with Labour. Indeed, Jack Bailey's response to this article starkly reinforced the anti-national affiliation argument and maintained that an alliance with Labour was the best way to achieve the party's aims as opposed to full national affiliation. He rejected national affiliation on the grounds that it would trade away the electoral machinery built up by the Co-operative Party and stifle its ability to form independent policy positions away from the Labour Party in order to gain representation on the Labour Party Executive Committee. He argues that whilst full affiliation would grant the Co-operative Party direct representation on this committee by trading away this independent party status it would lose its policy autonomy.<sup>192</sup> Instead, Bailey expressed confidence that policy issues could be dealt with via existing machinery as prior to its publication neither Labour nor Co-op MPs had had any real input into the policy regarding industrial insurance. He stated that because the responsibility for developing Labour Party policy statements lay with its executive committee before being subsequently discussed at annual party conference, it was unfair to suggest that Co-operative Party MPs could have influenced Labour Party policy.<sup>193</sup> Bailey's bullish response suggests the Co-operative Party were confident in their existing machinery and that its main objective was to retain its own autonomy. Whilst acting as a separate party, the Co-operative Party could negotiate policy differences with the Labour Party, whereas if it was to affiliate directly to it, it would be bound by its collective decision-making processes, which would make it more difficult for it to protect its own interests in the way the movement desired.

Furthermore, acting as an independent party had yielded successes for the Co-operative Party in this area. Indeed, Bailey was able to make this argument with such confidence as even without being affiliated the Co-operative Party through its own electoral weight and through Co-operative Union negotiations with the Labour Party had effected positive change over Labour policy regarding industrial insurance.<sup>194</sup> Of course, there were other factors which influenced the Labour Party's shifting stance on industrial insurance, such as the growth of anti-

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<sup>191</sup> *Co-operative News*, September 10<sup>th</sup> 1949, p.10

<sup>192</sup> NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party Monthly Letter, October 1949, CPY.CP MONTHLY LETTER, pp.7-11

<sup>193</sup> NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party Monthly Letter, October 1949, CPY.CP MONTHLY LETTER, pp.7-11

<sup>194</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Report of the Co-operative Union for submission to the meeting of the National Council of Labour to be held in London on Tuesday, March 21<sup>st</sup> 1950

nationalisation sentiment amongst business and the press. However, these pressures did not trigger a change in Labour policy. For example, the nationalisation of sugar had been vociferously objected to by Tate and Lyle.<sup>195</sup> Yet, in stark contrast to industrial insurance policy, the Labour Party continued to advocate the nationalisation of the sugar industry.<sup>196</sup> Therefore, it needs to be considered that there were clearly other factors which influenced the Labour Party's decision to abandon its proposals to nationalise industrial insurance and switch to the mutualisation of the sector instead.<sup>197</sup> Indeed, the conditions under which the discussions surrounding the nationalisation of industrial insurance took place were markedly different to those about food policy discussions in 1945. Two significant changes had occurred between the two elections which meant that the Co-operative Party through a combination of the increased involvement of its parent body, the Co-operative Union, and its own increased electoral strength was able to secure this policy shift.

The revision of the electoral agreement negotiated in 1946 was significant in this regard as under the revised agreement relations had improved significantly which then facilitated fruitful discussions and consequently enabled a revised stance regarding industrial insurance to be reached. But in addition, the Co-operative Party had grown significantly by the 1950 election and as such its MPs had become a significant part of the Parliamentary Labour Party making it more difficult for the Labour Party to ignore their views. This was especially so given Labour's own dwindling majority which meant that those MPs comprised a significant section of that majority. By 1950 the Labour Party had just 17 seat majority over the Conservatives, and there were 18 Co-operative Party MPs who comprised a crucial section of the Labour Party's majority.<sup>198</sup> As such, the Co-operative Party had improved its leverage within this alliance and in this way the alliance had become more reciprocal.

Additionally, whilst historians have been keen to emphasise the agreement reached in 1946 as a 'workable compromise', the episode surrounding the revision of Labour policy on industrial insurance demonstrates that for the Co-operative Party the agreement was working better than this term would suggest.<sup>199</sup> By shifting who was engaging in the policy discussions with the

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<sup>195</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.161

<sup>196</sup> Labour Party, *Let Us Win Through Together: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation*. Available at: [1950 Labour Party Manifesto - \(labour-party.org.uk\)](https://www.labour-party.org.uk/1950-labour-party-manifesto) [accessed: 5<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

<sup>197</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Report of the Co-operative Union for submission to the meeting of the National Council of Labour to be held in London on Tuesday, March 21<sup>st</sup> 1950

<sup>198</sup> Richard Cracknell, Elise Uberoi, Matthew Burton, 'UK Election Statistics: 1918-2023, A Long Century of Elections', <<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7529/>> [accessed 18 September 2023], p.17

<sup>199</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.105-114

Labour Party, fruitful discussions had taken place. Whilst *Labour Believes in Britain*, proposed to nationalise the insurance industry, within its 1950 election manifesto, Labour pledged to mutualise it instead.<sup>200</sup> There were, of course, concerns about how far the Co-op could trust Labour to abide by this revised policy commitment. The Party secretary was concerned to ensure that whilst the Labour Party had said it would adopt a policy of mutualisation, that this was along Co-op lines. However, on the same token, there was a great degree of appreciation that the Labour Party had made this change in the first instance. Additionally, the representative from the RACS hoped that having secured this change, similar progress could be made in negotiating alternatives to the nationalisation of other industries.<sup>201</sup> This was reflected in the Co-operative Party's 1950 manifesto, which made clear that its elected MPs would 'work to ensure that the most democratic form of administration is set up under the mutualisation plan'.<sup>202</sup>

Indeed, the tone of much of rest of the manifesto conveyed the impression of a Co-operative Party content in its alliance with the Labour Party. There did remain some differences between the Co-operative and Labour manifestos as the Labour Party continued to advocate the nationalisation of cement, cold storage and meat wholesaling. Labour's commitment to expanding nationalisation suggests that the Labour Party were still not, despite making compromises on industrial insurance, respecting Co-op business interests. Yet despite this, the Co-operative Party demonstrated its confidence in the Labour alliance. The Co-operative Party manifesto at the 1950 election placed the record of the Labour Government elected in 1945 in high regard, especially in relation to the welfare reforms implemented in response to the Beveridge report. High prominence was given to Labour's new consumer policies, such as its plans to create a new Consumer Advice Service and outlaw minimum price fixing, which reflected Co-operative movement priorities.<sup>203</sup> Furthermore, contrast was drawn between the experience of the Co-operative Societies under a Conservative government when compared with Labour.<sup>204</sup> As such, whilst Gurney has stressed the negative impact that the Labour Party's plan to nationalise the insurance industry had on Co-op-Labour relations, this clearly is an

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<sup>200</sup> Labour Party, *Let Us Win Through Together: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation*. Available at: [1950 Labour Party Manifesto - \(labour-party.org.uk\)](https://www.labour-party.org.uk/1950-manifesto) [accessed: 5<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

<sup>201</sup> NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1950 Co-operative Party Conference*, pp.51-52 and National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party, Forward with the People: election manifesto of the Co-operative Party, 1950. CP CP [FORWARD], p.3

<sup>202</sup> NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party, Forward with the People: election manifesto of the Co-operative Party, 1950. CP CP [FORWARD], p.3

<sup>203</sup> NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party, Forward with the People: election manifesto of the Co-operative Party, 1950. CP CP [FORWARD], pp.1-4

<sup>204</sup> NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party, Forward with the People: election manifesto of the Co-operative Party, 1950. CP CP [FORWARD], p.4

unfair conclusion in relation to the relationship between these two parties during election campaigns.<sup>205</sup> This dispute of course caused short term rifts in the alliance, but the long-term impact of this issue should not be overstated. The Co-operative Party demonstrated that as whole its aims could be best served through an alliance with Labour as opposed to either full affiliation or disaffiliating completely. When it was suggested that full affiliation was a preferable option to give more input into Labour policy, this was rejected on the grounds that the existing framework was more appropriate. Furthermore, whilst Whitecross is somewhat sceptical over the impact of Co-op opposition on Labour's revision of its industrial insurance policy, this section of the chapter demonstrates the need not to underplay this influence.<sup>206</sup> Indeed, the Co-operative Party's growing confidence was well justified. Other objections had been raised by other bodies regarding Labour Party policy. For example, Tate and Lyle had objected to the Labour Party's plan to nationalise sugar, and compromises had not been reached unlike when the Co-op forcefully articulated its policy concerns.<sup>207</sup> Largely through negotiations with the Labour Party and the Co-operative Union, a significant policy compromise had been achieved which was facilitated by the revised 1946 agreement and the growing electoral weight of the Co-operative Party in Parliament. Policy differences undoubtedly remained over nationalisation, but there was also emerging policy alignment on a range of consumer and cost of living issues.

### **The 1951 Election**

Following this change in policy direction by the Labour Party at the 1950 election, there were no significant conflicts over policy ahead of the subsequent 1951 election. Instead, the election campaign was characterised by an increased focus by both parties on consumer issues as a result of the high cost of living. Whilst the Co-operative Party demonstrated significant support for much of the policies proposed by the Labour Party, the increasing focus on consumer issues enabled the Co-operative Party to adopt a distinctive policy position.

Whilst the 1951 election was not marred by the policy disputes which had occurred in both 1945 and 1950, there were significant policy divergences as the Co-operative Party projected a more distinctive set of policies during its campaign whilst simultaneously demonstrating its support for several of the Labour Party's policy priorities. For example, the Co-operative Party manifesto discussed areas of policy which were overlooked by the Labour Party, such as issues

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<sup>205</sup> Gurney, 'A House Divided', pp.238-242 and Gurney, 'The Battle of the Consumer', pp.965-966

<sup>206</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.172-174

<sup>207</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.161

relating to fuel and power.<sup>208</sup> Furthermore, when similar areas of policy were discussed, approaches advocated by both parties could differ widely. Whilst the issue of the potential nationalisation of industrial insurance had been resolved at the 1950 election, there were still significant divergences with regards to nationalisation. Unlike previous general election campaigns the Labour Party did not prioritise specific industries for nationalisation, but they still insisted that where it was in the best interests to do so it would 'start new public enterprises'.<sup>209</sup> By contrast, the Co-operative Party emphasised the need to ensure the efficiency of industries already under state control by enhancing consumer control through giving, 'local public bodies, greater administrative powers over distributive functions.'<sup>210</sup>

However, there was also a significant element of policy overlap at this election. This on the one hand could be seen in more general policies such as those related to maintaining peace and full employment.<sup>211</sup> Yet, this alignment also extended to consumer policies. The rise in the cost of living meant that consumer issues became more prominent during these elections which worked increasingly in favour of the Co-operative Party as the issues of key priority to it were thus brought to the fore. For the Labour Party, the rise in living costs should be blamed on rising world prices and as such in order to deal with this issue, the Labour Party proposed strengthened controls on prices and engagement with international discussions surrounding import prices. It suggested that should a Conservative government be elected, they would abandon the policy of bulk buying, something which the Labour Party argued had helped ensure prices were lower than would otherwise have been and the utility scheme would be ended. Finally, they would allow rents to be raised by landlords.<sup>212</sup> Many of these consumer policies were general and therefore the Co-operative Party's influence over them should be kept in proportion. The election as a whole did see consumer issues brought to the fore because of the high cost of living, something which was also reflected in the Conservative Party manifesto.<sup>213</sup> However, the Co-operative Party displayed its support for several of these Labour Party policies

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<sup>208</sup> NCA, CPP, *Co-operative Party, For all the People: manifesto of the Co-operative Party*, CP/CP [FOR], 1951, p.2

<sup>209</sup> Labour Party, *Labour Party Election Manifesto 1951*. Available at: [1951 Labour Party Manifesto - \(labour-party.org.uk\)](https://www.labour-party.org.uk) [accessed: 20<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

<sup>210</sup> NCA, CPP, *Co-operative Party, For all the People: manifesto of the Co-operative Party*, CP/CP [FOR], 1951, p.2

<sup>211</sup> NCA, CPP, *Co-operative Party, For all the People: manifesto of the Co-operative Party*, CP/CP [FOR], 1951, p.1 and Labour Party, *Labour Party Election Manifesto 1951*. Available at: [1951 Labour Party Manifesto - \(labour-party.org.uk\)](https://www.labour-party.org.uk) [accessed: 20<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

<sup>212</sup> Labour Party, *Labour Party Election Manifesto 1951*. Available at: [1951 Labour Party Manifesto - \(labour-party.org.uk\)](https://www.labour-party.org.uk) [accessed: 20<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

<sup>213</sup> David. E. Butler, *The British General Election of 1951* (London: Macmillan, 1952), pp.108-109 and Fred W.S Craig, *British General Election manifestos, 1918-1966* (Chichester: Political Reference Publications, 1970), pp.144-145

and it also felt that its approach to price fixing was being adopted by it. The Co-operative Party voiced its support for the Labour Party's approach to bringing down prices, controlling profits as well as its approach to improving production.<sup>214</sup> Furthermore, the Co-operative Party felt its approach to price fixing was being heard by the Labour Party.<sup>215</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As such, this chapter has demonstrated the need to not over-exaggerate the extent to which there was policy conflict between the Labour and Co-operative Parties at general elections between 1945-51. Whilst the bulk of the historiography has highlighted a perceived disconnect between the marked policy alignment at the 1945 election and what has been characterised as a difficult period of policy conflict thereafter, this chapter has demonstrated that policy discontent did not define the Co-op-Labour electoral relationship during the general election campaigns of this period.<sup>216</sup> Whilst the period did see significant policy disputes, it also saw the Co-operative Party's ability to influence Labour policy grow significantly. The 1945 election had seen despite widespread overlaps in the policies both parties advocated, significant disagreements in areas crucial to Co-op business in the form of the continuation of the Ministry of Food, but this trend was not sustained throughout this period.<sup>217</sup> Whilst prior to the 1950 election there had been significant conflict over the Labour Party's plan to nationalise the insurance industry, by the time the election took place a significant compromise had been brokered to shift to mutualisation. Although Gurney has argued that regardless of the shift, lasting damage had already been inflicted on the alliance which led to a deeply untrusting Co-operative Party, this chapter contends that the negative impact of this policy dispute on Co-op-Labour relations during these election campaigns should not be overstated.<sup>218</sup> Although both parties continued into the 1951 election to advocate different approaches to public ownership and the Co-operative Party remained somewhat sceptical of how far the Labour Party's plans for the mutualisation of industrial insurance would adhere to Co-op values and principles, Labour's willingness to amend its preferred approach to public ownership in light of Co-operative movement objections was largely appreciated. Furthermore, this reinforced Co-operative Party

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<sup>214</sup> Labour Party, *Labour Party Election Manifesto 1951*. Available at: [1951 Labour Party Manifesto - \(labour-party.org.uk\)](https://www.labour-party.org.uk) [accessed: 20<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

<sup>215</sup> NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1951 Co-operative Party Conference*, p.8

<sup>216</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.164-165

<sup>217</sup> LHASC, *Let us Face the Future: A declaration of Labour policy for the consideration of the nation* (London: Labour Party, 1945) and NCA, CPP, *Co-operative Party, General Election Manifesto: We Make Tomorrow – Guard his Future* (Co-operative Party: Manchester: 1945), NCA/CP Publications, 1944-1947

<sup>218</sup> Gurney, 'A House Divided', pp.238-242 and Gurney, 'The Battle of the Consumer in Post-war Britain', pp.965-966

confidence, as articulated through its election manifesto and its rejection of Franklin's suggestion for full affiliation to Labour, that policy disagreements could be effectively managed through the existing machinery of the alliance.<sup>219</sup>

The chapter has provided clarity as to why there was significant policy overlap between both parties in 1945 and beyond. Whitecross has suggested three reasons this could have occurred, electoral pragmatism, genuine agreement or difficulties on the part of the Co-operative Party in forming policy due to balancing multiple ties in being in alliance with Labour and responsible to the Co-operative Union.<sup>220</sup> However, a much greater factor in this policy overlap was genuine policy agreement. The fact that there was little difference between the manifestos produced by both parties in 1945, reflecting the fact there was little for the two parties to disagree over. Many of the policies both parties were proposing in 1945 had direct links to the work of the Co-operative Movement and so this proved to be the central factor in the Co-operative Party's advocacy of these policies.<sup>221</sup> Furthermore, when you consider this election campaign alongside that of the latter 1950 and 1951 elections, the reasoning for this becomes increasingly stark. As these elections were increasingly dominated by consumer issues, there was growing space for the Co-operative Party to act as a voice of the Co-operative Movement, something which was reflected in what was increasingly distinctive election literature to that of the Labour Party.

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<sup>219</sup> NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party, *Forward with the People: election manifesto of the Co-operative Party, 1950*. CP CP [FORWARD] and NCA/CPP, Co-operative Party Monthly Letter, October 1949, pp.7-11 and *Co-operative News*, September 10<sup>th</sup> 1949, p.10

<sup>220</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.164-166

<sup>221</sup> NCA, CPP, *We Make Tomorrow: Guard His Future* (Co-operative Party: Manchester: 1945), NCA/CP Publications, 1944-1947 and LHASC, *Let us Face the Future: A declaration of Labour policy for the consideration of the nation* (London: Labour Party, 1945)



#### **Chapter 4 – The Co-operative Party Campaign in the constituencies**

In order to come to a full judgement about the extent to which the alliance with Labour functioned as an effective way by which the Co-operative Party could protect the Movement's interests through parliament, it is imperative to unpack local level campaigns were ran. As such, this final chapter will consider the Co-operative Party campaign in the constituencies. It will do so through both candidate election literature as well as local press coverage before moving on to consider how this ultimately translated into results.

The Co-operative Party existed in the first instance to secure political representation for the Co-operative Movement.<sup>222</sup> However, by standing candidates in alliance with the Labour Party, matters were complicated as at local level Co-operative Party candidates had to balance the requirement to act as representatives of the Co-operative Movement whilst standing under the joint Labour-Co-op designation.<sup>223</sup> Yet, there has been very little consideration of how these candidates balanced both of these responsibilities. Where brief references have been made to candidate's constituency campaigning, this has suggested there was little to distinguish the two parties, creating the impression of a Co-operative Party which was marginalised by its own candidates.<sup>224</sup> Thus, it is suggested that the alliance could be unhelpful to Co-operative Party attempts to protect Co-op interests as its distinguishing features could be lost during constituency election campaigning. Yet, the extent to which Co-operative Party candidates put forward a distinctive Co-operative identity through their own campaigns has remained largely unexplored, rendering this chapter highly original.

Nonetheless, candidate election literature can only tell part of the story of constituency campaigning and it is important to incorporate newspaper sources as the press also played a key role in election campaigns at local level. Work by Gurney has suggested a difficult relationship existed between the Co-operative movement and the press, but he has not analysed these difficulties in the context of the Co-op-Labour alliance.<sup>225</sup> The extent of local press coverage received by the Co-operative Party and its candidates and the way in which it was portrayed within the local media, therefore, warrants further scrutiny.

The chapter will analyse how the Co-operative Party's constituency level campaigns ran. How these campaigns ran were ran by Co-operative Party electoral has received little attention

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<sup>222</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.65

<sup>223</sup> Baily, *An Outline of an Organisation*, p.72

<sup>224</sup> W.J. M. MacKenzie and Cynthia Arditti, 'Co-operative Politics in a Lancashire Constituency' *Political Studies* 2 (1954), p.118

<sup>225</sup> Gurney, 'The Curse of the Co-ops', pp.1479-1483

amongst the historiography beyond the general consensus that the 23 MPs elected in 1945 represented a numerical success for the Co-operative Party. Whitecross has interpreted the 1945 result as a vindication of the Co-op-Labour alliance on the grounds that it enabled the Co-operative Party to gain the political representation it sought.<sup>226</sup> Yet several historians have suggested that the Co-operative Party faced a range of electoral difficulties. Whitecross, for example, asserts that the Co-operative Party would often aid the development of the Labour Party by contesting marginal or unwinnable seats.<sup>227</sup> This creates the impression of an alliance which was markedly uneven and not reciprocal in its nature as it implies the Labour Party would simply leave the Co-operative Party to contest seats it did not want to contest itself. Parker similarly states that Trade Union sponsored candidates tended to contest safer seats than those contested by the Co-operative Party or constituency parties and as such were more successful as a result. This, once again, generates the impression of a lack of equity within the alliance.<sup>228</sup> However, beyond this, there is little reference as to how these campaigns were ran and how this translated into results. This is once again an important oversight because as Chapter 3 demonstrated, these Co-op MPs proved crucial to the Co-operative Party's ability to negotiate with the Labour Party.

By considering these key issues, the chapter will contribute to the existing literature by demonstrating how at constituency level, there was a high degree of pragmatism involved in Co-operative Party campaigning. The issues candidates promoted in these campaigns and how far Co-op priorities were championed varied significantly on an election-by-election basis but also, by constituency. This depended on how ingrained Co-op issues were viewed to be by these candidates and could result in significant variations in the extent to which these candidates prioritised their Co-operative identity. This was something which ultimately proved a very successful strategy because as the chapter will demonstrate, this enabled the party to secure its highest number of seats to date in 1945 and maintain a significant number thereafter.

### **The 1945 Election**

How far Co-op Party candidates prioritised Co-operative issues within their constituency election material could vary significantly as candidates often adopted a pragmatic approach to maximise their chances of being successfully elected. In some cases, this entailed supporting policies which stood in direct conflict with Co-operative Movement priorities, whereas other

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<sup>226</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.103-104

<sup>227</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.104

<sup>228</sup> James Michael Trevor Parker, *Trade Unions and the political culture of the British Labour Party, 1931-1940*, PhD Thesis, University of Exeter, 2017. Available at: [ParkerJ.pdf \(exeter.ac.uk\)](#). p.174

election addresses could be very supportive of its work. This was the case with candidates, such as the Co-operative Party Secretary, Alfred Barnes, who at the 1945 general election was seeking re-election for East Ham South. Barnes was a significant figure in the Co-operative Party serving as its chairman but also had a long history of involvement in the Co-operative Movement since joining the Stratford Co-operative Society in 1908 and becoming its secretary in 1915.<sup>229</sup> His election address placed significant emphasis on issues of mutual concern to both the Co-operative and Labour Parties. For example, he declared his support for Labour policies which would indirectly support the work of the Co-operative Movement, such as full employment and housing. However, his election address also promoted consumer issues, such as questioning the price and quality of certain foods and as such was attacking profiteering.<sup>230</sup> The same level of support could be seen in election addresses produced by less high-profile Co-operative Party candidates. This was the case in Bradford South where the candidate elected, Meredith Titterington, pledged himself to pro-consumer policies, such as price control and reduction of consumer taxation including the removal of taxes on the Co-operative Societies.<sup>231</sup> Therefore, for these candidates they felt Co-op issues were embedded enough in their constituencies to make them vote winning issue.

The local press coverage in Bradford also aligned Titterington with Co-op and consumer issues. The *Bradford Observer* dedicated much of its local election coverage to Titterington. Reporting on local candidates' attitudes towards the continuation of controls, the *Observer*, despite its historical Liberal affiliation<sup>232</sup> contrasted the attitude of the Conservative Party, which wanted to completely remove controls, and Titterington's view that controls were necessary as a means of facilitating fair shares. It was highlighted that in Titterington's view the only person impacted negatively by controls was the 'profiteer'.<sup>233</sup> Similar coverage of Co-operative Party candidates was evident in the local press in other constituencies. The *Western Daily Press*' coverage of Will Coldrick's campaigning echoed the Co-operative Party's national campaign themes underlining

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<sup>229</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.83 and Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement, 1914-1960*, p.176

<sup>230</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Alfred Barnes, Election Address 1945, JN105055.AI

<sup>231</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, M.F. Titterington, Election Address 1945, JN105055.AI

<sup>232</sup> Stephen E. Koss, *The Rise and fall of the political press in Britain* (Chapel Hill: University North Carolina Press, 1981), p.447

<sup>233</sup> 'West Riding Elections: Four Bradford Candidates Talk Pensions', *Bradford Observer*, 30<sup>th</sup> June 1945, [accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> November 2023],

<https://britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bU/0003150/19450630/103/0003> p.3

his commitment to take under public ownership the same industries as proposed by the Co-operative Party nationally whilst avoiding areas of policy tension with Labour.<sup>234</sup>

Yet, the extent to which Co-operative Party candidates were a feature of these local election campaigns varied significantly. Many candidates marginalised Co-operative issues and could on occasion display their support for policies which directly challenged the work of the Co-operative Movement. Whilst some candidates, such as Barnes and Titterington, viewed Co-operative issues as vote winning issues, this was not the case across the board. Indeed, many candidates made little or no reference to the Co-op at all within their addresses. All candidates would declare themselves as standing under the joint label, but how far this translated into the policies discussed was limited. For example, whilst Frank Beswick, standing in the Uxbridge constituency, did as he was required declare himself as a Co-operative Party candidate.

However, Co-op issues were not visible within his campaign materials. He did support many of the policies nationally advocated by the Co-operative Party, such as full employment, housing and education. However, the extent to which he discussed consumer issues was limited.<sup>235</sup>

Another example of this would be Norman Dodds who had been the publicity manager for the Co-operative Wholesale Society and served on the management committee of the Co-operative Society in Dartford.<sup>236</sup> Dodds would be elected for Dartford in 1945 by a significant majority, winning 61.5% of the vote compared to the 38.5% won by the Conservative Party candidate.<sup>237</sup> Yet, despite his long involvement in the Co-operative Movement, he was elected on an address which prioritised Labour issues. He discussed the need to ensure the continuation of controls to prevent rising prices and made several general references to a 'Labour and Co-operative government', but how the Co-operative Movement would contribute to that government and how Labour would promote Co-op interests was not explained. Beyond this, his election address focusses on peace, housing, full employment and the National Health Service.<sup>238</sup> This contradicted the very reason the party had been set up in the first place, as this marginalisation of Co-operative issues impeded the protection or promotion of Co-operative interests.<sup>239</sup> In the same vein then as it had been pragmatic for Barnes to support policies of key concern to the Co-operative Movement as they were key consumer issues, for Dodds, it was seen as better for

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<sup>234</sup> 'Bristol North Labour Candidate', *Western Daily Press*, 8<sup>th</sup> June 1945, [accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> November 2023], <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bU/0000513/19450608/015/0003>, p.3

<sup>235</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Frank Beswick, Election Address 1945, JN1055055.AI

<sup>236</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Norman Dodds, Election Address 1945, JN1055055.AI

<sup>237</sup> Craig, *British parliamentary election results, 1918-1949*, p.123

<sup>238</sup> LHASC, Norman Dodds, Election Address 1945, JN1055055.AI

<sup>239</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.65

his electoral prospects to support wider non-movement specific issues prevalent within the national campaign. This was demonstrated in the emphasis he placed on popular policies such as those related to the Beveridge Report as opposed to directly focussing on consumer issues.<sup>240</sup>

Similar trends emerged within the local press which could obscure the Co-op's visibility. However, whilst many candidates did prioritise Co-operative Party priorities, how visible the Co-operative Party was in this coverage varied considerably as did the amount of coverage candidates received. For example, in Birmingham Deritend, the Co-operative Party candidate, Fred Longden received very little coverage, and much of the coverage he did get was largely in reference to his Conservative opponent, who had contested the seat consistently and often successfully since 1922.<sup>241</sup> However, this did not represent a particularly anti-Co-operative stance, but instead, represented a more general anti-Labour stance. The politics of the *Birmingham Mail* at this point in time needs to be considered. On the day of the election, the paper occupied a pro-Conservative stance argued voters to really consider whether they wanted to 'abandon an agreed programme of social and economic reforms' to 'embark at a perilous moment on Socialistic experiments alien to our mature British policy?'<sup>242</sup> This demonstrates that the paper occupied a general anti-Labour stance and so whilst the Co-operative Party candidate was neglected amongst this press, this reasoning for this stood outside the hostility Gurney has noted marred the relationship between Co-operative business and the press.<sup>243</sup> Whilst this candidate did receive this difficult coverage, this is not to say this had a direct bearing upon the election result, as this election saw a significant shift in this constituencies election results. When the constituency had been contested by Longden in 1935, he had secured 40.5% of the vote compared to the 59.5% secured by the Conservative candidate and so this seat was fairly secure for the Conservative candidate. By contrast, in 1945, Longden had secured the seat for the Co-operative Party by a significant majority. Here, he won the seat with 65.3% of the vote compared to the 34.7 secured by the Conservative Party candidate.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> LHASC, Norman Dodds, Election Address 1945, JN105055.AI

<sup>241</sup> Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, p.81 and 'How Deritend is being Wooed Anew', *Birmingham Mail*, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1945 [accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> November 2023], p.3<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000768/19450625/057/0003>

<sup>242</sup> 'Use Your Vote', *Birmingham Mail*, 5<sup>th</sup> July 1945, [accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> November 2023], <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000768/19450705/078/0003>, p.3

<sup>243</sup> Gurney, 'The Curse of the Co-ops', pp.1479-1483

<sup>244</sup> Craig, *British Parliamentary Elections, 1918-1949*, p.81

There were in addition, some cases during the constituency campaign whereby Co-op candidates would diverge from Co-operative Party policy in a way which contradicted the business workings of the movement. The Co-operative Party candidate for Nottingham South, Norman Smith, declared his personal support for Labour policy based upon the work of the Ministry of Food during the war years. In addition, he pledged his support, in spite of Co-operative Party opposition to the continuation of government bulk buying despite the issues this posed (as outlined in Chapter 3) to the Co-operative Wholesale Society.<sup>245</sup> Percy Holman, candidate in Bethnal Green South-West similarly advocated for state supervision of food.<sup>246</sup> However, whilst instances such as this could occur, these issues were the minority.

The vast majority of the rest supported policies which aligned with the national policy of the Co-operative Party, but lacked a distinctly Co-operative or consumer focus, demonstrating a pragmatic approach was being applied at constituency level.<sup>247</sup> The lack of references to Co-operative Movement concerns suggests that most of its candidates doubted the extent to which Co-operative specific issues were election winning ones. Thus, whilst historians such as Leonard have noted the grievances which would become particularly prominent during the post-war period, regarding the Labour Party's dominance of the alliance, this was part of a deep seated trend that Co-op Party candidates contributed to through their campaigning.<sup>248</sup> On the one hand, this could be interpreted as contradicting the very reason the party had been set up in the first place, as this marginalisation of Co-operative issues impeded the protection or promotion of Co-operative interests.<sup>249</sup> The fact that so many of its candidates would marginalise the Co-operative Party could suggest as much of the historiography does that it was dependent upon the Co-op-Labour alliance, or that it was controlled by it, as the party could not guarantee that its candidates would support policies which would protect its own interests.

However, this ignores the significant merits in this strategy for the Co-operative Party in terms of securing parliamentary representation and was not something which nationally the Co-operative Party tried to prevent, suggesting this was part of a pragmatic strategy which it was comfortable for its candidates to adopt. The Co-operative Party was pragmatic enough to recognise that on the whole its candidates could not base their campaigns solely on consumer and Co-op focussed issues. On the one hand, there was a need for candidates to address the

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<sup>245</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Norman Smith, Election Address 1945, JN105055.AI

<sup>246</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Percy Holman, Election Address 1945, JN105055.AI

<sup>247</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Election addresses for the 1945 election, JN105055.AI

<sup>248</sup> Craigen, 'The Co-operative Party: Out of Labour's Shadow', p.7 and Leonard, 'The Co-ops in Politics', p.6

<sup>249</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.65

issues which were of concern in the constituencies they were standing rather than focusing solely on the movement's priorities which in itself meant candidates could appeal to a wider section of the electorate. However, it also enabled Co-op candidates, through the alliance with Labour to draw on a wider pool of local activists during campaigning as well as broadening their appeal to local trade unionists. Once its candidates were elected as, earlier chapters have shown these MPs could then work to protect Co-op interests. As such, this represented somewhat of a trade-off to gain political representation which would thus enhance the political standing of the movement.

Yet, whilst Co-op centric issues might not have been the focus at many times during this election campaign, placing the focus on wider issues, such as those related to the Beveridge report, housing and full employment, which did directly relate to the work of the Co-operative Movement, assisted the Co-operative Party in what was ultimately a very successful election campaign. In addition to the 23 seats successfully won, the party also made significant progress in several others where it did not ultimately win. It also saw its proportion of both the Labour Party total vote as well as the overall share of votes increase. The number of MPs elected at this election represented a significant rise on any previous election result for the party. The previous best result for the Co-operative Party was the 9 MPs elected at the previous 1935 election. However, the party often had considerably less seats than this. As recently as the October 1931 election, the Co-operative Party had stood 18 candidates for election, but just 1 had been elected. Therefore, 23 candidates being successfully elected out of the 34 who stood for election represented a significant electoral breakthrough for the party.<sup>250</sup> But the party's percentage of both the total vote and the Labour Party vote also grew. Of the total British vote, the Co-operative Party's share rose from 1.6% in 1935, to 2.5% in 1945. Of the Labour's Party's vote, the Co-op Party's share rose from 4.2% in 1935 to a total 5.3% in 1945.<sup>251</sup>

However, even beyond the numbers of seats successfully contested, the Co-operative Party made significant in-roads in constituencies where it did not successfully gain the seat. Indeed, whilst both Whitecross and Parker have suggested that this alliance was not very reciprocal on account of the difficult seats the Labour Party left Co-op candidates to fight, deeper analysis of

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<sup>250</sup> Carbery, *Consumers in politics*, p.128

<sup>251</sup> Carbery, *Consumers in politics*, p.128 and Richard Cracknell, Elise Uberoi, Matthew Burton, 'UK Election Statistics: 1918-2023, A Long Century of Elections', <<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7529/>> [accessed 18 September 2023], p.19

the 1945 election results reveals the importance of not over-stating this.<sup>252</sup> An analysis of where the Co-operative Party were standing candidates for election between 1945 and 1951 does reveal that in several cases the party was contesting very difficult seats in which Labour candidates had previously struggled to make ground and often lost by very significant margins, indicating they were Conservative or Liberal safe seats. 20 seats contested by the Co-op Party at this election had previously not had a Co-op-Labour candidate, and of those seats Labour Party candidates had been defeated in 19 of them at the 1935 election. In 7 constituencies, the Co-operative candidate faced difficult opposition. For example, a Co-op candidate was adopted for the first time in 1945 at East Fife where at the prior election, the Labour candidate had been able to secure just 17.7% of the vote compared to the 82.5% secured by his opponent.<sup>253</sup>

However, although much of the historiography has placed emphasis on the difficulties faced by Co-operative Party candidates in several constituencies, it is important to not over-exaggerate these difficulties. Whilst 7 of these new seats were undoubtedly difficult to contest, 13 of the seats were marginal.<sup>254</sup> In many of these constituencies, the Co-operative Party saw success and as such there is a need to be cautious about over-exaggerating the difficulties faced. Of the 20 constituencies being newly contested, 12 of these saw the election of Co-op MPs. Whilst none of these new MPs were elected in these safe seats, this is not to say Co-op candidates could not on occasion make up considerable ground. For example, the 1945 election saw the Co-operative Party contest the Worcester seat for the first time where the Labour Party regularly lost by a considerable margin. For example, when the Labour Party contested the seat for the first time in 1923, it secured just 3.8% of the vote compared to the Liberal candidate's 45.3% and the Conservatives' 50.9%. Whilst the Labour Party position had improved by 1935 to a point where it secured 23.3% of the total vote, this still left it behind both the Conservative and Liberal candidate. However, at the 1945 general election it was a close contest between the Labour-Co-op and Conservative candidate, with the Conservative candidate winning by just 4 votes.<sup>255</sup> As such, even in constituencies where historically the Labour Party had struggled, Co-op candidates could make considerable progress. This could have been itself problematic for the

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<sup>252</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.104 and Parker, *Trade Unions and the political culture of the British Labour Party*, p.174

<sup>253</sup> Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, p.623

<sup>254</sup> Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, pp.4-741 and Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1885-1918*, pp.19-500

<sup>255</sup> Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, p.282



Co-operative Party as it meant it had created a rod for its own back, as by being successful in such seats, it gave the Labour Party justification for allocating such constituencies to fight.

	Candidates stood	MPs elected
North West	3	1
North East	1	0
Yorkshire and the Humber	3	2
West Midlands	4	3
East Midlands	1	1
East of England	1	1
London	11	10
South West	2	2
South East	1	0
Scotland	7	3
Wales	0	0

**Table 1 – Geographical concentration of Co-operative Party MPs at the 1945 election**

References: - National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Archive, Monthly Letter to Party Organisations, August 1945, pp.5-12

It is important to note though that of these 23 Co-op MPs which were elected in 1945 there was a particular geographical concentration in certain areas as a product of the voluntary, bottom-up approach adopted by the Co-operative Party to political representation. In some areas, the Co-operative Party had managed to secure a considerable number of MPs however, in others, they had struggled to make any notable progress. For example, in Scotland, the Co-operative Party had stood 7 candidates for election and 3 were successful elected, concentrated around the Glasgow area. In London, the Co-op Party had the most success. Here, it stood 11 candidates for elected and 10 were successfully elected meaning just under half of the Co-op MPs elected were in the London

area.<sup>256</sup> In addition, the RACS sponsored 4 additional candidates who stood under the Labour Party label, Adamson in Bexley, Joe Reeves in Greenwich, Herbert Morrison in Lewisham East and H. Berry in Woolwich West, all 4 of whom were successfully elected.<sup>257</sup> In many ways this fitted with the general trends at these elections, where there were demands for more candidates, especially from London.<sup>258</sup> In other areas, whilst the Co-operative Party clearly had a political presence, as it had stood candidates, its political machinery was far more limited.<sup>259</sup> Therefore, there was a significant degree of local diversity in the electoral strategy adopted by Co-operative Party and in the alliance with Labour, something which was in tune with the bottom-up approach to political representation adopted by the Co-operative Party. But, as Chapter 3 demonstrated, the candidates successfully elected, whilst geographically

<sup>256</sup> Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, pp.4-623 and Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1885-1918*

<sup>257</sup> Rhodes, *An Arsenal for Labour*, p.146 and Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, pp.19, 37, 63 and 76

<sup>258</sup> NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1952 Co-operative Party Conference*, pp.17-19

<sup>259</sup> Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, pp.4, 7, 8, 24, 81, 82, 102, 107, 123, 130, 131, 152, 182, 203, 209, 239, 257, 262, 280, 284, 402, 429, 430, 438, 482, 506, 594, 596, 598, 599, 621, 623 and 644

concentrated, played a central role in the Co-operative Party's ability to defend its interests when these were challenged.

### **The 1950 Election**

The 1950 general election followed a similar pattern to that of the 1945 general election whereby there were significant variations in the visibility of the Co-op political identity in candidate election addresses as well as Co-op issues in general. Again, there appeared to be a great degree of a pragmatism in this. Whilst there were some significant differences between the policies advocated by the Labour and Co-operative Party at national level in 1950, these issues do not appear to have been given prominence in constituency level campaigning. This was compounded by significant variations in the extent to which candidates prioritised the distinct Co-op part of their identity. For example, whilst there remained divergences over nationalisation whereby the Co-operative Party sought to demonstrate how its own business method could be applied to the industries to be nationalised, this was overlooked by the Co-operative Party's own candidates.<sup>260</sup> This suggests, once again, that candidates did not feel as though this part of their identity was integral to their political success and so placed emphasis on more specifically Labour issues in an attempt to win votes as these candidates clearly did not feel as though these nationalisation proposals were key vote winning issues and so chose not to discuss them and instead focus on policies viewed as more important to the electorate and were as such, being pragmatic.

There were, however, certain differences with the 1945 general election. For example, in 1950, candidates were careful about the wording they used to describe the plan for industrial insurance under public ownership. Whilst several candidates in 1945 had discussed the nationalisation of wholesaling, a considerable threat to Co-op business, of the election addresses available, no Co-op candidate advocated this being nationalised. Instead, all candidates abided by the mutualisation compromise and thus avoided diverging from Co-operative Party policy in this way.<sup>261</sup> This suggests that whilst Co-op candidates were often being pragmatic in not discussing nationalisation to same degree as the Labour Party, they did not overlook the differences over significant aspects of policy such as insurance and towed the party line over this key aspect of Co-op business.

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<sup>260</sup> NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party, Forward with the People: election manifesto of the Co-operative Party, 1950. CP CP [FORWARD]

<sup>261</sup> LHASC, Election addresses for the 1950 election, JN105055.AI

On the one hand, this would suggest a positive improvement had been made between elections whereby Co-operative candidates were abiding by agreed party policy to a much greater extent. However, the extent to which candidates saw the Co-operative Party as integral to their political identity remained variable and often was limited. Some candidates actively promoted their Co-operative Party identity and affinity to the movement. For example, William Bargh, candidate for Scotstoun, in Glasgow, described himself as an 'ardent Co-operator' who had devoted, 'much energy to the building up of the trading and educational aspects of Consumers' Co-operation' as well as stating that at the time of the election he was Chairman of the 'Glasgow District Co-operative Association'. Thus, the suggestion can be made that his connection to the Co-operative Movement was strong, and he felt this was important to his election campaign.<sup>262</sup> Smyth has noted Unionist concerns surrounding the impact of the Co-operative Movement on its vote share in Glasgow. This was on the grounds that many Conservative voters in Glasgow had also been co-operators and so the Co-operative Party standing candidates in concert with the Labour Party had led to shifts in voting patterns away from the Unionist party and towards Labour.<sup>263</sup>

Similarly, George Darling, who stood in Sheffield Hillsborough as successor to A.V. Alexander, emphasised his links to the Co-operative Movement by highlighting that he had previously been in charge of the Research Department for the CWS and had in the process written several textbooks related to the Co-operative Movement.<sup>264</sup> In standing in Sheffield Hillsborough, he had inherited a constituency which had long been contested by the Co-operative Party, and had been held by prominent Co-op MP, A.V. Alexander for almost all of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the exception of 1931-1935 where the Conservative Party candidate held the seat.<sup>265</sup> This was backed up by an election address which focussed on many policies of concern to the Co-operative Party nationally such as food prices and production, housing, employment, the NHS and social services.<sup>266</sup> However, whilst at national level, the Co-operative Party had suggested several ways its own form of business operation could be applied to several aspect of Labour policy, at constituency level, candidates continued to be selective about discussing these. Both Bargh and Darling did discuss their connection to the Co-operative Movement and several of the Movement's concerns, but both also chose to avoid highlighting the divisions

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<sup>262</sup> LHASC, William Bargh, Election Address 1950, JN105055.AI

<sup>263</sup> J.J Smyth, *Labour in Glasgow, 1896-1936: Socialism, Suffrage and Sectarianism* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2000), pp.202-203

<sup>264</sup> LHASC, George Darling, Election Address 1950, JN105055.AI

<sup>265</sup> Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, p.238

<sup>266</sup> LHASC, George Darling, Election Address 1950, JN105055.AI

between the two parties. The need for avoiding this was something the Co-operative Party had itself highlighted this same year when discussions were had that suggested the 1946 agreement could have done more to secure seats to be contested by the Co-operative Party. Here, Ballard speaking on behalf of the National Committee stated the Co-operative Party's, 'development within the democratic movement depends upon agreement in the field and the settlement of our little difficulties behind the scenes'.<sup>267</sup> Indeed, at a time when these candidates were fighting for election, it would have been unwise to have drawn attention to the differences between both parties as this would have projected a message of disunity to voters. It is this context which Darling's avoidance of discussing the distinct Co-operative identity projected nationally in his constituency which had a heavy Co-op presence. Instead, his election address, prioritised consumer issues whilst being pragmatic to avoid drawing attention to party policy differences.

This pragmatism could be demonstrated on a much wider scale. For example, in Scotland there appeared to be a co-ordinated campaign amongst the Co-op candidates which saw them rally around a specific set of issues. Out of the 7 Co-operative candidates who stood for election in Scottish constituencies 5 of the election addresses produced were available. With the exception of Hector McNeil who stood out as an exception to the rule, the other 4 addresses produced in Scotland followed the same trend. Each candidate would produce their own introduction, however the main content for each of these elections was the same. This meant these candidates adopted a coordinated stance on several key issues. Yet, the references to the Co-operative Party and Movement were not explicit within these addresses beyond the opening letter. On the one hand, these addresses proposed policies regarding employment, housing and policies related to social services which were generally complimentary of the work of the Co-operative Movement. The election addresses also included several Scotland specific policies much of which related to administrative devolution, and it was argued that this process should be continued.

These addresses also to some extent dealt with the issue of nationalisation, this was not however, to any great degree, instead they contain brief references to the development of nationalised industries, the mutualisation of insurance and the nationalisation of sugar and cement. These candidates did therefore to some extent contradict Co-operative Party policy as the Co-operative Party had, had some concerns regarding the nationalisation of sugar, however,

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<sup>267</sup> NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1950 Co-operative Party Conference*, pp.77-78

they towed the party line when it came to insurance.<sup>268</sup> Furthermore, there were several other nationalisation proposals pushed by the Labour Party as Chapter 3 discussed, such as the nationalisation of the meat and fruit and vegetable industries, which the Co-operative Party had taken particular issue with.<sup>269</sup> These candidates in Scotland chose not to discuss these issues with the exception of McNeil and none of these candidates made the case for the Co-op's form of ownership.<sup>270</sup> This again demonstrates the need these candidates had to make pragmatic decisions in light of balancing their links to the Co-operative Party as well as taking into consideration the constituencies they were contesting. Nationalisation had been divisive in Scotland, as when it was first implemented as both the Unionists and Nationalists had presented this as a means of 'denationalising' Scottish industry and usurping local control of public services.<sup>271</sup>

Similar trends could be seen amongst local press coverage during this election which saw Co-op issues marginalised. On occasion, this coverage could project a strong Co-op message. For example, Frank Beswick, who stood in the Uxbridge constituency, was the only candidate for whom newspaper material was available to address the Co-op's stance regarding nationalisation. His attitude towards this issue was that nationalisation was not appropriate when it came to Co-op societies as in his view the purpose of public ownership was to 'spread power and ownership'.<sup>272</sup> Therefore, this candidate was prioritising Co-op issues and the press was giving space to this candidate, alternative, Co-op influenced, pluralistic interpretation of Co-op ownership.

However, in other cases, the press demonstrated a stance which was particularly unhelpful to the Co-operative Party campaign. For example, the Co-operative Party secretary William Coldrick who stood in the Bristol North-East constituency was subject to considerable amounts of negative press coverage prior to the election in 1950. His campaign did receive a

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<sup>268</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, William Leonard, Election Address 1950, JN105055.AI; Labour History Archive and Study Centre, John Rankin, Election Address 1950, JN105055.AI; Labour History Archive and Study Centre, William Bargh, Election Address 1950, JN105055.AI; Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Crawford Morgan, Election Address 1950, JN105055.AI and Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Hector McNeil, Election Address 1950, JN105055.AI

<sup>269</sup> NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1950 Co-operative Party Conference*, p.75

<sup>270</sup> LHASC, William Leonard, Election Address 1950, JN105055.AI; LHASC, John Rankin, Election Address 1950, JN105055.AI; LHASC, William Bargh, Election Address 1950, JN105055.AI; LHASC, Crawford Morgan, Election Address 1950, JN105055.AI and LHASC, Hector McNeil, Election Address 1950, JN105055.AI

<sup>271</sup> Christopher Harvie, 'The Recovery of Scottish Labour, 1939-1951' in Ian Donnachie, Christopher Harvie and Ian S. Wood, *Forward! Labour Politics in Scotland, 1888-1988* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989), pp.77-83

<sup>272</sup> 'No Economic Crisis in 1950' *Uxbridge and West Drayton Gazette*, 17<sup>th</sup> February 1952. [accessed: 17<sup>th</sup> November 2023], <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002286/19500217/120/0007> p.7

considerable amount of coverage within the local press regarding some of the policies he was championing ahead of this election, this was particularly within the *Gloucestershire Echo*, *Gloucester Citizen*, and the *Western Daily Press*. On the one hand, some of this coverage, particularly within the *Gloucester Citizen* saw the candidate address several criticisms which had been levied at the Co-operative Movement. This was mainly on the grounds that the Co-op was not 'bearing their share of the burden of taxation'.<sup>273</sup> Much of this coverage also tried to taint Coldrick by associating him with Communism through the publication of several letters published in the *Western Daily Press* in the same month as election day. These letters suggested a Communist speaker had been urging those in the audience to vote for Coldrick. Whilst it was argued Communists were also present at the meetings of the Conservative Party candidate, it was suggested these were present not in support of the Conservative candidate, but that this was an attempt to discredit them to the benefit of Coldrick.<sup>274</sup> Whilst these were written and sent in by readers, however, the editor's decision to include them suggests a particularly anti-Co-operative stance.

Yet, this seems to have been an isolated example, the majority of this coverage was not so directly damaging to these candidates. Instead, much of this coverage saw the Co-op specific issues marginalised as opposed to this press coverage being outwardly hostile. Like the candidate election addresses saw Co-op specific priorities sidelined for what were perceived to be vote winning issues. For example, in the month leading up to the 1950 election, Fred Longden, the candidate for Birmingham Small Heath was mentioned several times across several Birmingham papers. However, both the fact he was a Co-op candidate and key priorities of the party at national level were absent from the coverage as much of this discussion referred directly to constituency-based issues.<sup>275</sup> Yet, whilst it may be argued this was problematic for the Co-operative Party in gaining representation, it has to be seen that these candidates had to represent their constituencies as well as their party. Again then, the absence of discussing consumer issues was then was not because of anti-Co-op sentiments, but more the candidates

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<sup>273</sup> 'Local Co-op Party Hears Tories Blamed', *Gloucester Citizen* 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1950 [accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2023] <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000325/19500123/023/0004> p.4

<sup>274</sup> 'No Election Bogey' *Western Daily Press*, 10<sup>th</sup> February 1950, [accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2023], <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000513/19500210/105/0003> p.3 and 'On the Road to Communism', *Western Daily Press*, 1<sup>st</sup> February 1950 [accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2023] <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000513/19500201/159/0004> p.4

<sup>275</sup> 'Nursery Schools – Candidates get a letter', *Evening Despatch*, Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> January 1950 [accessed 12<sup>th</sup> November 1950], <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000671/19500119/157/0007> p.7

themselves being pragmatic by focussing on constituency-based issues as a way to secure their election.

Once again, this election campaign was characterised by a geographical concentration of candidates following the trend which had predominated in 1945. This election saw no candidates and consequently no Co-op MPs elected in both Wales and North-East England. Furthermore, in both the Northwest and East Midlands, just one candidate stood for election. This suggests there was a limit to the extent to which these areas were on board with political representation or thought it was necessary as very few resources were put into gaining direct political representation. In many ways, this was in tune with the development of the Co-

	Candidates stood	MPs elected
North-West	1	1
North-East	0	0
Yorkshire and the Humber	1	1
West Midlands	3	2
East Midlands	1	1
East of England	3	0
London	11	9
South West	3	2
South East	4	0
Scotland	7	3
Wales	0	0

References: - F.W.S Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1950-1973*, pp.5, 7, 20, 63, 76, 101,126, 131, 133, 135, 136, 167, 230, 264, 272, 290, 305, 317, 318 379, 399, 416, 453, 461, 474, 480, 504, 605, 618, 620, 621, 622 and 644 and National Co-operative Archive, Co-operative Party Archive, Co-operative Party, Monthly Letter to party organisations, March 1950, pp.15-16

operative Party in the first instance. As Robertson has demonstrated, there was no united move towards direct representation on the part of the Co-operative Movement. Instead, the extent to which the movement was politicised was heavily wrapped up in the extent to which it felt the strain of government decision making.<sup>276</sup>

Whilst both areas' candidates were successfully elected, there were other areas which saw a complete deficit of and MPs. This occurred in both the South-East and East of England. In the former, 4 candidates were stood for election, but none were successfully elected. An additional 3 candidates stood in East England constituencies; none being successfully returned. By contrast to the situation elsewhere in the country, there remained a marked cluster of candidates both in

Scotland around the Glasgow area and London.<sup>277</sup> As such when the election occurred the distribution of Co-operative Party MPs remained clustered in this area. Once again then, the Co-operative Party's voluntary approach to political representation defined how the Co-operative Party protected its interests through the alliance with Labour. It meant there were significant clusters with regards to where candidates stood but, once again, the crucial thing was to get

<sup>276</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, pp.162-165

<sup>277</sup> Co-operative Party Press, Co-operative Party Papers, Co-operative Party, Monthly Letter, March 1950, CPY/CP MONTHLY LETTER, pp.15-166

these candidates elected, as once there were elected, they could form part of a crucial pressure group on the Labour Party to protect the movements interests.

Another trend which remained from the 1945 election was the tendency to contest difficult seats. 2 of the new seats contested for the first time represented hopeless contests for the Co-op candidates standing there. In Somerset Bridgewater. at the prior election the Labour candidate had lost securing just 14.3% of the total vote in that constituency. This was a good election for the Labour Party and so the fact that the candidate in this constituency was unable to secure more of the vote suggests this was a particularly difficult constituency to contest.<sup>278</sup> A similar situation could be seen in Surrey Reigate constituency. Whilst the Labour Party had contested the seat since 1924, the margins here were often very significant. For example, in 1931 the Labour candidate had lost with just 17.3% of the vote compared to the 82.7% won by his Conservative opponent. Similarly in the following election, this margin had been 73.8% to the Conservative and 26.2% to the Labour candidate. Even at the landslide Labour victory, the Labour candidate lost with 6.796 votes less than the opposition, equating to 14.2% of the vote.<sup>279</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that these new seats did not yield results for the Co-operative Party.

However, as a whole, once again the election did see positive results. Whilst the Co-operative Party was somewhat marginalised by its own candidates during the campaign and had to sacrifice contesting some difficult to win constituencies, the momentum from 1945 was still evident. The number of Co-op Party MPs may have declined from 23 to 19 (including Hector McNeil), yet this still represented twice the number of secured at any pre-war election fought by the Co-operative Party.<sup>280</sup> In addition, this election also saw, despite the redrawing of constituency boundaries, the Co-operative Party retain a large number of seats whilst contesting several others for the first time. 12 of the constituencies contested by the Co-operative Party in 1945 had been abolished by the 1950 election. Furthermore, 7 constituencies which it had also contested at that election were not abolished but were instead contested by Labour candidates as opposed to Co-op candidates. However, as has been discussed previously (see Chapter 2), the Co-operative Party still stood a significant number of candidates for election. It contested 16 constituencies contested in 1945, but it also contested 9 constituencies which were new and 14 which had previously been contested by Labour

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<sup>278</sup> Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, p.454 and Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1950-1973*, p.480

<sup>279</sup> Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, p.479 and Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1950-1973*, p.504

<sup>280</sup> Carbery, *Consumers in Politics*, p.128



candidates.<sup>281</sup> As a whole, this election was difficult for the Labour Party which saw its number of MPs fall from the high point of 393 in 1945 to 315 in 1950.<sup>282</sup> Therefore, it is unsurprising the Co-operative Party lost some of its MPs, with its total declining by 4 between elections. Furthermore, these seats meant that the party became an increasingly integral part of the Labour Party as the 1950 election saw the party secure only a narrow majority. The 19 seats made up the difference between the number of Labour candidates and those won by the Conservative Party and so this meant the Co-operative Party could no longer just be sidelined by the Labour Party.

### **The 1951 Election**

By 1951, whilst consumer issues were an integral part of both the Labour and Co-operative Party's national campaigns, the extent to which this was translated into the local campaign both through candidates own election material and press coverage was more significant. The 1951 general election was dominated by consumer issues of key priority to the Co-operative Movement due to the high cost of living, something which was indicated through the national policy documents produced by both parties and the discussions surrounding policy prior to their publication (see chapter three). However, in addition to the consumer related issues championed by both parties, the Co-operative Party also advocated several other policies which were overlooked by the Labour Party, and diverged from it in several other areas, such as providing its own approach for dealing with price fixing.<sup>283</sup> As such, there was growing space for Co-operative candidates to produce election literature which was distinct from that of Labour as the Co-operative Party itself produced election material which was increasingly distinctive when compared to that of 1945.

Yet, despite these distinct policy differences, once again, the extent to which Co-operative Party candidates championed distinctly Co-operative issues could vary on a constituency-by-constituency basis and as with the other elections already discussed, there was an element of pragmatism in the aspects of policy which the candidates chose to discuss. However, unlike

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<sup>281</sup> Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, pp.4, 7, 8, 24, 81, 82, 102, 107, 123, 130, 131, 132, 152, 182, 203, 209, 239, 257, 262, 280, 284, 402, 429, 430, 438, 482, 506, 594, 59, 598, 599, 621, 623 and 644 and Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1950-1973*, p.5, 7, 20, 63, 76, 101, 131, 133, 135, 136, 126, 167, 230, 264, 272, 290, 305, 317, 318, 379, 399, 416, 453, 461, 474, 480, 504, 605, 618, 620, 621, 622 and 644

<sup>282</sup> Richard Cracknell, Elise Uberoi, Matthew Burton, 'UK Election Statistics: 1918-2023, A Long Century of Elections', <<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7529/>> [accessed 18 September 2023], p.19

<sup>283</sup> NCA, CPP, *Co-operative Party, For all the People: manifesto of the Co-operative Party*, CP/CP [FOR], 1951 and Labour Party, *Labour Party Election Manifesto 1951*. Available at: [1951 Labour Party Manifesto - \(labour-party.org.uk\)](https://labour-party.org.uk) [accessed: 20<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

previous elections, whilst some Co-op concerns were overlooked, this constituency level campaign saw Co-operative candidates prioritise consumer issues to a much greater extent. Of the 14-candidate election addresses available for Co-operative Party candidates at this election, the majority discussed key consumer concerns due to their increasing prominence at national level. Whilst 4 election addresses were only somewhat supportive of the Co-operative Party's election campaign, 1 address was particularly supportive of Co-op and consumer issues, that of Alfred Barnes. 9 others championed the consumer issues to a much greater extent than at previous elections; however, the candidates link to the movement could be somewhat obscured and the key specific Co-op concerns remained overlooked.

On the one hand, many candidates were generally very supportive of Co-op business priorities. For example, Alfred Barnes emphasised consumer priorities within his election literature in 1951. He stated that because of his strong connection to the Co-operative Movement, one of his chief concerns was ensuring the cost of living stayed down. He stated this was possible both through ensuring Trade Union bargaining power which enhanced wages and also food subsidies which ensured food in short supply was made available to the public on an equitable and affordable basis. Thus, he highlighted that he was an ally of the Trade Union Movement as well as highlighting his concern for working class consumer concerns. However, he also makes the connection between his work in the Co-operative Movement and housing policy, stating that the Co-operative Movement had 'led the way' in providing the facilities for the public to be able to buy their houses. The Co-operative Permanent Building Society had been founded in 1884 and was an offshoot of the Co-operative Movement and by 1914 had become the 13<sup>th</sup> largest building society in Britain out of 1506 and it played a key role in facilitating working class purchase of houses.<sup>284</sup> In this way, Barnes was highlighting his commitment to raising working class living standards. He also supported policies such as those related to Social Services, arguing that a Labour government would be best placed to protect such services.<sup>285</sup> Therefore he was demonstrating to voters that as well as being a Co-operator, he was also an ally of the trade union movement as well as emphasizing his concern for working class consumer concerns. This again then, as with other candidates allowed the candidate to draw on support from various sections of the Labour Movement and appeal to a wider section of the electorate.

These candidates thus projected a strong Co-op identity through their election campaigns. However, not all Co-op candidates placed such emphasis on these issues. Instead, the majority

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<sup>284</sup> Luke Samy, 'Extending home ownership before the First World War: the case of the Co-operative Permanent Building Society, 1884-1913', *The Economic History Review* 95 (2012), pp.173-178

<sup>285</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Alfred Barnes, Election Address 1951 JN105055.AI

of Co-op candidates placed emphasis on more general consumer issues. For example, William Owen who stood for election in the Dover constituency provided an election address which represented the key aims of the Co-operative Party nationally. He discussed the need to both control prices and profits in order to prevent the high cost of living and as such consumer interests were once again a significant focus in his election material.<sup>286</sup>

The fact though that many of these candidates were promoting consumer interests, many of which did align with the work of the Co-operative Movement suggests there were more complex reasons for the specific Co-op priorities being sidelined during constituency campaigning. These candidates had to appeal both to the constituents in the area they were campaigning but they also had to present a programme for government, and therefore, there was a need to look beyond the very specific issues advocated by the Co-op which could then be prioritised once elected as Chapter 3 demonstrated the Co-operative Party were increasingly successful at doing.

This trend whereby consumer issues dominated these election campaigns was carried over into the media campaign, although there were variations regarding the extent to which this occurred. Whilst many candidates were discussing issues of importance to the Co-operative Party, this was often along Labour Party lines. Furthermore, on occasion there also remained some coverage which saw candidates diverge from Co-operative Party national policy. This was for the case for example, in the *Surrey Mirror* whereby the Co-operative Party candidate for Reigate, Garnsworthy, significantly diverged from the party nationally in its attitude towards the insurance industry. For example, when questioned on whether further nationalisation should be undertaken, he makes a case for the nationalisation of insurance having worked within this industry completely contradicting the Co-operative Party's stance nationally over the issue.<sup>287</sup> However, whilst this was undoubtedly problematic, a much more common feature of this election campaign was there remained significant differences in how far the press made apparent Co-operative Party candidates' connection to it clear during their discussion of them.

This could be demonstrated in the coverage of Garnsworthy himself. Whilst on occasion he was reported diverging significantly from the national message of the Co-operative Party, his connection to it was more regularly marginalised. Press coverage for this constituency regularly made the connection between this candidate and several issues of concern to the Co-operative

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<sup>286</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, William Owen Election Address 1951, JN105055.AI

<sup>287</sup> 'General Election Campaign – Labour', *Surrey Mirror* 19<sup>TH</sup> October 1951 [accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2023] <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000335/19511019/007/0007?browse=true> p.7

Party. He did discuss at length the high cost of living and the benefits to be had through continued control and food subsidies, however, his link to the Co-operative Party was completely lost, suggesting a lack of visibility.<sup>288</sup> This was a common trend at this election whereby whilst consumer issues were a focus how far what was distinctive about the Co-operative Party label was highlighted by the press. In a similar vein, in the lead up to this election, the candidate in Berwick, Thomas Jones, did place emphasis on many of the policies advocated by the Co-operative Party at national level, and this was picked up by the local press in his constituency. Indeed, this coverage often discussed the candidate's commitment to issues such as peace, full employment and production and that it would be a Labour government who was best placed to bring down the cost of living.<sup>289</sup> Another candidate in the Hertford constituency, Richard Marsh also placed emphasis on these issues and cited monopolies as a key problem and cause of the high cost of living. He additionally made the case for controls on the basis these would ensure fair shares.<sup>290</sup> Therefore, whilst these candidates outlined their support for several policy priorities of both the Co-operative and Labour Parties, the distinctive policies advocated by the Co-operative parties were absent from the coverage of these candidates.

However, this did not necessarily equate to press hostility or a lack of commitment from these candidates. These candidates were getting coverage which did align with the national campaigns of both parties and this coverage did often posit them as Co-op-Labour candidates, suggesting the party was often not outright marginalised during these campaigns. As such, the fact Co-op specific issues were absent from this coverage suggests these candidates were not discussing such issues during their constituency campaigns.

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<sup>288</sup> 'General Election Campaign – Labour', *Surrey Mirror* 19<sup>th</sup> October 1951 [accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2023] <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000335/19511019/007/0007?browse=true> p.7

<sup>289</sup> 'Four Major Tasks will confront the Government, says Labour Candidate' *Berwick Advertiser*, 11<sup>th</sup> October 1951 [accessed: 16<sup>th</sup> November 2023] <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000717/19511011/077/0005> p.5; 'Labour Candidate at Felton', *Morpeth Herald*, 12<sup>th</sup> October 1951 [accessed: 16<sup>th</sup> November 2023] <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000344/19511012/056/0004> p.4

<sup>290</sup> 'Mr Marsh explains the high cost of living', *Herts and Essex Observer*, 19<sup>th</sup> October 1951 [accessed: 16<sup>th</sup> November 2023] <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0003122/19511019/046/0004> p.4

	Candidates stood for election	MPs elected
North-West	2	0
North-East	2	0
Yorkshire and the Humber	1	1
West Midlands	2	2
East Midlands	2	1
East of England	3	0
South-West of England	4	2
South-East of England	3	0
London	15	8
Scotland	3	2
Wales	1	0

**Table 3 – Geographical concentration of Co-operative Party MPs at the 1951 election**

Reference for statistics: NCA, CPA, *Report of the 1952 Co-operative Party Conference*, pp.17-22

This election campaign, did result, once again in successful election results for the Co-operative Party, in spite of what was a difficult election for the Labour Party as a whole. There also remained as with the other elections a marked geographical concentration of MPs around the London area as demonstrated. 15 of the 38 Co-op Party candidates stood in 1951 were in the London area. There were also slight concentrations in the South-East and East of England as well as in Scotland. Outside of these areas however, there tended to be 1 or 2 candidates by area. The result of this was a marked concentration of MPs in London and then sparse representation elsewhere. However, the discussions which took place following this election regarding

candidate selection as outlined previously reveal that this was part of a wider trend within the Co-operative Party towards candidate selection. The London Co-operative Party was pressing the national party to field more candidates. As such it was supporting this campaign through its own actions which was reflective of its willingness to dedicate more resources to political activity.<sup>291</sup>

Once again, the trend continued of contesting several difficult seats. 14 of the constituencies being contested by the Co-operative Party in 1951, which it had not contested at the previous election, had been unsuccessfully fought by a Labour candidate. Some of these saw the Co-operative candidate go up against difficult opposition. A good example of this was the Berwick upon Tweed constituency. No Labour candidate had contested this constituency in 1935, but when it had been contested in 1945 and 1950, the Labour candidate had performed poorly, securing just 20.3% of the total vote in 1945 and 25.7% in 1950. It is therefore unsurprising the Co-op candidate went on to unsuccessfully contest the seat in 1951.<sup>292</sup> Similar difficulties were experience in Ruislip-Northwood. This was a new constituency in 1950, but when it had been contested by the Labour Party at that election, the candidate had secured 33.8% of the vote compared to the 57.5% by the Conservative Party, and as such it was a difficult constituency for

<sup>291</sup> NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1952 Co-operative Party Conference*, pp.17-19

<sup>292</sup> Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, p.440 and Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1950-1973*, p.464

the Co-op candidate to contest. The Co-operative Party candidate had not fared better when this constituency was contested in 1951, losing with 36.4% of the vote compared to the 63.6% secured by the Conservative Party candidate.<sup>293</sup>

The temptation may be to conclude this painted a bleak picture of the alliance with Labour, however, not all these seats conformed to this trend of being particularly difficult to contest. Indeed whilst 8 of these new constituencies were particularly difficult seeing the Labour candidate lose by more than 10% of the vote in 1951, 6 were more marginal constituencies. This election had seen for example, the Co-operative Party contest a Welsh seat for the first time, in the form of Cardiff North.<sup>294</sup> When this seat had been fought in 1950, the Labour candidate had lost with 41.3% of the vote compared to 46.9% won by the Conservative candidate, and 11.8% being secured by a Liberal candidate. Therefore, the vote in this constituency was split only marginally in favour of the Conservatives and so was not a hopeless contest for a Co-op candidate in 1951.<sup>295</sup>

Yet, the election saw the Co-operative Party become yet again, had in spite of a difficult election for the Labour Party, retain many seats whilst seeing its proportion of the Labour Party vote, and total British vote grow. Whilst there were losses in numbers of candidates at this election this was not greatly out of line with those sustained by the Labour Party as a whole. The number of Labour seats as a whole did decline at this election. The number of seats successfully contested fell from 315 to 295.<sup>296</sup> It is therefore would have been unrealistic for the number of Co-op MPs to not fall. Its number of successfully contested seats fell from 18 to 16, however, once again this remained a significant number for the Co-operative Party when compared to pre-1945 elections.<sup>297</sup> Furthermore, the percentage of the total Labour Party growth had grown one again from 5.3% in 1950 to 6% in 1951.<sup>298</sup> Therefore, even at difficult elections such as 1951, the Co-operative Party had cemented itself as a significant part of the Labour Party in parliament.

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<sup>293</sup> Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1950-1973*, p.256

<sup>294</sup> Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1950-1973*, pp.45, 60, 188, 198, 213, 215, 256, 348,402, 405,464, 495, 497 and 554

<sup>295</sup> Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1950-1973*, p.554

<sup>296</sup> A Long Century of Elections', <<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7529/>> [accessed 18 September 2023], p.19

<sup>297</sup> Carbery, *Consumers in Politics*, p.128

<sup>298</sup> Carbery, *Consumers in Politics*, p.128; NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1946 Co-operative Party Conference: Appendix II*, pp.43-47 and Richard Cracknell, Elise Uberoi, Matthew Burton, 'UK Election Statistics: 1918-2023, A Long Century of Elections', <<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7529/>> [accessed 18 September 2023], p.16

## **Conclusions**

Whilst the extremely limited historiography available which considers the Co-operative Party campaign in the constituencies has suggested there was little to distinguish between Co-operative and Labour Party candidates, this chapter has concluded this was not so clear cut and was not caused by outright marginalisation.<sup>299</sup> Instead, this chapter has concluded that this was part of a highly pragmatic strategy, which nationally the Co-operative Party were content with, which saw significant variations in the extent to which Co-operative Party candidates put forward a distinct Co-operative Party identity. Something which was wrapped up in several key factors.

First, the national context of these elections. In 1945, there were vast similarities between the national campaigns of both parties due to the types of issues which characterised these election campaigns. Whilst some candidates, such as Titterington and Barnes, did place significant emphasis on these issues indicating these were issues of prominence in these constituencies, the majority of the Co-op Party candidates' addresses did not conform to this standard.<sup>300</sup> Instead, these addresses saw these candidates prioritise issues such as health, housing, full employment and welfare provision, issues which had dominated the national campaign.<sup>301</sup> The fact that this was pragmatism is supported by the fact that as consumer issues became a greater focus of election campaigns, there was growing space for the party to project a more distinct consumer identity and this fed into the local election campaigns in 1950 and 1951. Second, the context of the constituency being contested proved to be a central factor in how far these candidates promoted a distinct Co-operative identity as these candidates had to balance representing their constituents as well as their party and this was something which had a direct bearing on these candidates' election campaigns.

By considering this constituency level campaigning alongside the election results, the chapter has been able to conclude how this electoral strategy fed into what were successful election results for the Co-operative Party in this period. Whilst both Whitecross and Parker have suggested this alliance benefitted the Labour Party to a greater extent than the Co-op as the alliance with the Co-operative Party allowed Labour to cheaply contest seats it did not want to contest itself; the chapter has noted how this alliance was also working for the Co-operative

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<sup>299</sup> MacKenzie and Arditti, 'Co-operative Politics in a Lancashire constituency', p.118

<sup>300</sup> LHASC, Titterington, Election Address 1945, JN105055.AI

<sup>301</sup> LHASC, *Let us Face the Future: A declaration of Labour policy for the consideration of the nation* (London: Labour Party: 1945)

Party. It did have to contest several difficult seats, but this represented a trade-off.<sup>302</sup> Several Co-op candidates across this period were contesting very difficult seats, however, this was a sacrifice worth making for the Co-operative Party. However, considerably more of the seats they were contesting during period could be described as marginal constituencies, and as such this period saw a record high number of Co-op MPs elected in 1945. Whilst the high point of 23 MPs was not sustained into 1950 and 1951, the Co-operative Party still retained a higher number of MPs than it had done at any pre-1945 election. Furthermore, the proportion of the Labour vote occupied by these Co-operative candidates grew during this period and as such these candidates became an increasingly integral part of it.

The chapter also considered where the Co-operative Party were securing the election of these MPs and has shown how the bottom-up, voluntary approach to political representation adopted by the Co-operative Party resulted a geographical concentration of Co-op MPs. In areas such as Clydeside and especially in London, there were significant numbers of candidates and thus MPs, whereas in other regions, Co-op electoral machinery was sparse. A trend which was present across this period.

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<sup>302</sup> Parker, *Trade Unions and the political culture of the British Labour Party*, p.174 and Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.104



## **Conclusions**

The thesis has questioned the extent to which the electoral alliance with the Labour Party acted as an effective medium through which the Co-operative Party was able to secure political representation for the Co-operative Movement by considering the post-war Attlee elections. It has shown the importance of not overlooking electoral campaigning when considering the Co-operative-Labour Party electoral alliance. By analysing how the alliance functioned electorally, the thesis has been able to show how a skewed interpretation of it during the Attlee years has dominated. Whilst the focus has often been placed on the disputes over diverging forms of public ownership, this has meant that the central purpose of the alliance with Labour, securing political representation for the Co-operative Movement has often been overlooked and misrepresented. This thesis has instead shown how the effectiveness of the alliance with the Labour Party shifted significantly over-time both due to the revised electoral agreement of 1946 which largely smoothed relations between the two parties and the improved electoral position of the Co-operative Party which meant the alliance became more reciprocal in its nature. In this way, the party became an increasingly successful pressure group on the outskirts of the Labour Party, a situation which the Co-operative Party consistently demonstrated contentment with. As the thesis has noted by considering the vastly neglected local election campaigns, the Co-operative Party's political organisation was heavily localised in its nature and involved a significant deal of electoral pragmatism to achieve its aims. As such, the debates over nationalisation constituted just one part of the Co-op-Labour alliance during the period of Attlee government and whilst these debates were undoubtedly a challenge, they did not define this relationship during this period.

The thesis started by considering the development of the Co-operative Party and the alliance with Labour and concluded that both of these developments were based heavily on local voluntarism something which heavily influenced the alliance with Labour. This was especially so under the 1927 Cheltenham Agreement due to its allowance for localised differences. It was this precise factor which caused significant difficulties between the two parties as the Labour Party sought homogeneity, whilst at the same time, the Co-operative Party sought to retain its autonomy.<sup>303</sup> Indeed, Chapter 2 has demonstrated how the Labour Party's frustrations with this agreement could prevent Co-op candidates from standing, even in constituencies such as

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<sup>303</sup> Stewart, "A Party Within a Party", p.139 and Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.95

Lettering where it had significant presence.<sup>304</sup> Furthermore, Chapter 3 has shown how under this agreement, the Labour Party, with Trade Union backing, would prevent discussions over contentious policies occurring.<sup>305</sup> However, it also demonstrated how on both sides of this alliance there was a commitment to working together on both sides of this alliance as demonstrated by the compromises both parties made in reaching it.

Chapter 2 considered how well this alliance enabled the Co-operative Party to gain candidacies which it could then stand for election. It showed how under both the 1927 and 1946 agreements, the Co-operative Party was able to stand growing numbers of candidates. Frustrations with the Cheltenham Agreement, ensured the Co-operative Party struggled to gain candidates in several areas.<sup>306</sup> However, despite these difficulties, the 1945 election had seen the Co-operative Party build significantly on its number of candidacies, with this rising from 20 stood in 1935 to 34 in 1945, and so whilst this electoral agreement could pose difficulties, it had still facilitated growths in candidates.<sup>307</sup> Furthermore, once the shift had been made to the 1946 agreement, these issues no longer occurred with regards to candidate selection and the Co-operative Party demonstrated significant contentment with the numbers of candidates it was standing for election.<sup>308</sup> Therefore, whilst Manton has argued this agreement changed little at a time when relations between both parties were at their lowest, this chapter considering candidate selection procedures demonstrates how this was clearly not the case.<sup>309</sup>

A similar shift could be seen when it came to policy development where there was a significant balancing act on the part of the Co-operative Party between retaining its independence and seeking to have influence over Labour Party policy. Here the thesis considered several key

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<sup>304</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, p.167; Robertson, 'A Union of Forces Marching in the Same Direction?', pp.216-221; Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, p.437; Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1944, CPY/2/10 (The National Co-operative Archive), p.1; *Co-operative News*, March 31<sup>st</sup> 1945, p.1; Co-operative Party National Committee Meeting Minutes, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1945, CPY/2/10 (The National Co-operative Archive), p.2; Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1945, CPY/2/10 (The National Co-operative Archive), p.2 and Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, May 16<sup>th</sup> 1945, CPY/2/10 (The National Co-operative Archive), p.2

<sup>305</sup> LHASC, National Council of Labour Minutes, March 21<sup>st</sup> 1944.

<sup>306</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain*, p.167; Robertson, 'A Union of Forces Marching in the Same Direction?', pp.216-221; Craig, *Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, p.437; Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1944, CPY/2/10 (The National Co-operative Archive), p.1; *Co-operative News*, March 31<sup>st</sup> 1945, p.1; Co-operative Party National Committee Meeting Minutes, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1945, CPY/2/10 (The National Co-operative Archive), p.2; Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1945, CPY/2/10 (The National Co-operative Archive), p.2 and Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, May 16<sup>th</sup> 1945, CPY/2/10 (The National Co-operative Archive), p.2

<sup>307</sup> Carbery, *Consumers in Politics*, p.128

<sup>308</sup> NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1952 Co-operative Party Conference*, pp.17-19

<sup>309</sup> Manton, 'The Labour Party and the Co-op', p.771

questions, on the one hand, it considered the extent to which there was policy overlap between these two parties and why this had occurred. In doing so it has noted as Whitecross is right to suggest there was a great deal of similarity in the policy programmes of both parties in 1945. However, it has taken issue with her argument that this was simply the result of electoral pragmatism or an inability to form independent policy positions as a result of balancing multiple ties through the alliance with Labour and responsibility to the Co-operative Union.<sup>310</sup> By considering election policy in 1945 in more detail and alongside the later 1950 and 1951 elections, the thesis has been able to provide insights into why this occurred. There could often be little to disagree over. Much of both parties policy in 1945 particularly, was dominated by issues directly related to the period of war and had direct links to the work of the Co-operative Movement and as such, there was, generally a limit to which consumer issues were a focus and as such, there was a limit to the extent to which it was able to project a distinctly consumer identity.<sup>311</sup> Furthermore, where there were policy disagreements, the Co-operative Party did not blindly support such policies for the sake of running a cohesive election campaign, as can be seen in the absence of mentions to the Ministry of Food in the Co-operative Party's 1945 election manifesto.<sup>312</sup> As the space for consumer issues to take precedence grew in 1950 and 1951, these did become a feature of both parties campaigns. But this also enabled the Co-operative Party, whilst demonstrating its support for much of Labour Party policy to put forward the case for its own business model and demonstrate how certain policies could be approached based off the experience of the movement.<sup>313</sup>

In light of these differences, the thesis also considered how far the Co-operative Party was able to influence Labour policy at these elections and has in the process nuanced accounts which suggest the Co-operative Party was wholly marginalised under the Attlee governments and those which have suggested these difficulties had an enduring impact on this electoral relationship.<sup>314</sup> On several occasions during the period of Attlee government, the Labour Party

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<sup>310</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.164-166

<sup>311</sup> NCA, CPP, *We Make Tomorrow Guard His Future*, NCA/CP Publications, 1944-1947, (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1945)

<sup>312</sup> NCA, CPP, *We Make Tomorrow Guard His Future*, NCA/CP Publications, 1944-1947, (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1945)

<sup>313</sup> NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party, *Forward with the People: election manifesto of the Co-operative Party, 1950*. CP CP [FORWARD], pp.1-4; NCA, CPP, *Co-operative Party, For all the People: manifesto of the Co-operative Party*, CP/CP [FOR], 1951; Labour Party, *Let Us Win Through Together: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation*. Available at: [1950 Labour Party Manifesto - \(labour-party.org.uk\)](https://labour-party.org.uk) [accessed: 5<sup>th</sup> October 2023] and Labour Party, *Labour Party Election Manifesto 1951*. Available at: [1951 Labour Party Manifesto - \(labour-party.org.uk\)](https://labour-party.org.uk) [accessed: 20<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

<sup>314</sup> Craigen, 'The Co-operative Party', p.7; Leonard, 'The Co-op's in Politics', p.56; Peter Gurney, 'A House Divided', pp.238-242 and Gurney, 'The Battle of the Consumer in Post-war Britain', pp.965-966

had declared its support for policies which directly challenged the work of the Co-operative Movement. First in 1945 when it proposed to continue the work of the Ministry of Food, which would have usurped the work of both the CWS and SCWS.<sup>315</sup> Then again in 1950 when it was proposed the nationalisation of fruit and vegetables, meat, sugar, but most crucially, industrial insurance.<sup>316</sup> Whilst it did not disagree with the historiography that this policy was problematic for the Co-operative Party, the thesis has taken issue with the assertion by Gurney that this policy dispute, despite Labour's compromise, severely damaged relations between the two parties. Undoubtedly this policy dispute, which occurred in quick succession to the other nationalisation proposals, somewhat damaged the trust the Co-operative Party had for the Labour Party. However, the thesis rejects Gurney's argument that this did significant damage to the alliance with Labour.<sup>317</sup> Undoubtedly in the short-term this caused rifts in the alliance, however, in the long-term, the Co-operative Party demonstrated its confidence in the alliance and its preference for this approach to Co-operative-Labour relations as opposed to full affiliation.

Chapter 3 also challenged Whitecross's assertion that the Co-operative Parties involvement in securing this policy compromise was limited.<sup>318</sup> The Labour Party was faced with opposition to several aspects of its policy programme outlined in *Labour Believes in Britain*, however, it was only the insurance issue which the party compromised on.<sup>319</sup> By being, in terms of raw numbers an increasingly significant part of the Labour Party's majority, especially post-1950 when the Labour Party's majority had diminished as well as having reached the revised electoral agreement, the Co-operative Party witnessed a growth in policy agency.

Chapter 4 considered the campaign in the constituencies and shows how a highly pragmatic, localised strategy was adopted by the Co-operative Party to election campaigning which enabled it to secure the representation which facilitated this improved policy agency. By considering the campaign in the constituencies, the final chapter of the thesis has covered

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<sup>315</sup> NCA, *Report of the 1944 Co-operative Congress*, p.63; NCA, CPP, Co-operative Party Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, May 16<sup>th</sup> 1945, p.2 and Labour History Archive and Study Centre, National Council of Labour Minutes, March 21<sup>st</sup> 1944.

<sup>316</sup> LHASC, *The Labour Party, Labour Believes in Britain*, p.16; NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1950 Co-operative Party Conference*, p.75

<sup>317</sup> Gurney, 'A House Divided', pp.238-242 and Gurney, 'The Battle of the Consumer in Post-war Britain', pp.965-966

<sup>318</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, pp.172-174

<sup>319</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.161; Labour Party, *Let Us Win Through Together: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation*. Available at: [1950 Labour Party Manifesto - \(labour-party.org.uk\)](https://www.labour-party.org.uk) [accessed: 5<sup>th</sup> October 2023], LHA, The Labour Party. *Labour Believes in Britain*, pp.16-17

largely new ground. It demonstrated how the Co-operative Party fought these campaigns at constituency level and how this translated into MPs and as such how the Co-operative Party secured the representation which it could then use to lobby on behalf of the whole movement. It concluded that in order to do this, there was a high degree of electoral pragmatism adopted by the Co-operative Party which saw significant variations in the extent to which its candidates prioritised Co-op issues through both their own election literature and also the extent to which this was picked up by the press in constituencies where this coverage was available.

It has been able to demonstrate the strategy adopted by these candidates in their constituency was highly pragmatic. Whilst MacKenzie and Arditti have argued when considering the Droylsden constituency there was little distinguish Co-operative Party candidates from Labour candidates, this thesis has shown this to be an oversimplification.<sup>320</sup> The extent to which Co-operative Party candidates projected a distinct Co-operative identity through their campaign literature varied significantly over time and place, something which was sustained throughout the 1945 to 1951 period. For example, in 1945, whilst Barnes and Titterington undoubtedly put forward a strong pro-Co-op message, at this election these candidates were in the minority.<sup>321</sup> It may be tempting then to conclude as brief suggestions have been made to, that there was little distinguishing features between Co-operative Party and Labour candidates as MacKenzie and Arditti have done so, but considering this alongside the latter 1950 and 1951 elections reveals that this was part of a highly pragmatic strategy of these candidates, something which nationally the Co-operative Party did not object to.<sup>322</sup>

Chapter 4 also considered some preliminary discussion surrounding the extent to which the Co-operative Party received hostility through the local press coverage during these election campaigns. Whilst Gurney has noted a difficult relationship between the Co-operative Movement and the press, the thesis has begun to argue through its preliminary findings that the situation was more complex with the Co-operative Party.<sup>323</sup> Its candidates did experience some difficult coverage in several cases, and Co-op issues could be marginalised, however, there were clearly a wider set of reasons for this other than outright press hostility. On the one hand, candidates had to balance representing their constituents as well as the party they were standing for. Additionally, the extent to which consumer issues were discussed in Co-op candidates' campaigns could vary and so whilst these issues were not discussed in the press,

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<sup>320</sup> MacKenzie and Arditti, 'Co-operative Politics in a Lancashire Constituency', p.118

<sup>321</sup> LHASC, Alfred Barnes, Election Address 1945, JN105055.AI and LHASC, M.F. Titterington, Election Address 1945, JN105055.AI

<sup>322</sup> MacKenzie and Arditti, 'Co-operative Politics in a Lancashire Constituency', p.118

<sup>323</sup> Gurney, 'The Curse of the Co-ops', pp.1479-1483

this might not have been the result of press marginalisation and was instead because candidates were not discussing consumer issues. Finally, in cases such as that of Fred Longden, the pre-existing political alignment of the paper discussing the candidate had significant bearing on the type of coverage the candidate received. In cases like this negative coverage reflected a generally anti-Labour perspective as opposed to a general hostility to the Co-op.

Finally, the thesis questioned how this fed into the election results achieved and has as such shown this to be a successful strategy for the party. The thesis has not disagreed with the assertions made by Whitecross and Parker that the Co-operative Party would often contest difficult seats.<sup>324</sup> However, it has shown that the extent to which this impacted upon the Co-operative Party's electoral prospects should not be overexaggerated. Instead, this was part of a trade-off which saw the Co-operative Party contest several hopeless seats in return for several which were more marginal, and it stood a much greater chance of seeing an MP elected. It has also shown by considering these election results that the bottom-up, voluntary approach to political representation adopted by the Co-operative Party came to have a significant bearing upon where its representation was secured with hotspots occurring round Clydeside and London.<sup>325</sup> These candidates whilst heavily clustered in set areas were though, once elected, able to lobby on behalf of the whole Co-operative Movement and so these results were significant.

As such, the alliance with the Labour Party was not perfect. Its quality varied significantly over time and place due to the voluntary, localised nature of the Co-operative Party. However, across this period, the Co-operative Party was able to secure representation for the Co-operative Movement which left it in a better place to defend its interests as it demonstrated an increasing ability to do so.

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<sup>324</sup> Whitecross, *Co-operative Commonwealth or New Jerusalem*, p.104 and Parker, *Trade Unions and the political culture of the British Labour Party*, p.174

<sup>325</sup> NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1946 Co-operative Party Conference: Appendix II*, pp.43-47; NCA, CPP, *Co-operative Party Monthly Letter*, March 1950, pp.15-16 and NCA, CPP, *Report of the 1952 Co-operative Party Conference*, pp.17-22

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