

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank the following for their time and courtesy. Leslie Huckfield was a member of Labour's NEC, the Labour MP for Nuneaton and served as parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the DOI from 1976-1979. Gerald Kaufman MP, who was Minister of State for Industry 1975-1979. Geoffrey Robinson MP, who was Chief Executive, Jaguar Cars 1973-1975, advisor to Triumph Meriden Motorcycles 1974-1977, and Chief Executive of Triumph Meriden Motorcycles 1978-1980. Special thanks to Lord Tomlinson of Walsall, better known as John Tomlinson who has been a lecturer in Industrial Relations, Head of Research of the Engineering Union (AUEW) between 1967-1970 and the Labour MP for Meriden 1974-1979. Although the name of John Tomlinson does not appear in any of the literature, he was present at many of the meetings between government and representatives of Meriden. The author finally acknowledges the help and co-operation of the staff of the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick; the Labour Party Archive, Labour History and Study Centre, Manchester; and the Library of the University of Manchester.

ABBREVIATIONS

- ACTSS Association of Clerical, Technical and Supervisory Staffs (White Collar section of TGWU).
- AUEW Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers
- BSA Birmingham Small Arms Company Limited
- CSEU Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions. (Often referred to as the 'Confed' by trade unionists).
- DOI Department of Industry. *Lifespan 16 April 1974 to 11 August 1983.*
- DTI Department of Trade and Industry.
Lifespan 20 November 1970 to 16 April 1974.
- ECGD Export Credit Guarantee Department
- GEC General Electric Company
- GKN Guest Keen and Nettlefold
- ICOM Industrial Common Ownership Movement
- KME Kirby Manufacturing and Engineering
- MBH Manganese Bronze Holdings
- Meriden Often used to mean the workers' co-operative,
Triumph Meriden Motorcycles
- NVT Norton Villiers Triumph Limited
- TGWU Transport and General Workers Union
- UCS Upper Clyde Shipbuilders

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This study is an examination of the Meriden Motorcycle Co-operative and the confluence of two industrial debates that were emerging in the early 1970s.¹ The first was the growing disposition by the state to intervene in manufacturing industry to save companies from bankruptcy and the propensity by workers to demand protection of jobs supported with extra-legal protest. The second discussion concerns the politics of industrial democracy, the relationship between state, industry and trade unions as they wrestled with the question of consultation for the shop floor worker under the spotlight of the Bullock Commission. The essay will attempt to construct a narrative from archive and oral sources and seek to test Martin Fairclough's argument that Meriden was constituted as an industrial experiment and not as an agency for retaining a British motorcycle industry.²

Politics pervaded the whole saga of Meriden even before the NVT Chairman Dennis Poore made his only visit to Meriden on 14 September 1973 to announce its closure.³ The political climate was very different, the left were strong and as Poore later told the *Sunday Times Magazine*, the Conservative government expressly concerned about the 'explosive potential' of the situation with a miners strike in the offing.⁴

¹ The eponym 'Meriden' will henceforth be used to generally denote the Meriden Motorcycle Co-operative.

² M.E. Fairclough, *The political economy of producer co-operatives: a study of Triumph Motorcycles (Meriden) Ltd. and Britain's industrial decline*, (Ph.D., Bristol, 37-6953, 1987), pp.344-347.

³ Tom Lester, 'How the British Bikes Crashed', *Management Today*, May (1976), p.47.

⁴ *Sunday Times Magazine*, 4 June 1978, p.24. and interview with Geoffrey Robinson MP, 21 March 2002.

One political participant was Leslie Huckfield, then Labour MP for Nuneaton. Huckfield had been deeply involved with Meriden from March 1973 when the Conservative government brokered the deal to merge the motorcycle industry with £4.8 million of state funding.⁵ The Conservative right criticised the industrial 'lame-duck' interventionist policy that also by-passed the requirement for parliamentary approval.⁶ Industrial intervention by the state begun by the 1970 Conservative government and continued by Labour after 1974 together with the Meriden co-operative became a right-wing policy think-tank case study by Jock Bruce-Gardyne.⁷ Although the Conservative party did not intrinsically oppose worker co-operatives but state aid,⁸ it could be argued that the politics of industrial intervention, aided by this study, contributed to the laissez faire policies pursued by the post 1979 Thatcher government.

The creation of the Meriden co-operative also enveloped trade union politics. The Meriden plant had been predominantly organised by the TGWU and one of its most active supporters had been Jack Jones, its leader.⁹ The Small Heath and Wolverhampton plants of NVT were organised by the

⁵ Birmingham Small Arms Company Limited, (MSS 19B/TB6), Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. Copy of letter from Leslie Huckfield MP to unknown NVT recipient dated 30 October 1973. Huckfield had led the Meriden shop stewards at a meeting with the Conservative Industry Minister, Christopher Chataway in March 1973. Interview with Leslie Huckfield, 4 April, 2002.

⁶ The Industry Act 1972, Section 8, allowed the Secretary of State to provide up to £5 million of state aid without parliamentary approval. Tony Benn used the same provision to aid Meriden, KME and the Scottish Daily News.

⁷ Jock Bruce-Gardyne, Meriden: odyssey of a lame duck: a study of government intervention in the motor-cycle industry - the way the money goes, (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1978).

⁸ Official Reports of Parliamentary Debates (Hansard), HC Deb. (1978-79), 960, 12 December 1978, col.383-384. Kenneth Clarke.

⁹ Interview with Leslie Huckfield, 4 April, 2002.

AUEW. Dennis Poore denigrated Meriden workers for 'sabotage' to the whole company and praised the responsible workers of Small Heath thus perpetuating a rift.¹⁰ There is little overt evidence to suggest inter-union rivalry may have been a factor responsible for the delayed commencement of operations at Meriden in March 1975. However, the lack of one unified trade union stance may have contributed. The Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions (CSEU) viewed Meriden, particularly during the plant blockade during 1974, in a less than positive light particularly when AUEW member's jobs were threatened.¹¹ The workers at Small Heath were consistently told by Poore that government support for Meriden favoured co-operative jobs at the expense of their own.¹² Poore had reacted angrily to Benn's decision to fund Meriden, it was 'a stab in the back' for 3,000 NVT workers in favour of 250 jobs for the co-operative.¹³ Workers' at Small Heath greeted Benn with 'boos and catcalls' when he visited the plant in an attempt to ease workers anxieties.¹⁴ When the tension between the Small Heath and Meriden plants were at their most intense, the silence of the CSEU could be a sign of probable dispute between the unions.¹⁵ At the

¹⁰ Financial Times, 23 November 1973. Speech by Dennis Poore to the *Motorcycle News* 'Man of the Year' dinner. Birmingham Small Arms Company Limited, (MSS 19B/TB6), Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. NVT Newsletter, February 1975 issued by H.M.Palin.

¹¹ Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions, Executive Committee Minutes, (MSS.259/5), Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. Meeting of 12 December 1974, Minute 74/122.

¹² Birmingham Small Arms Company Limited, (MSS 19B/TB6), Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. Letter from Dennis Poore to P.W..Turner, CSEU Birmingham District Secretary, 28 February 1975.

¹³ Birmingham Small Arms Company Limited, (MSS 19B/TB6), Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. Letter from Dennis Poore to Tony Benn, 20 May 1974.

¹⁴ Coventry Evening Telegraph, 9 November 1974.

special CSEU meeting with Tony Benn and his ministerial team, Meriden strangely was not discussed, although it occurred at a point when Dennis Poore was threatening to jeopardise the whole deal.¹⁶

In the early 1970s, a debate opened within the labour movement on the democratic participation of workers in industry. Tony Benn suggested that 'the demands by workers for a greater say in the running of the firms in which they work...has been growing rapidly...whether you call it participation, industrial democracy or workers' control, it is inevitable.' Benn called upon the trade unions to decide on their response, as no detailed policy yet existed.¹⁷ Although Labour had no definitive proposals, industrial democracy was a dynamic subject. Jack Jones was one of the few union leaders to take an active interest in furthering industrial democracy.¹⁸ By 1973, Jones was advocating union representation on company boards that would not only engage workers but also particularly empower positive fostering of shop stewards.¹⁹ Many claims were made for the benefits of industrial democracy, *Labour Weekly*, contended that it would end job monotony.²⁰

¹⁵ The *AUEW Journal* for the period 1973-76 made no mention of Meriden or the other co-operatives. (The author).

¹⁶ Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions, Executive Committee Minutes, (MSS.259/5), Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. Meeting of 13 January 1975, Minute 75/6. and Tony Benn, (Ruth Winstone ed.), *Against the tide. Diaries 1973-1976*, (London: Hutchinson, 1989), p.297.

¹⁷ *Labour Weekly*, 19 November 1971.

¹⁸ Labour Party, *Industrial Democracy*, (London, Labour Party, 1968), p.1 and p.7.

¹⁹ *New Statesman*, 6 July 1973.

²⁰ *Labour Weekly*, 8 June 1973.

Labour's policies remained vague, with a one line statement in the February 1974 manifesto promising an undefined 'Industrial Democracy Act.'²¹ The practical expression of this policy required interpretation within days of assuming office. The new Industry Minister, Tony Benn wanted to respond favourably to was an application to fund a workers' co-operative at the Meriden motorcycle factory then being occupied by its workforce. Benn wanted to encourage experimentation, 'I hoped people from the shop stewards' movement would begin to formulate their demands...to help me. The real test... [will be] the Meriden affair.'²²

Meriden was not the only workers' co-operative created during the period. Keith Bradley has argued that they all became an important laboratory for the 'feasibility of worker control strategies that focus on workers gaining managerial prerogatives.'²³ Meriden workers did not consider themselves exemplars or pioneers. The local MP, Leslie Huckfield and the TGWU union official, Bill Lapworth had only pressed the idea as a negotiating ploy to delay the closure of the plant. 'There was never any intention to start the Co-op' according to Lapworth, 'but we were convinced on business terms

²¹ Labour Party Manifesto, 1974, (February), Let us Work together - Labour's Way Out of the Crisis, (London: Labour Party, 1974), p.10.

²² Tony Benn, (Ruth Winstone ed.), Against the tide. Diaries 1973-1976, (London: Hutchinson, 1989), p.118.

²³ Keith Bradley, 'A Comparative Analysis of Producer Co-operatives: Some theoretical and empirical implications,' British Journal of Industrial Relations, Vol.18, No.2, July, (1980), p.157.

that Meriden was best placed to stay open as opposed to BSA at Small Heath.²⁴

Labour may have been advancing the debate but the trade unions were very ambivalent about industrial democracy of any variety, whether it be worker co-operatives or workers control.²⁵ One of the primary objections was that it overturned the traditional voluntarist bargaining relationship between labour and capital. H.A.Clegg spoke for many unions when he suggested a decade earlier that industrial democracy already existed in Britain because it had strong trade unions able to maintain a vigorous opposition to management enforcing 'democracy through collective bargaining'.²⁶ The AUEW leader of the KME co-operative, Jack Spriggs, stated that he would have preferred a private company rather than a co-operative because it would enable him to perform his traditional role.²⁷ Spriggs went on to say that he believed that union leaders were 'terrified of workers' control'.²⁸

From the left, the Mineworkers' leader Arthur Scargill argued that, 'workers' control...[was] a recipe for collaboration...designed to frustrate the real

²⁴ Fairclough, Producer Co-operatives, p.319. cites interview with Bill Lapworth. Authors interview with Leslie Huckfield, 4 April, 2002. See also Robert Oakeshott, The Case for Workers' Co-ops, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2nd Edition, 1990), p.108.

²⁵ Trades Unions Congress, Report of the 104th Annual Trades Union Congress, 1973, (London: TUC, 1973), p.391.

²⁶ H.A.Clegg, A New Approach to Industrial Democracy, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960), p.131. See also Eirene White, 'Opposition to Workers Control', in Labour Party Annual Conference Report, (London: Labour Party, 1960), p.230.

²⁷ Tony Eccles, Under New Management: the story of Britain's largest worker co-operative - its successes and failures, (London: Pan, 1981), p.95.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p.97.

aspirations of the working class.²⁹ Producer co-operatives were generally regarded with suspicion by trade unions as a source of self-inflicted sweated labour and undercut prices by reducing labour costs.³⁰ Robert Oakeshott argues that trade union opposition to producer co-operatives has a long lineage going back to 1871 when unions lost £60,000 invested in the Ouseburn Co-operative Engineering Works, a substantial sum for the time.³¹ Trade unions never again directly invested funds in workers enterprise. Bill Lapworth, an advocate of the co-operative idea for Meriden, was forced to reject the TGWU Jaguar branch demands for the union to financially contribute to Meriden. Jack Jones offered sympathy and moral support, however, it was union policy never to invest in 'commercial undertakings.'³²

The DOI advised Tony Benn that Meriden was not commercially viable.³³ Benn ignored the advice and announced the funding as a beneficial 'social experiment in industrial organisation.'³⁴ One commentator who supported

²⁹ Arthur Scargill, New Left Review, No. 92, July/August (1985), p.27. Cited in Mary Mellor, Janet Hannah, and John Stirling, Worker Co-operatives in Theory and Practice, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), p.48.

³⁰ Jenny Thornley, Marxism Today, April, (1985).

³¹ Robert Oakeshott, The Case for Workers' Co-ops, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2nd Edition, 1990), pp.57-58.

³² Transport and General Workers' Union: Coventry District, (MSS 208F), Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. ACTSS Coventry District Committee Minutes, 7 August 1974 and 14 August 1974.

When requested to invest in the Scottish Daily News, Sir Sidney Greene, General Secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen replied, 'our rules are most specific on the matter of investment in shares, laying down that such shares must be in companies quoted on the Stock Exchange.' Cited in Keith Bradley, and Alan Gelb, Worker Capitalism: The New Industrial Relations, (London: Heinemann, 1983), p.125.

³³ Industrial Development Advisory Board of the Department of Industry (IDAB).

³⁴ Birmingham Small Arms Company Limited, (MSS 19B/TB6), Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. Department of Trade and Industry press statement dated 26 July 1974.

experimentation suggested that the true cost to the taxpayer was negligible because of rising unemployment and the alternative cost of social security and redundancy payments.³⁵ The 'experimental' theory does have its critics. Tony Eccles who studied KME, argued that for the government to under-fund an experiment was illogical, 'it only made sense if the aim was to kill the whole idea dead.'³⁶ Although Fairclough based part of his supposition on the notion that an experiment by definition has a finite life and therefore the level of funding was appropriate, it was never intended to adequately resource the enterprise.³⁷ Robinson confirms that the investment in Meriden was 'nowhere near enough to rebuild the industry.'³⁸

The Meriden co-operative had an unusual collection of 'friends' willing to help at different times. Jack Jones was probably the most consistent and influential,³⁹ although one could argue that he was just representing his members. According to Huckfield, Bill Lapworth, the TGWU official and co-originator of the idea, was a well-connected traditional right-wing union official.⁴⁰ Harold Lever was a right-wing member of the Cabinet and the government's 'fixer'. Some accounts suggest that his decision to back Meriden was crucial for obtaining government approval.⁴¹ Geoffrey Robinson, was Chief Executive of Jaguar Cars and had no previous contact

³⁵ Victor Keegan, Guardian, 11 January 1977.

³⁶ Eccles, Under New Management, p.88.

³⁷ Fairclough, Producer Co-operatives, p.365.

³⁸ Geoffrey Robinson MP, interview 21 March 2002.

³⁹ Geoffrey Robinson MP, interview 21 March 2002.

⁴⁰ Interview with Leslie Huckfield, 4 April, 2002. This is also the impression gained by the author from Geoffrey Robinson MP, interview 21 March 2002.

with the 'troublesome' factory.⁴² Robinson was therefore somewhat surprised to be asked by Donald Stokes, Chairman of British Leyland, to assist the co-operative with their business plan for government funding.⁴³ The origination of the secondment of Robinson to Meriden is unknown.⁴⁴ It is however intriguing that one of Britain's senior industrialists, Stokes, was engaged with the problem of a group of workers occupying a Coventry motorcycle factory who proposed to turn into a co-operative. Geoffrey Robinson is hesitant about describing Meriden as an experiment, he believes that as a commercial venture it was a good idea, with a niche market product, 'it lasted until 1983 after all'.⁴⁵ However, in a letter to Tony Benn supporting the business plan for Meriden, Robinson wrote,

'the Co-operative's value as a social and industrial relations experiment is by far the most important aspect of what we are trying to do. Its relevance here is to point a new way forward in terms of whether with a wider system of ownership, labour relations can be got right, whether restrictive and other malpractices can be eliminated, and whether higher levels of production and productivity can be obtained and sustained.'⁴⁶

⁴¹ Sunday Times Magazine, 4 June 1978, p.26. and Geoffrey Robinson MP, interview 21 March 2002.

⁴² Geoffrey Robinson was a graduate of Cambridge and Yale Universities. Senior Executive, Industrial Reorganisation Corporation 1968-70; Financial Controller, British Leyland 1971-72; Managing Director, Leyland Innocenti (Milan) 1972-73; Chief Executive, Jaguar Cars 1973-75. Geoffrey Robinson MP, interview 21 March 2002.

⁴³ Geoffrey Robinson MP, interview 21 March 2002 and Lord Tomlinson of Walsall, telephone interview with the author, 12 March 2002.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Robinson and Les Huckfield believe that the impetus may have come from Jack Jones and Bill Lapworth of TGWU. Geoffrey Robinson MP, interview 21 March 2002 and Interview with Leslie Huckfield, 4 April, 2002.

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Robinson MP, interview 21 March 2002.

⁴⁶ Letter from Geoffrey Robinson to Tony Benn, 24 June 1974. Cited in Fairclough, Producer Co-operatives, p.345.

The political climate in the mid 1970s was such that many industrialists wanted to appease the Labour government because unions had a great influence over the government.⁴⁷ Although Labour had no firm plans for industrial democracy, the Bullock Committee were formulating details likely to favour trade union nominees on company boards, the Jack Jones-TUC policy. Business managers resisted the Bullock proposals, manufacturing industry considered union appointed directors as a too rigid response that would do little to eliminate conflict between workers and management in the workplace.⁴⁸ Business required alternative proposals acceptable to Labour's legislators, did some managers use Meriden to test new methods of management? The principle response suggests Howard Gospel (p.145) was the adoption of a strategy of workplace consultation by managers.

Gospel. P.140

Post Donovan 'the main instigators in reshaping the system of industrial relations were employers.'

Many union leaders were also critical of TUC policy, particularly with the potential contradiction between union directors and their traditional role in collective bargaining.⁴⁹ The TUC had recognised workers self-management had not been 'put to the test...in a significant enterprise', is it therefore possible that Jones may have conceptualised Meriden as a union test case?⁵⁰

Experiment to test management

This study has argued that Meriden and the other worker co-operatives were an industrial experiment to test if self-management in a manufacturing context was possible. However, an alternative synthesis suggests that it may have been a practical experiment to examine management under the conditions of extended workers participation. In 1977, Alan Williams the Minister of State, reported to the House of Commons on the Meriden 'experiment.' The benefits were labour flexibility, no industrial disputes and increased productivity. However, the experiment had identified that a limited management structure was a weakness that would be addressed with the help of one of Britain's largest firms and Donald Stokes.⁵¹

Geoffrey Robinson suggested that the industrial 'friends' of Meriden, Barrie Heath, Chairman of GKN, Arnold Weinstock, Chairman of GEC and Donald Stokes all behaved altruistically.⁵² According to Robinson, British managers accepted that the motorcycle industry collapsed because of bad management and felt some collective responsibility to aid its resuscitation.⁵³ It is certainly bizarre that a small manufacturing plant producing an outdated motorcycle should have access to the free expertise of senior Executives seconded by GKN and GEC with Donald Stokes as the unpaid marketing adviser.⁵⁴ Kenneth Clarke the Conservative industry spokesman told the House of Commons that he

⁴⁷ Interview with Leslie Huckfield, 4 April, 2002 and Geoffrey Robinson MP, interview 21 March 2002. See also, Howard Gospel, Markets, firms, and the management of labour in modern Britain, (Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.143.

⁴⁸ Oakeshott, The Case for Workers' Co-ops, p.8.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.9

⁵⁰ Trades Unions Congress, Report of the 104th Annual Trades Union Congress, 1973, (London: TUC, 1973), paragraph 23, p.391.

⁵¹ Official Reports of Parliamentary Debates (Hansard), HC Deb. (1976-77), 928, 22 March 1977, col.1211-1214. Alan Williams.

⁵² Geoffrey Robinson MP, interview 21 March 2002.

⁵³ Geoffrey Robinson MP, interview 21 March 2002.

⁵⁴ Sunday Times Magazine, 4 June 1978, p.30. GEC also offered KME the 'loan' of an Executive. See also, Eccles, Under New Management, p.172. and Official Reports of Parliamentary Debates (Hansard), HC Deb. (1976-77), 928, 22 March 1977, col.1214. Alan Williams.

was 'deeply suspicious of deals that are conceived between Sir Arnold Weinstock and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster [Harold Lever] in the Chancellors flat.'⁵⁵

Is it possible that Meriden was used by British management as a model for the examination of alternative forms of workers participation in anticipation of a changed legislative framework?⁵⁶ The differentiation of professional management influence between Meriden and KME is quite marked. KME was unsuccessful because Tony Benn 'failed to ensure that an adequate management system would be set up...he left it to them to work out details.'⁵⁷

Meriden had access to the management skills of Robinson and additional support came from one of the largest engineering companies of the 1970s, GKN. GKN seconded three senior managers for three months to Meriden to advise on management and technical matters.⁵⁸ The Chairman of GKN, Barrie Heath was not a Labour sympathiser like Robinson but he was the representative of British industrial management on the Bullock Committee.⁵⁹ In addition to management resources, GEC also made available over £1 million to finance the purchase of output for one-year to relieve the problems caused by revaluation of sterling against the dollar.⁶⁰ The Chairman of GEC rejected the notion of union directors but was supportive of widening workers participation.⁶¹ **ref**

The Left the Co-op and degeneration

The left has always been lukewarm to the idea of producers' co-operatives. Marxists have generally taken the view held by Rosa Luxemburg that co-operatives cannot survive in a capitalist economy without some form of insulation from the market or they revert to a capitalist enterprise.⁶² Braverman was critical of industrial democracy, workers remained dependent on 'experts' only genuine workers control could occur when technology becomes demystified and the mode of production reorganised.⁶³ Popular Marxists warned Meriden workers that a co-operative was a 'trap' to enforce productivity increases.⁶⁴

The British Labour party traditionally antagonistic towards producer co-operatives were heavily influenced by the Fabian writings of the Webbs who shared a similar position to Marxists that co-operatives must eventually degenerate and submit to the market eventually pursuing their own interests against that of a wider society. 'In the relatively few instances in which such enterprises have not succumbed as business concerns, they have

⁵⁵ Official Reports of Parliamentary Debates (Hansard), HC Deb. (1976-77), 928, 22 March 1977, col.1224. Kenneth Clarke.

⁵⁶ The Bullock Committee reported on 26 January 1977. See Report of the Committee of Inquiry on Industrial Democracy, Chairman: Lord Bullock, Cmnd.6706, (London: HMSO, 1977). See also Times, 27 January, 1977.

⁵⁷ Eccles, Under New Management, pp.372-373.

⁵⁸ Times, 25 January 1977.

⁵⁹ Times, 25 January 1977.

⁶⁰ Oakeshott, The Case for Workers' Co-ops, p.111. see also, Official Reports of Parliamentary Debates (Hansard), HC Deb. (1976-77), 928, 22 March 1977, col. 1214. Alan Williams.

⁶¹ REF

⁶² Rosa Luxemburg, Rosa Luxemburg speaks, (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), p.70. Luxemburg suggested that the consumer co-operative movement could have provided the necessary insulation.

⁶³ Harry Braverman, Labour and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), p.445.

⁶⁴ Socialist Worker, 16 November 1974.

ceased to be democracies of producers, managing their own work, and have become, in effect, associations of capitalists.⁶⁵

Admirers of Meriden on the Labour left cited the flat rate salary structure as an example of the co-operatives egalitarian dimension.⁶⁶ It had the advantage of requiring minimal wages administration but could not overcome the problem of skill shortage. Meriden had the same difficulties attracting skilled workers in a tight labour market as conventionally managed businesses. Without pay differentials even Meriden could not 'attract and retain workers in the skilled areas'.⁶⁷ Fairclough criticised Robinson for introducing a very basic grading system to overcome this problem as an example of co-operative degeneration.⁶⁸ However, for Robinson it was a practical measure, the only way Meriden could survive using outdated tools was on the skill of the worker able to exploit a range of engineering demands.⁶⁹

GOVERNMENT/PARTY

Another factor contributing to the argument that Meriden was only an experiment is to examine if co-operative enterprise was expanding during the period. The champions of workers democracy became increasingly vocal, Jenny Thornley argued that a Labour policy nexus existed between 'work-ins' and worker co-operatives.⁷⁰ Although Les Huckfield believes that the proponents of workers control 'got it wrong, there was no political strategy.' Tony Benn had vast numbers of proposals for schemes on his desk and numerous shop stewards lobbying him. His usual response was positive but all were told to come back with a coherent business plan, few did.⁷¹

Labour enacted two pieces of legislation to promote co-operatives.⁷² As the party moved further to the left during the late 1970s it led to a stronger commitment to co-operatives that offered 'a true socialist approach to economic planning.'⁷³ However, if one examines the record of the Labour government we find little practical promotion of new industrial co-operatives. The Industrial Common Ownership Movement (ICOM) was vested with only a five-year grant for £100,000 and £250,000 for investment. This amount provided under the

⁶⁵ Beatrice and Sidney Webb, 'Co-operative Production and profit sharing,' in New Statesman Special Supplement, 2 (45), (1914), p.133. Cited in Mary Mellor, Janet Hannah, and John Stirling, Worker Co-operatives in Theory and Practice, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), p.67.

⁶⁶ Ken Fleet, 'The New Co-operatives: Triumph Meriden,' in Ken Coates (ed.), The New Worker Co-operatives, (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1976), pp.88-108.

⁶⁷ Transport and General Workers' Union: Coventry District, (MSS 208F), Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. Untitled note from Geoffrey Robinson dated 20 May 1979.

⁶⁸ From April 1979 the single grade system was replaced by five grades. Transport and General Workers' Union: Coventry District, (MSS 208F), Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. Untitled note from Geoffrey Robinson dated 20 May 1979.

⁶⁹ Geoffrey Robinson MP, interview 21 March 2002.

⁷⁰ Jenny Thornley, Marxism Today, April, (1985).

⁷¹ Interview with Leslie Huckfield, 4 April, 2002.

⁷² The Industrial Common Ownership Act and the creation of the Co-operative Development Agency (CDA). The CDA was only an advisory body to promote Co-operatives of all forms. ICOM was the specific body for the promotion of industrial co-operatives.

⁷³ Labour Party, Workers' Co-operatives, (London: Labour Party, 1980), p.6. Les Huckfield was Chairman of the NEC Co-operative Working Group. Interview with Leslie Huckfield, 4 April, 2002.

new legislation was thus a pitifully small sum compared to the inadequate £4.9 million financing of Meriden.⁷⁴

Industrial co-operatives in Britain were weak reflecting the lack of political commitment from legislators and the labour movement.⁷⁵ (See Table I and II). Interest in co-operative enterprise was very limited compared to France, where industrial co-operatives employed 30,000 workers by the mid 1970s compared to Britain's thirty enterprises employing 3,500 workers. In Italy, industrial co-operatives employed 20,800 workers with strong political ties to the Communist Party and assistance to co-operatives enshrined in the Constitution.⁷⁶

**Table I:
Industrial Workers Co-operatives in Britain**

Year	Number in existence
1905	112
1913	71
1924	64
1936	50
1950	44
1960	37
1970	26
1973	16

Source: Robert Oakeshott, The Case for Workers' Co-ops, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2nd Edition, 1990), p.65.

**Table II:
Industrial Workers Co-operatives in France**

Year	Number in existence
1901	119
1914	251
1922	336
1939	478

⁷⁴ Labour Party, Workers' Co-operatives, (London: Labour Party, 1980), pp.32-33. Jenny Thornley, Marxism Today, April, (1985). The Co-operative Development Agency was first proposed in the 1970 Election Manifesto of the Labour Party. Labour Party Manifesto, Now Britain's strong - let's make it great to live in, (London: Labour Party, 1970). p.4. and repeated again in the October 1974 manifesto.

⁷⁵ Mary Mellor, Janet Hannah, and John Stirling, Worker Co-operatives in Theory and Practice, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), p.49.

⁷⁶ Oakeshott, The Case for Workers' Co-ops, p.125 and pp.153-155.

1947	703
1959	514
1966	494
1975	537

Source: Robert Oakeshott, The Case for Workers' Co-ops,
(Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2nd Edition, 1990), p.128.

CONCLUSION (150)

Traditional and industrial politics permeates the rise and fall of Meriden and to a lesser extent the other two worker co-operatives of the 1970s. The origination was to defend jobs not to foster a democratic form of control over the workplace. It may be true to say that Meriden would not have obtained government approval without the enthusiastic patronage of Tony Benn. However, it is a misnomer that they have become known as the 'Benn' co-operatives for as this study has shown in respect of Meriden it could equally be called a 'Lever' or a 'Weinstock' co-operative.⁷⁷

except that Benn's vision

Dick Jenkins one of the leaders of the KME co-operative believed that neither the Labour government nor the trade unions held a firm commitment to supporting the principle of the worker co-operatives. 'In fact I sometimes ask myself whether we have any friends, either on the left or the right.'⁷⁸

1983 The cooperative collapsed. The Triumph name and rights were bought by businessman [John Bloor](#). **1984** The Meridian factory was demolished.

Robinson

'Hot bed of industrial problems'

Lever well give it a chance 50-50. Jack Jones powerful. I spoke to Lever a lot.

Turned down by top board Suzuki talks - greenfield site no for agreement.

Political climate. Industrial relations, interests wc Bullock. Consultation key word - idea where will it get to. Left very strong those days.

Wrong place to try out at Meriden. Consultation, participation, less confrontation method of management..

⁷⁷ Even Robert Oakshott, a co-operative sympathiser refers to the 'Benn' co-operatives. See, Oakeshott, The Case for Workers' Co-ops, p.108.

⁷⁸ Cited in Oakeshott, The Case for Workers' Co-ops, p.35.

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