

“HOW BLAIR KILLED THE CO-OPS”: NOTE ON AUTHOR AND BOOK ABSTRACT

About Leslie Huckfield

Leslie Huckfield has a wide range of policy development experience as a Member of the House of Commons and Member of the European Parliament, as a Government Minister in the Department of Industry and as a Member of the Labour Party National Executive Committee. From 1989 till 2013 he worked on EU funding for projects for further and higher education and the third sector. In Scotland throughout 2015 he delivered a nationwide programme of 12 EU Funding Masterclasses for third sector organisations, attended by representatives of more than 400 organisations.

Leslie Huckfield is now a lecturer and researcher at both Glasgow Caledonian University and the Open University. His academic qualifications include an Oxford MA in Politics, Philosophy and Economics, an MSc with Distinction in Urban and Regional Planning from Heriot Watt and a PhD from Glasgow Caledonian University.

The following is a summary of his positions relevant to a Librorum presentation:

- He was Under Secretary of State in the Department of Trade and Industry from 1976 till 1979, when the Industrial Common Ownership Act 1976 and Cooperative Development Agency Act 1978 were introduced.
- He was Chair of the Labour Party’s National Executive Committee Working Party on Workers’ Cooperatives in 1980, whose recommendations on cooperatives formed part of Labour’s General Election Manifesto in 1983. His Report recommended the UK introduction of Italy’s “Macora Law” to assist with worker cooperative startups.
- He was Member of the European Parliament for Merseyside East from 1984 to 1989 and Vice Chair of the Transport Committee, during the introduction in 1983 of the Commission’s Local Economic Initiatives paper and Jacques Delors’ Social Chapter in 1986
- After leaving the European Parliament in 1989, he worked on EU funding for higher and further education and third sector projects in Merseyside, the West Midlands, Scotland, Ghana, the Caribbean, Poland and the Baltic States.
- He was a Director of the Social Enterprise Network Scotland from 2009 till 2020. Until April 2022 he was a Director of the Sheffield Cooperative Development Group
- Throughout 2018 and 2019 he was a member of the Shadow Chancellors’ Implementation Group to implement Labour’s 2017 and 2019 Manifesto commitment to double the size of the cooperative economy
- From 2016 onwards he has lectured in business management at Glasgow Caledonian University. He is also Associate Lecturer in Economics at the Open University
- His book “How Blair Killed the Coops,” published by Manchester University Press in November 2021, describes how, in contrast to most of Europe, under New Labour there was a major political shift from cooperative, mutual and democratically accountable structures in local communities towards individually controlled social enterprises.

Book Abstract: “How Blair Killed the Co-ops”

Social enterprise and third sector activity have mushroomed into a prolific area of academic research and discourses on an industrial scale over the past 30 years, with many contributions locating their origins in Tony Blair, New Labour and Giddens’ Third Way. Many academics have not accessed the wealth of grey, legacy and public policy literature from earlier periods, or those from mainland European sources, which support different conclusions and interpretations. A narrow UK academic focus on the vocalisation and articulation of a different concept of social enterprise under New Labour from 1997 to 2005 not only neglects previous origins and antecedents from Europe, but misplaces and miscasts the role of social enterprise and wider third sector. Social enterprises have been re institutionalised in a neoliberal way to support public service delivery, increasingly financed through social investment. Though many UK third sector organisations have now become delivery agents for the welfare state, it is unfortunate that their previous role in local economic democracy and the precedents of different interpretations in mainland Europe have been forgotten or ignored.

Many indigenous structures, which were formed as community and collective responses to massive deindustrialisation and market failure in the 1970s and 1980s – as happened in many EU Member States - in the UK are now forced to bid against the private sector for contracts for delivery of public services. In contrast to this common UK academic theme, this book represents an alternative and often mainland European narrative for social enterprise and the wider third sector.

Following the UK’s 1975 Referendum on EU Entry, UK Government was slow to promote the use of European Social Fund and European Regional Development Fund, which was used frequently in other Member States to promote Active Labour Market Policies delivered by third sector organisations, especially ‘Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) providing work experience and work placements for the unemployed. Huckfield was an MEP following the European Commission’s 1983 paper on Local Economic Initiatives (LEIs). The Commission reported on organisations which “seek to operate by commercial criteria and be operationally viable” and which “operate without any continuing public subsidy and the objective of achieving or maintaining financial independence” and referred to contemporary social enterprises, including worker cooperatives, non profits and voluntary organisations. The Commission reported in 1983 that worker cooperatives had increased from 6,500 to 13,900, with an increase in employment from 298,000 to 540,000.

The 1984 European Parliament Report from Heinke Salisch MEP described “local employment initiatives” (LEIs) as a valuable contribution to combating mass unemployment, with 136 new initiatives in London which provide 3,000 jobs”. This was followed by an EU Local Employment Development Action (LEDA) programme, an action learning programme, started in 1986, involving 12 areas. Though many UK initiatives, which would today be described as social enterprises, were funded following this important EEC/OECD LEI initiative, these precedents have been largely ignored in many UK academic contributions.

All this is particularly relevant when approaches were made to UK academics during the 1970s by the International Centre of Research and Information on the Public, Social and Cooperative Economy (CIRIEC), which publishes a monthly ‘Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics/ Annales de l’économie publique, sociale et coopérative’ and is now based in Liege. If these CIRIEC approaches had been more successful, then the UK might have moved closer to social economy structures like social cooperatives in Italy and other cooperatives and mutuals in mainland Europe and Ireland. At that time, there were enough existing UK structures to form the basis for a similar UK social economy to that which was being constructed in mainland Europe.

The consequences of a selective reliance on a limited number of North American policy regimes by UK academics as policy entrepreneurs have been further undermined by the drawing of parallels with US non profits as a platform for social entrepreneurship, despite their different and often controversial history through funding by foundations. There has also been an excessive reliance on interpretations from L’Emergence de l’Entreprise Sociale en Europe (EMES) Research Network, which seek to prioritise a marketised version of WISEs, following the Revenu Minimum d’Insertion minimum income guarantee introduced in France in 1988.

Most UK academics did not participate in EU policy discussions on a social economy during the 1970s and 1980s, during which French Regulationists and others projected a third sector role within an alternative social and solidarity economy. This culminated in 2000 with the Report from Alain Lipietz MEP to Martine Aubry as Employment Minister in France, which projected a distinct role for a social economy. This significant report has been completely omitted from most UK academic contributions. Other events and policy discourses in mainland Europe and from the women’s movement in Quebec, leading in the 1990s to the Chantier de l’Economie Sociale, are relevant since though contemporaneous with New Labour Governments, they rarely feature in UK contributions.

Through UK academic neglect of these precedents from Europe and Quebec and the significance of EU funding, a third sector dominated by North American business models has emerged, including latterly in Scotland.

Matthew Thompson Initial Book Review

(Matthew Thompson, now at researcher at the Barlett School at University College London.)

“This is the book that many of us in the field of social economy and the cooperative movement have been waiting for – the definitive contemporary history of the fascinating politics behind how co-ops were sold down the river. To my mind, this is the very first intervention in the field that delves into the history of how co-operatives have been transformed from a movement for local economic democracy and an alternative to capitalism into a watered down ‘third sector’ tethered to the New Labour raft of entrepreneurial welfare reform. Contrary to most other academic accounts, it tells the story of how the concept of ‘social enterprise’ – which dominates our contemporary understanding of the social economy, especially in the UK, but also in Europe and the US – had important antecedents in the largely forgotten and under-documented worker cooperative movement, which flourished in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s but which was largely reinvented in the 1990s”.

Manchester University Press Access to: “How Blair Killed the Co-Ops”

Access to “How Blair Killed the Coops”

<https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9781526149732/how-blair-killed-the-co-ops/>

Review in “Labour Hub”

<https://labourhub.org.uk/2022/01/19/new-labour-reinvents-social-enterprise-for-the-public-service-delivery-market/>

Access to How Blair Killed the Coops, Chapter One (available free online)

<https://www.manchesterhive.com/view/9781526149749/9781526149749.00007.xml>