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# Interview with Professor Alan Walker

## Part 3: on the book and its impact

### How do you feel about the project, being involved in it and the findings from it?

Well I feel incredibly positive about it personally, because it was a great opportunity, and the chance of working with Peter Townsend, I don't think when he first asked me to do the job I had a sense of what working, a sense of how significant a figure Peter was, and how working with him would have such a profound impact on my life. You know, we became very close friends, so that I knew his children and he was the non-believer's equivalent of godparent to one of my children. It was kind of very close relationship, I would, so I can only think of it as an incredibly positive experience, personally. I gained a huge amount from it and we're never again going to say that, really important.

In terms of contributing to the production of Poverty in the UK, I'm really pleased and proud to have done that. And it is the most important book on poverty that's ever been produced, I have no doubt about that. And I think probably always will be. So it's a huge milestone in the history of social science, and to be a part of that project, I think is a great thing, very pleased with it. To his great credit, Peter decided that he could not benefit financially from the publication of the book, so he set up a trust fund. So all the royalties for the book went into a trust fund that I'm a trustee of, Adrian Sinfield and Hilary Rose. So, and we, he asked in setting up the trust fund that the money should go to groups campaigning on behalf of the poor. So, most of it has gone to groups like CPAG. So it's a real, I think it's a real privilege to have been involved in it, and I'm very pleased about that.

The only sort of negative element I would mention is really nothing to do with my involvement. It's the protracted nature of the whole project. You know, it did stretch over a very long period, 10 years basically, and it had an unfortunate beginning in that it was meant to be a joint project and then Brian Abel-Smith pulled out of it, because he was sucked into government and working with the

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Labour Party. And Peter was left holding the baby, and likewise Peter was so heavily involved in the policymaking process, and so engaged that he found it incredibly difficult to devote the time necessary to undertaking such a mammoth project. And I think that's a real issue for social policy, and for the public academic, because as social scientists we want someone with the eminence and the capacity of Townsend to produce work like the poverty book. On the other hand, we want him to engage in the public debate. And it is impossible to do both of those things simultaneously. Something has to give, and what gave was the timetable of the production of the poverty book.

Having said that, and I did say it was the only negative aspect I can think of, it was worth waiting for. It's still immensely powerful. So, it's for me a very positive experience, and I think Peter was seriously proud of it. He may have felt subsequently that he carried the burden for too long, and it did become a huge burden, and his burning the midnight oil to try and finish it off at the very end. And that might have coloured the experience for him, and somehow diminished the achievement. I'm not sure. I never had a direct conversation with him about that, but I have heard him refer to subsequent work as the best thing he'd done. And I disagreed, you know, because the poverty book is immense and it's a stunning achievement.

**What do you think were the actual impacts of it? What kind of difference did it make in terms of policy and academic-**

What do I think is its impact?

**Yeah.**

Well I think it changed the debate on poverty. And one has to think of impact in all sorts of different ways. So, I've no doubt that its impact in academic terms is profound and long, long lasting. Ever-lasting, I would say. There can't be anyone who writes seriously about the subject of poverty without referring to Poverty in the UK, even though the fashion these days for doctoral students is only to reference over the last decade, you couldn't imagine a doctoral thesis in that field that didn't take as its starting point Poverty in the UK. And although Peter's earlier work on relative poverty has kind of paved the way, the poverty survey was the clear demonstration. So I think in terms of the academic impact it was huge, immense and long-lasting.

In terms of policy, it, of course it's so contingent on who's in power and who in particular is in national government in this country and in other countries. So, I'm sure that Gordon Brown was, had read and understood the poverty book and clearly understood the nature about relative poverty. George Osborne and Iain Duncan-Smith, fat chance. And that's part of the problem. It's indeed part of the problem that Labour is experiencing currently, is seeing how to sustain achievement and understanding and consensus in the face of radical ideological shifts. And there's no easy answer to that, because one of the reasons the Labour government was elected in 1997 is the reaction against the growth of inequality in the Conservative period and the driving down of the public sector, including the National Health Service. And Labour did a lot of bad things but also some good things in terms of trying to introduce anti-poverty policies and improving the public services. But those achievements have quickly turned around, as we're finding out.

So, I think on the left the understanding that the poverty book brought and Peter's writing about it brought, is deeply embedded. I can't see that being turned around. Of course it's solidly in the Fabian tradition, but politics at the moment is dominated by a neo-Liberal agenda which is antithetical to a relative understanding of poverty and all of the policy proposals that flow from it. So, that's the problem, in saying, impact in policy and practice terms. But nonetheless the academic impact means that there is a basis for helping to change the politics, and when the politics nationally change, there's a chance of reasserting some of those teachings that arise out of the poverty book.

**Okay. Is there anything else you want to say, because I've gone through my questions now, do you want to say anything else about that I haven't asked you?**

Gosh. I don't think there is frankly. This is about the poverty survey, and the poverty book, rather than about Peter more generally, so no, I don't think there's anything else. There may be some little things that I can't remember, but I don't think there's anything big I can tell you.

**Do you want to say anything about Peter that you think people might not already know in general?**

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Oh, wouldn't know where to start [laughter] in answer to that.

**You know a lot of his secrets.**

Yes, yes. No, I, what people need to know is that he was an absolute giant of twentieth century social science, and I think that he was not given the recognition that he was due, for two reasons. One, that he didn't sit firmly within the sociological discipline, and it always had that tension between sociology and social policy, and was at some early stage rather critical of sociologists for not paying enough attention to social policy, and secondly, because of his public stance, and for all the wrong reasons that tended to make some people sceptical about his position. That he should be in the academy, doing research, rather than speaking on public platforms and representing all of those causes that he did. That's a great shame, and it does huge injustice.

I think his work will stand for ever, for its quality, really. Amazing work, and not just the poverty book, if you go back to books like *The Family Life of Old People* and *The Last Refuge*, they are absolutely stunning in terms of the quality of the research, the quality of the narrative and understanding of human nature, and the quality of the writing. So he's a great, great social scientist, absolutely no doubt about that.