
Interview with Professor David Donnison

Part 2: on social policy research and radicalism

Interviewer: Do you think that there was a more of a passion in the kind of research world then than there is now or do you think it's similar?

Donnison: I think the similar things were going on probably. One was that Richard Titmuss always conveyed to his people in that department that it was our job to think about the moral and political problems, as well as the more strictly academic this is, our research dealt with, and also to contribute to public debate, to get involved in adviser roles to politicians and so on. You weren't expected to do that last bit but you were encouraged to and supported in doing so. And Richard himself his life kind of demonstrated those values and aims. I don't think you can devote years to research on poverty that involves fieldwork, or for that matter public health, without it being a really radicalising experience.

So that we tended all to be what people nowadays would call centre left I guess. Not all of us but most. And there was both in terms of the research questions took up and the way they tackled them and the life in the wider world the development of what some people called 'the Titmuss School' - that had I think some productive effect because we all learned from each other and our work in other fields. I worked mainly on housing and education and later on social security, and social work and social administration in the classic sense too, but we drew on each other's ideas and we talked about our work together and there were the usual kind of academic seminars where we could share what we were thinking about.

I think it had some less positive effects. I'd come via a two year stint in Canada in the University of Toronto from the University of Manchester in a department led by another great head of department, Bill Mackenzie. That's the department of government, and most of the professors of politics had been Bill's students or colleagues at some stage in their lives in later years and he had the same kind of influence in his field that Richard had in the social policy field. But Mackenzie would have been appalled at the idea that there was a Mackenzie school when he deliberately recruited people of widely varying disciplinary interests and widely varying political stances. You know, he thought that was part of the job of a head of a department in the polite social sciences.

So I came with a bit of that background, plus PPE, which was my degree at Oxford, which was cautious about too wholehearted a commitment to a particular

political kind of stance and. I don't think it did us much harm, but I think it alienated from the subject, from the field, because it's a field rather than the subject. People who came to it from a conservative standpoint, some of them went on to do social policy in one form or another, but they did it as economists or political scientists or philosophers. And I can quote examples of that. And that meant they didn't bring those disciplines to bear as effectively as they might have done in the discussions of social policy we were having at the LSE. It also meant that they didn't do fieldwork much, and they might do interview studies, social surveys as part of their research method, but they probably didn't spend a lot of time going out and interviewing people themselves.

And I think fieldwork is a vital part of the kind of approach to social policy that we had. It doesn't mean that everybody in the department has to do a lot of it, but at least you need to be among people many of whom are engaged in fieldwork so that when they talk about policy and maybe even get to the stage of main policy proposals to ministers in the Government, they do actually have real human beings in their heads that they're thinking of and what this policy would mean for people like that. And I think that's very important requirement if you're to contribute to policy debate and Peter had it in spades. Brian was not a fieldworker but he was an egalitarian and he was a human being and he mingled constantly, reminded me of Peter, but with others in the department who were doing that kind of fieldwork. So that there was never any doubt about his human sympathies for and understanding of people who would be affected by any policy he was debating.

So do you think some of the, you could call it radicalism of that time came out of having greater contact with the people that you were trying to help...

Yes I think so. And again Richard himself didn't do that kind of work but he was very much that kind of person and the very last thing he wrote, as far as I know, it was published anyway, was about the man in the next bed in the hospital where he ended his life. And it's a very sensitive, poignant humane discussion through an account of one person of the whole point of the NHS. And I think still deserves to be read and pondered.