
Interview with Professor David Donnison

Part 3: on influencing change

Interviewer: So, as well as being a time of reflection and learning, do you think it was exciting because people thought they were really going to change things?

Donnison: Yes I think the mid-60s particularly was a time of hope and particularly for our kind of academic there was a sense that we had in our work a contribution to make that to an understanding of social issues and problems, human needs that from time to time might actually affect policy and underdevelopment of our society. I think we were overoptimistic, as it turned out, but it was a great time to be there and to be in that kind of group and to be based at the LSE, you know, just a short bus ride from Whitehall and Parliament, and it was a great privilege to be part of that. There were other features of it that were important. All my first jobs, and the same went for other people in that group, I started at Manchester University and then Toronto and then the LSE and then on to directing the Centre for Environmental Studies.

I was the first person in the job; I never had a predecessor. At the Centre for Environmental Studies I did at last have a predecessor but he was only a part-time predecessor; I was the first full-time director. So you arrived without having to slot into somebody else's curriculum or research agenda. You could make your own way and formulate your own questions and choose what you wanted to work on.

Choose what you taught. Obviously you discussed with colleagues any lectures or teaching you were involved in, because you didn't want to overlap with other people in unhelpful ways but you wanted to slot, you know, to mesh with the rest of the teaching going on and to contribute to a general programme. But you had great freedom. And we also had the support of some remarkable research foundations, and notably what was then the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust, who were a very independent group of people their directors, who were prepared to give people time and they had a policy they had a set of priorities, you knew what they were, but if the work you wanted to do fitted in to some part of that then, well it was really Lewis Waddilove, their Secretary, who was a man you could talk to and learn from. He knew as much as we did about most of the things that they were supporting research on. And that was another wonderful privilege of those times.

My impression, I'm not, no longer applying, it's years since I applied for a research grant, but my impression is that research foundations are much more business-like and brisk; they want a clearly defined theme and set of questions and they want a report in six months, a year at most. Whereas the housing research my colleagues got involved in backed by Rowntree was something that began with a grant for a year or two, and they gradually evolved and went into, we had researchers in other universities we recruited to work with us. There were four team, small teams, and we took years, I can't remember precisely how long, it must have been five years or more before it was through, and that gradually developed - I think it would be very difficult to find supporters of research who would be as thoughtful and as generous as that these days.

There's been quite a lot of changes then since those times, yes.

I mean I should also add that the Labour Party at that time had amongst its leading figures quite a lot of former academics, who knew how to use academics, who enjoyed working with them. You know, Attlee and Crosland and a number of others who Peter and Brian worked with, Durbin, there are, Crosland, they used us in different ways, but they were always challenging and they were great people to work with. And Harold Wilson too himself, and it's difficult to find ministers of that sort of calibre these days or leading figures in any political party of that kind of intellectual calibre and kind of policy wisdom.

There seemed to be much more connection between academics and ministers and campaigners. It seemed to be a similar world of people, whereas now it's much more separate I think.

Yes well it exists. I mean if just occasionally happens I meet a student who wants to contribute by research that leads to some contribution to policy debate and analysis, I tend to say look you need to get in to a think tank rather than a university, or at least you should consider that. It means living in London almost certainly. It is a different world, you operate in different ways. But the people we're talking about, Peter and Brian and Richard, made their contributions to policy debate partly by forming quite strong relationships of friendship with politicians of a like-minded sort, and that's still is a part of the game. It's done in different ways.

In the think tank you won't have to place your work in peer review journals, you won't have to do any fieldwork, though you might do a little, but that's not really an essential part of your work, your career. And I think to be honest the kind of

strike record, the success rate of people in think tanks that are actually getting their proposals into policy, into legislation or government programmes is a good deal higher than ours was. Proceeding through in Brown's case, close collaboration as an adviser, policy adviser with ministers, but Peter really basing himself in the academy and in various voluntary agencies and pressure groups, and all of us contributing in various ways to the rituals of Royal commissions and committees of enquiry, which probably took three years to report, and by which time there'd be a new minister and very probably a new party in power.

So your chances of actually following through on your research into action were much less than those of somebody working in the think tank. On the other hand some of the great disasters of British public administration I believe are partly accounted for by this think tank model, because they haven't in fact been exposed to peer review. They haven't gone under the harrow of public discussion and criticism of the sort you get in a committee enquiry or Royal commission. They haven't had to talk seriously even to civil servants who could tell them whether the computer programmes exist to implement the proposals they have in mind. So that I think that we were in a world where the follow through into applications was slower and much chancier and frequently failed to deliver. At least some stupid errors were avoided because of the process of enquiry and public discussion and debate that these arenas obliged you to go through.