

Interview with Professor David Donnison

Part 4: on being chair of the Supplementary Benefits Commission

Could you tell me something about your time as a chair of Supplementary Benefits Commission? What kind of changes you implemented and how that kind of linked to your academic work and?

Yes again it was a due to the accidents of personal connections. I went from the LSE to the Centre for Environmental Studies in 1969 and was there until 1975. In 1973 Richard Titmuss was dying. He was the Deputy Chair for Supplementary Benefits Commission. Keith Joseph was the Secretary of state at the time, the Conservative Government. I don't know but I think it's fairly clear that Richard persuaded Keith to approach me to take his place on the Commission. And he knew he didn't have long to go. And Keith Joseph asked me if I would be the Deputy Chair which was a one day a week job in principle. So I could continue being Director of CES and social security was quite a new field for me. I'd never done any serious research on poverty or social security.

I was viewed I think with a good deal of suspicion by some people in that industry who very understandably had doubts about any contribution I was likely to make. It was a great learning experience and it meant that I was going regularly to accompany social security officers who in those days still visited their claimants. I was visiting social security officers all over the country on my one day a week and I was exposed to fieldwork in effect and I met on the commission people, particularly some of the civil servants who knew a lot about the subject, and I learned from them too. I met the pressure groups. And then the Chair of the commission Arthur, sorry I'm having a senior moment it'll come back to me in a moment.

I can't help you I'm afraid.

Don't worry, no it'll come back to me I usually remember his name very well, ex-General Secretary of the Agricultural Workers Union, Chairs of the SBC and before that the National Assistance Board had often been retired trade unionists. And he was retiring, he was coming to the end of his term of office, and by then Barbara Castle was the Secretary of State with the Labour Government and Wilson Government. I knew that she must be thinking of me as a possible candidate for the Chair, and I went to see her and said do remember that most of the people

who depend on supplementary benefits are women, that we've never had a women in the Chair, and if you thought it right to appoint Kay Carmichael – who was the kind of Scottish representative on the commission I knew her as a colleague, later got to know her much better, but it was a personal relationship at that time – if you thought it right to appoint Kay I think that would be a very good choice and if you and she wanted me to me to continue to be Deputy I'd be very happy to do so.

Everything then went quiet for quite some time. And it was only shortly before Kay died that I verified what I'd guessed was going on, which was that Barbara had asked her to do the job and she declined. I was then asked to be Chair and that was a four day a week job and Kay became my Deputy. She'd been on the Commission longer than me, I mean I first met her when I joined the Commission and that meant I really was much deeper into it and doing more visiting and going to more meetings relevant to social security. I said I'd take on the job if Secretary of State said in the House that the Commission would make an annual report to Parliament about the scheme and the problems it was dealing with. And we got that. And then I was probably overoptimistic about what such reports could do, but I had a good deal of experience of playing a part in those things. I'd been on the Committee on Primary Education, Committee on Housing, London housing, and in the Central Housing Advisory Committee which produced several reports on housing. So that I saw the blue book – it's very Victorian idea – as an instrument for contributing to policy debate. And it meant that we began to get a very good team of civil servants to work with us.

I think the writer, young people, we had some very good top people, but the brighter young people, principles, people of that sort of grade sensed that supplementary benefits was going live. It's one of the areas of policy in the DHSS that was going to be interesting. And we got great people and it became quite a team. And the Commission too, that changed, I mean people left and others came. And the need to write these reports every year brought us together I think.

More effectively because we had to agree; it was a commissioners report not mine. And we had a regular seminar once a month in the Commission's offices which brought in not academics and pressure group people, claimants union, CPAG and so on, to debate and discuss things that we were dealing with. And that was a marvellous experience for me and I think was useful. I think, you asked and I haven't responded to the question what have we achieved, and to be

realistic not a lot. I think we opened up a long established but rather ossified bureaucracy. It was at first absolutely horrified at the thought of this seminar and resisted it, but they became accustomed to dealing with the outside world, including some very expert people and people who were either users of supplementary benefits and independent on it or working every day with people living on this kind of scheme.

I think getting around the country, because every time I went to visit, I was now going to visit social security offices once a fortnight, two offices in one day and, or one visit took two days usually, and meeting not only people concerned with poverty and with social security but we met the local authority. We met the local social workers. If there was a university in town we always had a seminar in the university. We usually went to visit whatever local industry people were proud of; went down coal mines, went to power stations. There were different things in different places and to talk to the people working there. And it gave me a kind of ticket to cut a slice through the whole of my society of Britain and learn about it. I found that it certainly informed our thinking.

And I think another feature of this was that I was doing that job at a time when graduates were entering the Civil Service at executive officer level. In former years graduates entering the Civil Service usually came in as principals. They were high flyers and they expected to go on to be under-secretaries or deputy secretaries or permanent secretaries. But now, certainly in London, which to be working in London I got a lot of access to, many years, who were bright graduates and an increasingly they were spreading out over the five years that I was in the Chair into other parts of the country, at executive officer level and sometimes at more junior level. Which meant that if you went in to a social security office and asked to talk with staff, you met some people who were accustomed to the seminar, who were accustomed to challenging you as a speaker, to argument amongst themselves who were much more open to discussion of policy issues, and I think I mean they played a part and helped their colleagues, non-graduate colleagues to play a part in the development of ideas about policy.

If you're asking did we make any change in actually specific policies I think the only thing I can readily recall that we made a contribution to was the slightly accidental chance that we helped to create housing benefit and rationalise the weird mix of housing subsidies that were operating when I came to the job. You know there were council subsidies for council housing, but then there were rent rebates for tenants on low incomes. And there were rate rebates for people on

low incomes, and there were supplementary benefits which paid a rental house. So there were four quite different subsidy systems that worked in different ways to help people get a home. And partly because of Lewis Waddilove, whom I was still in touch with, and he was on the Commission for a while - was he? I'm not even sure about that.

It may have been the [unclear] committee, but anyway I worked with Lewis in commission which kind of generated the idea that we really needed one kind of housing subsidy for low income tenants. And that was outside the DHSS remit I mean that was ministry of housing and local government and treasury, but I think we played a part quite modest part and others played probably more important parts in rationalising housing subsidies. If I thought very hard I might come up with one or two other modest ideas but not a lot. I mean after all we ended with Margaret Thatcher. And this was not a government that wanted to work with people like us. And we weren't the kind of people who were well equipped to work with her and her colleagues.

Keith Joseph you could work with. He was a highly intelligent man who had also got an academic background and he was a fellow of all souls and understood about how to use academics. But Margaret Thatcher was not in the least interested in people like us. I did once participate in a meeting shortly after she, it was before she was Prime Minister, it was when she was Secretary of State for Education. I'd just come to office which other academics who knew a lot about education and been working on it for years. And when we were brought together to be introduced to her to see if we could offer any help and she quickly made it clear she didn't want to hear from us.

So was that the end of the Supplementary Benefit Commission then or it just changed...?

The Commission ended in 1980. I was there from '75 to '80. And I was due to move on anyway. I'm not sure if I had a five year stint. I don't think it was as formal as that but I was not wanting to go on any longer. I was asked if I wanted to be considered as Chair of the next Social Security Advisory Committee which had less powers but was still operating in the same field and still is. But I said no I wanted to go back to the academy and get a job. And also I wanted to get out of London for various complicated reasons. And some of which were political but also personal. And so I went to Glasgow eventually and finished my job there and got a Chair at University of Glasgow.