

Interview with Professor David Donnison

Part 5: on poverty and inequality

Okay great well is there anything else you want to say about the struggle to eradicate poverty over all these years and how far we've come and haven't come and what the role of academics are in that?

Let me try one thought and if you want to pursue it further push me to see if I can take it further. I think in this whole poverty analysis and debate there's an important distinction one always needs to bear in mind between those essentially concerned about poverty and those concerned about equality. I think if you get seriously into poverty studies you see that you have to move on to look at inequality, you can't stop with poverty. And Peter demonstrated that very clearly in his definitions of poverty and how he researched it because he spoke about it and wrote about it as meaning exclusion from the mainstream of society. He didn't use that word quite but that's what he meant. And was asking questions in his research about the things people could do that most families expect to be able to do and the things you can't do because you're too poor, and using this in definitions of poverty.

I think Peter and Brian and Richard Titmuss were fundamentally egalitarians; they wanted a more equal society, a fairer society, but the fundamental issue was resistance to gross inequalities. And that was part of a central tradition it goes back a very long way in British history as we know and to the Middle Ages and Tawney was the most famous recent example of it in previous years who had been a presence in the LSE common room when I arrived and met him there. I think Peter in his writing didn't, probably thought no need to clarify distinction between the egalitarian stance and the central concern about poverty. He wouldn't have, he would have thought you had to be concerned about equality. But in his writing he was talking about poverty, mainly, and this was the of the title of the great book and I think that was, as it had been for [unclear] Rowntree and Charles Booth in earlier times, probably a political necessity.

Inequality was and still is a highly contentious issue. If you talk about inequality as your main concern you attract a lot of flak. And if you make proposals that lead in equalising directions you'll have serious opposition to contend with - doesn't mean that it's wrong to do so. But if you're seeking in Britain to gain political support for your proposals, a country which still retained at that time, I don't know if it does now, a kind of noblesse oblige tradition, among

Conservatives too, then you talk about poverty and you get a response. And particularly talk about poverty of children, anyone stops to think about it seriously understands that our future and the future of our own children depends on the kind of society we create, and this will depend partly on how all children are growing up, whether they are productive law abiding and happy people, and all of that's a bit less likely if you're exposed to hardship and poverty.

But if one's looking for a kind of inheritor to the tradition of Tawney and Titmuss I think Richard Wilkinson is your man, [unclear], and they have indeed provoked a lot of hostility and conflict in the academy as well as in politics and media. And I think in a way the Titmuss, Townsend, Abel-Smiths group, for reasons I can understand, I think, because of the greater political purchase you got by talking about poverty, did not clarify that distinction. And also of course until about 1971 Britain was slowly and stumblingly growing more equal. Both through a convergence of income ranges from top to bottom and through the growth of welfare state, and it was only in the mid-'70s and then sharply in the mid-'80s that we started moving in the opposite direction into increasing inequality, which has gone much further since.

And it was understandable that they stuck to the poverty last, as it were, as the base for their work and campaigning and their public statements of research findings. I think therefore it was left to Richard Wilkinson and Michael Marmott and a lot of other people, many from the public health world, to pose the questions about inequality more sharply and Michael Marmott is always very cautious (one baby - inaudible) whereas Richard Wilkinson won't as a result of Wilkinson's much more forthright, aggressive kind of policy stance on inequality and his increasing move from establishing the correlation between inequality and life expectancy and poor health and then a range of other social problems and then now working on the reasons for that and increasingly the policy implications, what can we do about it, which leads him into very contentious kind of world but I think that while Richard and Brian particularly but Peter too had good friends in the public health world and had that kind of link, people like Gerry Morris and others London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in particularly though not only there, Brian's work on the Gilberg (?) committee which is enormously important, in effect saving the National Health Service, that gave them roots in the public health world and the people coming from a public health stance were those led into more serious analysis of inequality and then an equalitarian policy agenda, in some case not in all, though I don't know whether that is a thought worth unravelling or exploring further but it was something that really interested me about Peter's whole approach to the whole poverty issue and the way he wrote about it.

