

Interview with Professor David Donnison

Part 6: on the importance of inequality

Do you think in some ways it might have been a mistake to focus on poverty because it allowed people to talk about the troublesome family and those kind of agendas?

I think if you were with Peter and talking to him and indeed reading his work, you couldn't miss the egalitarian implications of what he was saying and his whole definition of poverty was an egalitarian one. And also you understood the man, he was a natural egalitarian and he could form strong relationships of mutual respect with people of all classes and income groups and the like and the same time I think we were slow in that department and school of thought in exploring the inequality issues and there are still people in that department in the LSE who would be quite hostile to Richard Wilkinson academically critical and suspicious of him and that may in a way be an endorsement or confirmation of the political nonsense, political good sense of Peter and Brian's decision, if it was a conscious decision, I don't know whether they did discuss it to focus on poverty rather than inequality in their writing and in the formulation of their research questions and the rest. They may have been right, I am not saying they were wrong, but I think the result was that that group of people and their successors at the LSE and remember the importance of that group in the development of social policy across the country because new universities, post Robbins widen the universities, were constantly recruiting people from that school to be heads of their departments and came to be what was called Professors of Social Policy so that tradition became very much a British tradition, social policy research, and it was left to people in the public health world to develop the inequality kind of agenda.

Or to put it another way which is a different way of saying some of the same things, to develop that agenda on a nationwide scale, on a broad social scale effecting the whole of society, there was an inequality agenda developing very fruitfully and vigorously over these same years on behalf of women, on behalf of the race issues and the ethnic minorities, on behalf of gays and lesbians and people of various sexual orientations, and they have been actually much more successful in terms of policy change than what you might call the Richard Wilkinson and Michael Marmott school of egalitarian research because that school has lost all along the road since the 1970s, you know, things have been going in the opposite direction, whereas we have made progress on behalf of women and the other groups. I think it was significant that although Peter and Brian and Richard their hearts were in the right place on those issues, they would have

been sympathetic to the concerns of people concerned about gender and race and sexual orientation and disability, Peter played a central role in that world, they didn't go out front other than Peter on disability in a campaigning way of that kind of egalitarian nature. I think, I never discussed it with them and I don't know too late now, but I think they felt coming from a kind of Tawney stance that while it was very important that women and the ethnic minorities and the rest gained a fairer share of opportunities and recognition and a fuller place in society, just to get more of the gravy in an increasingly unequal world for women or whatever wasn't good enough, you had to ask whether society needed to be so unequal in the first place and those were the more important issues but that's onto the Wilkinson agenda if I can call it that but they didn't really venture into that. I don't know what Peter thought about Richard Wilkinson's work, never discussed that with him, I think he would be broadly sympathetic to the things Wilkinson was saying, but I don't know whether he felt that was something he wanted to get into or should have got into, I never discussed it.

Interviewer: Is there any last thoughts, anything I haven't asked you, you want to say about the Poverty in the UK study or poverty or what we need to be doing?

I probably made it clear in the way I talked about it that I think that what I rather crudely call the Wilkinson agenda is in the long run the more important one even if politically less successful. I think, I understand some of the criticisms of Wilkinson's work and I think those need to be thrashed out, taken seriously, and I think there are some very good replies to most of them but I was slightly saddened when I went to the hundredth birthday party of the LSE, which was a good conference it was a day-long conference of very good speakers brought in from the United States and elsewhere as well as home grown and serious talk about some very good papers and important issues. Until I raised the question, I should explain poverty and inequality, or rather they mainly called it social justice, were the main themes of this day-long conference and very expertly discussed they were, nobody mentioned Michael Marmott or Richard Wilkinson until I did rather late in the day and said why are you not taking about that work, you may disagree with it but it needs to be discussed and I think they were depriving themselves of an opportunity of learning and of carrying an important debate forward, which was a pity and I am curious I'm not sure understand why. I think it is partly doubts about Wilkinson's methodology and his approach to his work generally but I think it is partly what Richard Titmuss never had a sense of disciplinary boundaries, this is public health and that's a different department of the academy, which is nonsense of course. You can't do serious work in public health, as I said right at the beginning, without becoming, it's a radicalising experience you become concerned about poverty because you see what poverty

does to people's health and now if you buy most of what Wilkinson is saying, along with Pickett now, you are concerned about inequality and have to be. A public health base is really rather an important one to start from and bring into the debate whenever we are talking about poverty. They ask slightly different questions and pursue them in different ways, I am not sure I have anything more to say than that.

Interviewer: Great. Thank you very much.

Thank you for the opportunity.