
Interview with Professor David Piachaud

Part 1: on his relationship with Townsend's work

Okay, thanks very much for agreeing to be interviewed. So I just want to ask you to start with, were you aware of the Poverty in the UK study being carried out at the time or is it something that you became aware of later on?

Well I studied in the United States and then I came back and I got a job as special adviser really, but that has a lot of bad connotations now. But it was working with Brian Able-Smith, the Department of Health and Social Security for Richard Crossman, and I became well aware that Brian had been involved in the study, but basically wasn't anymore, and I was very involved on working on child poverty and social security. So that's how I became aware of it.

Okay. So it was just after Brian Able-Smith had left the study.

Yeah, in that the end of '67 and beginning of '68.

Okay, and did you hear any stories from Brian about the research? Did he talk about it or?

Not really, no, he didn't. I think Brian had a certain amount of guilt about the whole thing that he left it. He started it up with Peter and left it, but he didn't really talk about it. And the first time I met Peter was in Cambridge when he was debating with Crossman about whether the poor had got poorer under Labour, and things got quite heated at that time because people in government were tending to think that they'd sort of done something about poverty and responded with the family allowance increase that was clawed back from better off people. So there was controversy about whether the poor had got poorer and in a sense they were on two sides and it got quite vituperative, because people in government were sort of trying to get re-elected and saw anyone as criticising them as helping the other side.

So I had very little involvement with the study, but then when Labour lost the election, which I mean might be something to do with what happened about poverty, but that's probably fairly incidental. Then I did a lot of work with the

Child Poverty Action Group and Frank Field, so Peter was chairing it then, but I wasn't directly involved at all with the study, although I knew people like Murray Brown had worked on it who was then studying at London School of Economics. So I had really no involvement in the study as such.

Right, okay, and you just became aware of it via Brian really and then being involved in the Child Poverty Action Group.

Yeah.

Yeah, okay, and do you think that it had an influence on your own work particularly, the study?

Well, Peter's work certainly did in the sense that the idea that poverty should be a relative concept wasn't widely known or accepted at that time, and what Peter wrote about it was certainly most powerful and persuasive, and so he'd had a lot of influence about work I was doing, which was basically monitoring what the Conservative government was doing and writing about the poverty trap and then. No, I went to work for the government in 1974, so I was more involved from the inside, but I was still in touch with Frank Field and still very much following the whole poverty debate, but not specifically about the study.

Okay. And when the study was actually published then in 1978 do you remember that happening, do you remember the impact of it, or had the impact not happened already kind of thing?

Well Peter very kindly sent me a copy and I remember thinking it was a sort of major study, but as you probably know I mean my relationship with Peter had sort of several phases of which the last and longest was a very harmonious one, but the one in the middle wasn't so good, because I thought the idea of an objective and scientific measure was something that really hadn't been established by the study. And I'm very much hoping that the release or the processing of the data will make it possible to do more on that. Although I'm fairly convinced that it will show that I was right, but then most people will take that perspective. But I felt that it collected a huge amount of data, it did show signs of, I mean the very fact that it took a long time to publish indicated that Peter had had a great deal of difficulty getting material under any sort of control.

So it's a somewhat discursive presentation of the results, but I mean some things which Peter had already written about relative poverty and, so he was representing those, but it seemed to me fairly monumental and very important work, and I've always stressed that even though I've had criticisms of it.

Part 2: on his criticisms of Townsend's approach

Could you say a bit more about when you say you weren't convinced it portrayed I think an objective measure of poverty, could you say a bit more?

Well the way that he arrived at that was by getting a deprivation score and then getting that score for different income groups and averaging it for those groups, and essentially finding that the average scores lay along the kind of curve, which he summarised as that you could draw two straight lines that kind of intersected and that indicated a flaw or an income level at which or below which the deprivation score started to increase very rapidly. I took the view that that was something of a statistical artefact, because if you grouped the income and got the average score for those it looked like a fairly clear curve, although even with a curve when is the turning point you can, it's difficult to say as it were when a curve changes. But if you look as I hope will become possible at the individual household scores then to my mind it's much well more of a sort of cloud.

A cloud in which the lower your income the much more likely you are to be highly deprived and the higher your income the less likely, but something in which there's no clear turning point. So some people were on high incomes and had quite high deprivation scores. Perhaps I was prompted in it when I looked at the deprivation index I scored quite highly in, I wasn't remotely poor, being a single lecturer. And some of the people on very low incomes weren't poor. And so some of the behavioural indicators that he used like having friends round weren't of themselves necessarily expensive. I mean poverty might certainly inhibit many people, but it didn't absolutely, I mean people could just go and have tea with their friends and their friends come to them.

So it didn't seem to me there was a clear cut off and the other aspect of it was perhaps a more ethical political issue that to my mind poverty was very much a moral issue. It wasn't just like measuring the speed of sound or something

where you can try and get it more accurate and do research into it. There was a very clear implication that, or I felt that if you studied poverty the purpose is to do something about it. It's not just the sort of voyeuristic exercise to say oh look at all these poor people. And that that inevitably involved some sort of political moral judgement about what you regard as acceptable, and opinions about that differ.

So in that sense I didn't conceive it really as a scientific thing, it was evidence about people's living circumstances which was very important, and I've always stressed that that importance of his working and of the study in showing extensive deprivation of many people on low incomes, which is a sort of powerful reason for thinking about how to improve those. But that there was some sort of sharp cut-off here were the poor and here weren't the poor has always seemed to me bit of an illusion delusion, bit of searching for something which, well, I'm not at all convinced by any of the evidence that there is that sharp cut-off. It doesn't make poverty any less important as a concern, any less harmful for great many people, but that there's a sharp cut-off as something I've questioned. Although I haven't convinced everyone I know that. Clearly many people here in Bristol.

Yeah, so is there anything you'd like to say about how, any other kind of debates that you think surround the Townsend study compared to your perspective on poverty or any of the debates that are happening at the moment?

Well because Peter was looking at it more broadly, I think that has been very helpful thing that he realised that economic definitions in terms of income were very inadequate and so looking at conditions at work, at receipt of public services, all those things I think he laid a very important foundation for the broadening out which you could say was reflected in the emphasis on social exclusion, uhm though I don't think he felt that was a very helpful concept it was a sort of invention on new Labour uhm to some extent it put the emphasis on agency on individuals rather than the structures but in arguing that public services and quality of the environment, security, all these factors that are crucial to people's lives that was one way in which it was extremely important. I think ones got to put it in perspective that he did a huge amount and those who worked with him at the very early stage in terms of social research because people hadn't done these studies and the fact is that university, apart really from the LSE work here, the bulk of the counting the poor and things has been based on government surveys and reanalysis of that so it was a very bold and major achievement to get

that up and running, to do that so sort of saying some things could have been different or better seems to me very unfair cause it was achieving an awful lot and one little thing the Breadline Britain studies later picked up on which a point I make some of the sort of things in the deprivation index were a matter of choice. I'm a vegetarian so I don't eat Sunday roast that he put in which was very common at the time but it's a culturally specific thing and well it's not specific to vegetarians and it's no doubt specific to some ethnic groups, but I mean it's not unreasonable to put that in. But where things were a matter of choice, the Breadline Britain surveys did try to ask did you not have that because you couldn't afford it? Although that's a fairly vague concept in itself but. So you could criticise bits like that, and I don't think Peter would have argued with that really. He wasn't defending every point about what he'd done and. I mean I feel very sad in a way that things broke down between him and Brian Abel-Smith, because they did seem to me to have rather different talents. That Brian was a very sort of organised and structured person, whereas Peter seems to me much more an innovative original thinker and thought much more widely. Brian was very pragmatic in terms of what could be done, what policies might follow from it; Peter was much more idealistic and well I'd say longsighted really about where this was all leading.

Do you think that was where the rupture occurred because of those different approaches or, why do you think they fell out?

I don't really know. I can speculate, because I knew them both quite well. But Brian was an incredibly private person and he kept his life in a lot of compartments and there's a biography coming out of him quite soon I think this autumn which touches on the whole period and by Sally Sheard from Liverpool, you know about that?

No, I didn't.

No, well it's not out yet, but I've read most of the chapters, and so I think you'll find that quite interesting. But one of the ideas for a title was to call it the Lives of Brian, because they were very compartmentalised and he didn't really give much away. I mean he was enormously helpful with my career, and didn't exactly recruit me but he wrote me a reference to go to LSE and. But he never expressed really how he felt about Peter, because they had been very very close friends and this did come between them I think the fact that Peter was left with

this as it were sort out and Brian was really good at sorting things out. But he was also perhaps much more cautious in his approach and, well, pragmatic politic in terms of seeing what he thought would be acceptable and to some extent acceptable to the Labour party as it then stood.

So he did a lot of his work as essentially sort of fairly committed and certainly very well informed but civil servant, and he was very discreet about that. He didn't gossip away about what ministers were doing or what they were thinking of, and I think he kept that very, apart from Peter and everyone, I think that was a source of sadness. But I talked to Peter after Brian died about Brian and Peter had enormous respect for him, so I think they were never sort of wholly separated. But I do think that well it imposed a huge load on Peter, because it was a massive material and bits of it came out like Dennis Marsden's Mothers Alone, which based on parts of the research, but bringing it altogether was a very, very challenging task, and I'm sure he would have liked help.

Thank you. Do you want to say anything else in general about the significance of the survey?

Well I just really repeat myself that I think the significance was that it reinforced very strongly the need to think broadly about poverty and that you had to think in relative terms, and that to my mind was an issue that was won by Peter's work and kind of the authoritative statement of that, most powerful statement of that was in his discussion of the survey, and that's had huge implications. I mean you contrast that with United States for example where they're still carrying on with basically a fixed poverty line which they adjust for inflation but falls behind living standards. So their idea of poverty is very very different. But Britain and I think Peter's work abroad has had a huge influence abroad. I mean the whole of Europe's following that. So that's been a colossal influence of the book.

Part 3: on why poverty wasn't abolished

And what do you think the reasons are? Because at the time, you know, I think they really felt that they were going to abolish poverty quite soon, what do you think has been the reason why we haven't yet succeeded?

Well I would say two things. I mean the basic analysis and the prescriptions that were put forward very much by the Child Poverty Action Group, but also in relation to disability incomes and, because I haven't mentioned disability at all, but Peter was a pioneer in looking at that. I mean he pioneered in so many areas like institutional care and old and alone and, so I've just been talking really about the poverty study itself, but.

Now I've forgot what you were asking me. About the solution, why it hadn't been abolished. So the prescription seemed to me entirely appropriate, but I suppose two things have changed. One, there was a kind of reliance on the economy to deliver two things: one full employment and two a sort of fairly stable distribution of earnings. And that hasn't been the case. I mean the sort of background has changed with the acceptance or encouragement of high levels of unemployment under Thatcher. And the distribution of earnings getting wider for a variety of reasons, but that's something that didn't happen. I mean up to '68 it hadn't changed for a century, so that wasn't anticipated. And it's led to much more expenditure on the working poor by the public sector. And I suppose the other factor is that political concern has diminished.

I mean that Peter, Brian and people like Crossman and Barbara Castle were all fairly committed to the idea that poverty should be abolished and could be abolished. I mean Crossman and Castle were practical politicians, but they certainly kind of endorsed the goal. And I don't really think any politicians since have, I mean I know Blair made a speech saying we'd end it, child poverty, which was quite steep politics, because losing favour of child poverty, but when it was made there was nothing underlying it. It was just opinions differ, but some say Alistair Campbell said stick it in, it'll make a good headline. And there was never any sort of strategy for how you get to that point. And clearly Iain Duncan Smith well takes the view that many of the things that most campaigners about poverty and regarded as solutions were to him the problem. I mean they were causing these dependants. So he's taken a wholly different attitude towards it, which we'll probably see poverty rising. I mean it doesn't, it's only because average incomes are doing so badly.

So the politics of tackling poverty Galbraith's argument that we've reached a culture of contentment in which some are doing very nicely, others are sort of okay, but the numbers who are doing it very badly, the minority, and therefore the majority basically doesn't care. Plus the kind of individualisation of blaming

the victims and seeing the social security system, which I mean all the evidence that I've ever examined shows how effective it is at relieving poverty. But if it's basically rubbish in the press and it suits people to do that if they want to roll back the state, I think there's a very hostile attitude developed as some of the public opinion polls and the British Attitude Survey shows, and it's got more harsh environments.

So I mean there's this continuing puzzle why when the Labour government between '97 and not really towards the end, but the first five or six years did take some quite substantial measures, but it never talked about them. They always sort of hid them, because they thought they shouldn't be spending public money, but people would disapprove of all of this. So the result has been that I think there's a deep pessimism in the public, certainly in people working in policy, about the situation. But I was involved in a Fabian Commission on life chances and there where people had it explained to them what could be achieved and what had been achieved by raising child benefits, people became quite more optimistic and quite excited and that I think there's a very strong belief among the great majority that child poverty should be overcome and indeed all forms of poverty. But a lot of people are very pessimistic about that.

So there's underlying economic and social conditions which have got worse which made it harder, and there's a pessimism about the possibility of doing it, and I think that's been exacerbated by people saying, as Reagan said in the war on poverty, poverty won. But dismissing it as what had been done in America to help pensioners for example, reduce pensioner poverty, it did work, but causes of more unemployment or lone parent families were not, it wasn't being caused by the response to it. But I think a lot of people chose to believe that, still do.

Okay, great, thank you. There's nothing else I want to ask, is there anything else you want to say that I haven't asked?

I don't think so. No, you've taken me back a long way. Well, let me just mention the last phase, because that when I criticised Peter and he criticised me for criticising him, that for a few years we were, I don't know, but certainly when he came to LSE to teach on the human rights course, I taught a lot with him on child rights and, well, I mean I got to know him then much better than I had known him before and that was a period when he was having a huge influence on a lot of

students. I mean they knew about all the things he'd done and he was working with, in Brazil and I think with ILO and.

So he'd come out of retirement I believe twice, I mean once from Essex to Bristol, and once from Bristol back to LSE, because he was filling a big gap in LSE. Because there was basically no-one to run that. And Tony Giddens, who was then director, brought him back who'd known him at Essex I think. But I think he had, I mean it was a very I think good period in his life. He seemed very happy and he was sort of spending whatever it was three days a week in London and rest of the time in West Country and. So I mean LSE was very fortunate to have him and we got on very very well. I think partly because we were both somewhat or more than somewhat sceptical about New Labour's posture.

Okay, anything else?

No, I think that's about it.

Thank you very much. Okay, I'm going to-