
Interview with Adrian Sinfield

Part 3: reflections on the study

What are your thoughts kind of looking back and your feelings about what came out of the Poverty in the UK survey?

I think that was a marvellous study. I know I heard one academic, social policy academic – and I won't name that person – who said I wish I could have been asked to review it. I just said it's ten years old, and there was no understanding of the problems that Peter, to a lesser extent, Brian had got to go through to get it. I remember hearing about Peter taking the various reports to Penguin, Allen Lane, and there was one occasion, which probably other people have told you, where Peter had a meeting with Allen Lane, and they said Peter, we can't possibly publish all these tables, just not possible. And for two hours Peter said, he took it back, everyone, I envisage him almost sitting there holding the text in his arms, and he said well we argued over it. And to their credit Allen Lane published this monumental book and brought it out in paper and it really made an enormous impact, and the very sad thing is that time and time again I heard when it was launched there were no copies because they hadn't got themselves ready for the demand.

Peter came up to Edinburgh in October '79, I'd moved up there that year, and we got Peter to address a student audience at very short notice, which took 200 and there were 300 people trying to get in. We managed to move to the university theatre, and in the end though I think it was something like 400 people listening, packed, but I think the local bookshop had 20 copies, although we'd warned them. And I heard the same thing happened in Newcastle, they ran out of copies, so they were reprinting and reprinting, and I'm sure they could have sold far more copies. And there was tremendous interest, on the radio, on the television, people were writing about it.

I was absolutely delighted and astonished and kept trying to note how often it was picked up, and I was invited to take part of a television discussion on not Radio 4 but Radio Forth, which was a Firth of Forth Edinburgh commercial radio station, one evening, on a Friday evening from seven until eight, which you might expect to be a sort of peak time, and we were discussing this. And it was

interesting that Scotland, the Head of the CBI, the Scottish CBI was interviewed, and it was expected me to have a task, but he said I was so upset by the poverty, particularly for disabled people, I'm really concerned that our country isn't doing enough. This was clearly a conservative. You know, time and time again people had this, this book really hit home. So it was as marvellous impact, and I don't know if you've seen the cartoon version? See if you can track that down because it's a marvellous, I think it was done in Nottingham but I'm not sure. Alan may well have a copy. I did once. But a short cartoon version.

Right, and what do you think was the reason for that massive interest? Was it the time, the thinking of the time or?

It was partly helped by the time, because it came out in September/October 1979, which was in the first few months of the Thatcher government, and they made it very clear within those first few months that they were going to cut, if they could, social security spending, at the same time as unemployment was already leaping. It really was a remarkable change. And if you look at their white paper on public expenditure, the first sentence is public expenditure is the heart of Britain's economic problems, and within that they then go on to talk about the need to cut social spending. And I think this book provided things for people who wanted to challenge this, to say look, here's this major study which challenges everything. Okay, the data related to earlier periods, but it was quite clear you could use this data to show that the sorts of cuts that were being talked about would have a far harsher impact.

So it was a really exciting period, that period. And I think it did make a difference, things did get very much worse. There was an enormous increase in poverty and unemployment, but I think there would have been more cuts if there hadn't been that evidence available.

Is there anything looking back that you think could have been done differently, with regards to the research, as far as you're aware?

I suppose if more funds could have been found to enable Peter to make the transition from the LSE computer to the Essex computer, and if he'd had research assistants, more than he actually did. I mean this is something that Alan particularly would be able to tell you more about because, you know, Peter wrote

so much of that by himself. And in those days, the sorts of, I don't know if anybody's got a sort of printout that you would have when you have something, so, you know, you'd stretch the stuff out. It wouldn't be the sort of stuff that you get now easily on a laptop. So the job of analysing this was extraordinary. How he managed to do it, it's an incredible achievement. I mean he'd been criticised for going too quantitative, but I think he said just to cope with those data and then there are some marvellous chapters within Poverty in the UK, which have some lovely qualitative data.

Yeah. So do you want to say anything about the impact? You've said that it made a big difference, do you want to say anything more about that?

I did, and sadly it came out at the time when the Government was very resistant to that sort of thing. But my own feeling is that it probably stopped them from doing worse, as various other bits of research encouraged within the government did. No, I just wish it had come out earlier with less impact on Peter's life and, yes.

Because it took so much of his time and that do you mean or?

Time, energy, almost life force, but he got it out, by god! And he continued the momentum on with further studies of this time.

Okay, that's all the questions that I had, is there anything else you want to say that I haven't asked that you think might be important?

Yes. I wasn't aware of the tensions between various people on the team, and it was only a few years ago that Dennis was telling me about the arguments, very principled arguments he and Peter had about moving from the qualitative work that Peter had done much more of in the family life of old people to the big quantitative stuff of Poverty in the UK. And I wasn't taking part in the discussions at the time, but looking back I couldn't help feeling it was so sad because it was almost presented as an either or.

Em, yes, and I also felt that it probably pushed Peter into perhaps dog in the manger is too strong, but because he had to take so much of this on, I always felt

that he and Amartya Sen had differences over how to tackle poverty at a time when if the two of them had said look, we've got major differences but we agree on these points and we are prepared to sign a letter to, in those days it would have been The Times, or to make a petition to the Prime Minister, the two of them to get, or to the United Nations, because they were both concerned about poverty across the world, the impact would have been so great. But somehow or other both of them couldn't get out of that and agree to make that thrust, and I always felt sorry about that. I thought it was a tremendous opportunity missed by both of them to really put pressure on. Because if Amartya Sen and Peter Townsend, and then the number of other people who would have joined with them, it could have made such a statement. All right, academics can't have a tremendous impact, but I think they could have had much more.

Yeah, it's a lesson for us all, isn't it? Anything else you want to say, any last thoughts about the process or the findings, or the relationships between people?

No, I really didn't know so much. I mean perhaps that was a fault on my part, because I was busy doing various things that I got involved with other groups. No, I don't think so, thanks very much.

Okay.

It was very exciting to have been involved. One particular memory that sticks with me, Brian Abel-Smith was an extraordinary charming legit man. He and Peter were close friends until they had this split up over the poverty research and it was like this. But as almost a research student, as rather a research assistant, which is what I was, it was one occasion when I was trying to design my own questionnaire and Peter said you must put this in, and I then took the draft to Brian, he said why have you put that in? So I took it out and put something else in. Peter then, so we actually had a three-way phone call, which in 1963 was very unusual, and Brian said go through to my bedroom, and I was lying there on this Thai silk bedspread and looking up, he had a copper ceiling. And this was just off Ebury Street in Pimlico in London, and we argued out this questionnaire over the phone.

It was one of these things that comes back to me every now and again, but working with the two of them, they were just such encouraging people. And I suppose I still am aware I suppose that I let them down, and one of the reasons I'm being so enthusiastic about the Shildrick Donald and others' book is that when I read it I thought this is the book that Peter wanted me to do. And I just wish I'd, you know, if I perhaps had other guidance at the time, I think I was only about two or three weeks off having a book that could have gone to publish. It went to Penguin at one point, and then it came back, but I don't know why it went to Penguin. But anyway I think it could have come out as an LSE occasional paper or something. But that was my fault.

I don't want to leave on a bad note, what's your proudest moment of the whole?

Well to have been involved with it. And it certainly helped me to try and make a contribution in terms of challenging the acceptance of unemployment of the '70s and '80s, and enabled me to get the follow-up research in the mid '70s, and then to in fact write in the late '70s, '80s and work with a group called the Unemployment Unit alongside the Child Poverty Action Group to try and challenge the acceptance of high unemployment as a permanent aspect of that society. But I edited a book called the Workless State, which Peter Townsend did the preface for, and if you read the preface you think ah, and I just wish we'd measured up to the preface, if he'd written it before we wrote the book, it's splendid.

I'm sure it was a great book. Okay, thank you very much.