

## **Interview with Professor David Piachaud**

### **Part 1: on his relationship with Townsend's work**

**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

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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.