

Interview with Professor David Piachaud

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 politics 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.