

Interview with Professor David Piachaud

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-