

Interview with Professor David Donnison

Part 1: on the Poverty in the UK 1968-69 study

Interviewer: So first of all I just want to talk generally about the memories you have of the time that the Poverty in the UK survey was being carried out, if you were aware of it and any conversations or input or knowledge of people that were involved, like Peter Townsend and Brian Abel-Smith?

Donnison: Yes I was a colleague and friend of Peter and Brian, and had nothing really to do with the study and I had no responsibility for it, but one would meet and chat over coffee, one would, there'd be the occasional seminar or something. So I was aware of it as a major project within our department in at the LSE and was of course very interested in what was going to emerge. But that's about all I can tell you about my involvement in it.

That's fine. Can you tell me about the sort of atmosphere at the time in terms of the kind of will to address poverty and the sort of commitment of researchers at that time?

My memories that Brian and Peter and Tony Lyons were playing a very important part in bringing poverty back to public consciousness as a policy issue. After post-war years when people on the left as well as the right tended to assume that the problems were if not solved at least on the way to solution and we knew what to do about it. And it was this was as relative of course to action as well as research and, you know, The Poor and the Poorest was the publication that kind of launched that process. The finding of CPAG was another action step. And we were as friends, I mean I was sort of immediately offering to subscribe to CPAG along with other colleagues, we thought this was a good initiative, and we were looking forward to results of the study, which of course took far longer than intended, and Brian and Peter kind of came apart before it was over.

They came back together again in other ways later. It wasn't a very serious break. But they had different roles in the policy debate and needed to play it in different ways. They both shared very much the same ideas. And since this was the first national study of poverty and neither, well nobody had done anything quite like this before, it was not surprising they got out of their depth sometimes and there were problems just in research method that held them up and, you know, Rowntree, the main backer, was sometimes at their wits end to know how

to bring this to a conclusion, but they were remarkably generous and patient. Research foundations rarely are these days, it was a different world. And it was great when it eventually emerged.

What did you know of the kind of problems that they had then?

I didn't really no, and I was very busy with other things and was not wanting to get too much involved, although I was looking forward to results when they appeared.

And what do you think was the impact of the results when they came out in the book?

I think the book gave authority and credibility to things that they'd been saying much earlier, and it became a continuing source of discussion and reflection about policy and about Britain and how it was going and gained a kind of worldwide significance. And it was and still is referred to.