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## **Interview with Frank Field, MP**

### **Part 2: on his rethinking of poverty**

#### **And also you were involved in setting up the Low Pay Unit?**

I was, yes. There were two reasons really. One was that raising funds for CPAG was actually quite difficult. I mean the organisation had increased massively, and it was running to keep still in fundraising. And there was resistance to existing funding, let alone expanding it. And secondly, see Rowntree's son Richard, Philip Rowntree, had chaired the Trust which resulted from his father putting into a trust, setting up as a trust, with the monies the work people at York saved, contributed as a leaving present. And Philip said he would willingly back the Low Pay Unit with this money. But he wasn't to give it to the CPAG, he wanted a separate organisation.

So that's how we started the Low Pay Unit. I just wanted to get into the low pay issue. Because we were very much benefit-orientated; it's rather like the Labour party is being painted now as the welfare party, rather than the working party, and given that those original data in Poor and the Poorest back in '65, showed the issue about working poor being lonely in their poverty, I think brought a new front on that, those grounds. To get their wages councils to operate and a bit better in protecting their members some of them hadn't met for 20 years. And also to use it as a campaign get a commitment to introduce a statutory minimum wage. But when we started on that campaign there were two other people that supported us, there was Alan Fisher and Rodney Biggerstaff, of what is now NUPE, or was NUPE, is now is Unison. So that was the beginning of the minimum wage strategy.

#### **And do you think Peter Townsend's work influenced in terms of understanding more about poverty?**

It taught me everything and then I was actually in the process of rejecting it, I just didn't, I mean the real weakness of the poverty lobby, it seems to have that everybody's poor is no poor. And the reason I want to abolish poverty is because it's destructive. It brings out the worst, destroys the people. And also none of

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them took into account human nature, in that self-interest is our biggest driving force, and therefore for a successful anti-poverty strategy, we've got to show it's in the interest of the people who are going to pay for it. And that's really my general position on that now. But I began in a sense swallowing down all the traditional stuff that, you know, the poverty lobby, particularly Peter because he was the architect of all this, actually, what his writing so beautifully described, but I increasingly, I just couldn't make it fit up with the reality that I saw.

### **When did that begin to happen and what drove you in that direction?**

Well it really did at CPAG in that, it's actually more marked now of course, in that. There was recently in The Guardian somebody was using a food bank, I mean if you'd had said at the beginning of my career towards its end we would be talking about food banks, I'd have you certified. So something clearly terrible is happening at the bottom of our society. But I think it's quite complicated. We know there's benefit cuts and we know about wage restraint/cuts and all the rest of it, but when the interview was going on in The Guardian this person was saying how she was using a food bank, and her son was playing with his iPhone. Now, to most people out there you think well, actually instead of paying whatever the iPhone rent is, you'd actually provide him with food.

Now, there may be good reasons for that, but the poor don't come up in these neat little piles, and they never accept there's a question of fraud. Whereas of course in my case against means testing partly rests on that it teaches all, it gives all the wrong incentives, brings out, rewards all the bad sides of human nature. You know, if you lie about your income you get help, if you don't save or you lie about, or dissemble about your savings, you get help. And if you're idle then you'll actually also get help. Most of the electorate are not in that position. That's one of the real problems we have now. And that was that journey really. And it has massively increased because once ones got one's own constituency, where it's a daily tutorial really, a wonderful experience of learning from that. But they also don't come up with these really rather sanitised views of the poor that we used to put out at CPAG.