
Interview with Frank Field, MP

Part 1: on his role at CPAG

I just wonder if you could tell me your memories of the time when the Poverty in the UK survey was going on and what came out of it, the Child Poverty Action Group and those kind of things, just in general-

Right, yes. I was never involved in Peter Townsend's academic work. The work Brian Abel-Smith and he did on the Poor and the Poorest obviously had an impact in public debate around Christmas time 1965. But prior to that a group of Quakers had already decided to have a series of meetings including one of child poverty, and the CPAG grew out of that meeting at the time before. It was not a direct result of Peter or Brian's work. Although Brian was immediately involved with the group, if I understand it correctly, and participated in it, as then did Peter. So I think the group was independent with their formation, because there was other work, there was Dorothy Wedderburn work about poverty in old age and so on, so there was a growing realisation that here was another big issue that hadn't gone away but was rearing its ugly head again. And Peter and Brian beneficially latched themselves onto the Child Poverty Action Group. The group was not as a result of their work.

Okay. And could you say anything about what you think the value of the study was?

Well, of course, like lots of important studies, it's unreadable. There's a few boring old tables. And looking back on it you think why were they making such a fuss over these really rather small numbers that they'd got from, well the equivalent of the labour survey, data survey? But anyway they managed to build it up into a campaign. And from that Abel-Smith and Townsend went on to seek monies, didn't they, for their big poverty study. Of which then Brian withdrew, with I think a lot of bad blood, when he became, first time round, the political adviser to Richard Crosland, and therefore Peter was left in charge of it himself, and that may account for some of the huge overrun of the time span getting those initial studies done and then the big survey itself. Because they had researchers, didn't they, looking at single parent families, large families and so

on, and I assume that that was as a basis for them when they were compiling their questionnaire for the big national survey.

Yeah, that's right. So, could you tell me anything about your activities at the time with regard to poverty?

Well, the Poor and the Poorest, and, well first of all the Child Poverty Action Group and then the Poor and the Poorest, have a history starting in 1965. I applied for the job following Tony Lyons, who was the first secretary in 1969, and was successful. And there had been, it was a crisis for Child Poverty Action Group, but they didn't know really what to do. I found this out afterwards. There was one group who favoured a takeover from Shelter. We'd have just become the research arm of Shelter, which was then a great campaigning organisation. And there's another group saying no, we're going to remain independent. And they tried to signify this independent by changing from a secretary to a director, grandiose title. And I was then had the job of trying to build, rebuild, resurrect CPAG, which was then this big task of raising public consciousness about child poverty.

But I think really by the end of those '60s the Wilson government not really forthcoming, they thought it was going to be much easier to lobby the government for major changes than it turned out to be. I think CPAG was genuinely, the steam had gone out, and the consolidators into Shelter had lost out and then they attempted a breach really by appointing me.

Okay. And what do you think were the barriers to addressing poverty at that time?

Well, we had actually, CPAG got itself into a position, it was from eyes seen as an appendage to the Labour party. That might pay off, if your party's in power and your party's going to do things. But for you to be known as being that close to the Labour party, and the Government not to deliver, is a pretty poor set up. And one of my jobs was to how can we reposition CPAG, and that the origin of me trying to learn about stuff that I knew nothing about before I joined the Child Poverty Action Group. The notebooks I was building up seemed to be totally at variance with my image of the Labour party, which was, you know, one of our great myths, as Crosland called it, that we were on the side of the poor. And I thought therefore to attack the myth, which was the document the Poor get

Poorer Under Labour was the basis of that. And then it gave us a totally new lease of life, earned our independence, made sure that when the Tories were doing things we didn't like, people couldn't dismiss us, saying oh that's a group of Labour party activists, because we'd attacked the Labour government, it had become part of the election campaign for us. So, that's my initiation into it all.

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 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.

Part 3: on interventions that work

And what do you think about the response to the report that you wrote, 2010?

Well, it's been good with the civil servants pushing it, but I don't think the Prime Minister's read it, or answer for it. So, given that it marshalled I thought a rather good case for showing that circumstances and intervention could trump class. We've gone ahead in Birkenhead; we've set up a trust, raised a million quid. We've got Cambridge University doing the indicators that we wanted, the measurements, school readiness where children will be at two-and-a-half and three. And we again partly we're trying to do an intervention project of some scale. I'm thinking about certain indicators for birth ready, which parents can find the easiest, and which parents might find it most difficult.

So the hope is that we have a model, which when we next get a radical government, the monies will be scarce still, they will know for any given amount of money in these foundation years, these are the things that we can do best to ensure those terrible class differences and mobility levels of children coming to school is, if not eliminated, much reduced. And already the Cambridge, set of indicators are ready for school, they've found of course these wide class differences, but if you are in poorer households, if your parents read to you, you were up there with the best kids. But also much more encouragingly if the children reported they had fun at home, they were simply up there with the bright kids, bright kids from richer homes. And intervention, the differences in the areas to say to parents come on, get home and have fun with your kids is a crucial factor for their life chances is better than saying, come on, reading to them is a crucial thing when parents themselves may have had a really tough year at school and don't read themselves. So we're doing it, while waiting for politicians to make up their mind.

But do you think it's hard for people to have fun with their children and provide lots of entertainment and stuff when they've got a lot of money worries?

I think that of course it's more difficult. But what the Birkenhead study already shows is that some poor parents manage it. And my guess is that more would try

it if they knew that was really important. One of the things, one of the other part, or a part of the intervention was in the one of the Birkenhead schools, and I tried it elsewhere afterwards, and I said given the collapse of behaviour, we're going to move back to a contract-based society, where you will know what's expected of you and you'll know what you can draw on. Tell me which six things do you most want from your school? And don't cheat, because every answer is the right one. And all of them came up with three, and I had six, but they all had a common three, and one was how to be a good parent. None of them said better, compared with some of toe-rags they've got. They said they wanted to know was it possible to make, to learn to make life-long friendships.

So again a huge denial of the adult world they were in. And they hoped to get jobs but they knew from their own brothers and sisters, getting a job and keeping a job were two different things. How could they teach that? So what we've done is that somebody at the, Erika Greenslade at the Manchester Academy, we've been to 15 schools, we've worked out what is already the national curriculum, which teaches these sets of skills. Where there were gaps, like on brain development science, which we're preparing that material and as we do all of this, and then there might be changes the national curriculum. So, but I mean that's going to happen, and I hope we're going to run that in schools and elsewhere.

So more young people will be leaving school who themselves have got poor parents will know the difference they can make. People are fascinated by our growing child's brain by looking and focussing and laughing and mimicking and talking, people actually make, and of course I agree with you it's hard if you've got all the other things coming down at once. But lots of poor parents show it's not impossible.

Okay, great.

Sorry, there's also a reason for not trying to combat poverty. But it's also a reason for not saying we can't do anything until we've solved poverty.

Yeah, okay. Is there anything else you wanted to say about the Peter Townsend study or?

No.

Or poverty in general, anything that I haven't...?

What I can, what's interesting is that Barbara Wootton in her Social Science and Social Pathology dug up all that information from official sources what we know and National Assistance Board reports and so on. And Peter's came out really so long after when they did the survey that it was easy for people to dismiss it.

So you don't think it had quite the impact that it could have had?

No, I don't. I mean the thing about Peter really was, like John Vaizey said we always want to do what we're second best at, and Peter wanted to be an academic. And Peter's great role in life could have been a George Orwell in the age of social sciences. He writes like a dream. I mean I don't know anybody who writes more beautifully than Peter did. And also, compared with Barbara Wootton who showed me once a manuscript when she, there were four drafts on one piece of paper, Peter almost never changed anything. I mean he wrote it in beautiful handwriting to be typed, and I don't think many things ever had to be changed from that draft. And his impact I think would have been so much greater if he'd been a journalist, than if he'd been an academic. And I think, you know, that, he wrote like Orwell, did that brilliant bit, he wrote in ways that, he used phrases to open up the imagination summed up what is actually happening. I think it's a pity that he got bored down with producing all these tables which when they were produced were produced so late. But that big book he did, taken from a refuge, Old People in Institutional Life, wonderful, wonderful descriptions. No, brilliant. But I think he was always trying to do what he was second best at, which was to be an academic like Tony Atkinson, Brian Abel Smith and so on.

Okay. Anything else?

I haven't, no, not at all.

Okay, well thank you very much.