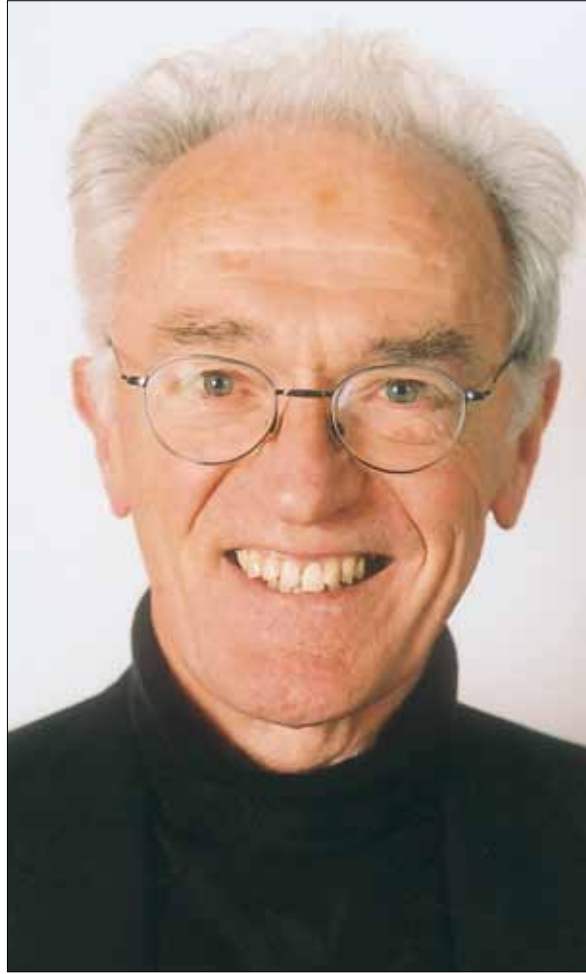


PETER TOWNSEND
1928–2009

“So much one man can do,
That does both act and know”

Marvell



In his will, Peter said that the year we met, 1980, was his 'annus mirabilis'. He acknowledged our inescapable mortality, but wrote that our life together was a little thrust to eternity and that it had filled his sky with stars.

I knew that I was the love of his life, as he was of mine, but I also knew that I only had half of him. I knew I had to share him.

I shared him with older people who were not treated with dignity and respect.

I shared him with disabled people treated as second-class citizens.

I shared him with people whose life chances and expectations were blighted by poverty.

I shared him with his students and colleagues, and knew that the sponge pudding and custard at the LSE was a high point of the week.

And I shared him with millions of children all over the world, who will never know his name, but owe him so much.

Jean's tribute to Peter at his funeral, 22 June 2009

A MEMORIAL SERVICE CELEBRATING THE LIFE OF PETER TOWNSEND

19th November 2009, at 11.00am • St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London WC2N 4JJ

ORDER OF SERVICE

‘The Bluebird’
Charles Villiers Stanford

Welcome by Rev. Richard Carter
Assistant Priest, St. Martin-in-the-Fields

HYMN – TO BE A PILGRIM

Who would true valour see,
Let him come hither;
One here will constant be,
Come wind, come weather.
There’s no discouragement
Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim.

Whoso beset him round
With dismal stories,
Do but themselves confound;
His strength the more is.
No lion can him fright,
He’ll with a giant fight,
But he will have a right
To be a pilgrim.

Hobgoblin nor foul fiend
Can daunt his spirit;
He knows he at the end
Shall life inherit.
Then fancies fly away,
He’ll fear not what men say,
He’ll labour night and day
To be a pilgrim.

John Bunyan
Music: Monk’s Gate
Collected and adapted by Ralph Vaughan Williams

Reading by Christian Townsend of an extract from
'The International Analysis of Poverty'

Reflection by Alan Walker

'Lascia Ch'io Pianga Mia Cruda Sorte'
from *Rinaldo*
G.F. Handel

Reflection by Hilary Rose

Reflection by Ruth Lister

'The Lamb'
John Taverner

Reflection by Conor Gearty

Address by Tony Benn

'Morgen'
Richard Strauss

Reading by Jean Corston from John Donne:

Bring us O lord God at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven,
to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no dark-
ness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence but one equal
music; no fears nor illusions but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings
but one equal eternity in the habitations of thy glory and dominion, world
without end.

HYMN – JERUSALEM

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?
And did the countenance divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among those dark satanic mills?

Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!
I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

William Blake
Music: C. Hubert H. Parry

Rev. Richard Carter

Then the King will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me”. Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the King will answer them, “Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of those who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Matthew, Chapter 25, verses 34-40

BLESSING

‘Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen’ BWV51

J.S. Bach

Music performed by
The Brandenburg Sinfonia and the St. Cecilia Chorus,
Soprano: Philippa Murray
Conductor: Benedict Hoffnung
Organist: Andrew Earis
Director of Music
St. Martin-in-the-Fields.

Please note:

There will be a RETIRING COLLECTION, the proceeds of which will be shared equally between the Child Poverty Action Group, the Disability Alliance, and Deepalaya, an education and community NGO in India, to which Peter was deeply committed.

First there was Tawney. Then came Titmuss. Now there is
Townsend. At least future students of social reform will have an
easy key to remembering the most important egalitarian writers of
the past 75 years: a convenient triumvirate of 'Ts'.

Guardian Leader, 31 July 1975.

Some extracts from Peter's books, articles, speeches and diary

Beginnings

Draft autobiography, August 2008

I was the only child of a separated, and later divorced, mother. I was brought up by my widowed maternal grandmother, while my mother earned our living. I was of mixed social class. My mother's father Thomas was, like his father Charlie, listed on his marriage certificate as a bookie's "agent" or runner, but in the 1901 Census, when he was 28, as a shipyard labourer. My father's father was a judge of rabbits, and more prosaically was listed as a master printer. My grandmother Annie Longstaff was the daughter of William Longstaff, a carpenter, and was born in Old Kilpatrick, Dumbarton, in 1874. When she married Thomas in 1895 one of them had lived in No.14 and the other in No 42 Gurney Street, Middlesbrough.

[...]

Beginnings can be tracked back a long way. My father found that my great great grandfather William Thompson Townsend, a musician and dramatist who was also a friend of Charles Dickens, had married a Sarah Brereton on 13 August 1834. With the help of



Six weeks old with parents Alice and Philip

an archivist at Leicester Museum and an editor of Debrett's *Peerage*, who had turned out to be a very distant relative, he traced the Breretons back through the Domesday Book to one who came across with William the Conqueror in 1066 and settled in Cheshire, where Brereton Hall still exists. Sir Ralph de Brereton fought in the Crusades. Another descendant was reputed to have killed Thomas a' Becket. Dr John Brereton was chaplain to Henry VIII whose brother William, "a gentleman of the Privy Chambers," was executed by the King in 1536 at the age of 28. Among other colourful descendants were Sir William de Brereton of Malpas, who served under the Black Prince and John O'Gaunt and fought at the battle of Navarrete in Castile, Spain, in 1367, Sir Randle Brereton, who was imprisoned in Windsor Castle in 1436, and later became Sheriff of Staffordshire in the late 1470s. The eventual family tree through to the 1970s that he compiled included an Admiral of the Fleet, Sir Cloudesley Shovel Brereton (born 1779), a Governor of St Lucia, many soldiers, prelates, writers and musicians, and a town crier.

1950s

Personal diary, 21 January 1953

Until recently my attitude in my work on "social policy" for P.E.P. [Political and Economic Planning] has been coloured by indignation at the way in which war-time aims have been quietly dropped in recent years or their non-fulfilment quietly concealed, and by a great wish to do all I can to publicise the need to improve and simplify the social services. The "welfare state" is a very tenuous term. But now I realise that there are greater claims on the energies of social reformers (more important: on the national income). True social security and welfare can be brought about in Britain – at a cost. In a sense the level of welfare at present is subsidised by people in our Colonies. Should not their claims have greater consideration than our own? The right to freedom from want has no geographical boundaries. Moreover, a moral and social principle regarded as obligatory for the British is all the more obligatory for colonial peoples for whom we are responsible. We have shunned the rights of East Africans, for example, while pontificating about our own. I fear that in arguing for the better and greater use of resources for the social services in

Britain, as anyone who studies these services is bound to do, I will lack conviction, merely because I will feel the resources ought to be used for East Africans and others. Investment against want in Africa and Asia seems to offer a better moral “return” than the betterment of living standards in Britain.

Personal diary, 1 August 1956

Last night Ruth and I had dinner with Richard and Kay Titmuss. We stayed late. The effort to persuade the Labour Party to adopt a differential national pension scheme seems to be making out – so far. Trade Unionists still to be convinced – as always. Reactions on the policy committee to my paper seem to suggest that the ‘fall in income’ retirement data proved a good choice. I have to prepare another. Richard described the failure to get the Ministry of Labour to encourage research into occupational pensions. The Government appears to be blocking efforts to find out what is happening. There must be something to hide. The annual £9,500 paid in for Sir Bernard Docker’s retirement, said to not to be unusual among top executives, has proved a public eye-opener on the inequality front. It’s surprising though how most left-wing people have been brought to think income and other inequalities in this country have been narrowed more than is the fact since the war. People do not appear to realise what has been happening in recent years or that presumed change has taken place in word rather than deed. Part of the trouble is too few people around capable of poking in dark corners. Richard is one of the outstanding exceptions. He is perhaps the only person I know who brings his most tenacious beliefs into the open for all to survey and criticise, he joining in. We all like to think we can be critical of our own society. Richard asks questions about things everybody else accepts. It is this, and his integrity, rather than mental brilliance and dexterity, which make him the one surgeon under whom I want to practise.

‘A Society for People’, 1958

During the last seven or eight years this disillusion with Socialism has persisted. I think it can largely be explained by the meaning given to the simple, but crushingly cold and complacent phrase, ‘the welfare state’. I want to attack this phrase, and all it is supposed to represent, because it suggests, or rather is taken to mean, first that a country which is a welfare state is soft and makes people soft, and secondly, that in a country which is called a welfare state there can be, in some strange way, no just causes left.



Age 3



*With his beloved
grandmother
Annie Southcote*

The strict values of the unbending spinster have always had a cherished place in British society – the peculiar and varying disciplines of the public school, the Church of England and the outside lavatory have seen to that – and it is not surprising to find them being expressed with peculiar vehemence as soon as the new health and social security services began to operate in July 1948. The general satisfaction created by the legislative achievements was quickly undermined. Britain, so the argument went, was going soft and everyone was being supervised from the cradle to the grave. Wage-earners had been granted improved insurance and assistance benefits in sickness and unemployment: no doubt they would be feckless and stay off work. Mothers were actually being paid a small allowance when they had two or more dependent children: no doubt they would spend it on perms or the pictures. The middle-aged and old were making extraordinary demands for wigs, spectacles and dentures: no doubt they would acquire them irresponsibly to entertain their grandchildren. Services were wasted on people who could not be trusted, who toddled off to the nearest doctor or national assistance officer to get what they could when they needed nothing.

All this may read like exaggerated parody. I only wish it were. The line of criticism could be documented at tedious and uniformly depressing length. When, in February 1958, the director of the Conservative Political Centre wrote in *The Future of the Welfare State* that we were ‘squandering public money on providing indiscriminate benefits for citizens, many of whom do not need them and some of whom do not want them’, he was simply repeating, in a characteristically vague way (which benefits? which people?), the complaint that has been made down the

years in the correspondence and editorial columns of *The Telegraph*, *The Times*, *Economist* and perhaps most revealing of all, *The British Medical Journal*.

[...]

The central choice in social policy lies in fact between a national minimum and equality. Support for the establishment of a national minimum in some or all social services has a long history, and especially from the work of the Webbs at the turn of the century to the present day. All one has to worry about, so the belief runs, is the need to raise health and living standards to a bare minimum, a subsistence level from which individuals can themselves build by their own efforts. It is in the State's interest to ensure that this minimum is attained: to go further would be to interfere with individual freedom and to waste national resources. In theory the idea seems wonderful. In practice it evaporates. It is extraordinarily difficult to define what can be meant by the 'minimum' (bread? tea? cake? newspapers? books? cortisone? 'invisible' hearing aids? plastic surgery?). It is all the more difficult to readjust one's ideas continuously during a period of inflation. Even when a pound is worth half its value the fact takes time to get used to. Has anyone tried running up a downcoming escalator? Supporters of the national minimum are all too likely to find themselves defending a policy which widens rather than narrows the gap between living standards and depresses the opportunities for recovery of the poor, the sick and the dispossessed.

[...]

Terms such as 'equality', 'privilege', 'the Establishment' and 'class' are imprecise and call up different images



Age 12



Head Boy, University
College School, 1946

for different people. One is conscious of the risks in using them. But if that overdone phrase 'a classless society' means anything it is a society where differences in reward are much narrower than in Britain today and where people of different background and accomplishment can mix easily and without guilt; but also a society where a respect for people is valued most of all, for that brings a real equality.

Personal diary, 22 February 1958

Although it was unbelievably uneven the book *Declaration* caused quite a stir. Its strength lay in the destructive criticism of Messrs Osborne, Tynan and Anderson. Now a successor is planned by the publisher and Norman Mackenzie is editing. The idea is to attempt to state left-wing views constructively, covering a variety of subjects. But each person will write about his subject in a personal way. I am a bit uneasy about Norman's influence on the overall effect of the book but the invitation to write is quite a challenge. What do I want to say? When given unlimited choice one's mind is apt to go blank or nothing seems to be worth saying.

Personal diary, 2 December 1958

I've had a terrible time of late trying to cope with a full research programme on top of so many other things. A lecture in the VLR club had an audience of over 400 (I tried to develop some of the ideas in my 'Conviction' essay) and the following week Iris Murdoch had an audience of nearer 600. Another big job was giving a lecture at LSE on the last 10 years' history of services for old people. There have also been book reviews, syllabi to prepare, meetings on the workshop, Fabian Executive and NCCOP meetings, student supervisions, trips to the LCC and a workshop for the physically handicapped, and a mass of lesser things. Poor Ruth sees far too little of me and I only wish I could get the balance right. My family are so wonderful and Christian is stupendous, with his whimsical smiles, his quiet insistence on dragging out bootbrushes and saucepans and his prolonged imitations of talk. Adam has just had his tonsils and adenoids out at Great Ormond Street and was very brave and philosophical about it. I shall not forget the relief of seeing him whole and resilient the day after the operation. He and Matthew now play murderous games of Ludo and Matthew has learned to play chess. Ruth does far too much, especially now she looks after the old man with the stick at the end of the alley. After long battles with the welfare services she now goes in daily to give him meals, clean his room, empty



With Brian Abel-Smith, LSE, 1957

his slops and get his shopping. She envies the variety and interest of my work. I envy the continuity and obvious worthwhileness of what she does. I sometimes wonder what a lot of my activities add up to. It's so easy to gain a false idea of one's achievements in this kind of work. They are impossible to measure and often depend, finally, on self-confidence.

'The Truce on Inequality', 1959

During the past ten years the general image of the Labour Party as presented to the public seems to have undergone a subtle but significant change. The party now seems to be characterised by a diminished attachment to moral and social principle and by a correspondingly greater concern with piecemeal reform, at least in social policy. Its leaders today rejoice in the impression that they are honest, practical men of restraint dealing with the realities of life. They are cautious about what they say they will do when they achieve power and are apt to be discouraged by the expert who tells them that a certain course of action will offend or produce too many technical difficulties. Their strength is their capacity for sustained practical activity; but as Tawney has said more generally about the failings of the English, they are increasingly

unwilling to test the quality of that activity by reference to principle.

[...]

In tracing the reasons for the current lack of interest in inequality we cannot be content with examining the exaggerated claims for the achievements of the Welfare State and of taxation in bringing about a more equitable distribution of income. We must look to the values of society. There is a near unanimity between Tories and Socialists on the desirability of ever-increasing production.

[...]

Yet look at the consequences. If public opinion, including the Left, puts expanding production first, then almost automatically there is a psychological obligation to subscribe to the importance of capital investment and of building so-called incentives into the tax system. In policy documents of the Labour Party there is a noticeable shifting of feet whenever there is the slightest suggestion of using taxation as a weapon for social ends. ... And subscription to the virtues of expanding output has sapped the moral

fibres of the Left. Not only, it is thought, will wage-earners benefit, everyone will benefit, and there will be an end to poverty. Yet this, as much as the hoped-for diminution in inequality, is not at all self-evident. On the contrary the evidence suggests both that a substantial minority of the population live in destitution or near destitution and that they have few prospects of improvement at a time when the wealth of some sections of the population is increasing rapidly.

1960s

The Last Refuge, 1962

The first impression was grim and sombre. A high wall surrounded some tall Victorian buildings, and the entrance lay under a forbidding arch with a porter's lodge at one side. The asphalt yards were broken up by a few beds of flowers but there was no garden worthy of the name. Several hundred residents were housed in large rooms on three floors. Dormitories were overcrowded, with ten or twenty iron-framed beds close together, no floor covering and little furniture other than ramshackle lockers. The day-rooms were bleak and uninviting. In one of them sat forty men in high-backed Windsor chairs, staring straight ahead or down at the floor. They seemed oblivious of what was going on around them. The sun was shining outside but no one was looking that way. Some were seated in readiness at the bare tables even though the midday meal was not to be served for over an hour. Watery-eyed and feeble, they looked suspiciously at our troupe of observers and then returned to their self-imposed contemplation. They wore shapeless tweed suits and carpet slippers or boots. Several wore caps. Life seemed to have been drained from them, all but the dregs. Their stoic resignation seemed attributable not only to infirmity and old age. They were like

people who had taken so much punishment that they seemed inured to pain and robbed of all initiative. They had the air of not worrying much about their problems because of the impossibility of sorting them out, or the difficulty of getting anyone to understand or take notice. I was told, in part justification of their inactivity, that 'although they sit and vegetate they have company. They can see other people. That's better than solitude at home in one room. They're less lonely here.' Yet I noticed isolated persons sitting alone in the wash-room, standing in a corridor and one looking out of a staircase window weeping silently. In the day-rooms there was little conversation.

[...]

The staff took the attitude that the old people had surrendered any claims to privacy. The residents were washed and dressed and conveniently arranged in chairs and beds – almost as if they were made ready for a daily inspection. An attendant was always present in the bathroom, irrespective of old people's capacity to bath themselves. The lavatories could not be locked and there were large spaces at the top and bottom of the doors. The matron swung open one door and unfortunately revealed a blind old woman installed on the w.c. She made no apology. In a dormitory she turned back the sheets covering one woman to show a deformed leg – again without apology or explanation.

[...]

So far as it is possible to express in a few words the general conclusion of this book it is that communal Homes of the kind which exist in England and Wales today do not adequately meet the physical, psychological and social needs of the elderly people living in them, and that alternative services and living arrangements should quickly take their place.

With all the qualifications that must be borne in mind this is in many ways a profoundly depressing conclusion. Directly, as well as by implication, it throws doubt on some of the basic values of modern society. More specifically, it poses uncomfortable questions for all who are trying to serve the best interests of old people. There are administrators of the social services who have to take difficult decisions about the welfare of many thousands of people, but also relatives, friends, nurses and welfare workers who are struggling throughout the country to help individual persons in their care, whether at home or in an institution. From feelings of love and affection as well as a sense of duty, many of them undertake tasks which



Opening the first sheltered housing scheme, 1964

are exacting beyond measure. This should be stressed again and again. Their confidence in one of the methods gradually established by society to meet the needs of old people should not be lightly undermined.

[...]

At a time when we stand perhaps on the threshold of a new era in social policy we are in danger of being stigmatized by future generations as grudging, indifferent and parsimonious to those among us who are unable, because of chronic illness, disability, poverty, loss of family or inadequacy of housing, to stand up to the rigours of a competitive society. We look back with horror at some of the cruelties perpetrated in the 1860s, just as our descendants, a hundred years hence, will look back with horror at some of the cruelties we perpetrate today. Possibly the ultimate test of the quality of a free, democratic and prosperous society is to be found in the standards of freedom, democracy and prosperity enjoyed by its weakest members.

1970s

Labour and Inequality, 1972

Really big structural reforms eluded the Labour Government. The Government strayed from moral authority over race and withdrew from the obstinate pursuit of socialist objectives. Its social achievements were much smaller than claimed or believed at the time by Labour ministers. Major onslaughts on inequality and poverty were required but not mounted. Although support for the social services was maintained during severe economic difficulties that support was not exceptional in scale nor was it inspired by one of a number of possible socialist strategies – to develop and integrate the local community (for example, through local employment policies, a public housing repairs and environmental improvement scheme, and services, like housing, for people

of different races), establish an effective system of civil and welfare rights as a basis for wider democratic control, or extend those essential educational, health and welfare services which should be available free of charge to the whole population.

There were important reforms but they tailed off in the last two years. As Thomas Balogh remarked after a long period at the Cabinet Office, “Some at least of the difficulties of the Labour Government in its last two years arose because fewer and fewer people believed that a steadfast redistribution of income was one of its main policy planks” (T. Balogh, 1970, *Labour and Inflation*, Fabian Tract 403, p 45).

Some early policies of the Heath Government help to place the shortcomings in perspective. For example, Labour’s half-hearted experiments with new forms of means tested services and its introduction or re-introduction of welfare charges paved the way for the more comprehensive selectivist policies upon which the new Tory Government has now embarked. Certainly the Government’s plan to re-structure housing subsidies, its veiled opposition to comprehensive education and its reform of direct taxation must give Labour gradualists pause. In these fields of policy, they must ask, why were not Labour’s reforms fierce and sustained?

But two major qualifications have to be attached to this uncomfortable but inescapable conclusion. The new Tory Government is pursuing social policies which are far more reactionary, short sighted and socially divisive than those of the previous Tory Government of 1959–64. To what extent they will actually be put into effect remains to be seen. But these policies are far removed from the timid but moderate reformist approach of 1965–70. Secondly, responsibility for change does not rest solely or even primarily with government. The shortcomings of other Labour institutions and groups, as well as the



*With his sons in the 1970s
(left to right: Ben, Christian,
Matthew, Adam)*

underlying if not declared opposition of different vested interests and a volatile public opinion have to be analysed and understood. In order to set the seal to social reconstruction democratic socialist governments must depend on favourable trends in social beliefs and values. They must also depend on support in depth from their own movements, in providing the information, the critical research and discussion, the staffing of new types of organisation and the fostering of local enthusiasm, all of which are required to bring about structural change of the right kind. If Labour can ponder constructively about these kind of matters democratic socialism can be shown to lead to the peaceful transformation of society instead of peripheral amelioration of the worst excesses of capitalism. The fundamental question left unanswered by Labour's rule is whether democratic socialism can be effective.

[...]

The kind of social plan for which I have argued would not be limited to the five social services – social security, education, health, housing and community welfare. It would cover the social aspects of incomes, fiscal, manpower and industrial relations policies too. Certain individual policies have been suggested or implied. They are a wealth tax; a minimum wage; an incomes gains tax for the highly paid; substantially higher family allowances; legislation to make industrial fringe benefits compulsory; abolition of certain tax allowances; pensions for the partly disabled (including a percentage pension for those at work) as well as the wholly disabled, and including the elderly; one-parent family benefits; flat rate housing subsidies for the disabled and for families with more than two or three dependants; housing schemes by which groups of poor housing needing renovation would be taken into cooperative or community ownership; the development of professional teams; using assistants, in medicine, teaching, nursing and social work; the further democratisation of the local community, perhaps through the establishment of community Boards to supervise projects to improve welfare and environment; independent information and welfare rights offices in every area; and community employment and welfare programmes. A programme of such scope could be spelt out in great detail long before the next election.

In the short term, such a plan is needed to restore stability and cohesion (in employment, race relations and housing, for example) from which greater national vitality and higher productivity might

develop; to provide a rationale for the allocation of national resources and the controlled growth of public expenditure; and to make incomes policy more acceptable to the unions and hence economic problems more manageable.

In the long term, such a plan is required to prevent the strong from gaining most of the fruits of economic growth at a time when the weak are increasing in proportion to total population. More positively, it is needed to construct a just society when powerful multi-national corporations and trading areas, expensive technology and arrogant professionalism are increasingly liable to undermine traditional democratic procedures and endanger individual and community rights.

Poverty in the United Kingdom, 1979

Poverty can be defined objectively and applied consistently only in terms of the concept of relative deprivation. That is the theme of this book. The term is understood objectively rather than subjectively. Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities.

[...]

What therefore is the explanation of widespread poverty? The theoretical approach developed in this book is one rooted in class relations. Some account has to be given of allocative principles and mechanisms and developments in the pattern of social life and consumption. In all societies, there is a crucial relationship between production, distribution and redistribution of resources on the one hand and the creation or sponsorship of style of living on the other. One governs the resources which come to be in the control of individuals and families. The other governs the 'ordinary' conditions and expectations attaching to membership of society, the denial or lack of which represents deprivation. The two are in constant interaction and explain at any given moment historically both the level and extent of poverty.

[...]

The insistence theoretically in this book on the concept of ‘resources’ instead of ‘incomes’ therefore shifts attention from the reasons for unequal individual net earnings to the reasons for unequal distribution of total resources including wealth. Here the importance, among other things, of the inheritance over the accumulation of wealth has to be recognized. This was shown in Chapter 9 for the rich in the sample. The resilience of fortunes also has to be explained – through ingenious tax avoidance, the accumulative value of portfolios of stocks and shares, the surges and offerings of the property market and the laws of testamentary succession. The extremely unequal distribution of wealth is perhaps the single most notable feature of social conditions in the United Kingdom. That may be the key not just to the action required to obtain a more equitable earnings structure, but also to any substantial diminution of poverty. Exclusion from access to wealth, and especially from property, is perhaps the single most notable feature of the poor. In general, access to occupational class tends to be a function of class origins and family wealth.

What is the social outcome of this unequal structure of resources, and how is it legitimated? Different types and amounts of resources provide a foundation for different styles of living. Occupational classes reflect the processes of production, but, since they have unequal resources, they also reflect unequal styles of living. The term ‘styles of living’ has been preferred to styles of consumption because it suggests a wider and more appropriate set of activities than a term which suggests merely the ingestion of material (and

implicitly *digestible*) goods. There exists a hierarchy of styles of living which reflect differential command over resources. There are, of course, threads linking behaviour and conditions of people in their capacity as producers or earners with behaviour and conditions of people in their capacity as users of resources. Level of resources reflects the style of living that can be adopted, as well as social acknowledgement of the worth of the recipients or earners of those resources. Marx put the point graphically: ‘Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is different hunger than that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth.’ But society has to foster citizenship and integrate its members, and not merely observe and regulate a hierarchy of life-styles. Different institutions, including the Church, the media and various professional associations, as well as the advertising agencies of private and public industry, endeavour to universalize, for example, standards of child care, the practices of marriage and family relationships, reciprocity between neighbours and the treatment of the elderly, disabled and [black people]. State as well as market agencies are constantly seeking to widen and change modes of consumption and behaviour. A social style of living is cultivated and recommended, in which both poor and rich are expected to participate. People low on the income scale cannot buy goods as expensive as those bought by, or live as well as, the rich, but they are presumed, none the less, to engage in the same broad scheme of consumption, customs and activities. The student of poverty is therefore concerned to trace two things. What constitutes the social style of living, and the changes which are taking place in that style, has to be described and explained. The standards which are consciously underwritten by the state, or established by popular expectations within the community, may be difficult or not difficult for some groups with low-ranking resources to attain. In other words, it is society which defines the nature and level of the threshold of activities and consumption which it expects its members to attain. And, by the nature of modern development, ‘society’ is increasingly a national rather than a regional or local society. Although the threshold style of living will tend to rise and fall in conjunction with any rise or fall in real national resources, there is no necessary or invariant connection.

[...]



Welfare Rights Stall, Colchester, 1970s

An effective assault on poverty would therefore include:

- 1 Abolition of excessive wealth ...
- 2 Abolition of excessive income ...
- 3 Introduction of an equitable income structure and some breaking down of the distinction between earners and dependants ...
- 4 Abolition of unemployment ...
- 5 Reorganization of employment and professional practice ...
- 6 Reorganization of community service ...

It would be wrong to suggest that any of this is easy or even likely. The citadels of wealth and privilege are deeply entrenched and have shown tenacious capacity to withstand assaults, notwithstanding the gentleness of their legal, as distinct from the ferocity of their verbal, form. Yet we have observed the elaborate hierarchy of wealth and esteem, of which poverty is an integral part. If any conclusion deserves to be picked out from this report as its central message it is this, with which, some time, the British people must come to terms.

1980s

Why are the Many Poor? (first published 1984, reprinted 1986)

Regrettably, the argument about the scale and regeneration of mass poverty not only in Britain but in the United States and much of Europe *does* have to be made. It is not a question of trying to influence political priorities to redistribute a little more income to a small percentage of the population, however much many influential public figures try to pretend it is, but one of clarifying, justifying, and adopting a programme to change radically the unbalanced structure and development of modern economies and modern societies to rescue hundreds of millions of the world's population from impoverishment and despair.

[...]

Scientific criteria which are common to all populations need to be developed in the teeth of clever political obstruction. The demands made upon people to fulfil society's expectations of them as workers, citizens, parents, neighbours, and friends have to be clarified and spelt out. The minimum resources required to perform these roles can be approximately defined. It then becomes possible to ask how society's resources can be reallocated so that the lives of

its people can become more worthwhile still. For the key thing in this debate about poverty is to insist that throughout the world human needs are not different in kind and they must not be restricted in definition to what is physiologically required for mere physical survival. It is a form of racism to suggest that "unsophisticated" peoples have lesser needs than those who are members of complex "civilizations" just as it is a form of ruling-class arrogance to suggest that the needs of the poor can be properly met if they are provided with the means of subsistence. Political influence takes many subtle forms. Through a process in the twentieth century which can only be described as one of intellectual attrition, even socialists are often inclined to accept pusillanimous objectives on behalf of the mass of the poor overseas and at home. This includes too ready acceptance of the definition of "subsistence" or "basic needs". All of us have to understand better than we do how we are brain-washed into depreciating the needs and rights of poor people.

[...]

The causes of mass poverty are structural not personal. The debates in Britain have been preoccupied with taxation and benefits rather than with the development of full employment and control of the systems of allocation of income and wealth. For socialists to have assumed that economic growth could substantially modify social inequality and abolish poverty was a mistake – whether in Britain or in the Third World. For socialists to have allowed the management of the economy to take precedence over the reconstruction of society was an even bigger mistake; for that has been to permit arrogant forms of greed and contempt to be perpetuated. Mrs. Thatcher's *social* beliefs and values provide the key to understanding her government's policies. Social policy has to be brought from the periphery to the centre of political attention.

The Thatcher Government is determined to increase poverty. It believes large numbers of people are living unnecessarily on government funds and that the need for lower wages in the economy will only be accepted if the benefits of the welfare state are drastically reduced. It does not accept that a generous level of income is required for full membership of society and the fulfillment of the obligations of work, family, and community.

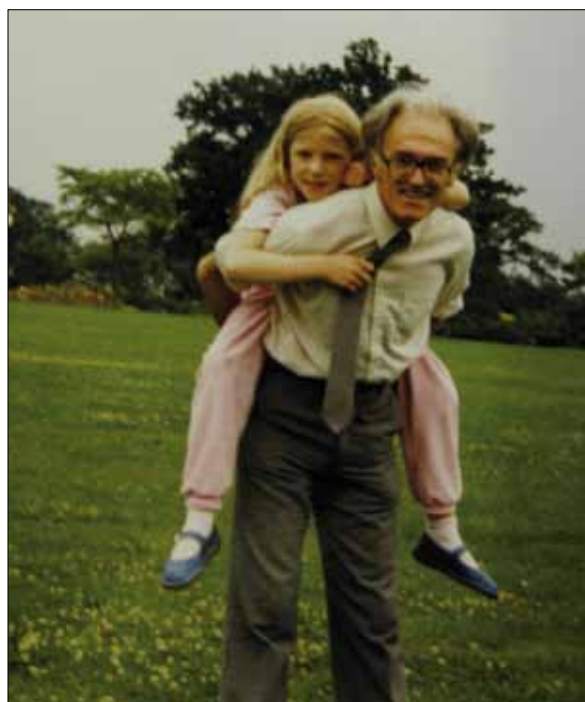
Socialists have two alternatives. One is to develop more energetically the familiar policies of the last 20 years to intervene in the economy and pay higher

benefits to raise demand and restore jobs, and to finance higher benefits by raising taxes and making taxation more progressive.

The other is to accept that social policies which are intrinsically subservient to the operation of the market have done little in practice to resolve poverty or reduce inequality and that a preventive strategy is the only one which will work. This is to take control of the creation and management of employment, and therefore of the wage system and the distribution of wealth. That will also involve collaborative action between democratic socialist governments, professions, pressure groups, and trades unions in different countries, just as it will involve collaborative action between different institutions of the Labour Movement at home. The abolition of poverty, as much as the reduction of inequality and other objectives of socialism, depends on the substitution of socialist institutions for those of capitalism and state bureaucracy. The conditions of the poor can be improved in the long run only by greatly restricting the power as well as the wealth of the rich.

'The Pursuit of Equality', 1983

In present conditions of extreme deprivation and mass poverty that case [for equality] deserves to be presented fully and more positively. One part of that case is to relate better the connected theories of poverty and inequality. This implies making a change of scientific and political direction [...] Among other things, such a change means giving greater recognition to the fact that individual needs arise through membership of society and not only through bodily requirements for warmth, shelter, food and clothing. People are social beings and not just physical beings. Such recognition leads inevitably to interest in the institutional processes by which social roles and customs are maintained, and therefore the part played by the state, industry and the wealthy classes in manufacturing poverty in the first place, rather than the part they might play in alleviating that condition once it is identified. The obligations at work, in family and community and as citizens which we feel bound to fulfil, using such incomes as we can command, are moulded in predominant measure by the rich through state laws and the establishment of social norms. Therefore, we have to look at the influences exerted by the rich in defining and controlling the conditions, and setting the fashions, which are continually redefining and reconstituting the structures of need which citizens experience in their everyday lives.



With daughter Lucy, 1984

'Ageism and Social Policy', 1988

Within a dominant national social scientific approach to theory which I have described as 'liberal-pluralism' there has been an approach to the study of ageing and the elderly which might be characterised as that of 'acquiescent functionalism'. It is a body of thought about ageing which attributes the causes of most of the problems of old people to the natural consequences of physical decrescence and mental inflexibility or to the failures of individual adjustment of ageing and retirement, instead of to contemporary developments of the state, the economy and social inequality. These latter developments are not themselves regarded as possible causal culprits. They have tended to be treated variously as commonly sanctioned, inevitable and unalterable – as the necessary accomplishment of market forces, technological change and democratic process. And if this is correct, the true interests of the elderly will have been poorly represented or even recognised over many years. Public and state perceptions of the functions and capabilities of the elderly population may now be completely at variance with properly independent scientific evidence about those functions and capabilities. The problem is in distinguishing uncontaminated from contaminated evidence. At the very least, the extent to which institutionalised ageism may be becoming a major feature of modern social structure deserves close investigation. Because of the growth in numbers in the elderly population, and the accompanying increase in costs and provisions for that

population, the dispositions towards them of the rich and powerful have been 'institutionalised' in a form which could be said to represent a new type of schism in society, namely ageism. At the time of writing this does not yet attract as much disquiet publicly as sexism and racism.

The set of theories which I have described as 'acquiescent functionalism' legitimates ageism in practice in contemporary society. The 'functionalism' legitimates the exclusion of elderly people from the labour market and from significant alternative social roles. It also legitimates incomes for the elderly at levels well below the employment incomes of the low paid. The epithet 'acquiescent' is intended to suggest the passive rather than active role played by intellectuals who have concerned themselves with issues affecting elderly people and tend to advocate 'minimalist' solutions to their problems. Either they have not questioned larger institutional developments and have not linked them with events in which the elderly have been concerned, or they have accepted them without fuss or protest.

'Far Better, Far Worse: A Sociology of Rich and Poor in Britain in the 1980s', Lecture to British Sociological Association, 1989 (revised and published in 1993 as 'Underclass and Overclass')

Another notable development in Britain's class structure is the disproportionately large growth of a prosperous class helping the dominant class, in Runciman's expression, to "exercise their domination" successfully. This class can be said to extend, below the top 1 or 2 per cent, to cover the richest 30 per cent of the population. Their disposable incomes are three, four or more times larger than the minimum levels of social security benefit payable by the state to those unable to take paid employment. Their assets, including owner-occupied homes, are considerable. Many live in two-wage households without dependants. Most own a large array of consumer durables and can afford to pursue expensive leisure activities and holidays or they are managers of the local branches of giant national services and financial institutions. Of course, attitudes among them vary considerably, but many are members of professions working for large public or private bureaucracies. What is interesting is their perception of their personal good fortune in an unjust and unequal society, combined with [a] strong disbelief in their personal capacity to bring about any form of social justice for others. In interviews a number of them seemed to be shrugging their

shoulders metaphorically about their own relative affluence in the midst of so much squalor and desperation. What can I do? I am just a small cog in a large machine. I just get on with my immediate professional, administrative or scientific expertise. And political activity really is beneath me and just something which is not expected of me in my present job.

Among the diverse and often confused attitudes struck by prosperous people this is not an unrepresentative statement of the views held. Many in the upper or prosperous middle classes have adopted a language of fatalism and not only of self-protection. The language also conveys their contempt for themselves as well as their acknowledgement of the difficulties of the poor. Ironically, it compares unfavourably with the high moral commitment, if censorious condescension, of their less numerous Victorian predecessors and represents a kind of betrayal of their social position and power.

1990s

'Underclass and Overclass: The Widening Gulf between Social Classes in Britain in the 1980s', 1993

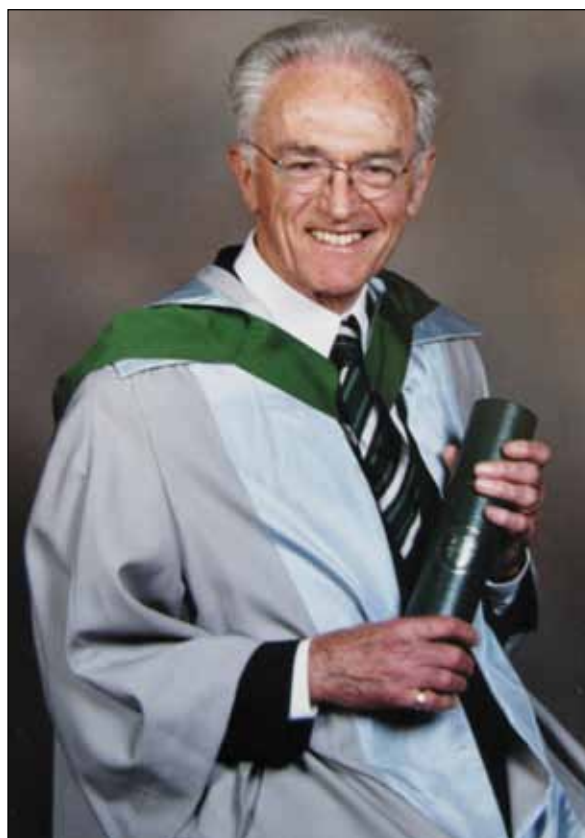
Polarisation of course implies much more than wider inequality of living standards or power. It implies restructuring as well as different patterns of consciousness at top and bottom of the social scale. Most attention has been concentrated on changes at the foot of the hierarchy. [...] If an underclass is being established on a substantial scale it is as a result of the exercise of new forms of power on behalf of vested interests. I believe we have to examine the functions and effects of the growth of corporations, and especially multinational corporations, and the corresponding elongation of the wage hierarchy. We must also examine those financial centres and institutions and international agencies which have facilitated this critical change. [...] The London survey of 1985-6 produced evidence suggesting the emergence of 'pedestal' elites with immense power and wealth, having relatively little to do with working people in their native country, and sometimes taking contemptuous attitudes to large sections of the population, and especially the dependent underclass [...] Some of these socially remote rich people spend a small proportion of each year in their London homes, because of their roving roles as multinational managers, highly paid servants of international agencies and professional emissaries. Others have businesses which have profited from the growth of financial institutions

servicing the internationalisation of the economy from London. This new 'overclass' is a counterpart of an 'underclass', some of whose members are impoverished partly as a consequence of the relocation of industry overseas and the more fanatical pursuit of monetarist policies at home.

Closing remarks at a celebration to mark a retirement from the University of Bristol, 1993

Formal retirement from an institution is a prosaic business, but it invites the idea of renewal. I mean renewal of the job, the roles to which the incumbent has contributed, and the "trade". There are things that are larger than self. Two things seem to me worth renewing on the part of the individual but also the people who have been in touch with that person. One is to interrelate the learned ideas into an image of what society might be like. Some call that vision. William Morris ends his *News from Nowhere* with his vision of a future society – "the fully-developed new society" as he called it. "If others can see it as I have seen it then it may be called a vision rather than a dream." After dreaming his dream that "mastery has turned into fellowship" he recognised the reality that "while you live you will see all round you people engaged in making others live lives which are not their own, while they themselves care nothing for their own real lives – men who hate life though they fear death." Vision is the counterpart of analysis. There have been endless disappointments, battles lost, opportunities forgone. What matters is to keep that little flame alive – for others to use, to remember, to protect, to bring back to life at the right time. The dissidents in Czechoslovakia maintained a network against every oppression.

Long ago I met an old man in a former workhouse. He had been locked up there for forty years. Many argued, and would continue to argue, that people like him were and are thoroughly institutionalised and become reconciled to these places. They are either cowed into submission or gradually treat the institution as home, environment and familiar community. I have never forgotten his answer to my question whether he liked being there. "All my life," he said, "I have wanted a job of my own and a home of my own." Forty years on, in his late seventies, that little flame still burned. If we can do nothing else, we can honour his example. When all seems lost, and traditions and precious values get abandoned, or tyrants stalk the land, we can try to ensure somewhere, somewhere, that a little flame remains alive.



One of eight honorary degrees

'Redistribution: the strategic alternative to privatisation', 1997

'Redistribution' does not denote a common social situation – like poverty, social exclusion, social injustice, homelessness or a divided society – which invites concern. The problem is implicit in the form of action which the idea suggests. Neither does it denote a strategy – like privatisation, liberalisation or deregulation – which cannot in principle or on all the evidence be calculated to do much about the problem. In past and current usage it *does* denote the direction of the structural change which must be engineered to address social polarisation and related concerns.

In the past 'redistribution' has been widely used to describe intervention by government to correct the unequal distribution of earned income through the institutions of taxation but also the benefit systems and public services of the welfare state. But this is a narrow interpretation. The meaning of 'redistribution' must be widened to include less unequal constructions of earnings and of shares in the value of goods and services produced for import and export or for home consumption.

All too easily the operational definition of precious principles and concepts can be demeaned politically,

professionally and administratively so that they pose less of a threat to established interests. Radical social aims can be frustrated.

An effort to break free from this stranglehold has to be made. Thus, it is not enough for research to deal only with the minimum benefits and services available to the poor. It will have to deal with the entire structure of wage and wealth disparities, including those which govern top earnings, bonuses, wealth accumulation and the corresponding structure of social relations. The exposition of conditions which affect any segment of the population cannot be successfully marshalled without some recognition of the social hierarchy as a whole to which that segment belongs, and the factors which affect that membership. As the authors and readers of this book will know, hundreds, if not thousands, of research reports dealing with the bottom end of the distribution but only a tiny handful dealing with the top end have been issued during the 1990s. Yet the form and depth of the entire social hierarchy is conditioned by the decisions made and the conventions reasserted at the top end of the hierarchy: as the reported behaviour of the 'top cats' of the privatised utilities in Britain in the mid-1990s testifies.

'Redistribution' should properly include redistribution of gross or original earnings, which would lead to more informed recognition of the contributions made to overall production and services by many people in the lower ranks of earnings. At least the reasons for the dispersion of earnings would have to come under public scrutiny. The limited range of wage studies of the 1980s and 1990s does not seem to represent even minimal justification for current wage differentials or the rapidly changing wages hierarchy of recent years in both big companies and small businesses, as well as in some parts of the public sector.

We need to transform the nature of our strategic thinking. What are other examples? Giving effect to equality of opportunity makes no sense if the structure of existing inequalities – especially for newly born children and those entering schools in different areas, but also for others across the age spectrum – and the forces determining inequality of outcome are not addressed. Greater equality of opportunity will not do much unless the distribution of earnings and wealth becomes much more equal at the same time. Limited objectives will not be achieved unless a process of give and take in the whole structure takes place. Again, a minimum wage makes no sense unless it is linked to a minimum income for those unable to

work and unless it is also linked to the moderation of the whole unequal structure of earnings and the management of that structure. The good intentions of measures which are expressed and developed without reference to their structural context, or the forces which are shaping that context, can be frustrated by knock-on reactions elsewhere. The strategic perspective has to be unitary – and if it is unitary 'redistribution' can become the big driving idea.

Personal diary, 23 August 1998

Careers can be like the ebb and flow of a tide. It would be difficult to pinpoint the start of my interest in poverty. Formally there is *Poverty: Ten Years After Beveridge* – the publication dated 1952. Before this, though, there were the articles at Cambridge on "The Other Cambridge" and on the divided city of Berlin and, earlier still, the first year at school in the back streets of Pimlico (1932-3), my grandmother's accounts of stillborn babies in makeshift coffins on kitchen shelves in Middlesbrough, and the tattered underclothes of "Aunt" Phyllis who contributed to the rent of the two-roomed upstairs flat (with "kitchen" on the landing) occupied by my mother, myself and my grandmother in the mid-1930s. Paul Thompson has helped me to recollect some of this in the days during 1998 when he interviewed me in relation to the archive now deposited at the University of Essex.

The ebb and flow is to do with the meaning, measurement, causes of and solution to poverty. They are each an inseparable part of the problem to be cracked. Until recent years I experienced an overwhelming sense of riding the crest of the wave, excited by a new found direction or source of seamanship to achieve my destination. But then I found myself beached or floating helplessly with an erratic compass.

The ebb, and the flow, is personal, professional and political. There is a struggle to comprehend, to use – but also restrain – personal experience and activity. There is the stimulus, but also the oppressive conventionality of professionalisation. Professions can be extraordinarily small-minded, and governments and foundations upon whom they depend extraordinarily obstructive and tight fisted. And there is the hope but also the despair of politics.

I have always had an interest in the politics of poverty. But until recent years I don't believe I had fully understood the permeating influence of politics on every aspect of poverty, including its scientific assessment. I have long tried to teach students that policies

are central causes of the problems of poverty, and not just potential means of the resolution of poverty. I have also sought to show how governments and political parties adopt definitions and measures to minimise or direct attention away from the extent of poverty.

But I had not fully absorbed the fact that governments have great power to set the entire agenda for scientific or independent work on poverty and to reformulate that agenda when scientists and other “independent” experts begin to bring forward conclusions on the basis of a previous agenda which threaten the political status quo. Of course, professional scientists have sometimes connived with this to obtain research money and otherwise curry favour.

I am concerned here with initiatives to define, monitor and prioritise problems for political convenience. The role of governments, multi-national corporations and international associations has become even more inescapably important than it was. It is no longer acceptable to write about the problems of Mr and Mrs Smith and their three children as the “problem” of poverty. Governments, multi-national corporations and international associations (like the World Bank, IMF, UNDP, WHO, etc) are an intrinsic part of the problem. The policies of these bodies which shape the lives and living standards of Mr and Mrs Smith and their three children are intrinsic to this family’s problem of poverty.

The ebb and flow of a career is also to do with frustration. Without wishing to exaggerate its importance, the work I was doing in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s constituted a political threat which insiders of all kinds recognised. It would be hard otherwise to explain the readiness of research institutions to grant money for poverty research in the early years but rarely later on. I changed tack. I made use of multiple subject-matter and low-cost means of maintaining the thrust of the work. What I wrote may represent merely an acknowledgement of reaching political maturity rather late in the day. Neither science nor those financing science are as dispassionate as I wanted to believe. I was more innocent in years gone by than I am now.

Personal diary, 27 August 1999

After cutting the grass we noticed how many small birds enjoyed picking up grass seed and grubs, especially when it cleared following rain. One morning Jean quietly opened the door, and we were able to



Launch of the Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research (1999)

stand looking at and hearing them – chaffinches, a robin or two, a wren, young swallows (gathering on the power line), goldcrests and bramblings(?). When I was out of the room, and Jean had moved from the door, a goldcrest came in, couldn’t find his way out. Hunkered against the kitchen windows and perched by the hanging light on the kitchen ceiling. We both looked at him with pleasure and then concern. We went out of the room to give him unflustered space to make his getaway. Half an hour later he was still there. I stood watching him when suddenly he swooped – straight into the kitchen window. He lay upside down on the shelf, either dead or stunned. I picked him up, and both Jean and I marvelled at his yellow streak, edged with black, at the top of his head, the gossamer green feathers on his back and wings, the pink legs and clenched claws. He lay with eyes closed in the palm of my hand no bigger than a man’s thumb. I covered him with my cupped right hand – realising that the warmth and cosiness of the enclosure might alleviate the state of shock. Jean put a drop of rescue remedy on his beak. Occasionally I looked at him. For a long time he lay inert with eyes closed. I stood in the garden. When I lifted my upper hand, whoosh – he was gone, flying quickly, it seemed, into or beyond the tall escallonia bush.

2000s

‘The Fortunes of Sociology at Essex 1963–82’, 2004

More than other scientists, university sociologists are bound to be conscious of serving two roles. As teachers, administrators and research workers they are allocated tasks which are legally defined or customary within large institutions of higher education. Usually they will do their level best to make a good job of that occupational role to which they have been formally allocated. But because of their professional education

and experience they will be more than ordinarily aware of the larger social forces controlling the institution within which they work, the behaviour and expectations of those around them, the social structure of town and gown and even the nature of the duties which they perform.

This can easily place them in the frontline of any social or political conflicts which arise in current daily events. Professional judgements and the events into which sociologists are obliged to participate may be particularly hard to reconcile with institutional obligations.

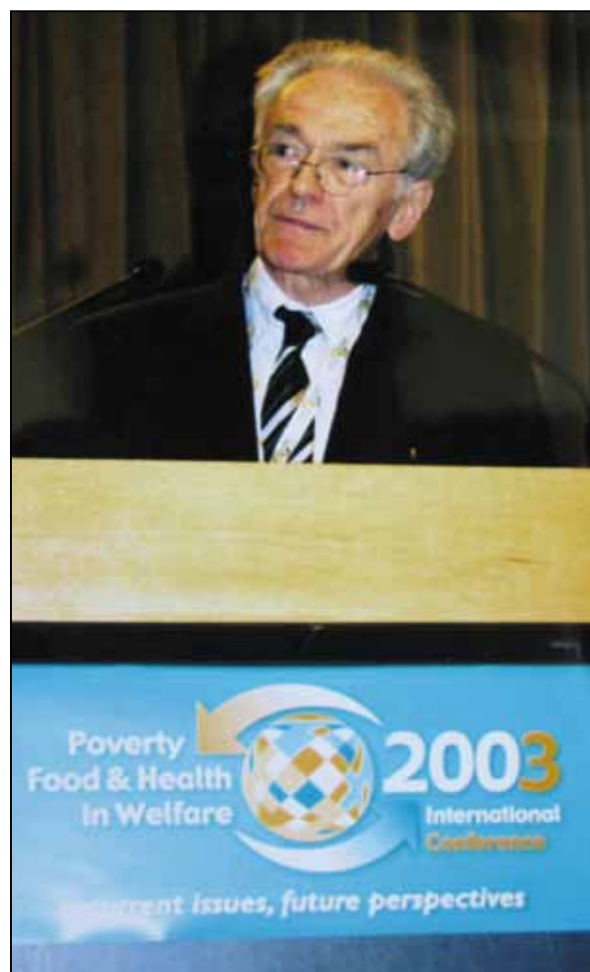
The management of this conflict can be creative as well as bruising. This is my central theme today. It is something which academic colleagues in other university departments as well as more illustrious political and social elites find difficult to understand. It affects interpretation of what has happened in the past as well as what is happening today. I was reminded of this at a degree ceremony in the University in 1990, 15 years ago. It was a colourful and warm-hearted occasion marking the University's development. But it was also a ritual conferring political as well as academic rewards, which revealed in its constitutional representation and programming the crushing political domination of higher education by established class interests.

This is not a difference of interpretation. Both interpretations are correct. The second is a legitimate and empirically verifiable sociological insight. The university class ritual cannot be set on one side as a bit of inconsequential historical pomp and circumstance and treated with mild amusement, because its organisation and its symbolism reflect a system of power relations in which contemporary authoritarian values are frequently asserted, not least in retrospective versions of history, which its exponents frequently invoke. The class ritual helps to sustain the wide and widening social inequalities which are such a marked feature of British society. Such a class ritual also threatens to distort and inhibit the intellectual and creative potential in all of us.

At that time the Chairman of the University's Council tried then to distance the University's development from some of the unrest marking its early years, instead of welcoming some of the events of those years as a necessary check on undemocratic rule and intellectual conformity and as a basis for many of the real achievements of the University. Leaders today continue to convey similar interpretations of past

conflict in the mistaken belief that this is how they should apply their healing powers. Historians like Simon Schama are at liberty to reveal the true nature of the social developments of the long-distant past, but sociologists who jab at the present with authority and no small expertise continue to be dismissed and condemned by the power elites of the present era.

Let me pick up a vivid example. The Department was noted for the leading part it played in the student protests of 1968 and 1974. Attempts to blame sociology for wider political discomfiture have been made of course to the present day. Noel Annan helped to perpetuate the myth of sociological responsibility for disruption, for example, in his book of 1990 (N. Annan, *Our Age: A Portrait of a Generation*, 1990). But even within the University the responsibility for what happened was much more widely shared. The events at Essex were a very minor part of a worldwide upheaval in higher education – due partly to the liberation implicit in rapid expansion but also to the reactions of the post-war generation against American imperialism in Vietnam and expressions of authoritarianism elsewhere, as in France.



July, 2003

The new universities were picked out for attention by the media. The protests at Essex were deliberately published by Conservative politicians concerned to crush left-wing movements. Incidents in the older universities attracted less than their fair share of publicity. For example, contrary to the media at the time, Denis Healey picked out in his autobiography violent student activity in Cambridge, and nowhere else.

The myths about those years deserve to be laid to rest. In 1990 I heard Sir Andrew Stark, the Chairman of the University's Council, speak of the more assured success of the University's development in the previous years. Like others he seemed to want to close the door on 1968 and 1974 as if they were years that were best forgotten. I raised the issue with him afterwards.

It is wrong to believe the University is successful because it has surmounted the turbulence of those early years. Closer to the truth is that it is successful because of the turbulence of those years. The real history is one on which future generations of staff and students can build. Some of the objectives that were brought into prominence are ordinarily disregarded in a class society and deserve to be kept in the forefront of public discussion.

[...]

I have tried to put my finger on the causes – the failure to change the hierarchical structure of power in the University and to match the needs of a new situation. This is not a particularly novel analysis. For Britain as a whole it is reiterated by many overseas observers and native social scientists and journalists, certainly by those sociologists with some appreciation of the history and contemporary development of social policy. It is a refrain played by the more discerning journalists – for example in 1987 by Robert Chesshyre.

Britain's main handicap is its anachronistic class system, the public school and the Oxbridge elite, the small minority who rule important British institutions and hold a disproportionately large concentration of unproductive wealth. While at Essex I wrote a book about poverty in the United Kingdom (P. Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, 1979). Least publicised, by my own profession as well as by the media, were the chapters on the rich and on class. In my personal view they are among the more interesting and original parts of that work. I wish I could get the resources to develop them.

Occupational or social mobility has been something of a diversion in sociology – giving the impression of dealing with the subject of class when not dealing with it at all. Some of my colleagues have done a great deal to redress that bias. The key questions concern the structure, the distances and institutions and particularly the policy control of class inequalities. I have tried to write a little about these matters, for example in *Poverty and Labour in London* (1987) and “Underclass and Overclass: The widening gulf between social classes in Britain in the 1980s” (1993).

Practically no resources are committed to ensuring the ownership of wealth, the personal and social control of corporate wealth, the links between wealth and income, the sociology of the rich, the political and legal management conferring wealth on the wealthy, the acquisition of wealth by professionals and the relationship of wealth and corporate wealth-holders to the management of universities. The explanation of educational malnutrition, like that of poverty, is primarily the explanation of minority wealth-holding and of extreme inequalities in the availability of personal and family resources. Access to university education and access to critical areas of study at a university follow similar structural edicts. Such access is controlled by a ruling class not yet accountable socially and politically to those with the needs and talents to profit from an open and highly developed university system. A full realisation of opportunities for hundreds of thousands, indeed millions, of deprived people could give society a creative impetus not experienced in its history.

This is not a political message. It is a scientific, a sociological, message. Some of the events in the early years at Essex demonstrated what a university of the people might begin to look like, whom it might recruit and what it might provide. To have breathed the exhilaration of those few experiences is privilege indeed, and worth recounting.

[‘Brian Abel-Smith, 1926–96’, 2004](#)

Brian Abel-Smith is someone whose value to Britain – and to Labour Governments, past and future – needs greater recognition. He did more than anyone else to consolidate the NHS in its early years, when in 1951 it came under threat from the incoming Tory Government of being emasculated and even dismantled. He was the key figure in the eventual adoption during the 1970s by Britain of earnings-related top-up state pensions and much else in social security. His self-effacing work for the World Health Organization

for 40 years in 62 countries until his death in 1996 to establish good health services was extraordinary and is unlikely to be matched by anyone again. These three things show what he would be saying today. He was one of the giants of international and national social welfare of the twentieth century.

His origins and balance of skills are the stuff of open-mouthed wonder. Born in 1926, the younger son of Brigadier-General Lionel Abel-Smith and therefore, so it was said, 27th in line to the throne, he saw military service in the final years of the war and became ADC to the military governor of the British zone in Austria during 1947–8.

Despite this top-drawer start in life he did not deviate from thoroughgoing democratic socialism. Aside from being a constant source of Fabian Society initiatives and management (being elected – for several years top of the poll – executive member, Treasurer, Chairman and Vice-President), strenuous efforts were made to get him into Parliament. Hugh Dalton, a post-war Chancellor of the Exchequer, wanted him to follow in his footsteps into a rock-solid Durham Labour constituency. He was judged by Dalton and Tony Crosland as well as Harold Wilson to be a likely Minister, even a Chancellor of the Exchequer, in a future Labour Government. Instead, Abel-Smith decided in the mid 1950s to remain in the political back room.

That room became a power house of directed energy. After Labour returned to power in 1964, Richard Crossman, Barbara Castle, David Ennals and Peter Shore tempted him in turn to be their top adviser. He worked with them (and part time at LSE) from 1968 to 1979. He wrote terse, immaculate briefs. Barbara Castle once said she had made the two best adviser appointments – Jack Straw for his low cunning and Brian Abel-Smith for his brains. Certainly as senior adviser Abel-Smith won unqualified, and uniquely rare, respect from senior civil servants.

[...]

Brian Abel-Smith deserves legendary status alongside Titmuss. He was the power behind the throne. He was at the time a more flexible exponent of new ideas in social policy and an ingenious economist. To the well-honed and memorable text of Titmuss he added political judgement and economic authority. After the death of Titmuss in 1973, he played a powerful role in developing international health services for 23 more years. This role came in part from his insights into the

law. He was co-author of two major books calling for a root-and-branch overhaul of the legal profession and organisation. More than anyone I remember he helped well-evidenced reason to prevail over the conventional wisdom.

World Poverty: New Policies to Defeat an Old Enemy, 2002

One virtue ascribed to many interpretations of social exclusion is that it signifies interest in process rather than state, and points to the need to scrutinise actions of governments. But if the problem of poverty is believed to be calling attention only to a negative state or condition, then the problem of the concept of social exclusion is to call attention only to a negative process. Both concepts direct attention to only parts of the population. As a direct consequence, scientific investigation becomes distorted and priorities for policy hard to establish. By contrast, the concepts of inequality and social polarisation, which correspond with the ideas of state and process, are all-embracing. These two concepts are necessary to the understanding of poverty and social exclusion, the other two concepts discussed so far. Social polarisation – the third concept in this chapter's title – is therefore the key ingredient. Early in this century it is the correct focus for scientific accounts of development. It is a structural process creating reverberations the length and breadth of global, national and local society. And while there are other concepts and themes that have to be employed to describe and analyse world social problems, social polarisation is indispensable. Poverty and social exclusion are inevitable by-products.

Building Decent Societies: Rethinking the Role of Social Security in Development, 2009

The strength of the universalistic, human rights, approach to social security is in turning to future advantage what, after extraordinary struggle in the past, proved to be highly successful. As we will find, working people responded to extreme individual need by combining in collective interest to contribute creatively to economic development and the alleviation of the poverty of others in their midst. Contributory social insurance and group benefit schemes turned out to be favoured instruments. Collective protest and action led to the social good – often by the extension of the ideas of representative democracy and citizen participation.

Human rights to social security and an adequate standard of living have today put these ideas on the

international stage. Properly applied, such universalistic measures can reduce poverty more emphatically and quickly than other – usually more costly and indirect – devices and at the same time improve social relationships. As illustrated by the range of research discussed in later pages, coalitions of interest between fractious ethnic and religious groups can be built up patiently on the basis of universalistic social security systems. Much the same is true of groups identified by generation, gender, age and disability. Self-interest and collective interest can be served simultaneously by such systems. Multiple forms of discrimination and social inequality can be moderated by applying international rights to social security and an adequate standard of living. Nationalism reinterpreted as universalism can also reinforce good multi-cultural and multi-generational values that promote stability.

[...]

Growing with equity is not possible without guaranteeing at least a minimum level of social security for the world's population. It is therefore imperative to promote a social security floor as a catalyst for the role of social security in development policies [...]

While the construction of such a basic social floor is the overriding priority for low- and middle-income countries, it is important not to end at this point, but to use this recommendation to establish a basic social floor as a solid grounding for more extensive social security systems in line with economic development and subsequently widening fiscal space. During the agonies of cross-national planning for recovery in the aftermath of the financial crash of 2008–9 there is more reason than ever to believe that the early introduction of social security as a means to build decent societies will become a widely accepted development policy paradigm.



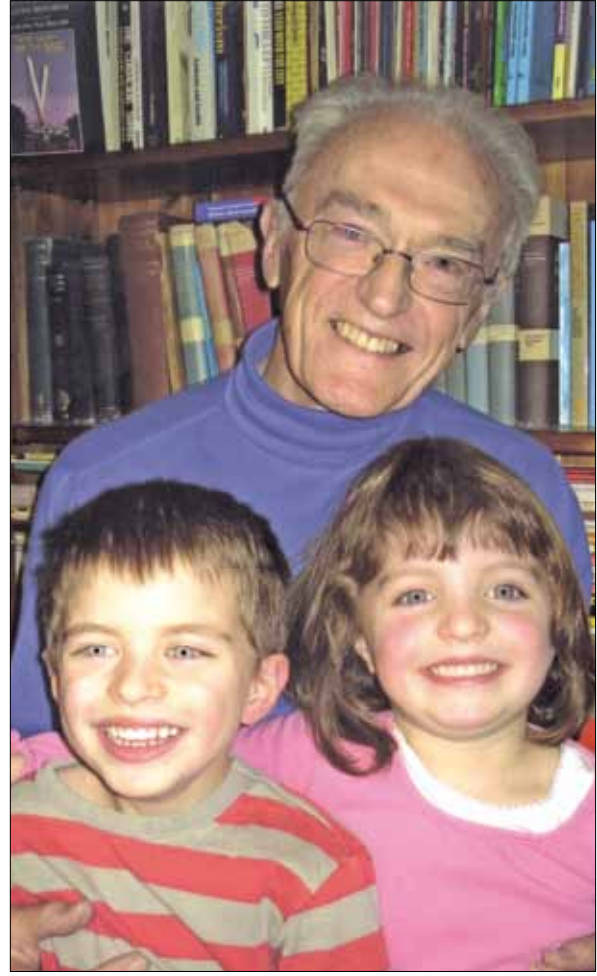
With Jean, 1988



With Jean, in Ireland, August, 2000



With grandsons Tom (left) and Luke (1988)



With grandchildren William and Ella (2009)

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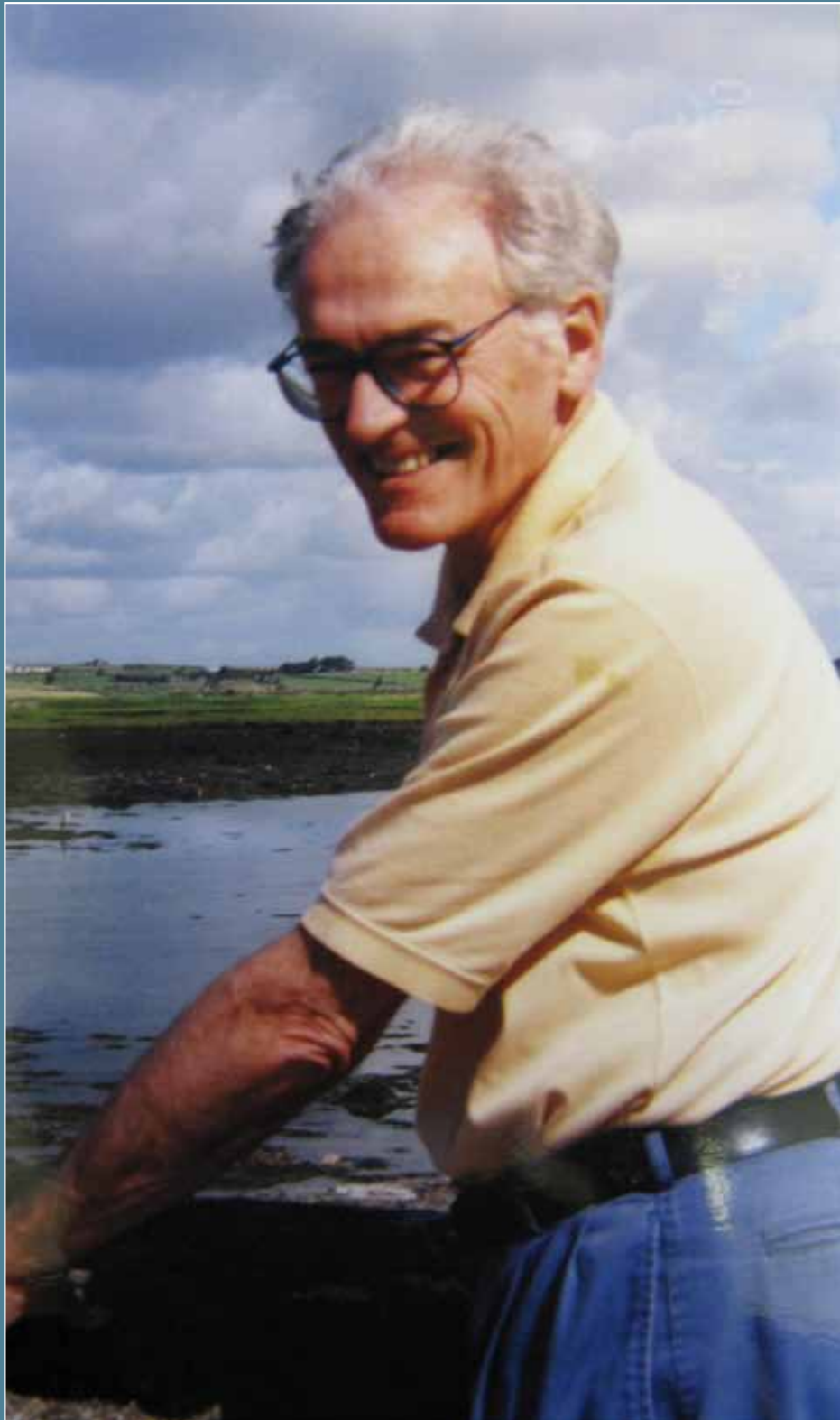
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“So much one man can do,
That does both act and know”
Marvell