



PETER TOWNSEND

# Peter Brereton Townsend

## 1928–2009

PETER TOWNSEND was a towering figure in the intellectual history of social policy in the twentieth century. He made his contribution both as a sociologist who changed the way poverty was thought about and as a passionate campaigner for poor and disabled people. He opened up more aspects of society to rigorous study than most scholars ever succeed in doing. He did so with a passion that did not always make him popular and certainly made him enemies. But his contributions will last and he inspired a generation of young scholars who are continuing his legacy. He died on 8 June 2009 aged 81. The British Academy, to which he was elected in 2004, is commemorating him with a named prize to encourage research and writing in the fields he made his own.

He challenged and then overturned what had become the accepted ways of conceptualising and measuring poverty—beginning with his seminal contributions in the early 1950s on which he continued to build throughout his career. He made the lives of elderly people, at home with their families, a legitimate topic for sociologists. He studied the life of old people in the vast old poor law institutions of the time and in scandalously run private ‘homes’. He made the financial circumstances of old people and of poor families a national issue at a time when the public had been lulled into thinking these problems had been solved. Then, in the 1960s, he opened up to public scrutiny the lives and financial circumstances of people with disabilities. He helped to open up the debate on health inequality as a key member of the Black Review in the late 1970s and publicised its findings. He moved on to study the role of international organisations like the World Bank, arguing they were often the cause of poverty not the

solution. Social policy had to be international in its reach. Finally, he turned, in his seventies, to making human rights his new intellectual lever for change. In every case these topics were not just studied. His academic work became the starting point for practical and political action. As a result of his inspiration and involvement, each strand of inquiry left institutional legacies that would continue to maintain the political pressure to act.

## Beginnings

Just over a year before he died Townsend began an unfinished autobiography. He had ten years earlier given a series of taped interviews about his early life that is lodged at the University of Essex and the British Library Sound Archive, on which I have drawn. The following extract from his draft autobiography shows how he viewed his own origins (he was born on 6 April 1928).

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. My mother's father Thomas was, like his father Charlie, listed on his marriage certificate as a bookie's 'agent', but in the 1901 Census he was 28—a shipyard labourer. My father's father was a judge of rabbits, and more prosaically was listed as a master printer.

His great-great-grandfather had been a musician and dramatist, a friend of Charles Dickens. He married Sarah Brereton—her surname being Townsend's second forename. His father had been proud of that lineage evidently. It could be traced back to one who came with William the Conqueror and whose descendants gained a knighthood and became Sherriff of Staffordshire—or so his father told him.

Despite that Peter's early life was tough. His mother was a singer in local opera and operetta. After his father left she moved in with her mother and all eventually moved to London where she earned her living singing in local clubs and then in musicals where she became modestly well known and toured entertaining the troops. That ended with the war and she took a series of jobs, suffering from depression for a period. Townsend saw his father occasionally—a commercial traveller by this time. His grandmother, who effectively brought him up, was the rock in his early life and source of his moral compass.

He attended local elementary schools but his long hours of reading alone helped him gain a scholarship to University College School. He did well there. The Head Teacher C. S. Walton was a particular inspiration—

open minded and liberal. Peter was Captain of the School for two years. He was influential in abolishing the Cadet Corps and setting up charitable activities to replace it. He spanned the arts–science divide, being good at maths, art and literature as well as geography. It was for that subject that he was offered a scholarship to Cambridge. Before going up he did his National Service without any enthusiasm. At Cambridge he switched to Moral Sciences. He took his degree in two years as was allowed under the post-war regulations. He was not greatly impressed with that part of his teaching and thought of his future lying in journalism and began writing for student magazines. But then he discovered anthropology and took a further postgraduate year in that subject specialising in the anthropology of what were then the ‘West Indies’. It was not the anthropology of far away people that attracted him, however, but close observation of the lives around him. He began writing about the slum area in which he was living with Ruth, who became his first wife. They had met in Hampstead, he from the bottom of the hill, she from the top, the daughter of a leading dentist.

After graduating he gained a scholarship to the Free University in West Berlin where they both lived, returning for Ruth to have their first child in 1952. He took a job as a research assistant in what we would today call a think tank, Political and Economic Planning (PEP), from 1952 to 1954. It once had a major influence in the 1930s, but by the 1950s it had become a rather unimaginative and conventional organisation—so Townsend would conclude. It did give him the opportunity to produce his first influential publication on poverty.<sup>1</sup> In it he fundamentally rejected the findings of the third survey of poverty in York which Rowntree had just published with Lavers, suggesting that the welfare state had largely eliminated poverty.<sup>2</sup> A debate was organised between the authors of these two conflicting accounts. The young research assistant was generally deemed to have won the argument. A special meeting of the British Sociological Association followed at which Townsend met Brian Abel-Smith, then working at the National Institute for Economic and Social Research. They had both been at Cambridge at the same time but had met little. Now there began a lifetime of collaboration.

Townsend left PEP to work as part of Michael Young’s Institute of Community Studies from 1954 to 1957 doing the kind of ‘anthropological’ work he had discovered at Cambridge. He studied the lives of the

<sup>1</sup> P. Townsend, ‘Poverty ten years after Beveridge’, *Planning*, 344 (1952), 21–40.

<sup>2</sup> B. S. Rowntree and R. G. Lavers, *Poverty and the Welfare State* (London, 1951).

unemployed in one community in the North of England,<sup>3</sup> but it was his study of the *Family Life of Old People* in the East End of London that became a classic.<sup>4</sup> He put these individuals' lives into their social context and let them speak. This art of listening to his subjects, telling their story and putting it into a wider sociological frame, was to inspire a generation of young followers. Townsend said he owed a lot to Peter Willmott for his apprenticeship in this kind of study.

Townsend became dissatisfied with Young's restless shifts from one topic to another and agreed to join Abel-Smith in Richard Titmuss's Social Administration Department at the London School of Economics (LSE). His appointment was as a Research Fellow, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, to study life in old people's homes. He was later appointed as lecturer. He was to stay until 1963 when he became Professor of Sociology at Essex. In his diary for 1 August 1956 he noted, after spending an evening with Titmuss and his wife Kay:

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 practice.

This says as much about Townsend as it does about Titmuss.

### Challenging poverty orthodoxy

It is difficult at this distance to grasp the intellectual courage it must have taken for a young man, recently down from Cambridge with no publication record, to challenge nearly a half century of work on the measurement of poverty by one of the pioneers of such research—Seebohm Rowntree. But that is what he did in a series of papers<sup>5</sup> that culminated in his *magnum opus*, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*.<sup>6</sup> Rowntree had been aware of the social determinants of the spending patterns of the poor, hence his notions of 'squalid living' and 'secondary poverty'.<sup>7</sup> But in seeking to convince a wider public that there were significant numbers of people liv-

<sup>3</sup> P. Townsend, 'Social security and unemployment in Lancashire', *Planning*, 349 (1952), 113–36.

<sup>4</sup> P. Townsend, *The Family Life of Old People* (London, Penguin edn., with a 'Postscript', 1963).

<sup>5</sup> P. Townsend, 'Measuring poverty', *British Journal of Sociology*, 5 (1954), 130–7; P. Townsend, 'The meaning of poverty', *British Journal of Sociology*, 13 (1962), 210–27.

<sup>6</sup> P. Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom: a Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living* (Harmondsworth, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> B. S. Rowntree, *Poverty: a Study of Town Life* (London, 1901).

ing below a minimally 'efficient' or socially acceptable level of income he took as his central measuring rod the cost to a family of feeding itself to a 'scientifically' determined minimum dietary standard. To this were added other judgements about minimal spending needs. It was this supposedly 'hard' core approach to measuring poverty that appealed to a succession of later investigators in the 1920s and 1930s, including leading social statisticians like Bowley and Llewellyn Smith. Rowntree had published a second survey of York using a wider range of more generous poverty lines.<sup>8</sup> But in the third, less thorough, study of poverty in post-war York, Rowntree and Lavers had kept to the idea of primary poverty to give them a measure that they believed could be compared over time.<sup>9</sup> Their conclusion that, viewed in this way, poverty had all but disappeared, outraged Townsend. It did not square with his observations of the poor. He began to put together a sociological refutation. Families' spending patterns and notions of 'necessity' are not grounded in dietary expert lists but in individuals' everyday experience of the social norms of behaviour—what your child is 'expected' to be able to do, eat and wear, for example, or the need to engage in social contacts. Occupations have different expectations of clothing, travel, and socialising. They may well have first call on family budgets despite the priorities set by dietary experts. As these social norms changed so should society's notion of a minimum acceptable life style and the cost of sustaining it.

His was the first challenge to the widely accepted view that the post-war reforms to the welfare state amounted to 'a job done'—a view I found remarkably widely accepted even on the left after 1951 in the archive work I have been doing recently. His central achievement was to define poverty in a way that has become an international point of reference.

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 at least widely approved, in the society 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.<sup>10</sup>

What should be put in the place of an absolutist dietary logic for poverty measurement? Here disagreements were to break out between colleagues who accepted Townsend's basic premise and Townsend himself. He explored

<sup>8</sup> B. S. Rowntree, *Poverty and Progress: a Second Social Survey* (London, 1941).

<sup>9</sup> Rowntree and Lavers, *Poverty and the Welfare State*.

<sup>10</sup> *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, p. 31.

varied ways to interpret and give statistical meaning to the concept. How did people from different social backgrounds actually perceive poverty? How had the state, in its various forms, interpreted 'a minimum acceptable standard of living' and how had that varied over time? Was it possible to discern an income standard, relative to other incomes, at which families were disproportionately denied access to commonly accepted social norms of living? This last was clearly Townsend's preferred idea and he worked hard to produce evidence of such a turning point.<sup>11</sup> He concluded that there was a significant increase in deprivation, key social activities not engaged in, once income had fallen to a level of 60–70 per cent of the mean income.

It was a highly controversial conclusion. His own figures and discussion showed how difficult it was to establish such a turning point. Later analysis by econometricians produced more sophisticated means of doing so but never fully convinced. What were commonly accepted norms? Which norms? How common? Which groups in society share them? What happens if they do not? What happens as they change?

This was, some concluded, just an attempt to dress up the goal of equality in the morally loaded term 'poverty'. The term 'poverty' carried with it an implication and a moral imperative that something should be done about it. That was a value judgement. Social scientists had no business trying to pre-empt such judgements with 'scientific' prescriptions.

Others wanted to stick closer to Rowntree's original strategy, working out explicit budget standard minima that could be openly debated and would change with costs and expenditure patterns. Socially 'necessary' items could be deduced by asking samples of the population to assess their centrality and changes over time. Yet others argued that Rowntree had not been as blind to the essentially relative meaning of poverty as Townsend implied.

Despite these differences, however, there was widespread acceptance that poverty was a relative concept and that some basis for adopting an acceptable measure of relativity had to be devised. Much poverty analysis has addressed that issue and refined Townsend's insight over the past fifty years.

Townsend went on working with colleagues at Bristol, where he took up a chair in 1981 and became Director of the School of Applied Social Studies. Here he developed with colleagues like David Gordon more sophisticated measures of deprivation and social exclusion and extended

<sup>11</sup> Chapter Six of *Poverty in the United Kingdom*.

their use internationally. They helped produce a statement by seventy leading social scientists calling for more agreed common measures of poverty. He worked with others at the Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research at Bristol on a series of seminars with international experts and published the results in 2000.

Even in the United States, which continued to employ a historically based absolute measure as its official poverty line, Townsend's arguments were seriously considered in a major report by the National Research Council in 1995 and some adjustments to the official methodology recommended.<sup>12</sup>

Many who accepted that a relative view of poverty was a legitimate one also argued that to include other perspectives gave a more rounded view. It was important to know how far absolute measures of living standards had changed, especially for the poor in times of rapid economic change. In poorer societies there was something morally different about absolute minima below which lay death or starvation as distinct from other less central aspects of social life. These kinds of consideration led to an interchange between Amartya Sen and Townsend in *Oxford Economic Papers* during the 1980s. It is one of the very few detailed debates between those adopting economic and sociologically driven interpretations of the same phenomenon. It was characteristic of Townsend that he felt both equipped, and morally required, to conduct a long debate with one of the leading economists in the world in a major economics journal.

### Creating a new way to measure income distribution

Changing the balance of theoretical debate about poverty was, thus, Townsend's first major contribution to sociology. In the course of this process he made a related but distinct contribution to the way we measure income distribution that holds to this day. He did so in collaboration with his LSE colleague Brian Abel-Smith.

If Townsend could be a stickler for good sociological grounding for his arguments he could also be a political pragmatist, spurred on, no doubt, by his intensely pragmatic colleague. Let us not worry about the theory, or at the very least confine it to chapter one. Let us get on to derive a number that will be difficult to argue with politically—one can almost

<sup>12</sup>C. F. Citro and R. T. Michael (eds.), *Measuring Poverty: a New Approach* (Washington, DC, 1995).



hear Abel-Smith arguing. That was precisely the strategy they jointly employed in the most famous Occasional Paper in Social Administration of all time, *The Poor and the Poorest*.<sup>13</sup>

The state, the argument ran, sets its own implicit poverty line by agreeing that those below a certain income will be given support if they are sick or unemployed, retired, or unable to work. This was undertaken by the National Assistance Board. From time to time Parliament approved a new 'basic scale rate' and various extras were added at the discretion of local officers for defined special circumstances. The result was, therefore, a politically determined level on which such people were expected to live. It was a kind of implicit poverty line. How many families who were in work were living below that level? How many were living below that income and not drawing benefit if they were not in work? How many children were in families affected? How many were poor on that definition?

The answers were that no one knew. There were no comprehensive national surveys of the distribution of income that included non-tax-payers. Well, there was, but no one was using it for that purpose. Every year the Ministry of Labour undertook a Survey of Family Expenditure to set the weights for the basket of goods that were to be used in calculating the retail price index. To check its respondents' accuracy they were asked questions about their income. The results were used for verification purposes but never analysed and published in full. The pair persuaded the Ministry to enable them to use the income returns to measure the number of households whose income fell below the National Assistance Board benefit levels. They were not permitted to simply undertake another run of the punched cards but had to go to the original paper returns and transcribe them. Their research assistant, Caroline Woodroffe, recalls several weeks of work in a gloomy old workhouse in Watford where the original questionnaires were stored. However, in the end, this process produced the first estimates of the poverty of the working poor since Rowntree's contested ones.

Their publication, deliberately timed to come out just before Christmas 1965, created a political storm and effectively launched the Child Poverty Action Group. Townsend went on to chair that organisation for twenty years until he became President in 1989. But the approach used in that study became established as the UK's official means of tracking income distribution among lower income households. The use of the National

<sup>13</sup>B. Abel-Smith and P. Townsend, *The Poor and the Poorest*, Occasional Papers in Social Administration No. 17 (London, 1965).

Assistance rate as a poverty line had its deficiencies but that was replaced. Later official surveys became more detailed, the sample extended and the precise measure of the poverty line changed but the essential approach remained. More, it set a tradition of using official large-scale surveys for secondary analysis, a very important development in its own right.

### Studying the lives of older people

The second important focus of study that lasted a lifetime was Townsend's work on older people—'the elderly' as he called them, in common with most other authors at the time. There had been work on the demography of ageing, and some on the financial, health and social circumstances of old age but nothing that rigorously examined older people's social lives, took their accounts as legitimate evidence and combined them with other sources to produce policy relevant conclusions. I think it is fair to see him as the founder of our modern sociology of old age.

It all began with a project to interview just over two hundred elderly people in Bethnal Green as part of research undertaken at the Institute for Community Studies. His rapport with those he interviewed and his capacity to let them tell their story shines out from the book and is a model for those entering the field today.<sup>14</sup> The strong connections individuals had across the generations in that community, the importance of grand-parenting and the tensions of retirement are sensitively portrayed. They are as relevant today. But so, too, were older people's relationship with the state, then the National Assistance Board, and their reluctance to apply for financial help. Out of these whole life studies began to emerge national policy questions not just about pension levels but also how public institutions interacted with vulnerable individuals, about housing allocation, redevelopment policy and much else.

This work led on to a complementary one studying those living in institutions. It was Townsend's idea, not supported by Michael Young, probably because it was not seen as a 'community' study and so it was undertaken on his move to the LSE. It led to probably his finest work, *The Last Refuge*.<sup>15</sup> It was based on a national sample of homes—the large old poor law institutions housing over a thousand people in many cases,

<sup>14</sup> *The Family Life of Old People*.

<sup>15</sup> P. Townsend, *The Last Refuge: a Survey of Residential Homes for the Aged in England and Wales* (London, 1962).

smaller local authority homes, voluntary, often religious foundations, and varied privately run homes. No such comprehensive study of this sector had ever been undertaken. It involved not just visits and interviews with staff and 'residents' but observation, discussion with local authority and care staff, analysing records, by hand, some gained with considerable effort and negotiation.

The interviewing was done mostly by two people supplemented by three others, including Townsend's wife. He took two temporary jobs as a bathing attendant, bathing elderly men, to get some feel of life on the inside. The result was a book that must rank as the near-perfect example of the social administration tradition. It began with a history of the state's involvement in the care of elderly people and the varied range of public, private and family care that existed in the late 1950s. This was then followed by a series of brilliant, closely observed sociologies of institutional life within the old workhouses, the newer local authority homes, the varied voluntary homes, and a range of private homes. A long chapter was devoted to each. In them he described and discussed the interacting effects of buildings, administrative and professional rules, methods of control, the nature of daily living and the lack of outside contacts, staffing ratios and the assessments of 'residents'. Such structural factors and their impact on residents' daily lives were illustrated with their own moving accounts. The regimes in each sector were contrasted, drawing on the then new literature of institutionalisation to which this was a major contribution. Past work had been primarily devoted to psychiatric institutions. This study was one of the first to observe and discuss institutional neurosis and the rules and practices that gave rise to it, leading him to draw the crucial distinction between isolation and loneliness.

Townsend did not leave it there. He contrasted institutional life with the home and family lives he had already studied. He went on to discuss practical policy alternatives. How many of these 'inmates' could be looked after at home with proper community services? What would that cost to achieve over a reasonable period? Should the state permit unregulated provision of very vulnerable people for profit with no regulation of standards? In a subsequent pamphlet he spelt out how the sector could be regulated. Here we have the classic Townsend—breaking new sociological ground but using it to inform detailed practical policy suggestions. That was then followed up with the regular harassment and embarrassment of politicians until they took notice.

A year before *The Last Refuge* he had published the results of a national sample survey of private nursing homes undertaken with Caroline

Woodroffe.<sup>16</sup> Why did people find their way there? What external oversight was there of the highly varied and often dreadful conditions? The report ended, as always, with recommendations, this time for inspection and regulation. Both these studies put the spotlight on some of the darkest corners of British society and demanded action. He had also embarked upon, partly written-up and then abandoned, a parallel study of geriatric wards in hospitals. This abandoned study was something he was regretful of later in life, not least because of the damage it had done to the researcher involved—Sheila Benson. She felt let down with little of her own work published: ‘I sometimes took on too much’, he admitted.

Action followed this stream of work, if less fully and more slowly than he would have wished, but come it did. In 1963 central government required local councils in England and Wales to produce ten-year plans to expand community care services, to build smaller old people’s homes and close the old workhouses. Regulation of old people’s residential homes and nursing homes, private and public, followed later. But here was major policy change that can be clearly traced back to Townsend’s research. Academically the idea that these institutions were somehow beyond the legitimate scope of study and public scrutiny was destroyed by Townsend’s accounts.

He went on to participate in a study of *Old People in Three Industrial Societies*.<sup>17</sup> It began a new tradition of comparative work in this field and, even if not widely noticed at the time, set a marker for the future.

His concern with older people’s circumstances did not end there. Simultaneously he was working with Titmuss and Abel-Smith charting their financial circumstances. He was a member of a Labour Party sub-committee that set out a detailed blueprint for a completely new graduated pension scheme—National Superannuation. It rejected the old Beveridge flat rate model and was based, instead, on a combination of the Swedish, German and US Federal social security pension schemes.<sup>18</sup> The plan was to take nearly another two decades to be implemented in a watered down version as the State Earnings Related Pension Scheme. That was subsequently undermined by later legislation in Mrs Thatcher’s time. But the principle that state action is necessary to ensure all individuals,

<sup>16</sup>C. Woodroffe and P. Townsend, *Nursing Homes in England and Wales: a Study of Public Responsibility* (London, 1961).

<sup>17</sup>E. Shanass, P. Townsend, D. Wedderburn, H. Friis, P. Milhoj and J. Stehouwer, *Old People in Three Industrial Societies* (London and New York, 1968).

<sup>18</sup>Labour Party *National Superannuation: Labour’s Policy for Security in Old Age* (London, 1957).

and not just the poor, make adequate provision for their old age has been underpinned by modern behavioural economics. It is reflected in the policies and analysis advanced by the Turner Commission.<sup>19</sup>

Townsend had, over his lifetime, contributed to changing the lives of older people in major ways—their financial circumstances, their chances of being cared for at home or in a civilised way in institutions. That would surely have been enough for most people in any one career. But no, he next turned his attention to people with disabilities.

### Understanding and improving the lives of those with disabilities

When Townsend began his career there was nothing that could be called the ‘sociology of disability’. By the time of his death it was a flourishing field internationally. This was largely the result of his pioneering work, the inspiration and support he gave to young colleagues, and to his political drive. His approach was inclusive. It embraced those with mental as well as physical disabilities. It showed that the attitudinal and structural exclusions they suffered had common origins as well as differences which only a sensitive understanding of their lives could reveal to a wider public.

His initial work on disability had grown out of the *Last Refuge* study of older people in residential homes. How far were residents incapable of looking after themselves and for what reasons?

It is one of the fundamental questions we have to answer if we are to rationalise our rather muddy definitions of ‘disability’ and ‘incapacity’, decide what role institutional care should play in modern society, and devise fair methods of compensating individuals for injury or disability. (p. 257)

This led Townsend to devise a survey instrument that would measure residents’ ‘incapacity for self care’. It graded individuals’ capacity for mobility and self care, getting in and out of bed, washing, dressing and so forth, and their capacity to communicate, together with activities necessary to overcome special handicaps. This survey instrument was built up from his team’s observations of daily living and from studies undertaken by others in various specialist settings and some instruments used by staff in some hospitals. All this is set out in an appendix to *The Last Refuge*. This survey approach is now such a standard element in studies of people’s need for

<sup>19</sup>Turner Commission, *A New Pension Settlement for the Twenty-First Century* (London, 2005).

care that it comes as a shock to see his team inventing such an instrument almost from scratch. Throughout, Townsend emphasised the need to define and measure disability in terms of people's capacities or incapacities not their specific labelled condition.

Clearly, if the scale of the problem was to be assessed, similar measures were needed and applied to those living in the community and their circumstances understood. The next stage in this strand of work was a survey carried out at the University of Essex shortly after he moved there in 1963. It involved disabled people living in Essex, Middlesex and in parts of London. Sally Sainsbury was his research officer and went on to make disability her life's study. In an account of this work in a lecture to the Royal College of Surgeons Townsend outlined what was to become a classic definition of disability that included, but cut across, the normal highly specific medical conditions.

Irrespective of a disabled individual's *specific* behaviour or condition he attracts certain kinds of attention from the rest of the population by virtue of the 'position' that the disabled, when recognised as such, occupy in that particular society.<sup>20</sup>

From then on, Townsend writes over several decades about the lives of those suffering from a range of disabling conditions, the service inadequacies they encounter and the uncertain, messy and inadequate financial support they and their carers received. There were also the barriers to employment. Disabled children, those with learning handicaps, those in long-stay hospitals for the 'mentally handicapped', the frail elderly, the long term sick—all came under the spotlight.

He was not content, as always, to draw attention to failings in government policy and to point a finger at those in the professions and in politics whom he saw standing in the way of reform. In 1965 he helped found and sustain a movement to change things; the Disablement Income Group (DIG) campaigned for a common, as of right, income for those unable to work because of disability.

In the early 1970s he began working towards a much wider organisation bringing together a wide range of groups who supported those with particular disabilities. With Alan Walker and others he eventually founded the Disability Alliance in 1973. He was to chair that organisation for many years, as he had the Child Poverty Action Group. It was remarkably successful especially in its early years. With Alan Walker he devised and was

<sup>20</sup>The Policy Press (eds.), *The Peter Townsend Reader* (Bristol, 2010), p. 479.

the co-author of the *Disability Rights Handbook* and a survey of the lives of disabled people.<sup>21</sup>

The organisation campaigned not just for those suffering from disability but also for those who were the main carers, and he threw himself into the campaign to get government to provide payment for those who made financial sacrifices to care for kin—the Attendance Allowance.

These new benefits established in the 1970s at a time of economic crisis were sustained through Mrs Thatcher's era and survived subsequent attacks on their universal nature as 'welfare extravagance'. It is a tribute to the careful practical and moral case Townsend and colleagues mounted that they have been sustained.

### Inequalities in health

While his colleagues Abel-Smith and Titmuss had concentrated much of their work on the finance of and open access to health *services* throughout the world Townsend had always focused on the impact structural inequalities in society had on individuals' healthy *life chances*. The coming of the National Health Service may have removed many financial barriers to health care but he questioned whether it had made any impact on the underlying causes of unequal health.

It was a point Townsend had made in his appreciation of Titmuss's life in an essay written for the *Lancet* in 1974.<sup>22</sup> In 1977 just before the thirtieth birthday of the NHS, David Ennals, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Security, set up a small committee to consider what had happened to differences in health status between the social classes. Prompted by his advisor Abel-Smith, Ennals appointed as members not only Townsend but also Titmuss's co-author from the 1930s, and friend, Professor Jerry Morris—an epidemiologist. The other members were the Secretary of the then Social Science Research Council and Sir Douglas Black, a Chief Scientist at the DHSS and President of the Royal College of Physicians. He was to chair the committee but it was Townsend and Morris who drove the committee's work and Townsend who emerged as its champion.

The review was completed in 1980 just after a new Conservative Government had come to power—the result was the Black Report, as it came to be known.<sup>23</sup> In an attempt to hide its controversial findings it was

<sup>21</sup> A. Walker and P. Townsend (eds.), *Disability in Britain: a Manifesto of Rights* (Oxford, 1981).

<sup>22</sup> P. Townsend, 'Inequality in the Health Service', *The Lancet*, 15 June 1974, 1179–90.

<sup>23</sup> Black Report, *Inequalities in Health: Report of a Research Working Group* (London, 1980).

released in very small numbers (250), in cyclostyled format only and on the Friday before an August Bank Holiday! There was a dismissive introduction by the Secretary of State.

The government had not reckoned with Townsend, who publicised it, talked to journalists, wrote widely about it and in the end got it published by Penguin Books with a foreword to which he contributed.<sup>24</sup> It became a best-seller and is still cited world wide to an astonishing degree. There have been successor reviews that have elaborated but not contradicted its main conclusions.

This is not to say that there have not been disputes about the Black Report's conclusions. For instance, was social class applied to males the most helpful way to consider trends in differential health status, given the changes in social class structure over time? But Black's primary finding, and it was Townsend's major contribution, was to locate differences in health status and life expectancy in the structural constraints and inequalities within which individuals live. It may be true that poor people smoke more and have less healthy diets, but why is that? They may take less exercise but how far is this a reflection of the physical limitations of the areas in which they live and the strains and expectations with which they live? These were much more subtle explanations than any simple relationship between 'inequalities' in income and health outcomes. They emphasised the contexts within which people spent their lives at work, at home, in poor neighbourhoods and over the life course. These insights have been confirmed and extended in later work

Hence Black's recommendations went far beyond giving advice on smoking or diet. They recommended improvements to social services and benefits. This, of course, upset the government machine. What were these medics and sociologists doing poking their noses into other ministries' affairs and suggesting big public spending beyond their remit? Their set of recommendations fell upon deaf government ears, as have more recent reports, but the report changed the nature of public debate, gained widespread academic notice internationally and began gradually to affect policy.

Townsend was in demand to undertake surveys of local health inequalities and to advise the newly devolved Welsh Assembly on tackling health inequalities. He led an inquiry which, perhaps predictably, came to different conclusions to those of the committee advising the English Secretary of State. Instead of measuring differences in the demands that people from different demographic groups made on health services, information

<sup>24</sup>P. Townsend, M. Whitehead and N. Davidson, *Inequalities in Health: the Black Report and the Health Divide* (Harmondsworth, 1992).



should begin with individuals' own perceptions of their poor health, he argued and suggested how this could be done.

### International dimensions to poverty and human rights

All the way through his career Townsend made use of international literature and examples of policy practice. He moved to the University of Bristol as Professor of Social Policy and Director of the School of Applied Social Studies in 1983. There his research emphasis became more international in focus, both European but global too. It was, however, being appointed to the Michael Harrington Chair at the City University in New York in 1992 that led to his book analysing the international aspects of poverty.<sup>25</sup> He retired, formally, in 1993 taking up a Centennial Professorship in International Social Policy at the LSE in the same year.

He became increasingly critical of the way international agencies were, in his view, exacerbating world poverty not alleviating it. This was occurring as a result of insensitive and unrealistic structural adjustment policies imposed on developing countries by 'Washington' institutions—the IMF and the World Bank. In this he was reflecting other writers' diagnoses but he was able to link the frame of thought that drove many of these policies to similar, as he saw it, mistaken directions in domestic policy, notably by the US and UK governments.

What we needed, he argued, was a set of institutional reforms to those agencies that would set us in the direction of an international welfare state with poverty relief at its heart. This was a utopian goal but, as ever, he spelled out the first steps on the way. Mobilise and gain collaboration between existing national organisations. Develop a critique of existing policy trends. Develop common policy principles and common measuring tools for poverty and social exclusion. Develop strategies for international agreements on international taxation, company law to control global corporations. Get agreement on improvements to social security world wide. Develop strategies for social policy in the developing nations and make poverty central to aid policy. Reform the international agencies that were doing so much damage.

He moved, for one last time, into a new framework of analysis. The human rights literature seemed to offer a new way into conceptualising and campaigning for some old goals. He discovered that under the United

<sup>25</sup>P. Townsend, *The International Analysis of Poverty* (Hemel Hempstead, 1992).

Nations' International Covenant on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights there was a right to Social Security. This informed much of his human rights work. He and colleagues had a powerful influence on UNICEF and their revised definition and survey of child poverty in the developing world.<sup>26</sup>

Not long after returning to the LSE he was approached by those in the Law Department who wanted to start a new Masters programme on human rights. Would he perhaps teach a paper on children's rights? He seized the chance and threw himself into the design of the degree, helping to get it through the politics of the LSE system and then teaching with all the old fire. The degree became one of the School's most popular new offerings and the law students loved it.

### A remarkable life

Looking back over these more than fifty years of hyperactive academic and political life it is difficult not to ask how did he do it? There were, of course, costs and life changes to contend with too.

He was a Founding Professor at the University of Essex, helping to set up the new university and the study of sociology and social policy there. The early years, especially during and after 1968, were not easy. He became a Pro-Vice-Chancellor between 1975 and 1978 with all the administrative worry that entailed. He would work at Essex in the week having only the weekend with his family in London, often interrupted with speaking engagements. Looking back, as he did in his interviews, he regretted this. His passionately held views also led him to fall out with some old friends and colleagues he had once admired and worked with closely. On his own admission he sometimes took on too much which had its impact on colleagues.

There were life changes too. He had met his first wife, Ruth, when he was fifteen, and they both grew and grew apart in mid-life. The break caused pain but they remained good friends to the end. There was a second marriage, to Joy Skegg, a health economist interested in social inequalities, and then, in the last decades of his life, he met someone with whom he fell, and remained, deeply in love. Jean Corston was Labour Party Regional Organiser for the South West whom he met at a Labour Party Conference

<sup>26</sup>D. Gordon, C. Pantazis and P. Townsend, *Child Rights and Child Poverty in Developing Countries: First Report to UNICEF* (Bristol, 2002).

in 1980. They married in 1985. She later became MP for the Bristol East constituency (1992–2005), Chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party and then entered the House of Lords.

Freed from the demands of running a department and other organisations, returning to teach as much as he wanted, driven by the sheer joy of teaching, Peter relaxed. Some old wounds were healed. With his wife in Parliament he spent much of the week in London and returned to the LSE. He was generous with his time, amazing students with whom he would go to have tea or lunch after a lecture and seemed to have endless time for them. Here was this international figure willing to spend time in the refectory until all the queries had been properly answered.

He was not an outstanding public speaker but he wrote brilliantly and never clouded his work with academic jargon. He was not an abstract theoretician or a statistician. He took the constraints imposed by social structures as his starting point. He did not believe they were immutable. Indeed, he spent most of his life trying to change them. But he saw how they could constrain and shape people's lives in demeaning ways.

In 1958 he published an essay in a collection edited by Norman McKenzie called *Conviction*.<sup>27</sup> It was an attempt by a younger generation to rethink what socialism meant. Entitled 'A society for people', his essay contains the essence of Townsend's creed. It set out at the age of thirty what his life's work was to be and what motivated it.

I work as a sociologist. I should like this to mean that I explore, and write about, present-day society so that others may understand it better. I should like it to mean that I spend a good deal of time observing and interviewing small cross-sections of the population before writing detailed reports which aim to keep human beings at the forefront. Above all, I should like it to mean studying very carefully the life of the poorest and most handicapped members of society. (p. 103)

I read that in my second year as an undergraduate at Oxford and decided, like others I suspect, that yes, that was what I wanted to do, too.

He might have called himself a socialist but he was a relentless critic of Labour Governments which in his view failed to rise sufficiently effectively or vigorously to the task of confronting poverty. He jointly edited two Fabian critiques of Labour's two periods in office in the 1960s and the 1970s.<sup>28</sup> He was critical of the Blair Labour Government, too, but he never gave up on or left the Labour Party.

<sup>27</sup>N. Mackenzie, *Conviction* (London, 1958).

<sup>28</sup>P. Townsend and N. Bosanquet (eds.), *Labour and Inequality* (London, 1972); *Labour and Equality* (London, 1980).

‘Knowledge for its own sake’ was not a notion Townsend could embrace. Knowledge was pursued relentlessly for what it could achieve in illuminating practical action to help the disadvantaged. It began with understanding ordinary people’s lives. Once understood it had to be communicated. Top journals and RAE assessments were diversions. If a top journal was the best way to convince and communicate so be it. If a Fabian pamphlet, a book or a *Guardian* article would do it better, that is where he must write. But for all the political campaigning his contribution to the sociology of poverty, of old age and to understanding health inequalities will remain monuments to an outstanding academician. I share with John Hills the view that the last sentence of *The Last Refuge* sums up Townsend:

It may be worth reflecting, if indeed a little sadly, that 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. (p. 438)

HOWARD GLENNERSTER

*Fellow of the Academy*

*Note.* In writing this I have drawn on Townsend’s own life story given as a series of interviews with Paul Thompson 1997–9 and lodged both on the University of Essex website and in the British Library Sound Archive. I have also talked with friends and ex-colleagues. I have been generously given material and reflections by them.

An invaluable source of his writings for those without easy access to a university library is the edited volume produced shortly after his death and edited by Alan Walker and other colleagues: *The Peter Townsend Reader* (Bristol, 2010). A full list of his life’s publications is available from the University of Bristol website at <[http://www.bristol.ac.uk/poverty/Background\\_files/townsend%20publications%2048-08.pdf](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/poverty/Background_files/townsend%20publications%2048-08.pdf)>.