
Interview with Frank Field, MP

Part 1: on his role at CPAG

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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