



## Remembering Peter Townsend

Peter Townsend was one of CPAG's founders and our president. Despite his diverse interests and the many demands on his time, he still made the occasional visit to our offices, joining in with the policy debates and urging us to think more radically and be more visionary. Both courteous and challenging, I often felt that Peter thought we were just not quite bold enough.

Perhaps he was right. The calls in CPAG's recent manifesto to reduce reliance on means-tested benefits, increase universal child benefit and provide more help for the unemployed, disabled and lone parents repeat many of the arguments that appeared in the CPAG manifesto of 1969. No wonder Peter was impatient for us to go faster and work harder to avoid another generation of children experience the damage of poverty.

A conversation with Peter was always a pleasure. His interests were wide-ranging and, while this meant discussions sometimes veered off course, they always provided new and more imaginative perspectives on familiar problems. He had a special place in the hearts and minds of both staff and members of CPAG, and he will be sorely missed. But we will do everything we can to ensure that his legacy lives on, and his hopes and dreams for a society free of relative poverty is fulfilled. ■

**Kate Green**, Chief Executive Child Poverty Action Group

In the ten years between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s Peter Townsend published three of the most outstanding social policy studies ever produced in this country.

In 1953, when Peter was 25, he produced the work that began to transform how we thought about poverty in a seminal article in the *British Journal of Sociology* on the meaning of poverty. He followed this up with another *British Journal of Sociology* article on measuring poverty in 1962 and, in 1965 (with Brian Abel-Smith) he published the *Poor and Poorest*. In 1957 he published his superb interview and observational study of the *Family Life of Old People*, and in 1962 he published *The Last Refuge* – a survey of residential institutions for

the aged. Even today, we are transfixed by the combination of empirical quantitative research, passionate, beautiful writing and outrage at the conditions of old people in poor law institutions. His studies of old people were followed by his mammoth *The Aged in the Welfare State* (with Wedderburn in 1965).

But Peter's great work, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, was not published until 1979 – 1,216 pages and ten years after the survey on which it is based – for reasons he explains in the preface and which still make me wince to read: they recruited their own field force, and the London School of Economics and University of Essex computers were incompatible and so they had to enter the data twice. It is amazing that it was ever completed. It is a Great Work, the place from which poverty researchers should start.

I am going to mention just three elements. His first contribution was to conceptualise poverty as relative. Others, notably Gary Runciman (1967), had written about relative deprivation but Peter did it earlier, mainly in his criticisms of the absolutist biological understandings of Rowntree and Beveridge. It must have been hard reasoning at the time, but it was an idea which was nothing less than scintillating; a genuine shift in the paradigm. As he pointed out, understanding poverty as relative to a time and place was the only way in which we could reconcile talking about poverty in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the only way to reconcile poverty in Ethiopia and Luxembourg.

This re-conceptualisation was enormously influential. It was more or less immediately put into operation in the UK in the Low Income Statistics and then, more fully by Mrs Thatcher in the Households Below Average Income series. Today, we monitor the poverty strategy with regard to relative poverty – 60 per cent of the conventional average – as does the European Union, LIS, the OECD and UNICEF. The US government still holds out against defining poverty as relative, although its poverty line was relative when Molly Orshanksy developed it in 1961. The World Bank is the other important body that has not given way to relative notions. Its \$1 a day per capita is firmly absolutist. Peter's definition of relative poverty referred to individuals 'excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities' long before social exclusion became part of our discourse.

Peter's second contribution in the field of poverty was to get us to think about resources. Poverty had been understood economically as a lack of income (or spending power), but he argued it was concerned with much more – working conditions, the quality of the local environment, capacity to participate in social activities, access to assets 'widely encouraged and approved' and socially determined, and the availability of services and capital. It was for this reason that he pioneered the use of social indicators to measure poverty, counting the number of items that were lacking. For this he was much criticised. Some of the criticisms were dealt with by Mack and Lansley in the first *Breadline Britain* survey and Peter Townsend was an enthusiastic participant in the second and third *Breadline Britain* surveys that led eventually to this government complementing its income-based poverty measures with an index based on a lack of socially perceived necessities.

The third element in Peter's poverty work is the way he classified groups. He was not alone in this: Seebom Rowntree had made a start. But Peter took it to another level. In *Poverty in the United Kingdom* he organised his research assistants around groups – Hilary Land worked on large families, John Veit Wilson on disabled people, Adrian Sinfield on the unemployed and Dennis Marsden on lone-parent families. Thanks to Peter, we no longer talk about the poor as a single class, but as human beings with certain (structural) characteristics we can identify and overcome. It sounds so obvious and simple, but I think it was one of his great contributions. Of course, he wrote about the circumstances of the each of these types of people with great sensitivity and authority.

Peter was intensely humane, and combined both personal and political commitment. He was heavily engaged in politics, and in CPAG and the Disability Alliance. He wrote beautifully and evocatively, and without the jargon and obfuscation that has made so much sociology hilarious and economics incomprehensible. What made Peter's contribution so extraordinary is the fact that he was very young when he did his great work, but committed a lifetime to the subject. ■

**Professor Jonathan Bradshaw**, University of York

Peter Townsend was often introduced as the 'country's greatest social scientist', a description which would cause him to visibly squirm. He was a surprisingly modest and self-effacing man. I never once heard him call himself a 'professor', let alone boast about his achievements – and there were so many achievements he could have boasted about. The other frequent description of Peter, by both academic colleagues and administrative staff alike, was as the 'best boss I ever had'. There are few people (however brilliant) who achieve this accolade.

His staff and colleagues would often work long hours and go to extraordinary lengths to make sure that something Peter wanted was delivered on time. They would then invariably try to hide the trouble they had gone to in order not to embarrass him. Few people inspire such loyalty.

A recent article about Peter in the *Guardian* stated that: 'For four decades... he has doggedly used his academic expertise to urge governments to eradicate inequality'. This is, of course, not correct: Peter Townsend did this for much longer than a mere four decades. If he had ceased all academic work 40 years ago, he would still be recognised today as one of the world's greatest social scientists. Forty years ago, Peter had already revolutionised our theoretical understanding of the nature of poverty (in two articles in the *British Journal of Sociology*) and, with Brian Abel-Smith, provided empirical proof that poverty had not been abolished. He had already produced two seminal works on the elderly and their care – the *Family Life of Old People* and *The Last Refuge*. He had proposed the introduction of sheltered housing and attendance allowance, policies which the government subsequently adopted and which have improved the lives of millions of elderly people.

By 40 years ago, he had successfully argued for the establishment of the General Household Survey, the most widely used survey in social science, and developed the Poverty in the UK survey, arguably the single most important poverty survey in history. And yet most of his major academic achievements still lay ahead, including publishing *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, which transformed the scientific study of poverty, revolutionising the study of health inequalities with the publication of the *Black Report* and changing the way the United Nations, European Union and UK government define and measure poverty.

However, this long list of academic achievements fails to capture the essence of the man. The most important thing about Peter was not that he created new knowledge but that he then acted on it. To paraphrase the Marxist adage, he did not just understand the world – he changed it. He helped to found and build both CPAG and the Disability Alliance, organisations whose advocacy and campaigning work has helped improve thousands of lives. Peter also worked effectively with politicians and policy makers. For example, he helped to transform the way NHS resources in Wales were targeted at the areas with the greatest health needs. When he died, he had been actively working with both UNICEF and the International Labour Organisation to improve the human rights of poor adults and children, including campaigning for a global child benefit, as a means to reduce poverty. ■

**Professor David Gordon**, Director of the Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research, University of Bristol

Peter Townsend played an active role within the Fabian Society over many years, having joined in 1947. He was the longest continuously elected member of the Fabian Executive Committee, serving from 1958 (a committee that also included Denis Healey, Tony Crosland, Roy Jenkins, Margaret Cole and Tony Benn) all the way through to 1988, and taking the Chair for a year in 1965. In 1989 he was made a Vice-President of the Society, along with Brian Abel-Smith.

As well as his years of service, Peter's scholarship and political activism were a massive influence on the Society in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in its core focus on poverty, inequality and welfare. This is well reflected in the numerous pamphlets and articles he contributed to the Society's output over the decades – on a wide range of subjects, but all reflecting Peter's unique blend of analytical rigour, radicalism and compassion.

His first pamphlet (with Brian Abel-Smith), *New Pensions for the Old* (1955), led to the creation of Labour's study group on pensions, and this was a subject he was to return to several times in Fabian research, including in *The Future of Pensions* (1995). His last contribution, an essay on the role of the World Bank in poverty prevention (2009) reflected his growing

interest in, and optimism about, the possibilities of international collectivism and global welfare rights – presaged by his earlier Fabian essays *Poverty in Europe* (1984) and *The International Welfare State* (1993). In recent years, Peter was also a member of the Fabian Commission on Life Chances and Child Poverty (2004-2006), which called for a rebalancing of child support towards universal child benefit – that pillar of our welfare system which he himself worked so hard to create.

The Fabian Society will bear the imprint for many years to come of Peter's work and outlook, which combined a profound concern for those in need with his own distinct brand of inclusive and progressive universalism. ■

**Tim Horton**, Research Director, Fabian Society

Peter Townsend was a towering figure in the anti-poverty cause. It is difficult to exaggerate the impact he has had on both the study of poverty and on the campaign to eradicate it. He was Chair of CPAG during the 16 years (1971 to 1987) that I worked for the organisation. During that time he provided a model of passionate commitment to the anti-poverty and universal benefit causes. I will always be grateful for the support he gave to me as Director through sometimes difficult times. He always kept us on our toes and encouraged us to raise our eyes from the day-to-day struggle of fighting the latest round of benefit cuts. Peter never lost sight of the bigger picture. And that picture, he frequently reminded us, required an international analysis.

Peter developed that international analysis subsequently in a number of publications. In particular, he contributed to a growing literature in both the global North and South that is conceptualising poverty as a denial of human rights. Indeed, the last time I saw him was at a recent seminar on human rights and poverty where, as always, he was challenging us to think more radically.

For many, though, it will be his work on developing the notion of relative poverty which will mark his place in the history books. His magnum opus, *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (1979), carried an endorsement from Barbara Wootton: 'This momentous book will rank as the contemporary successor to the classic works of Booth and Rowntree'. How right she was. It is difficult to imagine teaching about poverty today without making reference to

Peter's work alongside that of Rowntree. He has so indelibly influenced our understanding of poverty, that it is difficult to imagine too how the study of poverty would have developed had he not been there to shape it.

Peter never lost sight of the need to understand poverty in the context of inequality and social polarisation. *Poverty in the United Kingdom* contains a chapter on 'the rich'. It ends with an astute observation, which is as relevant today: 'Broadly speaking, the rich are conventionally discussed in terms of quantiles – the top 1 or 5 per cent, for example, of either incomes or wealth, but not of both. Yet this is to conceal the manipulation and conversion from one to the other, and also depersonalises the concept of the rich. It is almost as if wealth were being claimed to be independent of class'. The book concludes: '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'. He wrote, of course, at a time when the gap between rich and poor was significantly narrower than today.

In the preface to my book *Poverty* I paid tribute to Peter: 'He has been an influence on my own career; but more importantly his lifetime's commitment to the anti-poverty cause continues to be an inspiration to many'. I cannot quite believe that Peter will no longer be there to continue to keep us on our toes. But his inspiration will continue through his writing and through his example. I can only say 'thank you'. ■

**Professor Ruth Lister**, Loughborough University and Director of CPAG 1979-1987.

I know Peter was 81, but he has been such an important part of my life for so long and in so many ways that I am still shocked by the loss. Peter was tutor, research director and guide, teaching colleague and mentor, an exemplar as social scientist, public analyst, lobbyist and campaigner – and, above all, a very good friend.

A wealth of memories include helping each other push a heavy CPAG welfare rights stall laden with leaflets up an icy hill to do our turn on welfare rights duty in Colchester in the 1970s – even worse, taking it back down without it running away. And his telling, still shocked, of the meeting at the publishers when



■ Peter Townsend speaking at CPAG's 40th anniversary conference

he was told that they would, of course, have to take many tables out of his monumental *Poverty in the United Kingdom*. For a few hours, Peter took it back while they argued.

Peter transformed our understanding of the meaning not only of poverty, but also of old age, disability, inequalities in health and social policy itself, stimulating and changing policies in many areas and countries, as well as shaping further research and analysis. A particular strength of his systematic integration of sociology and social policy was to set the analysis of issues in a broad, structural context; and that revealed the inequalities that permeate every aspect of life in ways we rarely perceive. That is why he argued that we should study not only redistribution but the initial distribution of resources and respect right across society.

To understand how Peter worked and the values that drove his commitment, you cannot do better than read his own short, passionate essay, 'A Society for People', written in 1958 when he was 30, reprinted in the April 2009 *Social Policy and Society*. No one can read this today without being forced to think about the sort of society we want to live in now.

'The central choice in social policy lies', he argued, 'between a national minimum and equality'. 'The source of confusion is that the national minimum has been held to be the badge of equality. The problem for the future is to refuse to tolerate two standards of social value and apply one'.

Peter's lifelong commitment to a single standard of social value explains his thoroughgoing critique and rejection of means-testing in whatever form. He remained a firm and principled opponent of the attempt 'to assuage guilt by employing more palatable means tests'. The fight 'to preserve the distinction between the 'deserving' and the

'undeserving' poor' maintains 'the division of the population into first-class and second-class citizens'.

Peter ended that essay half a century ago by calling for 'a society where differences in reward are much narrower than they are today [1958!] and where people of different background and accomplishment can mix easily and without guilt; and also a society where a respect for people is valued most of all. For that brings a real equality.' For Peter 'a society for people' was, without any shadow of doubt, a society without poverty. ■

**Professor Emeritus Adrian Sinfield**, University of Edinburgh

**P**eter Townsend started my poverty research career at the University of Essex in 1964, so I owe him everything. In 1965 when Harriett Wilson (my mother) arranged a meeting to discuss setting up an organisation to collect evidence, propose policy and lobby government, Peter's push for action that summer resulted in the preparation of a memorandum of evidence on family poverty, with many notable signatories, and its delivery to the prime minister by Christmas. Together with the contemporaneous publication of his and Brian Abel-Smith's statistical analysis of how many people lived at or below the government's minimum income levels (*The Poor and the Poorest*) this launched CPAG.

Peter's lifetime achievements span great fields, but I want to emphasise his pioneering contributions to poverty research theory and methodology, and his integration of research with social action. The idea that necessities and poverty can only be defined relative to society dates from Adam Smith, but from the 1950s onwards Peter shifted the whole poverty research perspective away from sterile prescriptive poverty budget arguments to the use of social research to discover what society itself defined as social participation and statistical analysis of the household incomes at which people actually managed to participate.

Peter's own childhood deprivations fed his sociological insight that the *relativistic* approach to necessities and deprivation indicators must start with the views of all the people in the society in which they are experienced and which defines them, and not be based as hitherto on elite or expert prescriptions. Peter's methods enabled, for the first time, the ideas of ordinary people to influence national research into deprivation.

The national poverty survey started with four intensive qualitative studies finding out how ordinary people across the income range, living in large or lone-parent families, or who were unemployed or disabled, themselves experienced their situations. What they told us helped design the national sample survey questionnaire. But its discovery of minimum household income levels for participation did not depend on their opinions or totting up the price of necessities, but was a genuinely independent outcome of the statistical analysis (*Poverty in the United Kingdom*). This made it far more unassailable, methodologically and politically, than previous budget approaches, and may be why governments around the world continue to oppose it as a basis for their minimum income schemes.

Peter never wanted research for mere knowledge; he aimed to reduce people's suffering by working right across the spectrum from understanding to action. While he brilliantly theorised poverty and other social evils, it all fed into his practical research, which itself fed into his policy proposals and very active political campaigning. The various parts of his work were consciously and cleverly linked in ways which few other scholars of his international standing have tried to do, let alone achieved as he did. Doing poverty research in other countries I often meet statisticians measuring intolerable inequalities, scholars philosophising human rights, academics lecturing on poverty, whose activities rarely emerge from their narrow career-oriented silos and thus never even start to relieve the suffering of the people on whose lives their studies and jobs depend. Peter taught us that academics do not have to be like this: his death must not be seen as a loss but an inspiration. ■

**Professor John Veit Wilson**, Visiting Professor  
Newcastle University

**Peter Townsend, born 6 April 1928,  
died 7 June 2009**