

The Herald / Society 31.07.2007

## **Speaking from experience**

**Bob Holman**

The 1960s are deemed the great musical era, with not just the Beatles, but the Beach Boys, the Hollies, and, dare I mention it, Petula Clark.

It is the decade I look back on with nostalgia. I marched against the war in Vietnam and saw the new wave of films with working-class heroes such as *A Taste of Honey*. By that time I was at the London School of Economics (LSE), where I met a lecturer, Peter Townsend. No, not the Who guitarist. The son of a single mother, he became Britain's foremost researcher on poverty. He made no secret of his politics, and had written *You Cannot Live Like a Lord and Preach Like a Socialist*.

Also at LSE I met a beautiful Glaswegian, Annette. We got engaged and went into social work jobs. Housing was scarce and, two weeks before our wedding, I was camping in the office. Just in time, we got a corporation house and, before long, had two children. Then Townsend re-entered our lives. He encouraged me to start a PhD. At about the same time, he and his colleague, Brian Abel-Smith 27th in line to the throne published *The Poor and the Poorest* (1965). Following post-war welfare reforms, it had been assumed that poverty was abolished, and any residue of poor people was dismissed as a feckless minority.

Townsend and Abel-Smith argued that our understanding of poverty took no account of rising standards. Using the government's own figures, they showed that 14% of the population was poor.

The wealthy questioned how anyone who owned a radio could be poor, but their findings clicked with the experience of two young social scientists at Nottingham University, Ken Coates and Richard Silburn, who investigated a neighbourhood in the St Ann's area. Publishing their findings in 1967, they

revealed real hardship with 36% of residents assessed as poor: 85% of the homes had no bathroom and 92% no indoor toilet. In Birmingham I discovered the same poverty.

Coates and Silburn went on to write *Poverty: the Forgotten Englishmen*, which established the existence of income poverty, socially deprived areas and enormous inequality in the distribution of wealth. They concluded that poverty could not be solved by welfare programmes, but required a heavy redistributive incomes policy. Their work ran to five re-prints. Poverty had been re-discovered, and it was this that made the 1960s so important.

Forty years later, poverty is being re-discovered. Research by the Rowntree Foundation shows that government figures are a snapshot of a moment in time. Many people pass in and out of poverty and may not be counted in the snapshot. The real number is twice as much as the poverty rate at any one time.

Inequalities are being noted. Some families exist on less than £7,000 a year, others on £70,000 or more.

The present decade is re-discovering the extent and depth of poverty. What it lacks is a Coates and Silburn to argue that tax credits plus parenting programmes will not abolish poverty. A massive redistribution of income and wealth is required.