



## THE STEVENSON TRUST FOR CITIZENSHIP

On the occasion of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.....

**Professor David Donnison**

***'On Tap But Not on Top:  
Reflections on Academic Contributions to the Analysis  
of Social Problems and the  
Formulation of Social Policy'***

**Chair: Ruth Wishart**

*With opening remarks from Professor Graham Watt, MD  
FRCGP FRSE FMedSci, Norrie Miller Chair of General Practice  
and Primary Care, University of Glasgow*

**Tuesday, February 9th at 6 p.m.**

Sir Charles Wilson Lecture Theatre  
*(Corner of Gibson Street and University Avenue)*

## **INTRODUCTION**

*It is a pleasure and an honour to introduce David Donnison.*

*I have another friend, Dr Runa Mackay, who every November holds a fundraising event in Edinburgh for Medical Aid for Palestinians, a charity for which we have a common interest, regularly raising about five thousand pounds in a morning. When I commented how remarkable it was that she continues to do this at the age of 93, she was quick to point out that she was “only 92”.*

*Our speaker this evening is “only 90”. No longer nimble on his feet, he continues to be nimble of mind. Since his 80th birthday lecture in 2005, he has completed two books and published a collection of poems in memory of Kay Carmichael. Emeritus professor, he is also a poet, painter, musician and occasional wild swimmer. He is described as “Britain’s foremost authority on social policy and administration”. The list goes on and on. David goes on and on.*

*His CV includes schooling at Marlborough College, university at Oxford, academic posts at Manchester, Toronto, London and Glasgow, succeeding Richard Titmuss to the chair of Social Administration at the London School of Economics and chairing the Supplementary Benefits Commission, until it was abolished by Margaret Thatcher. The list of activities barely captures the man, who had contacts in high places but never let his feet leave the ground.*

*His book “Last of the Guardians” tells the story of his parents, who were among the last governors of Burma in the final days of the British Empire. In 1926, they had a son, David, who is reported as not having breathed or cried for 20 minutes after he was born. They need not have worried. Even at that age, David thought carefully before deciding what to say.*

*I know David mainly via the Kettle Club, which recently had its 100th meeting. We meet every so often, a dozen or so friends and colleagues sitting round a table to discuss issues, mostly involving science, politics and health – what used to be called social medicine, but is now spread over many disciplines, diagnosing and remedying the ills of society. Over 20 years David has attended 33 Kettle Club meetings, so I have some idea of where he is coming from.*

*There are other sources of reference in his 80th birthday lecture Traveller there is no path. Paths are made by walking (still available on the web) and a famous joint session with Julian Tudor Hart in 2008, discussing What then must we do?, echoing Tolstoy and Lenin.*

*He can talk history in real time, describing how he heard the 1945 election result, as a young Royal Navy midshipman crossing the Indian Ocean late at night. He can recall the pioneering post-war days of social policy and administration, and then the process of decline as the Labour Party, the Welfare State and public service professions all seemed to lose their way.*

*David doesn’t pine for the past. That is another country. Rather, he is hopeful, imagining a better future and trying it out as an advocate and practitioner of advocacy, from the bottom up. In 2008, he argued that publicly funded professionals needed to develop new*

*alliances with the people they serve. Academia, he noted, was largely absent from that agenda.*

*That challenge facing academics is the topic he will address this evening. He is serving the main course. My job is to serve some starters.*

*Health inequalities in Scotland are wider than in any other western European country and have been so for many years. What does that say about our publicly funded institutions, including universities? If they haven't been part of the solution over the last 20 years, aren't they part of the problem, hypertrophied, inefficient, bureaucratic, past their sell-by date, sensitive to the slightest suggestion of external governance?*

*Robert Graves was Professor of Poetry at Oxford. Under "occupation" on his passport, he put "professor". To put "poet" was asking for trouble. He found that "professor" guaranteed "dull respect". Graves survived four years in the trenches in World War 1, writing it up in *Goodbye to all that*. By 1918 the only thing that front line soldiers believed in was loyalty to comrades, in the face of cruel fate and blind chance. They had only contempt for priests and preachers trying to put a gloss on futility. Their solidarity with comrades was based on shared doubt and uncertainty. Doubts unite. Certainty divides. Might there be a basis there for re-inventing society?*

*As scientists whose job is to measure doubt, to chisel away at uncertainty so that what remains is the truth, we could have a role. But do we? We aim to inform and influence decisions, from the First Minister down. Decisions are usually based on experience, sometimes on evidence, but are always underpinned by values. Our role might be to draw on the experience, to produce the evidence, to distil the values.*

*But it sometimes seems that we only produce evidence, of a rather narrow kind. Yesterday the First Minister announced funds for precision medicine, genetically-based treatments that could transform the lives of patients with multiple sclerosis and pancreatic cancer. That's fine. But what about everybody else, especially people whose lives end 10-15 years earlier than the most affluent, and spend twice as long in poor health before they die?*

*The last great natural resource, at least for now, is the human resource, especially the energy, commitment and passion that people bring, not only to what they do by themselves, but also to what they do with others. To paraphrase Bill Clinton's presidential campaign, "It's relationships, stupid".*

*At the 12th meeting of the Kettle Club, Angus Erskine spoke of "partnership" as a weasel word, which tells nothing of the nature of the relationship between partners. Exploitative? Productive? Mutual? Distant? Close? Absent? What kinds of relationships do academics have? In the outside world, there are powerful people, streetwise people and the people. Clever people in universities need better relationships with all three.*

*Ladies and Gentlemen. You are about to be served.*

**Graham Watt**  
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**9<sup>th</sup> February 2016**

## ON TAP, NOT ON TOP?

David Donnison

### How it was when I began

When I entered University as a student after war service in the navy I found myself among teachers, also just back from the war, who expected to bring their learning to bear on practical problems and public policies. That's what they had been doing for years. Bill Mackenzie, my politics tutor, whom some of you will recall from his last job in this University, explained that he had been "jobbed into" the Air Ministry (a splendid 18<sup>th</sup> century phrase) "to hold down Bomber Harris", head of Bomber Command. "He was quite mad" he added.

So, as soon as I had learned enough about social and urban problems and the policies applied to them to be of some use, it was natural to get involved in the work of the state. That was not always welcomed. "On tap, not on top" was Whitehall's favourite way of describing the proper role of academics and "experts" of every kind in affairs of state. Even in the London School of Economics, previously directed by William Beveridge, no less, which gave me my third academic job, a senior colleague took me aside to warn that academics should not do this kind of thing. "We had enough of that in Laski's day" he explained.

But in Richard Titmuss's Department of Social Administration, where I worked, there was no hesitation. Before long I found myself alongside the best academic team working in the field of income maintenance and social security to be found anywhere in the world. They were pretty good on health services too. Other friends I made were distinguished performers in the fields of education, social work, community work and mental health. Meanwhile, along with colleagues in other universities, I was soon playing a similar part in the fields of housing and planning.

But there were very few of us. Only 5 per cent of my age group went to University, and those of us working on problems of social and urban policy were a tiny fraction of this privileged minority. But that made us pretty special. There were so few trained economists and social scientists out there. No "think tanks" (apart from the Fabian Society – daddy of them all) and scarcely any effective research units in central or local government. So we should have been able to offer some help to policy makers and the officials who were their courtiers.

We had wonderful opportunities, opened up by Ministers in Harold Wilson's cabinet who had more first class degrees than any other cabinet, before or since. (They included Wilson himself, Crossman, Crosland and others). Later, Conservative cabinets scored pretty well too, with people like Edward Boyle, Enoch Powell and Keith Joseph, often in Ministries responsible for what came to be called "the welfare state". Whether academics make wiser or more skilful politicians than anyone else is for you to decide. My point is that they understood how to use academics, and enjoyed working with us in challenging ways.

Well before we gained opportunities for talking to Ministers it was possible – necessary indeed - to publish our evidence and ideas, not only in learned journals but in the Times,

the Guardian, new Society magazine and sometimes Penguin books. “We don’t read the books you people write” said a senior official to me. “None of us have time to read a book. But if you get an article in the Times or the Guardian I must have answers for the Minister before he comes in.”

We also got to know the specialist correspondents every decent newspaper employed to write about social policies – at least two of them dealing with education alone. They had read all the books and government reports and had met all the actors in the unfolding drama – not only Ministers and their senior officials but senior officers in local government, the trade unions and professional associations. Great people, always ready to swop ideas.

And, despite occasional cut-backs and crises, this was a time of innovation, experiment and growth in the public services, and it’s always a happier experience to work on problems of growth than problems of decline.

Meanwhile, in the background, we had a set of political ideas, fashioned over long years stretching back to the last quarter of the nineteenth century, which gave Labour Governments a sense of direction, and a reasonably coherent political philosophy that Conservatives had to respond to. Karl Marx, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree, Octavia Hill, Eleanor Rathbone and a whole pantheon of pioneers in social and urban policy still featured in our thinking and our teaching. No-one expected Clement Attlee or Harold Wilson to formulate a fully-fledged “vision” of Britain’s future. They were spokesmen for movements which had done that long ago.

## **And now**

That has all changed; both for better and for worse. As the proportion of youngsters going to Universities rises towards fifty per cent, and as the social and economic sciences advance and expand, the world is full of bright young graduates involved in policy analysis; full of research units – now found in many Government Departments and some local authorities – and, in London, full of “think tanks” – research groups with a political standpoint looking for powerful patrons. Ministers equip themselves with so many “special policy advisors” – often recruited from these groups - we have had to invent a name for them – the “SPADS”. That’s the good news.

But newspaper editors, who are going through hard times, have sacked their expert specialist correspondents - whom they always suspected of “going native” and getting too pally with their sources – and they no longer have a budget for academic articles they did not commission; New Society magazine has folded, and Penguin Books no longer publish our kind of stuff. So it is harder than it used to be for academics to communicate fresh knowledge and serious ideas to the general public.

If universities are to play an effective part in this game, they have to ask themselves what’s special about their contribution that justifies this diversion of effort from teaching and more theoretical research. My experience suggests that there are features of the best academic contributions to this kind of work which are less likely to be found among the SPADS and think tanks.

The best university researchers observe the people whose needs they are concerned about and talk with them at length. They do field work. That means not only that they

have good evidence to support their proposals; they also have real human beings in their heads and some understanding of their hopes and hardships as they write their reports.

Before they get to writing policy papers they gossip about their work with colleagues – colleagues often from other disciplines. (The title of Richard Titmuss’s best-known book, “The Gift Relationship”, about volunteer blood donor services, was derived from talk with anthropologists researching in Africa.) They also present their evidence and policy proposals to seminars where colleagues – who may come from disciplines and political allegiances different from their own – comment critically on them. Then their findings will be offered to peer reviewed journals where, once more, they go under the harrow of expert, independent criticism.

The best policy-oriented work usually deals with questions the researchers have formulated for themselves from a pretty deep knowledge of the field, not from contract research on questions posed by others who have their own axes to grind. It calls for careful consultation with other experts in the field concerned: service providers, service users and others with relevant experience: people, for example who know whether we have the computing systems required to make their proposals work. And it is published when the authors are ready – not censored, or timed to suit the needs of politicians and news media.

I am well aware that colleagues of mine here, constantly racing to keep pace with deadlines dictated by others while preparing half a dozen bids for more funds in the hope that one of them will bring home the bacon, may be groaning at the unreality of all that I’m saying. But Universities and research funders that are now – rather belatedly – demanding evidence of the practical “impact” of our research should ponder these requirements.

They should be cautious, too, about “impact”. Peter Marris wrote the best analysis I’ve read of the way in which policy impact is achieved by people coming to the task from an academic base of some kind. It appears in his small book, *Witnesses, Engineers and Story Tellers* (published by Yale University Press in 1997). Impact is achieved, not by acting as witnesses for the working class, reporting their tribulations to the powerful, nor through rigorously scientific analysis of social and economic data – although both are well worth doing – but by coining vivid phrases to tell stories which characterise problems that powerful people worry about and suggest appropriate responses to them. These stories may be true or they may be false.

Our country is today in the grip of such a story. It tells us that we have amongst us families who have for generations been tempted by generous social security benefits to live on the state rather than go out to work and support themselves.

And the appropriate response to this story? By greatly reducing social benefits and compelling people to do all sorts of things before they can claim them, we shall do good both to the poor and to those, described as “hard-working families”, who pay the taxes that fund these benefits. Every line of this story is either untrue or highly questionable. But it continues to be told every day - in news media of all sorts, in television “soaps”, and through the very language we use. Beveridge wrote about “social security”, a phrase which suggests that people have *rights* which enable them to live without *fear*. Today

we are supposed to use instead the Americanism “welfare” which is demeaning both to those who depend on these benefits and to those who work in the services that provide them. There are many other chapters to this story that you will be familiar with – about refugees, crime and the European Union for example. This is how people often make an impact.

To find one’s work has made an impact on the world is always satisfying. But if that is your *main* aim, don’t waste your time in a University. You will probably do better in a think tank, or writing for the tabloid press – or as a SPAD for a Minister sympathetic to your ideas.

The job of University researchers is to pose important questions, to discover the truth about them and tell it as honestly and convincingly as possible. Politicians then have to decide what to make of it. And the opponents of those politicians have to challenge them - with help from sound researchers - if they think those in power are mistaken.

### **Looking ahead**

I want to conclude by talking about another important task in which academics, as well as others outside the Universities, should play their part. Attlee, I said, did not have to formulate a larger “vision” of his country’s future. That had already been done by many others before him who hoped to see a more equal Britain; a Britain in which every citizen would be entitled to assured minimum standards of income and housing, a free and competent health service available to all, good educational opportunities for their children, and work for themselves that would enable them to support a family. Beveridge’s talk about slaying “The five giants” – poverty, ignorance, idleness and the rest – was the beginning of *his* story, laying out what had to be done to achieve this.

Many people now feel that cuts in benefits and services, the growth of punitive sanctions, and spreading privatisation threaten us with a return of these giants. I do not have time to get into this larger argument. I want to look at how these services operate – whether they are provided by the state, by voluntary bodies or by commercial enterprises - how they make decisions and how they treat the people who depend on them: a narrower but important question too often neglected.

It is not surprising that Attlee’s Government, bravely struggling to build a welfare state when the world was in chaos and Britain on the brink of bankruptcy, resorted to familiar, top-down, bureaucratic styles of governance, relying on standardisation, professional authority and rank. These were the styles that had won the war and there was no time to invent new ones.

This has led – not always, but too often – to the creation of institutions that are not greatly loved by those who have to depend on them. And that has political as well as therapeutic, educational and other implications. When a “demo” sets out through our streets to protest about “the cuts” it marches under the banners of the public service unions. It is entirely proper that they should give us a lead on these occasions; but the social security claimants, the social housing tenants, the health service patients, the social work clients, the school pupils and their parents are not there. And that night in

the broadcast news programmes, and next morning in the press there's no mention of what may have been a huge gathering, drawing people from all over Scotland and addressed at its conclusion by leading political figures. The media are not interested because they no longer have specialist correspondents who understand the issues, and because they see these gatherings as simply a protest by the public service unions in defence of their jobs, pay and pensions.

But there are other models of public service which many of you will know about. I will briefly outline some examples – all drawn from nearby, from different services, led by different professions.

When this city set out, yet again, to tear down the Gorbals and rebuild it, some of us were invited by those leading the project to make a survey that would reveal what those living in the area wanted. We agreed to do that, provided our brief was extended to produce a report showing how local residents could be continuously involved and listened to. Mike Galloway, the excellent planner leading the redevelopment team, welcomed the idea. Better still, he placed his office in the middle of the Gorbals, kept his doors open and welcomed local people who wanted to know what he and his colleagues were doing.

We used his money to hire and train local interviewers who understood the area's problems. And, when the first contracts for rebuilding Crown Street were let, Mike put the designs of five firms bidding for them on the wall and invited local residents and their associations to inspect and vote on them. What you see today is what they chose. A return to a street pattern replacing the wind-swept towers, with a bank, solicitors, butchers and other services on the street, private open spaces for most of the dwellings, and small parks designed for children and for old people. Community-based design. We also asked that people living in the Gorbals or recently rehoused from the area should have a few months in which to bid for purchase or tenancy of the new houses before outsiders were allowed in – thereby avoiding conflicts between "locals" and "incomers". And it was done.

Or take an example from Education. When, twenty years ago, I first came to live part-time on Easdale Island – south of Oban – we had a splendid Head of the small primary school across the sound that separates us from neighbouring Seil Island. My nearest neighbours had a boy with Downs Syndrome who had been welcomed and cared for by other children on the island. (It's that sort of place.) When the time came for him to go to school his parents went to the Head and said "We've been offered a place for Jonathan in a special school, but he wants to come to your school and stay with his friends. He can't speak, but in the family we use a sign language used by deaf people. "That's fine" she said. "I and my colleagues will learn Jonathan's signs – and so will all the children in this school". And that's what happened. It worked very well. She was saying, in effect, that this child would be an asset, teaching her youngsters that everyone – no matter how handicapped – has a contribution to make to the community in which they live. It was the same Head who invited her children's parents to come in, take a class and teach them whatever they wanted to offer. One of my neighbours – a former merchant seaman – took ropes in and showed the children how to tie knots and what each one was for. Jonathan's father took his guitar in and taught the children tunes and songs. Michael Gove would not have approved; but this school provided many of the duxes - the best academic performers - in the Oban High School to which they all went on.

Or take an example from what you might expect to be the least feasible setting for this approach: the Special Unit in Scotland's biggest jail, where they placed violent men serving life sentences who had proved completely unmanageable in other jails. Its regime was modelled on that of the therapeutic community pioneered by Maxwell Jones in the Dingleton mental hospital. Prisoners and prison officers in the Unit had to work together, with no separate office for staff. If either had a problem, everything had to stop, a meeting was called and everyone sat down to talk it out. Joyce Laing – brilliant art therapist – came in every week and got murderers who had never tried such things to create sculptures and pictures that vividly expressed their feelings. Professional artists, musicians, writers and other creative people came to the Unit to perform and to talk with the men. Some of you will have read the books of Jimmy Boyle, long ago released from jail, who has been a star example of the rehabilitation this regime achieved.

A third example: my colleagues in our medical school have coined a new word - "co-production". Not an attractive word - it sounds as if someone has just completed an M.B.A. – but it expresses a very important idea: the idea that doctors and patients each have much to learn from the other, should treat each other with mutual respect and work together to advance the cause of better health. It's an idea that every public service profession should develop in its own way.

A fourth example. I recently attended a two-day conference, held every year, at which senior officers of Scottish housing associations meet to discuss their work along with other high heidys of the housing world. All the models of social administration were to be seen there; the bureaucrats, the professionals, the entrepreneurs, *and* those leading a broader movement for better housing conditions that uses the buildings in their care and mobilises the people living in them to provide debt counselling and money advice, welfare rights services, family centres and youth clubs.

I could run on with further examples, but I've talked for long enough. Politicians and those who elect them – not the academics - will decide whether to develop or destroy our public services. But those who work in whatever remains can, I believe, develop new ways of working inspired by the kind of ethos I have described, thereby building movements which will provide better services and help to ensure that the service users march alongside the service providers in future.

Along with the opinion surveys and cost-benefit calculations, our research agendas should also deal with the longer-term vision we have for our country's future. Academics, along with many others doing their daily stint in the public services, can help to shape that future. But – before you tell me so - I do appreciate that is not going to be easy. Outstanding examples of the approach I have described always tend to disappear. The Special Unit has closed. Dingleton's therapeutic community too. The wonderful Head of my local primary school has moved on. That is not an accident. We are not talking about technical inventions, like a new vaccine or drug, that will be widely adopted once they can be shown to work. We are talking about a challenge to long-established bureaucratic authority, a shift in power - about democracy. And when you challenge power the empire always strikes back. Each generation has to reinvent these threatening ideas, applying them in new ways and in new settings.