

# ARGUING ABOUT THE WELFARE STATE:

A RADIO CONFRONTATION WITH PROFESSOR PETER TOWNSEND

— JULY 17<sup>TH</sup> 1996

BRIAN MICKLETHWAIT



A group of British Treasury civil servants, of debatable and much debated importance, has recently been asking itself in writing what sort of employees the Treasury will need for the next few decades, and it would appear that it has been using that question as an excuse to survey the entire range of likely government policies for the foreseeable future. To know who you'll need, you've got to know what they'll be doing, haven't you?

I don't know who leaked what these Treasury persons had been writing, but someone did, and on Wednesday July 17th 1996 this was the lead story in the British media. The government has for two decades now been taking all it can from the British economy, so the report contained many references to how this or that government programme might be cut, and most of the media coverage was about these possible cuts: cuts to allow other things not to be cut, and cuts for the sake of it (such as we libertarians prefer). Should the Welfare State be rolled back? Should road use be priced, and the roads sold? Should government spending on higher education — this being the sort of education that soon-to-be-rich people get most of — be cut? And did the report represent, as the Labour Party claimed, some sort of hidden Conservative agenda for after the next election? Labour held a press conference to draw attention to it all, and to the divisions about government spending in the ranks of their enemies. Conservative dissident John Redwood said the Treasury report sounded pretty good to him. Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer Kenneth Clarke dismissed what some of his own underlings had produced as the scribbles of teenagers.

## “MEET FOR LUNCH”

I was woken at the crack of 10 am by BBC Radio Wales, who wanted me to do a two-talking-heads performance for their “Meet for Lunch” political debate spot. The resulting argument was duly recorded at noon, in one of the BBC's Millbank studios a convenient walk away from where I live, in London SW1. It was broadcast (I assume) at about 1 pm.

My antagonist in London was Sociology Professor Peter Townsend of Bristol University, and the two of us were interviewed down the line from Wales by one Vincent Kane. Kane started with me, and I waffled away as best I could about how, yes, there is indeed much talk of cutting government welfare, both here and in America, and how I'm for this. This doesn't mean only “cuts”, but also policies like setting up state pension schemes as free standing, free enterprise enterprises.

In addition to being a Professor (he was the Sociology Professor at Essex University when I was there in the early seventies), Townsend is/has been a big cheese of some description in the Child Poverty Action Group — he and it figuring heavily in the demonology of academic lefty-bashers like Professors Antony Flew and David Marsland. Accordingly he was against cutting state welfare. We could afford to keep it, he said, and “the evidence” from other countries, like (if I remember them correctly) Sweden and Denmark, showed that such cuts aren't needed.

What I might have said at this point, was: Actually they *are* starting to cut government welfare in these other countries, because they're starting to have all the same welfare-related problems as the Anglo-Saxons have been having. Underclass, moral hazard, poverty trap, Charles Murray, change of Labour Party policy on welfare spending, revival of friendly societies, blah blah blah.

But you know how it is. These things finish almost as soon as they start, and you have to make quick decisions. Not being strong on Swedish welfare policy, I ignored Townsend's “evidence” and instead broadened the argument by saying that the Treasury document wasn't only about government welfare cuts; it was also about other cuts, such as in higher education, which might be worth talking about on account of Professor Townsend being in that line of business himself. Personally I favour a totally free market in education of all kinds, not just the higher sort, and I made all that my next point.

When it was his turn again, Townsend returned to the topic of how government welfare spending should remain at its present high level. Further evidence for this was that there is increasing inequality between rich and poor in the world generally and in the rich countries in particular. OECD Report, United Nations figures, blah blah blah.

## STATE WELFARE INCREASES INEQUALITY!

Doing lots of radio rather than doing it only a few times means that what you previously only wish you'd said later becomes what you do say, without skipping a beat and in the heat of the battle. A common anti-welfare-state line of argument goes that poverty in countries like Britain is much exaggerated, *relative* poverty being confused with the *absolute* level of poverty (this being an argument pushed especially by David Marsland). But I prefer a different tack. This time I did respond to Professor Townsend's “evidence”, with the following item of intellectual kung fu, crafted at my leisure after many previous debating reverses and hesitations:

*I'm not surprised that there is increasing inequality in the rich countries between rich and poor. If what I and my comrades (“comrades” being the exact word I used) have long been saying about how welfare hurts those whom it is done to, then you would expect the rich — unimpeded by welfare — to carry on getting richer; but the poor — enmeshed in welfare — to stay stuck in poverty.*

This was a cruel blow to the Professor, which I suspect does much to explain the boiling hot temperature of our debate by the time it ended. Here's a man who has spent half his life churning out numbers about the depressing persistence and extreme depressingness of poverty. And here was this sound-bite spouting, ideologically motivated (“comrades”!) little shit from some what-the-hell-is-that? groupuscule from off the far edge of that same classical liberal ideology that he and all his lefty friends thought they'd buried for ever in the sixties and seventies, telling him, Professor Peter Townsend, that *his evidence meant the opposite of what he said it meant*. Townsend says that because millions in Britain are still poor, we need more state welfare. But if, after all the state welfare there's been these last several decades, the poor are as poor as ever and more numerous than ever, that means (said I) that state welfare is not the solution but the problem. Growing inequality in all the countries rich enough to have lots of state welfare is just what we should expect. Or words to that effect. Basically I was telling the Professor that he had scored a huge propaganda own goal.



## Political Notes No. 130

ISSN 0267-7059 ISBN 1 85637 352 5

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,  
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN  
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1996: Libertarian Alliance; Brian Micklethwait.

When not being the LA's Editorial Director and appearing for the LA on the radio and TV, Brian Micklethwait is a self-employed desktop publisher.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait  
Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

**FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY**

## HE SAID THIS — I SAID THAT

It can't have improved the Professor's level of happiness that his preferred mode of radio communication was a dreadful repetitious droning, with a full stop dangling at the end of it that was for ever being postponed by yet another subclause, tangent or further illustration or item of "evidence", and that this droning would continue long after what Townsend was trying to say with it was as clear as it was ever going to be, and only stopped when I interrupted it on the grounds (stated out loud to the good people of Wales) that if no-one did interrupt it, it would go on for ever. (This worked so well the first time that I later did it again, which may have been once too often. The presenter may have thought that I was usurping his job. But there you go, you have to make snap decisions when you're on the radio.)

There was an exchange about the USSR. I said that the 100% state (the USSR) has been a total catastrophe and has collapsed ignominiously, and that the 50% state (our state, now) will be relentlessly mediocre for as long as it persists. Cutting state welfare shouldn't only mean turning state pensions into privatised pensions; it should also mean cutting taxes and allowing a booming, thriving free market economy of the sort now made impossible by high levels of state spending. Townsend referred to contemporary Russia as proof that ideologically motivated gung-ho capitalism (not his exact words but you get the drift) was not the answer and was causing havoc. I replied that blaming the free market for the current mess in Russia is like blaming the lifeboatmen trying to rescue them for the fact that the people still desperately bobbing about in the water after a shipwreck are suffering (another what-I-should-have-said sound-bite finally getting its first airing on the radio).

Kane asked me how welfare wrecks people's lives. I said it sucks people onto welfare and makes it hard for them to get off it, because to pay for state welfare you have to tax even quite modest incomes heavily, which makes them harder to get. Then — Townsend was right about this bit of the story and I said so — the amount of welfare that each individual welfare recipient receives is cut. But I made this last horror sound not like any sort of alien imposition by anti-welfarists, but rather an inevitable part of the workings of the welfare state.

(Which it is. The multitude sucked into state welfare becomes so huge that keeping them in the manner they at first get accustomed to would soon bankrupt us all, and anyway seems only to turn them into permanent paupers with barbaric children. So cut state welfare, say the voters. Given what state welfare really does and what it really costs, I don't see how this scenario could have turned out otherwise. Once again I am here taking some pro-state-welfare facts — "savage cuts in welfare" — and turning them into an argument *against* state welfare. It's in the nature of state welfare that it ends up being savagely cut.)

Townsend was then brought back to the point I had earlier made about a total free market in education, which he had at first ignored. How did he feel about that? He produced some more unmemorable droning about how the foreigners didn't agree with this either, and generally implied that if the government didn't educate the people, the people would never be educated at all. I replied with a sound-bitised version of the *evidence* (the word heavily emphasised) about pre-1870 British non-state education, to the effect that pre-1870 British non-state education was rather good and improving, and should have been left to get on with it. Townsend accused me of wanting to recreate Victorian levels of poverty. I replied that I favour Victorian methods — which worked well — of *getting rid* of poverty, but that the policies he favoured had *recreated* Victorian-style poverty in our midst. And that, pretty much, was that.

## "YOU'RE MAD!"

So far so ordinary. According to a friend who works for the BBC at Millbank, BBC Wales rang back later and said words to the effect that "they nearly came to blows", but my own recollection is that although it got pretty boisterous, it was nothing out of

the ordinary. Afterwards I expected Townsend and me to be exchanging smilingly wary civilities, the way that professional cricketers claim to after the close of play in a test match.

Not a bit of it. It seemed that I had seriously got under the Professor's skin. "You're mad!" he said, as soon as we were finished. I was, he said, an ideological fanatic who ignored evidence. He was trembling with rage, and almost ran out the room, squashing my newly purchased *Radio Times* under the door in his haste to open it and get away from me. It was as if, having been (at any rate the way I tell it) savaged by me in debate, he was terrified that I was about to attack him physically. As it was, I merely asked him to stop attacking my *Radio Times*.

I was unimpressed by Peter Townsend's performance, and *very* unimpressed by his bizarre conduct afterwards. He struck me as a man who, being a Professor at a University for most of his working life, is not used to arguing with anyone on equal terms.

There we both were. He was saying why he opposed government spending cuts, and something of why he thought that. And I was saying why I favour cuts in government spending, and something of why I think that. He kept going on about "the evidence" as if "the evidence" was only what he said it was, and as if it proved only what he said it proved, and that me ignoring or denying any of what he was saying (despite the whole exchange only lasting ten lightning-quick minutes) branded me automatically as a fanatic. Because I mostly preferred to expand on why I think what I think to discussing why he thought what he thought, this meant I wasn't listening to "the evidence". But I listened. I just didn't choose to reply to all of it, and what evidence I did reply to I put a different spin on.

In short, Professor Peter Townsend expected to dictate the entire agenda, and reacted like a spoilt child when I denied him this pleasure. Confronted by someone over whom he had no power, he could only resort to frantic off-microphone abuse. He left the studio looking and sounding like the deranged talk radio amateur that — compared to me — he is. Such was my impression.

Ironically, if he had said *on air* what he actually said off it, he would probably have done a lot better for himself. "You're mad!" was *by far* the most concise and memorable thing I recall him saying. I'm sure that lots of the Welsh people listening would have heartily agreed, very possible a majority of them.

## CONFRONTATION IS DRAMATIC

So why write all this down? Here I note the example of Sean Gabb, who recently did a similar media-inspired memoir (Tactical Notes No. 17, *Putting The Case Against Gun Control: Reflections on an Outrageously Effective Television Performance — May 2nd 1996*). The same comrades who first persuaded Sean to write down the dramas he there describes also urged me to immortalise my little confrontation with Professor Townsend.

Our confrontation was indeed very confrontational, and confrontation is dramatic. It's fun to read about. People may be introduced by this piece of writing to some key libertarian notions (a total free market in education, road pricing, the evils of state welfare) where worthier but less racy pieces of writing on the same topics (including many other worthy pieces published by the Libertarian Alliance) wouldn't interest them. And just as people in general like a good old ding-dong, so too do the broadcasters, who now need libertarians to liven things up, most lefties having now gone quiet in order to get Labour back into power. If my ding-dong with Townsend is anything to go by, we are starting seriously to upset the state welfarists. Free market "fanaticism" is now, at any rate as far as state welfare is concerned, back with a bang. The burden of disproof is now on state welfare's defenders, and they are becoming thoroughly rattled.

Besides which, it's nice to show the LA's subscribers and donors that they are getting their money's worth in media as well as publishing effort. Libertarians want libertarianism shoved under other noses besides their own. Political ideas are important not just because of what they say but because of who else is hearing about them besides you.