Attlee, Toynbee Hall and the importance of direct social work practice.

A talk for the Social Work History Network
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Clem Attlee recounts this story in his book the ‘The Social Worker’.

‘I met a small boy in the street one day and we walked along together. ‘Where are you off to?’ said he ‘I'm going home to tea’ said I. ‘Oh, I'm going home to see if there is any tea’ was his reply thus drawing a very useful economic distinction’. p. 134

According to the Trussell Trust over 1,000,000 people accessed food banks in 2014/2015 – a group of people larger than the City of Birmingham.

So for me, history, particularly the history of social change, among other things, is both an inspiration and a resource for how we make society a better place today.

Toynbee Hall – what would now be called a voluntary sector organisation - was the first and the pre-eminent example of what became known as the Settlement Movement - a movement that became international, spreading to Europe, India, Japan and the USA.

Attlee was one of many people who volunteered at Toynbee Hall - he then went on to a paid role at Toynbee.

When Terry originally floated the idea with me of doing a talk on Attlee, Toynbee Hall and perhaps other individuals involved in the settlement movement my first thought was I could talk for hours.

Many extraordinary people volunteered, or worked for Settlement Houses. Examples included Jane Addams, who made it on to a US stamp and won the Nobel Peace Prize and W.E.B Dubois
author of ‘The Souls of Black Folk’ published in 1903 and a classic for the US Civil Rights movement.

Settlement Houses are a living tradition in the USA so there is a large volume of literature. But in the time frame available I can't do justice to all this, so I propose simply to whet your appetite and if you are interested I can provide more afterwards. I will emphasise the importance of linking theory with practice and set out what the implications might be for today. I'll conclude with some thoughts on practice, social change and politics. I will rely heavily on the words of Attlee writing in ‘The Social Worker’.

‘Social work’ has had a range of meanings over the years. It can emphasis the importance of social change, as does the IFSW definition of social work. Or, it can crudely attempt to subordinate all social work to the direct control of the State. I refer you to The Children and Social Work Bill currently before Parliament. As I hope you will agree, I believe Attlee’s understanding of social work is firmly within the tradition of social work for progressive social change.

Needless, to say, the material presented is my own and does not necessarily reflect the views of my current employers.

A big emphasis at Toynbee Hall historically, and when I was Chief Executive, was on volunteering. This was not simply what might be called ‘constrained’ volunteering but volunteering at all levels. For example, we had volunteers who worked with the Metropolitan Police and other agencies around the issue of sex workers. Volunteering in this manner helps us reflect on society – it is an eye-opener.

Here’s Attlee. He’s describing a typical settlement house volunteer who has recently graduated and is now working in the City or West End. Much volunteering was around ‘clubs’ - what we would call structured leisure activities. The volunteer, and now we have Attlee’s words: ‘… goes out to referee for them [the boys football team] at football, and finds it the only available ground is 4 miles away and he remembers that somewhere he heard of an agitation for open space as well question of getting them [there] makes him consider transport problems, trains, rail and buses, and he may begin to enquire who is responsible for the services.'
He finds his boys get there late so that the moon is already up, and perhaps a centre-forward on whom he was relying, cannot get there at all; he finds it is a case of overtime, and the demand for shorter hours of labour becomes a reality; he [the volunteer] always played in the afternoon at school, and even at work in town gets off in fairly good time…

A little later he will perhaps visit one of his boys who is sick and begin to see the housing problem from the inside – perhaps the family cannot afford proper treatment for the boy, and he is forced to consider the provision now made for the sick, and further the wages question begins to interest him after he’s had a talk with the boy’s father who is in the building trade and gets only occasional work…” p. 212.

Attlee describes how experience and direct observation lead to reflection:

‘Theory and practice must work together, it is no good to leave theory to the universities and practice to the social workers’ p. 233

And he gives an example:

‘A good example of a piece of investigation by social worker on a specific subject is William Beveridge’s study of unemployment worked out while he was a resident at Toynbee Hall which is one of the causes for the adoption of the system of Labour Exchanges in this country.’ p. 236.

Perhaps because Attlee has walked the walk and not simply talked the talk his observations on social work have an extraordinary immediacy:

‘…. one is very apt to feel a fool when starting social work’. p. 132

‘All social work is apt to be discouraging at times and it needs a fairly robust faith in the general goodness of human nature to resist depression’. p. 65

‘It is hardly necessary to add that the work of social service requires great patience and tolerance, a sense of justice, and an infinite capacity for suffering fools gladly…. There is, too, always a fair proportion of fools, many of them in positions of importance’.
‘Many social workers wear themselves out through failing to map out their work ahead…’ p 144.

And the one I particularly enjoy:

‘… nothing is more common in a meeting of social workers then to find a total absence of business methods. The chairman is often appointed not from his or her ability in conducting business and keeping members to the point… With the result that long rambling discussions take place with no real idea of what is the point at issue so much time is wasted’. p. 143

But back to the main point I want to make.

I would argue that social work has been beset by a divide, a divide between theory and practice. I would define ‘practice’ as direct work with clients.

What happens in other professions? Senior doctors continue to see patients. My wife’s cousin is a Professor of Psychiatry – he sees patients and he treats them - a role which he combines with his academic research. This is not unique to him, it is embodied in the idea of a teaching hospital. My Chair of Trustees at Toynbee was a partner in a ‘magic circle’ City law firm. My sense was he saw clients every week.

But in Children’s Services and Adult Care direct contact with clients is lost from ‘Practice Manager’ – i.e. first tier manager - upwards.

I haven’t seen the criteria for continuing registration of doctors and lawyers. I do know that in the HCPC criteria for re-registration of social workers there is nothing about direct practice.

Why is this important? Because practice, direct contact with the patient or client, should be at the heart of what we do. The risk is that social work practitioners loose touch with research insights, social work academics loose touch with how social work is actually delivered, social work managers loose touch with the front line of their own organisation. This loss of touch results in ineffective solutions, or ‘solutions’ that actually make matters worse.
I’m not sure how this situation came about. I’d be interested to hear people’s views on this. I wonder if it is something to do with confidence and something to do with the 1970s and early 80s. Confidence because, unlike medicine and law, social work does not enjoy the highest prestige, and maybe in an attempt to secure prestige, there is an attempt to distance oneself from vulnerable clients. In the 1970’s, influenced by certain takes on Marxism, there was a reaction in social work against ‘professionalism’. Practice, and indeed lack of qualifications, was privileged over an academic perspective that was equated with ‘elitism’. Both had the tendency to widen the gap.

Seven years ago after luxuriating in various management, policy and study roles I went back to direct practice. It was a revelation to see how things worked, or failed to work. I gained insight into numerous service providers including prisons and courts, immigration, schools and the benefits system and, of course, Children’s Services itself. Like Attlee’s volunteer I’d aimed simply to take on a role at a football game, but instead was provoked into thinking about a range of other social work and social policy issues from a fresh perspective.

Here’s Attlee again:

‘We claim then that theoretical training is necessary, but not more so than practical; the two should go hand-in-hand, so the problems encountered in practical work may be related to the theoretical principles studied and the latter illuminated by living examples’. p. 152

I now want to argue that what made Attlee’s blend of theory and practice give his social work vibrancy and impact extended to how he did politics.

We have a situation today, where a high political career goes like this: Excellent school. (Could be private or state. Ideally, Westminster, St Paul’s, Holland Park). PPE at Oxford. Any college you like so long as it’s Balliol, dissenters can go to Brasenose. Internship with MP/Cabinet minister leading onto policy role / speech-writer. Get a job in what a friend of mine calls ‘The Dark Arts’ (a term from Harry Potter): consulting, strategic marketing,
PR or communications. Safe seat. Cabinet. Implement social reform. Wonder why the electorate isn’t grateful.

I think Attlee would have said take time out to connect with real people in real situations. Here’s Attlee again:

‘this type of man will criticise and condemn all methods of social advance that do not directly square with his formulae, and will repeat his shibboleths without any attempt to work out their practical application. In despair he waits for the social revolution without any real attempt to further it. Here again a dose of practical work is the remedy. The dreamer must keep his feet on the Earth and the thinker must come out of his study.’ p. 139

Coming out of the study needn’t involve being employed as a social worker by Children’s Services. Volunteering at a Food bank can be eye-opening enough.

So the social worker who can combine theory and practice can be a real force for change. As Attlee says:

‘The social worker is in high company, and social service is not the preserve of the parish worker, the charity monger and the statistician, but is the legacy of the prophets.’ p. 5


All references from: