

Being Here

William Clark

Bob Holman Interview

I had not been to Easterhouse for some time. Bob Holman is a busy man, so I started asking him some questions as we walked up the stairs of the converted block of houses that are now their thriving Community Centre. How had it all come about? They had started above a group of delapidated shops...?

Bob Holman Then these shops were taken over by the contractors and of course—they originally said that they valued what we were doing in the area and we could probably have the upper floor of these shops. And when they built them there wasn't an upper floor. So we didn't have anywhere. As a result of that there was a public meeting in 1989 and we just formed this organisation

Family Action in Rogerfield and Easterhouse (FARE) and we didn't have any premises...I used to work part time for it, just from my flat...

William Clark Who are the power brokers in Easterhouse, I can't quite work out how it's broken down, OK there's the council...?

BH They've got the Greater Easterhouse Development Corporation, now headed by Cllr. Coleman, he's also deputy leader of the Council...

WC So their work is basically to do with housing policy?

BH No. It's all to do with what's called 'Partnerships'...

WC And 'Social Exclusion'...?

BH 'Social Inclusion', in Scotland: 'SIN'—the 'Social Inclusion Network'. They've pumped a lot of money into the area: football pitches and all that kind of thing. It's a very different approach from our approach which is very much being here. This place is run by local residents. To be on a committee you've got to come to the AGM. The idea of this is that local people know best what an area wants. We're not trying to be a Social Services dept. In terms of things like local services, youth clubs, supporting people—we think we're the people who know best what the area wants, and that's been our emphasis, what you might call a bottom-up approach. That kind of approach doesn't get grants of millions of pounds—it gets chickenfeed.

WC Why do you think it is this way?

BH Well it's a strange thing...the Westminster government when it came into power and started the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) the magic word was 'empowerment': 'we're going to empower local people with the SEU.'

WC As you said:

"The first thing the Social Exclusion Unit did was to define its own membership, its own leading 12 members. And the 12 members include professionals, a highly paid business person, chiefs from the voluntary sector, people who've been to public school and Oxbridge, but nobody who is unemployed, who is poor, who lives in the estates like Easterhouse. So here's a very strange thing, that immediately the Social Exclusion Unit excludes anybody who is excluded."

But fundamentally the SEU and the Performance & Innovation Unit (PIU) are both run by Geoff Mulgan with their 'third way' Demos-type ideas...

BH 'Empowerment' in that kind of context is

a nonsense because the decisions are still being made in the same old way by the same people. What the government has done through the SEU and SIN—it's idea of empowerment—is to set up large 'Partnerships': the Housing dept., Health dept., the Police; they're the people on the Partnership, with a few local representatives. It's quite interesting that in this area they advertised the voting: "you can have four representatives". In the end it only got four nominations, so there wasn't in fact an election. Which I think is indicative about what local people thought of it. So it's really about large organisations in partnership. We know very well that for a small organisation entering into partnership means that we are junior partners. A partnership is senior and junior partners and we are the small fry. So we don't get to distribute money, we get 'consulted', but we don't get to actually make decisions. And I think what organisations like FARE—and we're only one, because there are lots of groups—what we are showing are that local people are capable of making decisions, they can run budgets, they're not going to put it in their pockets and run away, they can appoint staff and sack staff.

WC You seem to be indicating that these large associations of government agencies are getting together to maintain the status quo really. They've got other agendas, which concur with the New Labour agenda: Third Way stuff which was thought an electoral expediency with nothing really to it. Their policy is influenced by their 'social research' and here there's been a bit of a rise of interest in sociology in a similar way that the Thatcher government tried with economics. The rhetoric is now 'social' rather than 'economic'. One of the things I wanted to ask you was with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which is the government funded organisation where they get their information—they set up a particular (dubious) branch of that, the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE), at the LSE with much the same remit as the SEU. Well in their annual report of 1999, they cite you as taking part in their seminars and that they consulted you...

BH I did take part in their seminars...

WC But doesn't that means you're being used to justify their position...?

BH Well I don't know. If you look at the seminar I really made an attack on what they were doing, the kind of things I'm speaking about now. Criticising the government for having a top down approach and completely undervaluing what we're doing at a local level. I never realised I got cited as part of the gang.

WC You're last on the list! Somehow you get the impression they went round genuinely consulting everyone. This organisation spent three quarters of a million pounds in one year, producing a couple of reports—research into poverty! There's something slightly disgusting about that.

BH It's a point I made in the seminar: that the government can give £2m to that unit and nothing to us. They argue it comes from different budgets, but it's still public money. But a lot of the people on this list on these seminars: Bill Jordan, Peter Townsend, would be critical of the work of that unit.

WC I think it is fundamentally dishonest. When you start to look at the names in their report—the director of CASE, John Hills' work is cited 38 times. He also writes with Geoff Mulgan, what are they going to do with all their information—they're going to send it to the SIU, so they get all this money, use their own work

and tell Mulgan stuff he already knows, meanwhile he's moved onto another unit pumping all this stuff out as if it was independent.

BH I know. It's a self-perpetuating organisation. When it first came out I did write a piece for the *Guardian*, which they never published, criticising setting it up. I could have made a lot more use of the money. One of the professors was saying "there's no point in giving the poor an extra pound a week, it wouldn't make any difference getting people out of poverty," which is true, but I think people on low income would sooner have an extra pound per week than £2m going to this unit. These people are earning £60, £70,000 a year. One of the small things I can do because I've got a small toe-hold into the academic world is I can convey what happens at places like this...

WC That's how blind and remote these people are, that you are the only link they have with the outside world?

BH Geoff Mulgan came straight from public school and Oxbridge straight into...but one of the few good things we've been doing here is—I encouraged the local people to write (a book called *Faith in the Poor*), six Easterhouse people wrote it—great stuff—about their experiences; which dismisses the myth that people are not articulate here. We had enormous problems getting it published. Penguin told me 'the poor can't write, who wants to read it anyway?' When finally it did get published it sold out.

WC I would have to say that I am a product of Easterhouse but I don't feel overawed by the intellectual weight of these people. There are these prejudices against working class culture in general.

BH I think a lot of that came with Charles Murray and his version of the 'underclass'...

WC Well they don't want to use that phrase now...

BH It still seeps out now and again—Tony Blair uses it now and again—Murray said that Easterhouse was the classic example of underclass society. There are no fathers and the kids run wild...and apparently he based it on a half-day visit here. He's got another book out 'Underclass plus ten', it's been ten years since he wrote that book. Murray's a typical case. He started on the left, Lyndon Johnstone's time, and gradually moved to the right. He is in fact financed by the *Sunday Times*: by Rupert Murdoch and they're the people who pay for him to come over here and finance the books.

WC Well that's interesting. Obviously these people's theories benefit someone. Within a lot of their ideological shift there is this notion of 'globalisation'. For me it is an excuse for the government carrying on letting multi-national companies do what they want. You mentioned big agencies' agendas swamping everyone: development companies have agendas and consultants and the fact is these people are gaining from the private sector. CASE is funded by Toyota, Demos and its spin-offs in 'sustainable development' are paid by and on the side of big business.

BH It's 'partnerships' isn't it?

WC Yeah, the third way. There's nothing to it. The whole 'Nexus' debate, set up by the government, all these Oxbridge academics and there's no academic basis for it. None.

BH I've read the books...I think the problem is it's so nebulous it's actually quite difficult to criticise, because you can't actually see what



they're saying.

WC Which was much the same with monetarist economics, it's got to be slippery. Eventually Thatcher went on TV saying 'well you know I had nothing to do with monetarism.' But you were also mentioned in a magazine article by Ian Christie the deputy director of Demos. He starts with 'the History Man', sociology is tainted by Marx, he tries to erase the last twenty years of what has happened and then lines himself up with British Empiricists Young and Willmot.

BH Michael Young wrote the Labour manifesto in 1945...

WC ...Lord Young.

BH Yes I'm a bit disappointed at that...

WC Well let me read you what Christie wrote:

The example of Bob Holman, former professor of social administration at Bath University who has lived for years on Glasgow's Easterhouse estate as a community worker, rejecting the remoteness of academics from their objects of study, is a counsel of perfection few can follow.

BH I really dislike that sort of thing. There's another chap—Bill Jordan—who's written a little bit about me and he says I'm 'marginalised'. People say these things to put you in a corner so they don't have to accept anything you say—so it is not really relevant. I do find that objectionable. But what it also illustrates is with think tanks people can move into these positions straight from University and they've no real understanding of what life is like for ordinary people. You don't want to give the impression that you've got to be a missionary going into poor areas. But probably because of our own upbringing within working class cultures we've got a greater grasp of what life is like than people who've been brought up by their fathers who're professors and went on from a good school to good universities and then into a think tank. That's a very dangerous mode the government have adopted to get their information.

WC You can say that this is incredibly naive and excuse them, or you can say for example well wait a minute...there's connections here. How come what they're running now within the Labour party mirrors aspects of the process of ideological deception and anti-left propaganda that the US and UK secret services were pushing in the 50s and 60s.

BH I suppose the government gets what it wants. The SEU when it was first set up, with its twelve members—all affluent or business people—there wasn't one member who was unemployed or lived in a deprived area or had any experience at the other end. So it's a very slanted view and also in some ways a very patronising view because the assumption is that powerful people can make the right decisions for people at the bottom end. But in a sense that's a contradiction about what they're saying about empowerment. And that is the fallacy which is behind all the government policy and rhetoric about neighbourhood renewal. Hilary Armstrong is very keen that organisations must belong to local people: but they don't. And that's just what I've been trying to chip away at.

WC But they are trying to suborn Non Governmental Organisations with their policy now. Mulgan's PIU is described as 'exerting pressure' to make sure that people are trapped into conforming. Now that involves psychological pressure, propaganda.

BH Targets. I think a great example of this is the government's SEU document of 'Neighbourhood

Renewal'. There's a lot in it about empowerment and local involvement but then it says what the targets are; so the targets already set by government and all local involvement really means is help us to reach these targets we've already set. They've set targets for the reduction of poverty but poverty by their own definition: 'below half average income'. But that is meaningless. Having half average income does not mean that you have got a sufficient income. But in terms of targets what the government *hasn't* said anything about is in terms of *inequality*. You can go through that book issued by Alisdair Darling—which has I don't know how many targets—but nothing about reducing inequality. There's nothing about reducing the gap between the rich and the poor. For New Labour, it is prepared to alleviate poverty by their own definition but it isn't prepared to reduce the gap between those people and those at the top. For instance it will not increase personal taxation. It won't increase inheritance tax. I haven't seen their manifesto yet—but it will probably say the same thing: no increase in personal taxation. Until you do that you can't reduce inequality.

WC You say with the definition of Social Inclusion that it is:

...defined as 'Multiple deprivations resulting from a lack of personal, social, political or financial opportunities.' Now this is incredibly broad and vague, and it includes things like kids deprived of school, truancy, even prostitution, ill health. Now of course one wants to stop that kind of social distress, but the trouble is that they're so multiple, so vague, so general, that you can't really get a measure of social exclusion in itself, and it's noticeable that New Labour refuses now to set a target a) for reducing poverty, or b) for lessening inequality. And I think social exclusion really lets it off the hook.

BH In terms of poverty, what New Labour won't do is to assess how much pounds, shillings and pence you need a week to have a decent life style, to enable you to participate fully in society. It's always going back to half average income. Now the Family Budget Unit of London University has in enormous detail worked out how much money you need for a 'low cost but acceptable income'; and that includes having a weeks holiday—not in Italy but in Blackpool. And it shows from that if you're in receipt of income support you're probably about £39 below a stringent (I think too stringent) amount you need to live on. You see the government just refuses to identify how much money you need and that is why it isn't tackling poverty. If you ever meet a Labour politician ask them that question: they'll never answer it.

WC So they've got all these statistics, all this million of pounds worth of 'research' from CASE but...

BH If you ask them how much money does a person need—a lone mum with two kids—per week to have a decent life style—they will not answer.

WC There is also the Acheson Report. [The Report on Health Inequalities carried out by the former British Surgeon-General, Sir Donald Acheson] This says it very simply: you've got to give them more money.

BH That committee of enquiry was set up by the Labour party as soon as they came into government. The basic recommendation was that to overcome health inequalities it isn't enough to alleviate poverty, you've got to reduce inequalities. But of course that's been ignored.

WC It is inequality itself that makes people preventably sick.

BH After it's had years in power New Labour will be able to say that the position of the poor

has improved in the sense that Child Benefit has gone up, Income Support's gone up, there's a Minimum Wage; but in the sense of inequality their position has actually worsened because the affluent have made gains at a far greater rate. So in terms of old socialistic principles I think it's been a failure and it follows that therefore the gaps in health won't change. This area in particular: Baillieston has a very high infant mortality rate: I mean it's double. I think it's so offensive that kids under the age of one have twice the chance of dying here than they do in Surrey or Norfolk: I mean it's just so inhumane. But New Labour won't change that. Even within Glasgow women here die five years younger than women in more affluent parts of Glasgow. How can any socialist defend that.

WC Well they defend it via the Third Way, where they say 'instead of re-distribution of wealth we're re-distributing opportunities.'

BH Well that is it isn't it: it's not a level playing field—it's nonsense. What equality of opportunity is there for youngsters around here. There are teenagers around here that are not even getting the dole. There are people from the age of sixteen to twenty-one who couldn't cope who didn't like the New Deal and dropped out. That's where the dole gets cut off. There's this great thing in Britain where if you're like seventeen to twenty-one you can't be unemployed: that's one of the reasons why the figures have come down. So you have about 300,000 young people who are actually unemployed, but, they're not receiving benefit. And the measurement now is 'unemployed and receiving benefit'. This is one of the spins that get put on figures. There's the election coming up and they're not only choosing not to vote they can't vote because they're not on the list. They've been disenfranchised in our democratic society. In a way you can understand that. They're not going to vote because politics is meaningless. But within that kind of culture of despair in a way, what's going to happen to them? Some young people without the dole are dependent upon parents who are on the dole—so clearly the poverty of that family is multiplied. Others just drift around from bed to bed. The other side of this is it shows how resilient and strong the society is: that people in poverty are willing to take in people who are in poverty.

Outside in the bright May Day sunshine I walked off to get the train. On the way I passed where I used to live. It had been obliterated, completely demolished, I couldn't even configure where anything had been or where the roads were going, it was just too confusing. As I stood there bewildered, Holman came along and gave me a lift to the station in his car. "Keep Struggling" he said with a cheery wave, and drove off to look after his grandchildren.

