The Oxford School at Donovan – Understanding the ‘Labour Problem’

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What was The Oxford School? What influence did it have, on Donovan and after? To qualify these observations I should start with my own connection. This arose from having Hugh Clegg as my tutor in politics while I was a PPE undergraduate at Oxford from 1963 to 1966. At the dinner celebrating the end of final exams, he suggested I should become his research assistant at the National Board for Prices and Incomes (NBPI). It was an easy decision. He was the tutor whom I had found most stimulating – and my three other options all involved yet more exams. Two months later I arrived at the Board’s office on Victoria Street. Hugh had just left Oxford for the newly-born Warwick University, but had delayed his start there for a year because of his commitments as member of both the Board and the Donovan Commission.

My role was to interview whoever Hugh thought relevant for the topic in hand. I had an initial trip with the Board’s industrial relations adviser, Fred Bayliss, to see managers and union officials in South Wales. After that I was sent out on my own to roam, as the Board’s references dictated, around Britain’s refineries, power stations, factories, coal-mines and much else. Hugh was always quick to read the reports I wrote for him, ask questions, make suggestions and encourage discussion of implications. Sometimes I accompanied him to meet the gate-keeper for a new project. I fondly recall meeting Will Paynter, the mineworkers’ General Secretary, this way, before embarking on a study of their recently concluded Power-Loading Agreement. I mostly worked on the three ‘general references’ for which Hugh as Board member was responsible: productivity agreements, payment by results, and job evaluation. In preparation for the pilot for the case studies that lay behind the Board’s report on payment by results¹, he fixed me up with a week’s familiarisation with time and motion study at a Joseph Lucas factory in Birmingham.

While at the Board I came to meet some key figures of the, in retrospect, Oxford School, who worked there part-time. My introduction to Allan Flanders was in October 1966, when I accompanied him on his first return to the Esso Fawley refinery since the publication of his influential book on their productivity agreements two years earlier². It was memorable partly because it turned out that those agreements had already substantially unravelled, and I was sent back later to find out why³. I was to meet Derek Robinson and George Bain at the Board, and also academics not associated with Oxford, notably Sid Kessler and Bert Turner.

The two issues of incomes policy and industrial relations reform were undoubtedly very much intertwined in Hugh’s mind at that time. I recall, for example, a drafting meeting in early 1967 at which a topic of discussion was the appropriate ‘warmth’ of the Board’s official response to productivity agreements. It was a discussion that hinged on the extent to which approval should be given to formal workplace bargaining. Before Donovan it was seen in many quarters as a subversive activity but, in my naiveté, I was surprised at how pleased Hugh was to have ‘warmth’ approved. I got a glimpse of the Royal Commission at work, one April morning in 1967, when I delivered

¹ NBPI (1967), Payment by Results, Report 65, Cmd 3627, London: HMSO
² Flanders, A. (1964), The Fawley Productivity Agreements, London: Faber
³ Ahlstrand, B. (1990), The Quest for Productivity: a Case Study of Fawley after Flanders’, Cambridge: CUP
something to Hugh at Lacon House as Commissioners were assembling for their regular Tuesday meeting.

Later that year, after making an embarrassingly large error in calculating the benefits of an electricity productivity agreement, I decided I was not cut out to be a civil servant. Conveniently on cue, Hugh suggested that I moved to join him and Richard Hyman at Warwick. Although I continued to work part-time for the Board for over a year, I started at Warwick in January 1968. Before the month was out, we had met with the Coventry and District Engineering Employers’ Association, a connection which launched many a case study and paper, and at least two books⁴. Hugh gave us little guidance on what to do, but good fieldwork access and a lot of moral support, mostly over pints of Davenports ale. He organised a red minivan for our fieldwork, and he provided rapid and detailed criticism of anything we wrote. We could go to his lectures and, as he converted them into his textbook⁵, he welcomed our comments on draft chapters.

It was an exciting time. Gaining research access for case studies was so easy compared with today, and factory security was virtually non-existent. Coventry was a hothouse of workplace bargaining and shop steward organisation. Both junior management and shop stewards alike usually welcomed the chance for a chat about their strange procedures, perspectives and customs. It was also exciting in terms of policy. Harold Wilson’s incomes policies were lurching from crisis to crisis. The pressure on him to ‘do something’ about workplace-based collective action was rising, and with it pressure on the Donovan Commission. Hugh created his own crisis within the Commission in 1968 when he produced a draft minority report opposing direct legal intervention. I still recall the thrill of reading the draft that he shared with us, spelling out his ‘two systems’ analysis. This was to become the essence of Chapter 3 of the Report when he had won over the other Commissioners⁶. Donovan, and the twists and turns of its mistranslation into Barbara Castle’s In Place of Strife white paper, became a recurrent theme of our coffee-time conversations."⁷

I first met Bill McCarthy at a fairly riotous party held at Hugh’s home in early June 1968 to celebrate the publication of the Donovan Report. Bill was to become Warwick’s most enduring contact with Oxford, actively involved for over thirty years⁸. But there were many others. George Bain came to Warwick, via UMIST, when the Industrial Relations Research Unit (IRRU) was established with SSRC funding in 1970. Allan Flanders came, via the Commission of Industrial Relations, the next year. During the IRRU’s early years, we received personal support and encouragement from Oxford from, to my knowledge, Alan Fox, Arthur Marsh, Derek Robinson, and John Corina. We in return helped with examining at Ruskin College and with shop steward teaching at the Oxford Extramural Delegacy. Academic links between Oxford and Warwick were excellent. But relations among the Oxford academics themselves appeared to be non-existent or even downright acrimonious. Their research was impressive, but by 1970 it had ceased to have the interdependence or coherence to merit the description of a ‘School’.

So what was ‘The Oxford School’? In terms of people, it was Allan Flanders and Hugh Clegg, coming together in Oxford in the late 1940s. They were united by their close intellectual friendship,

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⁷ Jenkins, P. (1970), The Battle of Downing Street, London: Charles Knight
complementary skills and temperaments, and their political views, shaped by extraordinary pre-war and wartime personal experiences. It is worth noting the authorship of the System of Industrial Relations in Great Britain, which they edited in 1953. The names of other contributors do not reflect the presence of any wider Oxford School: Otto Kahn-Freund was then at LSE, Denis Bell was at Glasgow, and Asa Briggs and T. E. Chester, who were at Oxford, went on to greater things in other fields. Twenty years later, in a strategy paper for the IRRU that Hugh wrote with George Bain, we get their opinion on which research during the intervening period they considered worthwhile. Although some was by Oxford authors already named, the majority of the recent research that they considered influential was not.

Our focus should shift from the people to their intellectual stance. In terms of content, a feature of the Oxford School was their approach to social science research. It was to a purpose. They were concerned with the building of institutions to moderate power relationships in employment. In their youth the key figures had seen in war what happens when democratic structures break down. Their subsequent academic focus was very explicitly on facilitating pluralist institutions in the inherently unequal sphere of employment.

They owed no loyalty to any particular academic discipline. As George and Hugh’s strategy statement made clear, they were intellectually promiscuous between history, law, sociology, politics, and economics. They nurtured whatever it took to explore the underlying power relationships and their constraints – whether interviews or econometrics, surveys or archives, workplace studies or international comparisons. Some of them became experienced industrial mediators and arbitrators, which provides a sensitivity to the unavoidable concealment, both intentional and unintentional, that characterises industrial relations. They developed close friendships among both managers and trade unionists. They welcomed controversy, so long as it was empirically supported. They were certainly not hostile to theory – today’s PhDs regularly cite Flanders, Clegg and Fox theorisations. But hostile they definitely were to all-embracing theories - whether market, Marxist or whatever - if those theories smothered relevant complexity.

This was the approach to research that Hugh, Allan and George took with them to Warwick. It has characterised much of the IRRU’s work there subsequently. More important was its impact on public policy. It had been fundamental to the approach adopted by the NBPI through Hugh’s influence as a foundation Board member in the mid-1960s. Such was the extent of informal workplace bargaining at that time that the people who purportedly were in charge of enterprises – and even of trade unions – knew little of the fiddles, compromises, customs and arm-twisting that actually fixed pay and controlled work organisation. The only way of finding out was to go and talk to the combatants where they worked. The on-site case study became the Board’s trade-mark instrument of investigation.

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It was developed further with Allan as a foundation Commissioner when the Commission on Industrial Relations (CIR) was established in 1969. It was particularly important for CIR general studies of, for example, shop steward facilities, disclosure of information, and communications. Later in the 1970s, George’s membership of the Bullock Commission on industrial democracy ensured that it had as sound an evidence base as time constraints permitted. Twenty years later, in 1997, in a profoundly different industrial world, George’s founding chairmanship ensured that the Low Pay Commission (LPC) continued this tradition of grass-roots engagement and multi-disciplinary research. The LPC’s task of establishing the National Minimum Wage called above all for the understanding, and the balancing, of economic, political, legal and social constraints. The integrity of its research was fundamental to the credibility of the National Minimum Wage. The demands on that integrity are now even tougher with the increased political intervention announced by the Chancellor in 2015.

Whatever ‘The Oxford School’ may be, there is no doubt that, during the 1950s and 1960s, the teaching of Allan and Hugh, and the seminar series they ran at Nuffield College, were hugely influential in promoting interest and research in industrial relations. Among the doctoral students they supervised were McCarthy, Bayliss, Bain and Hyman. More to the present point, there can be no doubting the overwhelming influence on the Donovan Commission of Oxford-based academics. Hugh and Otto Kahn-Freund (who had moved to Oxford in 1964) were both Commissioners. Allan Flanders’ evidence, Collective Bargaining: Prescription for Change, would certainly have been influential with them. Bill McCarthy was the Director of Research. The substantial programme of work he commissioned was dominated by Oxford academics: Arthur Marsh, Alan Fox, John Hughes, George Bain, and Ted Whybrew, as well as McCarthy himself.

The Donovan research programme was not only comprehensive and authoritative, it was innovative. For example, Fox’s introduction of the sociological distinction between unitary and pluralist approaches had an impact that still resonates. McCarthy’s overview of evidence on the shop steward’s role was unprecedented in its breadth. The survey of workplace institutions carried out for the Commission by him and Stan Parker was arguably the direct fore-runner of Britain’s continuing and incomparable Workplace Employment Relations Surveys. Their survey coined the Report’s most quoted and highly significant phrase - that shop stewards were ‘more of a lubricant than an irritant’. Working a minefield of popular prejudice and media panic, it is hard to exaggerate the importance of the strong evidence base of the Donovan Commission – largely Oxford provided - in enabling it to reach and, no less important, to agree upon its conclusions.

Looking back over fifty years, perhaps the clearest legacy of the Oxford School is simply that it was an exemplary episode in the history of British social science research. A group of individuals were strongly motivated to understand the contemporary manifestation of what in the 19th century would have been called the ‘labour problem’. They wanted to understand the world in order to change it. In building their evidence base, they got out of their disciplinary comfort zones, and they got out of their libraries to listen to the people whom they were studying. Our contemporary ‘labour problem’

18 McCarthy and Parker, op cit, p56, RCTUEA Report, p29
may be fundamentally different, but it is, alas, no less than theirs. I hope that, in working to alleviate it, today's social scientists will learn from the example of the Oxford School.