

Clement Attlee and the social service idea: modern messages for social work in England

Abstract

Clement Attlee is most famous for being the Labour Prime Minister of the United Kingdom after the Second World War. It is less well known that he was a social worker and a social work lecturer on either side of the First World War, before he was elected to Parliament in 1922. He had even written a book about it, *The Social Worker*, published in 1920. This paper describes Attlee's time as a social worker and social work lecturer, setting his experiences and the book in the context of the times, especially the tensions and overlaps between 'individualist' and 'collectivist' understandings of society. It outlines Attlee's vision of social work, and considers the on-going relevance of his understandings of social work and society. In particular, the paper highlights Attlee's notion of 'the social service idea'. This brings together four essential elements of social work – that it should be radical, relationship-based, realistic and reciprocal. Attlee's social service idea, and his individual example, still offer guidance and inspiration for social work today.

Key words

Social work history; social policy; values

Clement Attlee is most famous for being the Labour Prime Minister of the United Kingdom after the Second World War, whose government finally ended the Poor Law, created the National Health Service, brought the coal, steel and railway industries into common

ownership, and brought independence to India and Burma (amongst other achievements). Before that he had been deputy prime minister during the Second World War, leader of the Labour Party since 1935 and a Member of Parliament since 1922. He joined the army at the start of the First World War, and served with distinction. It is less well known that Clement Attlee was a social worker and a social work lecturer on either side of the 1914-18 war, before he was elected to Parliament. He had even written a book about it, *The Social Worker*, published in 1920. This has been a rather forgotten corner of social work history, although it has become better known in recent years, partly because the book has been reprinted, and also because it is now easily available online.

This paper describes Attlee's time as a social worker and social work lecturer, setting his experiences and the book in the context of the times. It outlines Attlee's vision of social work, as set out in the book, and considers the on-going relevance of his understandings of social work and society, still powerful messages for social workers today.

The paper draws on *The Social Worker* and Attlee's autobiography, *As It Happened* (1954). It also draws Attlee's correspondence about the book with his publishers, George Bell and Sons (archive held at Reading University); his drafts for his autobiography, held at Churchill College, Cambridge; and his employment file held in the archive at the London School of Economics. There are numerous biographies of Attlee (e.g. Beckett, 1997; Howell, 2006; Jago, 2014), and accounts of the social policy of the era (e.g. McBriar, 1987; José Harris, 1994; Bernard Harris, 2004; Fraser, 2009).

Clement Attlee

Clement Attlee was born in 1883, the seventh of eight children in a prosperous family in Putney, South London. His father was a leading lawyer. It was an archetypal upper-middle-

class Victorian family, with firm Christian beliefs and a strong ethic of social service. Attlee later gave up Christianity, but the notion of 'social service' came to play a pivotal role in his thinking about social work and society.

Attlee was educated at Haileybury College, a public school in Hertfordshire, and then at Oxford University. He graduated in 1904, and then started training as a lawyer. However, his heart was not really in that work, and one evening in 1905 he and one of his brothers visited Haileybury House, a boys' club in Stepney run by former pupils of his old school. By Attlee's own account, this was one of the most important turning points in his life (Attlee, 1954, pp. 26-28). Attlee was impressed with the man running the club, Cecil Nussey, and started volunteering there, at first once a week and then more and more often. The club was run as part of the army cadet corps, and the boys had to join up in order to become members. Attlee himself took a volunteer commission as an officer in the army reserve so that he could take on a leadership role in the club. Within two years he had become the manager, and moved to live in a small house beside it.

During those two years, Attlee's old attitudes about poverty and society changed completely. He had not played an active part in student politics when he was at Oxford, but described himself as being a Conservative in those days. He shared the dominant beliefs of his social class, that individuals were responsible for their own poverty and misfortune, and the way out was to work harder and lead more responsible lives. But now, as he got to know the boys and their families, his understandings began to change.

He gives some powerful and moving examples of this, as shown in this excerpt from *The Social Worker*. Attlee is writing in the third person, but clearly talking about himself:

Take the case of a boy from a public school knowing little or nothing of social and industrial matters, who decides, perhaps at the invitation of a friend or from loyalty to his old school that runs a mission, or to the instinct for service that exists in everyone, to assist in running a boys' club. At first he will be shy, then on getting to know the club boys he will find himself with a new outlook and shedding old prejudices. The rather noisy crowd of boys on bicycles with long quiffs of hair turned over the peaks of their caps, whom he always regarded as bounders, become human beings to him, and he appreciates their high spirits, and overlooks what he would formerly have called vulgarity.

He goes out to referee for them at football, and finds that the only available ground is four miles away and he remembers that somewhere he had heard of an agitation for open spaces, while the question of getting there makes him consider transport problems, trains, rail and buses, and he may begin to enquire who is responsible for these services.

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 has had a talk with the boy's father, who is in the building trade and gets only occasional work ...

In a year or two the thoughtless schoolboy will have become interested in social problems ... and will perceive that the faults he sees are only the effects of greater causes.

(Attlee, 1920, pp. 211-213)

By late 1907 Attlee was describing himself as a socialist, and joined the Fabians and the Independent Labour Party.

The work at the club was in the evenings, and not well paid, but Attlee was comfortably off because of support from his family, and after his father's death in 1908, money he inherited from him. He gave up his job as a lawyer – he said that his friends in the East End congratulated him as though he had given up the drink (Attlee, 1920, p. 207) – and got involved in local political activity and social work. He was an active member of a school care committee, organising free school meals, visiting families to see if the children qualified for them, and if medical treatment was being followed (Attlee, 1954, pp. 36, 40-41). Attlee worked for a year, 1909-10, on the National Campaign for the Breakup of the Poor Law, run by Beatrice and Sidney Webb. In 1910 he was appointed secretary of Toynbee Hall, the well-known education and social 'settlement' in Whitechapel. He did not enjoy the Liberal ethos that dominated there, and left after a year (Attlee discusses settlements in some detail in Chapter 7 of *The Social Worker*). Attlee also helped with a piece of social research, a study of 'outworkers' in the tailoring trade, drawing attention to the long hours they had to work and the extremely poor pay. He then worked as an 'official explainer' for the 1911 National Insurance Act, one of a number of people employed by the Liberal government to travel the country to explain the provisions of the Act and how it would work in practice.

In January 1913 Attlee started work at the London School of Economics, as a tutor and lecturer in social service (discussed further below). The other person who was interviewed for the post was Hugh Dalton, who went on to become a Labour MP himself, and was Chancellor of the Exchequer in Attlee's government in 1945. The interview panel was chaired by Sidney Webb, and according to Dalton (1953, p. 71), Webb explained the decision to him afterwards by saying, 'We thought that, if we appointed him, he'd stick to it, but that if we appointed

you, you wouldn't'. Attlee attributed his getting the job to Webb's influence, but with a different slant, saying 'I was not appointed on the score of academic qualification but because I was considered to have a good practical knowledge of social conditions' (Attlee, 1954, p. 40).

Attlee left the lecturing job when he joined the army in 1914, but returned to it after the war. He gave it up after he was elected to Parliament in November 1922. In that post-war period he took on other social work administrative duties, along with his political activity. He was on the Limehouse Board of Poor Law Guardians, and chairman of their children's home. He was also their representative on the Metropolitan Asylums Board, which ran mental health hospitals and institutions. Attlee reflects 'We did much to humanise the institutions, while seeking to preserve instead of breaking up the families that sought the assistance of the Poor Law' (1954, p. 59).

In order to make sense of *The Social Worker*, it is important to appreciate the wider context in which Attlee practised and taught social work. And although much is different now, a century and more later, it is striking to see how the underlying issues are the same.

Context

The Edwardian era has been called 'one of the most extravagantly unequal decades in British history' (Harris, 2009, p. 57), but it was also a time when debates about social policy reached a new level of prominence, becoming central to the public, political and intellectual life of the times. There were debates about the definition of poverty, the causes of poverty, and what should be done about it. Charles Booth's studies of poor communities in London had been published in 1890s, and Seebohm Rowntree's study of poverty in York was published in 1901. There was concern about the high infant mortality rate in poor areas, the challenges of increasing life expectancy and dependency in old age, and about high unemployment. These

led to intense debates about the proper role of the state and the responsibilities of individuals and families, many of them focusing on what should happen to the Poor Law. There was general agreement that it needed reform, but in what way?

To caricature, there were two schools of thought. The terms that were used at the time were individualists and collectivists, and the ideas are not so different from ways of thinking that prevail today. On the one hand, there were the individualist views: individuals are responsible for themselves and their families, for their own welfare and conditions of life. If they fall into poverty they need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Some may need help from outside the family to do this, but that should not come from the state. If necessary, help should be provided by charities on the basis of careful assessment and close monitoring. Those who were helpable, should be helped; those who were assessed as unhelpable should be referred to the Poor Law. The Poor Law offered relief, but on the basis of deterrence; the help should only be delivered in the workhouse, in conditions so harsh that no one but the most desperate would accept them. The leading exponents of this point of view were the members and supporters of the Charity Organisation Society, or to give it its original name, the Society for Organising Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendicity (begging). It was often just known as the COS – and in poorer areas, COS came to stand for ‘cringe or starve’ (Rooff, 1972, p. 321).

On the other hand, there were the collectivist views of the trade unions, the cooperative movement, socialists, the Fabians and the developing Labour Party. These views placed more emphasis on the social conditions in which people were living, the wider causes of poverty - unemployment through no fault of the individual worker, ill-health, inadequate training and education, high rents, bad housing, poor working conditions and low pay. They argued for the breakup of the Poor Law, a greater role for the state to intervene earlier, not on the basis of

deterrence, but through notions of entitlement and citizenship, through central government programmes such as old age pensions and financial assistance, and direct services provided by local authorities.

A Royal Commission on the Reform of the Poor Laws and the Relief of Distress was established by the Conservative government in 1905, the year Attlee started volunteering at the boys' club. It continued after the Liberals won a majority in the general election of January 1906. The commission contained supporters of the individualist and collectivist schools of thought. In an era when campaigns for women's rights were also to the fore, especially the right to vote, it is notable that both sides were led by strong and determined women – the individualists by Helen Bosanquet, a leading member of the Charity Organisation Society, and the collectivists by Beatrice Webb. The commission reported in early 1909, but without a definite conclusion. The majority report, written by Helen Bosanquet, recommended reforms to the Poor Law to make it more effective along the individualist lines. It upheld the principle that whilst the state should give help to those in the greatest need, the main role should be played by voluntary agencies, and the state's role minimal to the point of being a disincentive to claim help. The minority report, written by the Webbs, urged the breakup of the Poor Law altogether; and as noted, Attlee worked for their subsequent campaign to promote this.

But by then the Liberal government had lost patience with the commission and was going ahead with its own schemes. The first state old age pensions had been paid on New Year's Day 1909, and plans to introduce national insurance were developing. The Webbs objected to these plans because they thought they did not cover enough people, the contributions amounted to a heavy poll tax on the poor, and the payments were inadequate (McBriar, 1987, p. 313). The proposals provoked major political struggles, but the National Insurance Act was eventually passed in 1911, introducing compulsory national insurance against

sickness and unemployment. As mentioned earlier, Attlee worked for a year as an official explainer for the Act; but he kept a good relationship with the Webbs, which helped him to get the lectureship at the London School of Economics.

It should be emphasised that the simple two-way split between individualist and collectivists is a caricature. There were disagreements and debates within both of those general schools of thought, in both of them there were gaps between the ideals and the reality, and there were considerable overlaps. It would not be true to say that members of the Charity Organisation Society did not recognise the significance of the wider environment and social conditions, and it would not be true to say that those on the left wing did not recognise individual differences and individual responsibility. That context of debate and overlap gives the framework for understanding Attlee's approach to social work, and his job as a social work lecturer.

The London School of Economics

Attlee joined the newly-formed Department of Social Science and Administration at the London School of Economics (see Titmuss, 1951 and 1962; Harris, 1989). This had been created in 1912, by taking over a pre-existing organisation for training social workers called the London School of Sociology – a school that was run by the Charity Organisation Society. This school had been set up in 1903, but had its origins in programmes run by the Charity Organisation Society since 1896 (Bosanquet, 1973 [1914]; Harris, 1989). The School of Sociology ran full and part time courses, teaching practical techniques for social work, but in the context of a set of philosophical ideas about the nature of society known as 'idealism'. This took an organic view of society, drawing on Ancient Greek and German philosophy (see Harris, 1992). One of the leading writers in that tradition was Bernard Bosanquet, an Oxford philosopher, leading member of the Charity Organisation Society and husband of Helen

Bosanquet. (The perspective is shown in his 1901 lecture on 'the meaning of social work': Bosanquet, 1901.) The relationship between the Webbs and the Bosanquets was compared at the time with a game of tennis mixed doubles, an image pursued by McBriar (1987).

By 1912 the School of Sociology had fallen into financial difficulties, and the merger with the London School of Economics offered a sort of survival. Funding to support the new department came from a substantial donation from Ratan Tata, a member of one of India's greatest industrial, commercial and philanthropic dynasties, which the Webbs had secured (Harris, 1989, gives a fascinating discussion of the creation of the new department). The money established the Ratan Tata Foundation, with the aim 'to promote the study and further the knowledge of the principles and methods of preventing and relieving poverty and destitution' (quoted in Harris, 1989, p. 44). In 1916, the whole department was renamed the Ratan Tata Department and transferred to the direct control of London University; and that is the name that appears on the front page of Attlee's book. An economic slump in the early 1920s led to the withdrawal of the funding, and the Department was reabsorbed into the London School of Economics in 1922.

Going back to 1912, the Charity Organisation Society insisted that the person who had been the director of the School of Sociology, Edward Urwick, became the first director of the new department, and that it kept the same staff and curriculum for the first two years. This may explain why Attlee got his job as a lecturer, and why he approached it as he did. Attlee's 'good practical knowledge of social conditions' fitted with the practical aspects of the inherited Charity Organisation approach, but avoided an open clash with the theoretical underpinnings. But it is important to appreciate that in those pre-war years Attlee was teaching social work to a Charity Organisation curriculum. This means he would have been used to taking their

language, their ideas, but adapting them to his collectivist understanding of the issues. That is the approach he takes forward in his book, after the war.

'The Social Worker'

Attlee is clearly writing from a left-wing perspective, and by 1919 when he wrote the book he was positioning himself for a national political career (he was mayor of Stepney during that year), so his motive in writing it was not just about social work, but also about presenting himself as a Labour thinker and future MP.

The book was meant to be the first in a series called the Social Service Library, and Attlee was the general editor. In fact, the series was short lived, only publishing four books, which was the number specified in the original contract with Attlee (George Bell and Sons, 1919, archive reference MS1640/151/12). The publishers had hoped it would run longer than that: a fifth book was commissioned, but ended going to another publisher. Attlee described his own book as 'not a very brilliant effort' when he sent in the manuscript (Attlee, 1919, George Bell and Sons archive reference MS1640/151/8), but later he said it was well reviewed. It sold for six shillings, but was not a great seller: it only sold 600-700 copies, and Attlee said he did not even make £25 from the whole venture (Attlee, n.d., Churchill College papers, ATLE 1/25).

Despite the disappointing sales, for us it is an intriguing and inspiring book to read. Attlee's vision of what social work should be like, how it should be done, reflects the struggles of this relatively new profession to decide its purposes and skills, in the context of the debates of the time about the proper roles of the state, the individual and the family, and the charity sector.

Attlee is strongly critical of the Charity Organisation Society. He reflects that he was 'quite enamoured' of their methods at first, but later became 'bitterly opposed' to them (Attlee, n.d., Churchill College papers, ATLE 1/9, p. 3). He discusses their work and philosophy at

length in *The Social Worker*, calling their charity a 'hard and unlovely thing' (1920, p. 66).

Attlee appreciates the importance of co-ordinating charitable activity and their contribution to social work training, but is scathing about their focus on individual character, arguing that 'the points of character that are especially emphasised ... are those which are most convenient for the wealthier classes' and that the Society is 'essentially designed for the defence of the propertied classes' (1920, p. 73).

On the other hand, Attlee is fully aware of the fact that individuals do react differently to different circumstances. Some are able to make the most of help that is offered, others are not able to, and some seem to take advantage of it. Some of Attlee's harshest criticisms are for people he considers 'cadgers', and he warns that 'the enthusiastic social reformer is sometimes apt to rely too much on bettering environment and not enough on bettering the individual' (1920, p. 222). This is characteristic of Attlee's approach, recognising both sides but favouring the collectivist approach, putting the emphasis on trying to understand people in their social context.

Attlee had started as a volunteer himself, so he was not opposed to all forms of charity or voluntary activity. He saw an important role for them to work in cooperation with local authorities, which were taking on an increasing role in delivering welfare services in the years after World War 1. A large part of *The Social Worker* is taken up with descriptions of the roles of various charities, making it a practical manual for social workers at the time. But Attlee is very mistrustful of the way that charity could all too easily become patronising and self-serving:

Charity is always apt to be accompanied by a certain complacency and condescension on the part of the benefactor, and by an expectation of gratitude from the recipient

which cuts at the root of all true friendliness ... The evil of charity is that it tends to make the charitable think that he has done his duty by giving away some trifling sum, his conscience is put to sleep, and he takes no trouble to consider the social problem any further ... Very many do not realise that you must be just before you are generous.

(Attlee, 1920, pp. 9, 58).

Social work and 'the social service idea'

Attlee says that the first qualification for a social worker is to be sympathetic (p. 126). Charity Organisation thinkers said that too, even if this was not always delivered in practice. Attlee goes on to explain what he means by sympathy, again in a way that the Charity Organisation Society would have approved: 'in order to sympathise one must understand, and to understand one must know' (p. 129). This is so that sympathy and help are not given naïvely, indiscriminately, but based on sound knowledge of the individual and their social circumstances, what nowadays we would call a good social assessment. Also, Attlee emphasised the importance of understanding the wider conditions that shaped people's lives, based on good knowledge of social research (Attlee, 1920, esp. pp. 14-17). Those are all themes that the Charity Organisation Society included in its training for social workers. Attlee takes those ideas, but gives them a new slant, using them to advance a new understanding of social work, and a new understanding of society. (Of course, the ability to draw on both sides of debate is also a key political skill, using the words and phrases preferred by one's opponents to advance one's own argument.)

For Attlee, social work is in a new phase now. He writes that social work was formerly done *for* the working classes, but is now done *with* them (original italics: Attlee, 1920, p. 19, and also p. 192). Attlee identifies a number of reasons for this change, but crucial is the rise of

social democracy. Attlee argues that the old way of social work, based on ideas of charity, should be replaced with a new understanding, 'the social service idea', grounded in social justice and citizenship.

Yet again he is taking an old idea, and giving it a new spin. 'Social service' was a well-known term for voluntary work, and Attlee himself spoke with pride of his family's long tradition of social service. There was a popular social service movement in Edwardian England (see Brewis, 2009). But as Attlee observes, there are two sides to 'social service'. For people who consider that society is, on the whole, well-ordered and just, the activities it covers would merely be 'a praiseworthy attempt to ease the minor injustices inevitable in all systems of society' (p. 10); but for those who see society generally as unfairly structured and in need of major reform, it brings a whole new set of expectations. Attlee takes the old understanding of social service, the rich doing good to the poor, and overturns it. His concept of social service replaces the ideas of generosity with justice, benevolence with duty, condescension with respect. Attlee argues that social workers and 'service users' (as we would now call them), are 'fellow workers' in creating a better society (p. 130).

One thing that comes across clearly is that Attlee liked the boys and their families, and enjoyed their company. This is shown in the way he talks about discussions that he had with the boys about topical matters, quoting some of their responses (for example, 'A gentleman is a bloke that is the same to everybody': p. 133). It is also apparent in a story he tells about one of the boys losing a half sovereign coin, and his friends quickly agreeing that they each give some of their own money to make it up (Attlee, 1954, p. 29). Attlee was sharply observant too, and fully aware of the poverty of the children and their families – for example, he comments on the poor clothing, lack of footwear, and poor diets of the children. And he comes across as a kind and modest person. In the notes for his autobiography he talks about

bathing the feet of children who had no boots to wear in winter; and with regard to the lost coin incident, describes how he urged the boys to have one more look for it, so he could contrive to 'find' it (Attlee, n.d., Churchill College papers, ATLE 1/10, p. 6). Both of these details are omitted from the published autobiography.

Attlee argues that social workers should be pioneers in social reform (p. 220); they should also be social investigators, using observation and analysis to track the results of new policies and social legislation (p. 229); and he argues that every social worker is almost certain to be an agitator, or campaigner, for change (p. 237). Attlee recognises this may be difficult for employees in some organisations, but holds that even so, social workers should have their rights as citizens to express their views (p. 240).

Attlee argues strongly for good working conditions for social workers, their rights to reasonable hours and fair pay. He would like to see increased recognition of social workers: he says 'the community does not recognise their work is as valuable as that of the stock broker or lawyer' (p. 156).

Attlee offers some guiding rules for social workers, all of which would have been agreed by supporters of the Charity Organisation Society. First is never to forget that one is dealing with individuals, not just 'cases'. He urges social workers to remember that service users 'are men and women with the same human relationships as themselves' (pp. 135-136). He stresses that 'there is no reason and no excuse' for failing to treat people with courtesy (p. 136). A second rule is to try to remain cheerful: Attlee recognises that social work can be discouraging at times, but it is important to keep faith in the general goodness of human nature (pp. 136, 65). A third rule is to try to see things in perspective, as a whole (p. 137). Finally, it is important to have patience and tolerance, a sense of justice, and 'an infinite capacity to suffer fools gladly

... [because] there is always a good proportion of fools, many of them in positions of importance' (p. 141).

Attlee also discusses the training of social workers, drawing on his experience at the London School of Economics. He argues that practical and theoretical training should go hand-in-hand (p. 142). He taught on a full time course where students spent three days a week at the university and two days on placement (p. 146). For Attlee (as for the Charity Organisation Society), the best practical training is to work alongside an experienced person, and students should undertake a range of different placements to get different experiences and insights. He describes the academic subjects that a training course should cover, which included knowledge of social conditions, central and local government, social philosophy, and social psychology. This combination of the theoretical and the practical was characteristic of the Charity Organisation approach to training social workers. And, although Attlee may have said that he got his job because of his good practical knowledge, he certainly shows a thorough theoretical approach to the issues in *The Social Worker*. At one point he even goes into a discussion about ancient Athens (p. 95), to show that he knew that literature as well as the Charity Organisation thinkers.

Modern messages

Attlee took a well-known Edwardian theme, social service, and gave it a new, radical slant. The flexibility and power of the idea explain why it has continued to have an influence on social work and social policy ever since. This can be traced through three examples.

First, the social service idea acquired an international resonance for social work because one of the leading schools for training social workers in the United States of America, at the University of Chicago, took on the title 'School of Social Service Administration' in 1920. One

of the school's leaders at that time, and later its dean, was Edith Abbott, who had studied at the London School of Economics and knew the Webbs. (I am grateful to one of the anonymous referees for this insight: an account of the history is on the School of Social Service Administration website.) Second, returning to the United Kingdom, social service had a powerful meaning for William Beveridge, who wrote the report that led to the creation of the 'welfare state' by Attlee's Labour government. Beveridge, who was director of the London School of Economics from 1919 to 1937, actually preferred the term 'social service state', because he thought this brought out the element of citizens having responsibilities as well as rights (Harris, 1977, p. 459). Third, of most significance for social work in England, is its role in the reforms of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The Seebohm report of 1968 is often seen as a 'watershed' moment for social work in England (AUTHOR, 2011). At the time, local authority social work was split across three main departments, for children, health and welfare, and the report called for social work services to be brought together into unified departments. It led to the creation of social services departments in England and Wales in the 1970s, a unified professional association and generic social work training.

But what is sometimes forgotten, is that the report itself did not use the term 'social services'. It used Attlee's old term, 'social service', to emphasise that the new departments were not just to be about providing services to the neediest, but a way for all citizens to give and receive help. Richard Titmuss, professor of social administration at the London School of Economics 1950-73, had argued for such an approach and the creation of 'social service departments' even before the Seebohm committee was established (Titmuss, 1965, a lecture given in April that year; the committee was formed in December 1965.) The report's vision for

the new departments looked to the wider benefits for society as a whole, as the following quotation shows:

We recommend a new local authority department, providing a community based and family oriented service, which will be available to all. This new department will, we believe, reach far beyond the discovery and rescue of social casualties; it will enable the greatest number of individuals to act reciprocally, giving and receiving service for the well-being of the whole community.

(Seebohm, 1968, para. 2)

There are no longer social services departments in England – local authority responsibilities are divided into children’s services and adult services – but the Seebohm report retains a powerful symbolism. An example of this is the policy document on adult social care published by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in November 2010. The document was entitled *A Vision for Adult Social Care: Capable Communities and Active Citizens* (Department of Health, 2010). The ministerial foreword referred to the Seebohm report, arguing that its proposals were a return to those foundations: ‘Care must again be about reinforcing personal and community resilience, reciprocity and responsibility, to prevent and postpone dependency and promote greater independence and choice’ (DH, 2010, p. 5). But the vision is not quite the same. Seebohm saw the local authority social service department taking the lead in enabling people to give and receive service; the coalition version had a different edge, emphasising a much more reduced role for the state. The majority of social workers do still work for local authorities, although there is a growing variety of employers – for example, voluntary organisations, social enterprises, health trusts and private businesses. But it is important to remember that Attlee was not writing for any

particular organisational setting. He was giving messages for social work as a profession, and his messages still speak to us today.

Given the evidence that we have, what would Attlee make of the state of social work and society in England today? There is no doubt that he would be distressed and angry at the levels of poverty and inequality (see Department for Work and Pensions, 2016), and that he would reject approaches that put the blame for this on the behaviour and moral character of poor people. He would be familiar with having a variety of welfare providers, and social workers playing an important role in referring service users to other agencies or obtaining services from other organisations. That was a way of working he was used to. Attlee would, however, be concerned about the thinking behind the involvement of voluntary agencies. If it is to 'work with' people for an improved range of flexible and responsive services, no doubt he would welcome it. He would be opposed to it if the old patronising ideas of 'doing good' and 'knowing best' prevail.

Attlee would probably be surprised at the role of private businesses in the delivery of welfare services (AUTHOR, 2016). *The Social Worker* has a section called 'The businessman as a social worker' (pp. 243-250), but this is not about supplying social work services, rather about running a business in a socially responsible manner. Attlee calls on social workers to be business-like, but this is in the sense of being organised and efficient, not to make money (pp. 143-144). One suspects that Attlee would not be impressed with the growing role of profit-making businesses, given his commitment to common ownership and opposition to private individuals making profit out of essential public services. He would be concerned about the risks of owners' profits coming ahead of service users' needs.

It is likely that Attlee would be opposed to the direction of some recent initiatives to reform social work training in England (see Department for Education, 2016, esp. pp 19-21). He would certainly want to see high calibre recruits and high quality courses, but it is probable he would be cautious about 'fast track' schemes and a narrow focus on statutory work. He warns social work trainees against starting off as Poor Law relieving officers (the 'statutory work' of its time), as this too easily builds a distorted view of how poorer people live, and breeds suspicion and mistrust (1920, pp. 130-132). Instead, Attlee recommends that trainees learn more gradually about the conditions and outlook of poorer communities. It is notable that he took two years before taking on the leadership of the Haileybury Club. The quotation about his work at the club, earlier in this paper, shows how important time and experience are for developing real, deep-rooted understanding and the capacity to 'stick to it', that Attlee had.

Conclusion

Some aspects of Attlee's book are rather old-fashioned now, but his core messages for social work are timeless. The book shows that the challenges and opportunities for social work now are much the same as they were then. Attlee too was working in a time of transition, limited resources, high levels of poverty, deep disagreements about the causes of poverty and what should be done about it, strong conflict about the responsibilities of the state, individuals, families and charities.

Attlee's social service idea captures four essential elements of social work which always have to be held together – that it should be radical, relationship-based, realistic and reciprocal. The radical perspective and relationship-based work are not alternatives but complementary. The word radical comes from the Latin word for root, and social workers must be radical in looking for the root causes that lie behind individuals' troubles. And social workers work

through relationships, as Attlee did with the boys and their families, working *with* not just *for*, offering help without patronising the other person, always respecting their dignity.

Also, social workers have to be realistic – Attlee certainly wasn't naïve – in recognising the individual *and* social factors behind people's situations, and in their expectations of service users, of colleagues and of themselves. Realism does not mean being defeatist, but because accurate assessments and thorough analysis give the best grounding for planning and supporting people.

All of this is based on a notion of reciprocity. That does not mean that social workers should expect to get anything back from service users, although if they are prepared to listen and learn, as Attlee was, then they will gain a great deal. But it reminds us that social work is a two-way activity, which is an important message in today's policy climate. It is not just about shifting more and more responsibility on to vulnerable people, dressed up as choice and control, expecting them to fend for themselves; rather, social work is about sharing responsibility, challenging and supporting people to achieve their best, and social workers, their best.

Attlee's social service idea, and his individual example, offer guidance and inspiration for social work today. His social service idea gives a guiding vision, a moral compass, that can help social work in England through challenging times; and his own life story – the person who was changed by social work and who went on to change the country – gives an inspiring role model for social workers everywhere, to help them face the future with confidence.

Acknowledgement

This paper is based on the author's inaugural lecture, delivered at XXX on 20 April 2016.

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