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JOHN VEIT-WILSON'S PAPERS
ON CONCEPTS, DEFINITIONS AND MEASURES OF POVERTY,
ON INCOME ADEQUACY AND ON MINIMUM INCOME STANDARDS.**

NB: this is the original text of the article below. If you want to quote the page numbers on which passages appeared in print, you will have to find the book or journal in which it was published. John Veit-Wilson asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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INDEPENDENT DISCOVERY, UNCONSCIOUS PLAGIARISM, OR MY 'BOOK OF THE YEAR'.

B Woolf [1946], "Poverty Lines and Standards of Living",
Thirty-second Scientific Meeting: 'The Role of Nutrition in Social Medicine',
2 March 1946, *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* volume 5, nos 1 and 2, pp 71-84.

My book of the year would have been the DWP's *Final Report on Measuring Child Poverty* [December 2003] because it beautifully exemplifies the persistent failure to distinguish between the Humpty-Dumpty prescription of a word's meaning (they can measure what they choose to call poverty however they want), and the empirical enquiry needed to satisfy the public that *what the public itself perceives and experiences as poverty* has been reduced or abolished. But the reading which struck me most was a 58-year-old paper, scholarly, critical and incisive, which is even more relevant to today's poverty measurement arguments.

I had never heard of its author before the US historian of poverty measures, Gordon M Fisher, recommended the paper, and it was a year before I got it from the library. Reading it was worse than déjà vu: it showed that when I was researching the papers of Rowntree and Beveridge in the 1980s, I had come unaware to conclusions like those which a Dr B Woolf had reached four decades earlier. (Edinburgh University, where he worked in social medicine, records him as Dr B A Wolf – does anyone know?)

If independent discovery and coincidence could be plagiarism, it was totally unconscious. When I was writing about the abuses of Rowntree's views on poverty, it didn't occur to me to search apparently unrelated society proceedings. Had I seen the paper's title I should undoubtedly have read it, but there were no computerised search methods at that time. I was struck how for political reasons Rowntree's heuristic minima had been turned into maximum incomes, and said so in *New Society* in 1983, not knowing that Woolf had used an almost identical expression. Similarly, I thought my use in 1992 of food share methods to analyse the (in)adequacy of Beveridge's benefit levels compared with Rowntree's *Human Needs* recommendations was original, but Woolf had already used them and come to the same conclusion, that while the gross figures were similar (which still wrongly leads some to think they are based on the same calculations), Beveridge's allowances for non-food expenditures were unrealistically low (to retain less-eligibility).

Woolf's current relevance is his insistence that such prescriptive budget methods can never determine whether, for instance, good health will be achieved at some minimum dietary cost. He noted the oppression of blaming victims for failing to achieve prescribed standards on inadequate incomes, and insisted "The only safe way ... [is] ... to find out what people actually buy, and at what income level the diet reaches the postulated nutritional standards". Whether we are trying to measure the minimum

income needed for nutrition, health or any other aspect of social participation, this is what John Boyd Orr recommended in 1936; what Peter Townsend repeated in 1954; and what the Blair government steadfastly refuses to consider, even though it has the data and the methods needed.

Finally, Woolf even quoted the ILO's tiered distinction of income maintenance between subsistence, decency and comfort and drew parallels with the income maintenance system: minimum wage rates should offer decency, not mere subsistence. His conclusion is as relevant today as half a century ago – "...it would ... be wrong and harmful to let [benefit rates] be accepted without critical and authoritative examination as scientific measures of optimum human needs".
