

Tony Atkinson: A humble giant (1944–2017)

The Economic and
Labour Relations Review
2018, Vol. 29(1) 6–8
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DOI: 10.1177/1035304618756832
journals.sagepub.com/home/elrr



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I have the great fortune to have known Tony as a colleague, as a Head of Department, as a mentor, and as a friend. I first met Tony when he came to the University of Essex in 1971 as a Professor of Economics. He was appointed at the same time as Christopher Bliss, both moving from the hallowed halls of Cambridge. Essex was a young university, and it showed great perspicacity in appointing these bright, young scholars. Essex had been through various Professors arriving for short periods and moving on to greater things. Tony was not only a remarkable academic economist but also a caring human being with a social conscience. For him, economics was not simply a discipline to investigate complex economic problems with high powered mathematics, but a discipline that would help to make society a better place for the poor and disadvantaged.

I remember Tony from the time he joined the University of Essex as a young dynamic Professor. It was great that Essex had the foresight to appoint someone like him who was doing applied work on poverty. I still remember seeing him on a Saturday morning sitting at a desk in a Colchester Square providing information and guidance to passers-by about welfare payments etc. For a Professor of Economics that showed amazing humility!

While he was a Professor at Essex, he introduced a new subject at an undergraduate level: Economics of Inequality. Essex was probably the only university that had such a subject offered to Economics students. It was a very popular option with students and some of his colleagues, myself included, attended some of his lectures. He was extremely generous with his undergraduate students, discussing various issues after lectures and in his office, reading their essays and providing very helpful comments. When he took over as the Head of Department he handled the various competing views with great diplomacy and tact. He would spend time talking to young lecturers and advise them about their research. Even though he was often younger than the lecturers on his staff, we looked up to him for his advice. While he was Head, he insisted on teaching all levels of undergraduate students, from First to Final Year, as well as lecturing to master's and doctoral level students. His lectures on Public Economics to graduate students were subsequently

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published with Joe Stiglitz as a textbook (Atkinson and Stiglitz, 1980) that is still used in many leading universities. He even found time to supervise a few PhD students, many of them to move on to Professorships at universities around the world.

As a Head of Department, he was kind, considerate, and helpful to junior staff and to students (undergraduates and graduates). No other Professor (at Essex) took this role so seriously, either before he came or after he left. Again, when research students gave him a paper to read, he would provide detailed and helpful comments usually within a week. I remember, and also, learned from him, that he always began his comments by saying something nice about the paper before providing critical and helpful comments. When I became Head of Department, many moons later, I tried to emulate his style of being the Head, but I do not believe I ever lived up to his standards.

On one occasion, I was visiting the Indian Statistical Institute in Delhi and had written a paper on Agricultural Taxation in India which I had sent (by snail mail) to various academics in India and to Tony. Two weeks later (which meant he read and commented on my paper immediately), I received a few pages of comment and suggestions for improvement from Tony, but no comments from my Indian colleagues!

Tony has been recognised for his contributions to Economics: he was the President of the Royal Economic Society, the Econometric Society, Section F, British Association for the Advancement of Science, European Economic Association, Human Development and Capabilities Association, and International Economic Association. He was Fellow of the British Academy and Member of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, and Foreign Honorary Member of American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was awarded a Knighthood in 2000 and made a *Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur* in 2001. He had numerous Honorary doctorates from various European universities. Unfortunately, he was not awarded a Nobel Prize in Economics, although many of his colleagues and friends recommended him for it. The list of Nobel laureates is missing a shining star!

He held Professorships at Essex, University College, London, London School of Economics, Cambridge, and subsequently became Warden of Nuffield College, Oxford, and Centennial Professor at the London School of Economics. He held visiting Professorships at MIT and Harvard University.

The set of tributes that follows shows the enormous contributions he made to the economics discipline as well as to society in general. His biggest contribution lies in the setting up the sub-discipline, the Economics of Inequality, with a path-breaking paper in the *Journal of Economic Theory* (Atkinson, 1970) on the measurement of inequality, as well as several papers on applied work on the distribution of income and wealth in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. He has published in various academic journals, including those listed in my selected bibliography of Tony's major work that appears at the end of this compilation of tributes and evaluations of his scholarly contribution. Thomas Piketty (2014) has helped to extend his work by publishing his classic, *Capital in the 21st Century*. Tony's last two works were *Inequality: What Can be Done?* (Atkinson, 2015) and *Monitoring Global Poverty*, a Report for the World Bank (2016) which was published in September. I am told that he single-handedly wrote the complete Report based on the work with his colleagues.

It is impossible to complete an account about Tony without mentioning the wonderful support given by his wife Judith. She shared his commitment to social justice. He will be remembered fondly by his colleagues and students. He leaves behind his wife, Judith, and children Richard, Sarah, and Charles and their respective families.

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Author biography

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