

Tony Atkinson: Challenging 'market fundamentalism'

The Economic and
Labour Relations Review
2018, Vol. 29(1) 44–45

© The Author(s) 2018

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1035304618756834

journals.sagepub.com/home/elrr



Nicholas Stern

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Tony Atkinson influenced profoundly our thinking on poverty, inequality, mobility, public policy and the economics of growth. From his first book, Atkinson (1969), *Poverty in Britain and the Reform of Social Security*, to his last, *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* (Atkinson, 2015), he demonstrated the great care and rigour which should characterise serious economics. His approach was identify the issues, examine carefully the facts and the forces that shape them, and ask what we can or should do.

Drawing on his work on inequality and market imperfections, his was one of the clearest voices challenging the 'market fundamentalism' of the 1980s and 1990s. He argued that economics had taken a 'wrong turn' (Atkinson and Stern, 2017). The consequences of that fundamentalism in terms of lives and livelihoods were deeply troubling for Tony. His arguments were based both on its misleading assumptions about behaviour and markets and on its apparent disregard for poverty, inequality and human rights.

He saw markets that were often controlled by the powerful. He saw profoundly damaging externalities go untackled. He saw managers of big firms being able to feather their own nests more or less unchallenged. He saw dangerous dominance of the media by a few of the very rich. He saw, during that time, poverty, inequality and human rights slipping down the agenda. He saw a celebration of behaviour that was narrowly and self-centredly maximising, where consequences for others were dismissed. And he saw a disparagement of the sense of community. Tony saw we could do much better and showed us how.

Tony was a builder of institutions. He founded the *Journal of Public Economics* in 1971 and was editor for nearly two decades. With Mervyn King and myself, he initiated at the Suntory and Toyota International Centres for Economics and Related Disciplines (STICERD), in the London School of Economics (LSE), the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) programme on 'Taxation, Incentives and the Distribution of Income' which lasted for 12 years coinciding with his time at the School. Tony recognised very early the great value in household data sets for understanding the distributional consequences of policy.

Corresponding author:

Nicholas Stern, The London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE.

Email: n.stern@lse.ac.uk

He was a much-loved Warden of Nuffield College, Oxford, and had a lasting influence on the economics departments of the University of Essex and University College London. In both his teaching and his research, he insisted on the importance of institutions and in so doing, straddled many disciplines. And within economics he stressed the importance of being an economist without a qualifier, that is, not simply a trade economist, or a macroeconomist or a labour economist.

He was a great European; the majority of his many honorary doctorates were from European non-UK universities. He worked in a hospital in a deprived area of Hamburg before going to university. He was involved in the economic analysis of the potential effects of joining the European Economic Community in the early 1970s prior to the referendum on joining in 1975. He was President of the Luxembourg Income Study from 2011 which has made a great contribution to international comparisons of well-being and inequality. He was a member of France's Conseil d'Analyse Economique, 1997–2001, and was Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur.

He was the finest of human beings. His decency, humanity and integrity were profound and extraordinary. He was quiet and understated but deep and strong. He was charming, and he could be very funny, including irony of the highest class. He was a special colleague, always ready with his support and wisdom. He had a wonderful gift of friendship; notwithstanding his great commitments and his constant writing of books and papers, you knew that Tony was there for you.

He met his wife Judith (née Mandeville) at Cambridge as undergraduates when they were 19. They were married for more than 50 years. They shared and reinforced their commitment to making the world a better place and tackling injustice.

References

- Atkinson AB (1969) *Poverty in Britain and the Reform of Social Security*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Atkinson AB (2015) *Inequality – What Can Be Done?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Atkinson AB and Stern N (2017) Tony Atkinson on poverty, inequality, and public policy: the work and life of a great economist. *Annual Review of Economics* 9: 1–20.

Author biography

Nicholas Stern is the IG Patel Professor of Economics and Government, Chairman of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment and Head of the India Observatory at the London School of Economics. President of the British Academy, July 2013 – 2017, he was elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 2014. Professor Lord Stern has held academic appointments at Oxford, Warwick, the LSE, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Ecole Polytechnique and the Collège de France in Paris, the Indian Statistical Institute in Bangalore and Delhi, and the People's University of China in Beijing. He was Chief Economist of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1994–1999, and Chief Economist and Senior Vice President at the World Bank, 2000–2003. He headed the *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change* (published 2006). Knighted for services to economics in 2004, he was made a cross-bench life peer as Baron Stern of Brentford in 2007, and appointed Companion of Honour for services to economics, international relations and tackling climate change in 2017. His most recent book is *Why are We Waiting? The Logic, Urgency and Promise of Tackling Climate Change*.