

Tony Atkinson, 1944-2017

President, Human Development and Capability Association, 2012-14

Tony Atkinson, the fifth President of the Human Development and Capability Association, passed away on 1 January, 2017. Tony was a brilliant economist, and he was a man of modesty, kindness and integrity, with a passion for social justice.

I first came across Tony's work when, as a student, I read two of his works. The first was *Poverty in Britain and the Reform of Social Security*, which had been published in 1969. The conceptual clarity combined with empirical detail, motivated by and leading to passionate policy advocacy for social justice, has been a model that many of us try to emulate. It is amazing how much I find myself repeating the basic arguments in that analysis in the current policy discourse on universalism, targeting, and transfer policies.

The second work, which had been published in 1970, also hit me like a bolt and created a channel for my own work in the years to come. This was the classic theoretical piece "On the Measurement of Inequality." Technical and mathematical virtuosity were put to the service of answering a question whose historical roots were traced back to Hugh Dalton and before—what do we mean when we say "inequality has gone up?" Tony argued that the question is deeply normative and requires a specification of value judgements. He showed a way in which such specification could lead to interpretations of standard inequality measures, and indeed developed a measure now known as the Atkinson Index of Inequality.

Frank Cowell and I organized a conference at Cornell University to mark the 40th anniversary of the inequality paper, and the presentations were sufficiently distinguished and sufficiently numerous to warrant a symposium covering two issues of the *Journal of Economic Inequality* in 2011. Tony himself contributed a characteristically searching piece entitled "On Lateral Thinking", asking how insights from one area of analysis (for example income inequality) did or did not translate to other areas (such as health inequality).

Tony's analytical interest in inequality and poverty was always in the broad frame of public economics. He was a founding editor of the *Journal of Public Economics* and like many others, I learnt my public economics from his book with Joseph Stiglitz, *Lectures in Public Economics*. I see this book as essentially advancing the analytical agenda of the great Cambridge economist Arthur Pigou, who argued that equity had to be treated on par with efficiency in public policy. The public economics frame, with rigorous weighing up of social cost and social benefit with equity concerns to the fore, provided a structure to thinking and analysis which Tony demonstrated in his theoretical excursions, but also in his empirical and policy contributions.

My most recent interaction with Tony was on one of his final projects. Tony chaired the World Bank's Commission on Global Poverty, of which I was a member and whose report was published in September, 2016. While commission members gave their advice, Tony was the sole author of the report, *Monitoring Global Poverty*. The report is already recognized to be a landmark document which will frame the work of the World Bank and other agencies in the years to come. Characteristically, while

Tony presented detailed technical critiques and recommendations on income based measures of poverty, he also highlighted and emphasized that poverty was multidimensional and that monitoring non-income deprivation was a central task for international agencies. One would expect nothing less from a former President of the Human Development and Capability Association.

Tony wore his stellar professional achievements lightly. He was Sir Tony Atkinson, a Knight; a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur; Fellow of the British Academy; former President of the Econometric Society, the Royal Economic Society, the European Economic Association, the International Economic Association, Society for the Study of Economic Inequality, among many other honors and accolades. But we were all struck by his modest and soft spoken manner. And he listened more than he spoke.

I mourn Tony's passing even as I am inspired by his analytical and policy contributions to fighting inequality and poverty, and even as I am guided by his example of how to bring rigorous thinking to the service of social justice.

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