

Tony Atkinson: A great economist and committed European

The Economic and
Labour Relations Review
2018, Vol. 29(1) 48–49
© The Author(s) 2018
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1035304618756838
journals.sagepub.com/home/elrr



Christopher Bliss

Nuffield College, University of Oxford, UK

With the death of Anthony Atkinson, the economics profession has lost not only one of the finest British economists of his generation, but also a figure of world standing. Someone once asked Paul Samuelson, one of the earliest recipients of the Nobel Memorial prize in Economics, what it took to win a Nobel prize. Samuelson replied: hard work. That description certainly applies to Samuelson. His answer, however, tells only part of the story. Hard work must be allied to a powerful intellect, but hard work is a necessary condition for the highest attainment. Reading through the obituary for Tony Atkinson in the Times newspaper, one cannot help but be struck by the sheer volume of his achievements. There are the numerous journal papers – more than 2 a year throughout his career. Added to this are a dozen books and advisory documents, plus reflections of his thought in publications by pupils and colleagues. Right at the end of his life when he was gravely ill, he completed a study for the World Bank on the measurement of poverty which will surely be hugely influential. All this on top of administration and advising on the international stage. How he found time for recreation, including his much-loved sailing, and travel, and family is hard to comprehend.

One thing that stands out from Tony's career is focus. He could do anything from high theory to detailed data crunching. He could easily have switched from one field to another, following the latest fashion. But that was not his way. As a young economist, he worked on and taught about poverty and inequality, and so it was until the end of his life. This focus came from a powerful moral concern with poverty. Some people who share that concern are rather self-righteous and condescending to those who disagree with them. That was never Tony's way. He was sure in his views, as they were well-researched, but he knew that there were other views and he confronted them by arguing his case firmly and respectfully.

Tony was always a committed European and a supporter of the European Union (EU). There was nothing starry-eyed about this position. He travelled widely and absorbed the many different national and sub-national positions on European questions. If he found British Euro-scepticism exasperating it was because of its ignorance not because it was

Corresponding author:

Christopher Bliss, Emeritus Fellow, Nuffield College, New Road, Oxford, OX1 1NF.

Email: christopher.bliss@nuffield.ox.ac.uk

self-interested. It was just this balanced realistic assessment of the EU that the voters rejected in the Referendum of June 2016. The voters voted from the heart not from the head, led in that direction by a shameful national debate prior to the vote. We all have hearts as well as heads. Was Tony's support for a national dividend (a fixed payment to all citizens followed by high marginal tax rates) a case in point?

Author biography

Christopher Bliss was Nuffield Reader and Professor of International Economics at Nuffield College in the University of Oxford, from 1977 to 2007, and Emeritus Fellow at Nuffield College thereafter. He was elected Fellow of the Economics and Economic History Section of the British Academy in 1988 and was a Member of its Council from 2006 – 2009. His publications include: *Palanpur : The Economy of an Indian Village*, with NH Stern (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982); *Economic Theory and Policy for Trading Blocks* (Manchester University Press, 1994), *Trade, Growth and Inequality* (Oxford University Press, 2007) and he contributed to the three-volume *Capital Theory*, edited with Avi J Cohen and GC Harcourt (Edward Elgar, 2005).