

Tony Atkinson: A former student and co-author remembers

The Economic and
Labour Relations Review
2018, Vol. 29(1) 46–47
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DOI: 10.1177/1035304618756836
journals.sagepub.com/home/elrr



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I first met Tony Atkinson in the 1970–1971 academic year, when I was an MA student at the University of Essex. Albert Sloman, Essex’s Vice-Chancellor, had just recruited Christopher Bliss and Tony as professors of economics, and although the appointments were not effective until the summer of 1971, Tony was already teaching in the MA programme.

In the spring of 1971, when Tony learned that the Social Sciences Research Council had awarded him funding to support research on the distribution of wealth in Britain, he asked me whether I would be interested in a full-time research position working on the project, adding that I would, at the same time, be able to pursue doctoral studies as a staff candidate. I accepted Tony’s invitation, without realizing at the time the scale of positive consequences that would result.

For the next three years, until the summer of 1974, when I left Essex to pursue my own university career, I worked under Tony’s direction on the data analysis that was eventually described in *The Distribution of Personal Wealth in Britain*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1978. True to his word, Tony made sure I also had time to begin work on a PhD thesis, which I completed in late 1977.

These three years at Essex were a wonderfully stimulating time for all of us working towards a PhD, many of whom were Tony’s supervisees. The Department of Economics, since its creation in the 1960s, had been an exciting place to be, but a constantly changing one too. Tony’s arrival heralded a period of stability. He was not, of course, solely responsible for, but he was certainly a very important part of, the rebuilding of the PhD programme that occurred in the early 1970s, not least because he took his supervisory responsibilities so seriously and always had time for all of us.

Tony’s supervision of my own work for the book and for my thesis was exemplary, but I owe much more to Tony than just the development of research skills that have served me so well over the years. For example, while we were both still at Essex, Tony told me I would be a co-author of the book, which was an act of incredible generosity, one that helped enormously in launching my academic career.

In 1976, I moved to Canada, but I continued working with Tony until the end of the 1980s. As well as the book, Tony and I co-authored four journal articles, the last one in 1989 (with James Gordon). We also gave evidence to, and wrote a background paper for,

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the 1976 UK Royal Commission on the Distribution of Income and Wealth, and contributed to *Wealth and Personal Incomes*, a book published by Pergamon Press for the Royal Statistical Society and the Social Sciences Research Council.

In the summer of 2015, the Department of Economics at Essex, as part of the celebrations to recognize the University of Essex's first 50 years, hosted a day of seminars presented by distinguished economists with past ties to Essex. Tony's book, *Inequality: What Can Be Done?*, had just been published by Harvard University Press, and formed the basis for Tony's presentation, which took as its theme Keynes's 1930 comment that 'we are suffering just now from a bad attack of economic pessimism'.

I am only three years Tony's junior, and, for me at least, age has led me to reflect on individuals who most influenced my career. In particular, I came to appreciate the crucial importance of all the things Tony did for me, and a few months before the Essex celebrations I visited Tony in Oxford and expressed my thanks to Tony personally.

Anyone who knew Tony could predict his response. He was gracious in accepting my thanks, but nonetheless as self-effacing as ever. We have lost a truly outstanding economist, but we have also lost a most wonderful human being, one who defined altruism.

Thomas Piketty has described Tony as 'the founder and godfather of modern scholarship on the distribution of income and wealth and the historical study of inequality'. Along with many others, I believe Tony's work, in this and other important areas, should have been recognized by the award of a Nobel Prize, but I take comfort from knowing that Tony himself was not in the least the sort of person who craved such recognition: he cared only about making a real difference to society, and in this respect he has left a lasting legacy.

Tony Atkinson was one of a kind. It was my amazing good fortune that he was a friend and a mentor to me.

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Author biography

Alan Harrison gained his PhD in Economics at the University of Essex in 1978, co-publishing on wealth distribution with Professor Atkinson whilst working on it and into the 1980s. He spent 26 years at McMaster University, researching and publishing in fields including labour economics and rising through the academic ranks before serving as Chair of the Department of Economics (1992-1997) and Dean of Social Sciences (1997-2003). In 2003, the McMaster Students' Union honoured him with a Lifetime Achievement Award in teaching. He went on to serve as Provost and Vice-President (Academic) at Carleton University (2003-2006), the University of Calgary (2006-2011) and Queen's University (2011-2016). He has subsequently undertaken research as Fellow at the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario and is also working on a book on university budgeting.