


Derek Robinson (9 February 1932–1 September 2014)

The Economic and
Labour Relations Review
2015, Vol. 26(3) 490–492
© The Author(s) 2015
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1035304615597839
elrr.sagepub.com


Derek Robinson, who died at the age of 82 on 1 September 2014, was a formidable figure in the study of labour markets and its application to policy. When he arrived at the Oxford Institute of Economics and Statistics in 1961, the golden era of industrial relations (IR) in Oxford, represented by Hugh Clegg, George Bain, Allan Flanders and Alan Fox, was in full swing. Together with Bill McCarthy and Arthur Marsh, Derek continued and enhanced this tradition.

The son of coal miner, Derek was brought up in Barnsley and entered the Civil Service straight from school. He was fond of telling how his line manager in London asked him not to answer the office phone because of the poor impression his Yorkshire accent might give. He became a union activist there and as a consequence won a union scholarship to Ruskin College, after which he went on to Lincoln College where he obtained a First in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. After a brief spell of teaching in Sheffield University, he took an appointment at the Oxford University Institute of Economics and Statistics where he remained for the rest of his career, simultaneously holding a fellowship at Magdalen College.

At the time of Derek's arrival at the Institute, Doeringer and Piore were producing influential work on internal labour markets in the United States. Derek was independently developing his own ideas in this area and on the workings of local labour markets more generally. He described the manner in which, at least to an extent, many firms were insulated from external labour market forces. Partly through this work, Derek understood the fundamental imperfections in the labour market long before they became so central in academic thinking. Respect for, and intimate knowledge of, the data were his trademarks. It is easy to forget how comparatively few official labour market data were around when Derek started his research, and as a result, he often had to collect his own, which he did with painstaking skill. He had no superior in his knowledge and understanding of the numbers.

In the days when the necessity of demonstrating the 'impact' of research has become so important, Derek would have been a dream-come-true for any head of department. His career was at its zenith at a time when IR were central to policy discussions. In 1968, the Donovan Report had described a whole series of deficiencies in the UK's IR system. The Commission's recommended solutions were essentially pluralist and voluntarist in nature. However, as the 1970s wore on, many believed that at least sections of the union movement were abusing their power and that more radical and enforced solutions were needed. In this sense, Mrs Thatcher was a catalyst for increasingly widespread opinion. In the midst of these turbulent times, Derek remained true to his union roots and never

lost his belief in unions' centrality in a liberal pluralist employment relations system. However, he fully recognised the need for unions to change and for the role of the state to be re-defined. He was centrally involved in policy formation. He advised the National Board for Prices and Incomes, and in the late 1960s, he acted as adviser to Labour's Employment Secretary Barbara Castle at a time when she was devising *In Place of Strife* (in many ways a more coherent and effective approach to reforming IR than Heath's 1971 Industrial Relations Act) and giving early consideration to the introduction of a national minimum wage. Both initiatives foundered on the rocks of internal Labour Government dissension. Given Derek's public attachment to the Labour Party, it was a testimony to Derek's professional standing that, when Prime Minister Heath performed his famous U-turn and adopted an incomes policy, he appointed Derek as one of the two deputy chairs of the Pay Board. Subsequently, with the Miners' Dispute in full swing, an inquiry was established into pay and conditions in the coal industry and Derek was appointed as its chair. The report was leaked only days before the General Election of 1974. For a long time, Heath believed that this cost him victory and blamed Derek.

Today incomes policy is a discredited and largely forgotten macro policy tool. In his academic work, Derek's concern was not so much with its general justification but with the detail of incomes policy design and implementation. In such matters, he had no rivals, as demonstrated in *Incomes Policy and Capital Sharing in Europe* (Robinson, 1973) and *Pay Policies for the Future* (Robinson and Mayhew, 1991). In this and other areas of his work, Derek's profound knowledge of the intricacies of the IR system produced a richness of analysis lacking in most labour economists. This and his mastery of institutional detail is what made him such a valuable policy analyst when he took on several overseas missions, particularly in the 1980s for the International Labour Organization (ILO). The highlight of these was his work in South Africa for which he received a personal commendation from President Mandela. Indeed, international and comparative work had long been one of Derek's passions, as marked, for example, by his contributions in the 1970s to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) work on solidaristic wage bargaining in Sweden.

Derek's main role as an academic manager was serving as chief executive of the Social Science Research Council, the predecessor of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), in the early period of the 1974 Labour Government. Amidst all of these national and international roles, Derek remained firmly grounded in Oxford. He was a demanding tutor who challenged lazily formed opinions or carelessly assembled evidence; and his pupils loved him for it. The centre of his life in Oxford was undoubtedly Magdalen College for which he had unbounded affection. Having dinner with him there was a joy, although dangerous to health. A man of great intellect, sturdy independence of thought and a zest for life, Derek Robinson made a unique contribution to our understanding of labour markets.

An amended version of the obituary published in *The Royal Economic Society Newsletter* Issue no. 168, p.24.

Ken Mayhew
Pembroke College, Oxford

References

- Robinson D (1973) *Incomes Policy and Capital Sharing in Europe*. London: Barnes & Noble.
- Robinson D and Mayhew K (1991) *Pay Policies for the Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.