

## Sir Tony Atkinson – Egalitarian

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When they refer to ‘the one percent’, I’m not sure how many Australians know that they’re using the work of Tony Atkinson. During his 72 years on the planet, Tony contributed as much as any modern economist to the study of poverty and inequality.

When I first met Tony in the early-2000s, I was struck by the contrast between his exalted status and his willingness to engage with a mere PhD student. He was the head of Oxford’s prestigious Nuffield College, and had recently been knighted by both the British and French governments. He was at Harvard presenting some preliminary results on top incomes in a handful of countries. When I suggested that he also include Australia, he agreed on the proviso that we also work on New Zealand. Then, he invited me to come over to Oxford to prepare a draft.

When we began work, I quickly realised that I was in the presence of someone who knew much more about my country’s economic history than I did. Tony was precise, and rigorous, with a deep sense of the scholars who had gone before. He ensured that our articles acknowledged the groundbreaking work of prior Australian researchers such as Timothy Coghlan and Colin Clark.

His approach to work was strikingly egalitarian. Calculating top income shares from historical tax tables involves typing in 50–100 numbers in order to calculate each year’s estimate, so entering a century’s data takes several days. Most professors coauthoring with a PhD student would have seen to it that the student did the data entry. But in Tony’s case, I entered the Australian tax tables into spreadsheets, while Tony did the New Zealand tax tables. Given this, it always seemed a little ironic that he was the only colleague I knew who had the title ‘Sir’.

Tony’s interest in income distribution was piqued in the 1960s, when he worked with deprived children in Hamburg, Germany. Over the next five decades, there was virtually no aspect of the field that he left untouched. He created his own inequality measure (the Atkinson Index), devised a novel technique for estimating wealth inequality from inheritance data, and shook up public finance through his work on optimal taxation with Joseph Stiglitz. Trained originally as a mathematician, Tony could

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crunch numbers with the best of them. But like Adam Smith and John Maynard Keynes, he recognised the importance of economics being grounded in history and politics. He was generous to intellectual predecessors like his Cambridge teachers James Meade and Joan Robinson.

Over his career, Tony moved through a range of British economics departments, including University College London and the London School of Economics. As a UK economist once remarked to me, he seemed to leave each department friendlier and more collegial than it had been when he arrived.

Amid it all, Tony made major contributions to policy. He once told me the story of how he'd built the first computer model to analyse a British budget, and surprised the Thatcher Government by helping the Labour Opposition to estimate the distributional impact of a proposed tax cut before the Chancellor had finished speaking. When we took a pause from work, he was keen to discuss global events, and the right role for countries like Britain and Australia in a fast-changing world.

This policy interest manifested in a plethora of important contributions. In 2005, the seminal Atkinson Review took a fresh look at how to analyse the output of a government. In 2008, he produced the definitive study of inequality in advanced countries for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). With Thomas Piketty and many others, Tony created a global database of top incomes. In 2016, he chaired the World Bank's Commission on Global Poverty, taking a fresh look at the question of what constituted extreme poverty in the poorest nations.

Meanwhile, Tony had learned that he didn't have long to live, and set about writing what he knew would be his final book. Titled *Inequality: What Can be Done?*, it focused on policy solutions to the rising gap between rich and poor. These included guaranteed public employment at the minimum wage, encouraging innovation that improves employability, stronger union power, and more foreign aid. Tony also proposed that competition policy should explicitly take account of inequality, an idea that found its way into the Australian Labor Party's 2016 election platform.

I last saw Tony and his wife Judith Mandeville when I stayed at their home in May 2015. By coincidence, I arrived on the evening of the British national election. We talked for much of the next day about why the UK Labour Party – of which he had once been a member – had been given another thumping by the electorate. Tony was thoughtful, funny and wise as we walked around Oxford, watching spring cricket, and discussing topics such as the impact of technology on inequality.

In his generosity and intellect, Tony was the best of scholars. I feel lucky to have known him: as a mentor, a coauthor and a friend.

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### Author biography

**Andrew Leigh** is the Shadow Assistant Treasurer and Federal Member for Fenner in the ACT. Prior to being elected in 2010, Andrew was a professor of economics at the Australian National University. He holds a PhD in public policy from Harvard, having graduated from the University of Sydney with first class honours in Law and Arts. Andrew is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Social Sciences, and a past recipient of the ‘Young Economist Award’, a prize given every two years by the Economics Society of Australia. His books include *Disconnected* (2010), *Battlers and Billionaires* (2013), *The Economics of Just About Everything* (2014), *The Luck of Politics* (2015), *Choosing Openness: Why Global Engagement is Best for Australia* (2017) and *Randomistas: How Radical Researchers Changed Our World* (2018). Andrew is a keen marathon runner, and hosts a podcast titled ‘The Good Life’, which is available on *Apple Podcasts*.