

Record of Remembrance for Tony Atkinson

Iain McLean writes: “Tony was not himself a Friend. He used to joke that he was nevertheless a regular Attender, coming every year to Meeting on December 25th. However, he was in complete sympathy with our core testimonies. He remains the weightiest Friend that some of us have known.

“As an economist, he almost single-handedly pulled his profession from a narrow focus on efficient markets. In that focus, the best thing for governments to do was to keep out. Tony knew that the world of perfectly competitive markets was unreal. There are all sorts of imperfections, some of which justify government intervention. Above all, what the market cannot on its own guarantee is greater equality. From first to last he saw inequality as a great and avoidable evil. He lived and worked in the spirit of the Leveller Thomas Rainborough, who said in the Putney Debates of 1647 – in the turmoil of the English Civil war that led to the foundation of the Quakers – ‘I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he’.

“Like Rainborough, Tony was too radical for his times. As Oliver Cromwell slapped down the Levellers, so the British Labour Party in Tony Blair’s time stopped listening to Tony, although he had been a party adviser for a long time. In the policy world, he was more feted in France and Italy than in Britain. He composed a new index of inequality, and used it to document the increase since 1980 of inequality of income and wealth in modern societies. His protégé Thomas Piketty published his blockbuster book on *Capital in the 21st Century* in 2010, and Tony followed up with his own last book *Inequality – what can be done?* (2015). This contained 15 practical proposals in the spirit of Rainborough, e.g.

Proposal 10: Receipts of inheritance and gifts *inter vivos* should be taxed under a progressive lifetime capital receipts tax.

Proposal 11: There should be a proportional, or progressive, property tax based on up-to-date property assessments.”

A non-economist writes: “Friends knew of Tony’s important work on poverty and inequality, so much in keeping with our Quaker testimonies.

“He was accordingly invited to speak to our regular meeting on Fridays, which we call Friday with Friends, on the subject of Economics, and many of us felt we had much to learn on the subject. The room was very crowded with many people sitting on the floor, all eager to hear what he had to say.

“We found that he came to us in a spirit of extraordinary humility, He expressed himself very clearly and simply, in words we could understand, making us all feel that we were his equal. Many of us had thought that economics was a really challenging subject. No doubt we were right, but for one evening Tony managed to make it genuinely accessible, meaningful and interesting for us. He also showed us something of his enormous capacity for listening attentively and with respect in his replies to the many questions that were asked that evening.”

Tony was warden of Nuffield College for eleven years. Generally he was the easiest and most encouraging of bosses but he had a tough side, which bristled at the slightest suggestion of financial impropriety. He was tipped for a Nobel Prize many times before his untimely death. More to the point, he encapsulated Quakerism – without even being formally a member of our Society.

Sir Tony (Anthony Barnes) Atkinson, 4th September 1944- 1st January 2017.