

Remembering Tony Atkinson as the architect of modern public economics

The sad news that Sir Antony Atkinson has passed away was released today. Tributes and reminiscences will no doubt flow this week, focusing on his extraordinary humility and generosity, alongside his lifelong dedication to the study of inequality (whose essence is perfectly captured in Piketty's review of his last book). I would like to emphasize another aspect of his biography: his key role in the development of public economics from the 1960s onward. His contribution was intellectual (in particular his papers on optimal taxation), educational (he coauthored the most influential textbook of the 1980s and 1990s), and institutional (he was the founding editor of the Journal of Public Economics).

Atkinson's early interest in poverty led him to Cambridge at a time the study of government intervention, then called public finance, was on the verge of a major overhaul. In 1966, as he received his BA, he flew to MIT, where he met two others key protagonists of the transformation of public economics: Joseph Stiglitz, then a graduate student, and Peter Diamond. The latter had just returned from Berkeley, then immersed in the application of duality techniques to microeconomic issues. In the public economics course he had set up with Carry Brown, Diamond was thus teaching duality and how to measure dead weight burden using expenditure function...

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