MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

Melville H. Watkins
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Professor Melville H. Watkins OC, Professor Emeritus of the Departments of Political Science and Economics, passed away on April 2 at age 87. For more than fifty years, he was a leading figure in the study of the Canadian economic history and the nature of Canada’s political economy. He provided a direct link between an earlier generation of Canadian political economists and intellectuals from the 1930s and 1940s, principally Harold A. Innis, and the subsequent generation of Canadian scholars whose careers launched in the 1970s. Over the course of his forty-year career, he wrote extensively on the staples thesis, the impact of the multinational corporation and foreign investment on the Canadian economy, and the implications of Canada’s resource-based pattern of development for our indigenous communities, particularly in the North.

A prime concern was to link the theories of the staple economy developed by the prewar generation of scholars with the development of the economy from the 1950s onward. This led, shortly after his return from Ph.D. studies at MIT to take up his position in the Department of Political Economy in the early 1960s, to the publication of his seminal article “A Staple Theory of Economic Growth”. An influential intellectual contribution is one that scholars and commentators return to decades later to find lasting insights as relevant as when it was originally penned. In 2013, a wide array of colleagues and a younger generation of scholars came together to reflect on his seminal paper fifty years after its publication. The overriding consensus was that its insights were as relevant to understanding the nature of Canada today as when it was originally published: https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/staple-theory-50.

His academic and applied policy work quickly brought him to the attention of Walter Gordon, then a key minister in Prime Minister Lester Pearson’s federal cabinet. From the mid-1950s onwards, Mr. Gordon had been concerned with the impact of high levels of foreign investment on the development of the Canadian economy. Following the 1965 election, he asked Prof. Watkins to head a federal task force to investigate the issue. The result, known as The Watkins Report, quickly became a touchstone for public debate, with Prof. Watkins nationally recognized as the spokesperson for the Report. Despite the fact that divisions in the federal cabinet blocked action on its recommendations, he continued to speak and lobby on the issue. The following year he helped pen the Waffle Manifesto, which became one of the most hotly debated political documents across the country for the next half dozen years. It marked the beginning of a long period of his career as a political activist both within political parties, but more generally in public and scholarly debates.

In the mid-1970s, he became increasingly concerned with the impact that the pattern of resource development in the oil and gas industry was having on both the environment and indigenous people. Prof. Watkins took a leave of absence from the University for two years in the mid-1970s to work for the indigenous people of the Mackenzie Valley, who called themselves the Dene Nation. His purpose was to ensure that their views and concerns were well represented in the hearings being held by Mr. Justice Berger and to mobilize credible economic research to bring before the inquiry.
The research he coordinated for the Dene people and the subsequent volume published on *The Dene Nation* were pathbreaking in putting the perspective of Canada’s indigenous people front and centre in debates over the future course of our energy and resource development. He remained deeply committed to linking resource development to environmental issues for the rest of his career.

Perhaps his most enduring legacy is as a teacher and mentor to almost three generations of students at the University of Toronto and in countless lectures across the country. Not content just to teach Canadian economic history to undergraduate economics students, he became a founding member of the Canadian Studies program at the University and for decades taught his hallmark course, to several generations of undergraduates from across the university. He was equally effective at mentoring and training graduate students and many of those who benefited from his contributions are teaching at universities across the country today or working in a variety of professions. In the 1970s and 1980s he became a founding member and leading light in the New Canadian Political Economy, a school of thought promoted by a diverse group of scholars from across a range of academic disciplines, that builds on the thinking of Innis, Mackintosh and Watkins and seeks to bring the insights arising this tradition of Canadian scholarship to bear on current analytical and political issues.

His continuing role as a public intellectual contributing to debates about the pattern of economic development in Canada stands as one of his most enduring contributions to public life in this country. His historical and theoretical understanding of the constraints on the development of dependent economies drew him, as a man of conscience, from the academy into the public arena. His activism as well as his progressive politics set him at odds with the ascendant intellectual thinking of much of his own generation, but as an inspiration to subsequent generations of scholars.

Throughout his career, Prof. Watkins was driven by a deep passion for Canada and a determination to bring the academic skills and knowledge at his disposal to bear on helping make this a more prosperous and equitable country for all Canadians and future generations.

*BE IT RESOLVED THAT* this Resolution be inscribed in the Minutes and a copy sent to [family] with the Council’s sympathy.