

Tribute

MEL WATKINS - SOME RECOLLECTIONS

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Melville Watkins, (Mel to most who knew him) became a fixture in Canadian academe and in the political life of the nation. If economics needed someone to outline the case for Canadian nationalism, Watkins was that person, though he himself was surprised at the influence his ideas and writings had.

It feels good to have written something with a shelf life of half a century. It feels not so good that fifty years on the resource-based structure of the Canadian economy, and polity — with their dependence on global forces largely beyond our control and with their increasing capacity for environmental degradation — has actually deepened.¹

In his main academic articles early on, Watkins took up some themes opened by economist Harold Innis in an attempt to escape from the burdens imposed by existing versions of Canadian economic history, steeped in the legacy of British imperialism. Watkins² and Innis landed like bombs in the midst of those of us working in national and provincial government departments, trying to extricate ourselves from the weight of imperial notions in policy, planning and programming. At last, we had a theory, an ideology in its very best sense, upon which to build arguments for better progressive governing.

Watkins took it a step further. From academe, he expanded into practical politics and upset that institution as well. Along with others in the New Democratic Party (NDP), Watkins pressed for an independent Canadian economy and policies to promote that goal. He was the initial drafter of the so-called “Waffle Manifesto”, which became the Manifesto for an Independent Socialist Canada, first published in *Canadian Dimension* magazine in 1969. From that movement came Jim Laxer’s candidacy for leadership of the NDP in which he garnered 40% of the vote, shocking the party establishment.

¹ Jim Standord, "Reflections on the Lasting Significance of Mel Watkins' *A Staple Theory of Economic Growth*" in *The Staple Theory @ 50*, March 20, 2014, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives/Centre Canadien de Politiques Alternatives, <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/staple-theory-50>.

² Melville H. Watkins, "A Staple Theory of Economic Growth," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science/Revue canadienne d'Économique et de Science politique*, 29(2), 1963, pp 141-158.

Watkins became, thus, a long-term spokesperson for Canadian nationalism, progressive economics, providing astute analysis of the many public issues that still bedevil us – staples development and general development education and theory³.

Mel Watkins appears in several of the Society for Socialist Studies programs at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences through the decades. His presence at the society's annual general meetings brought not only a sense of his extended dedication to the cause, but also gave us benefit of his organizational wisdom and experience.

Maybe you can ask for a better comrade and academic colleague, but you won't likely find one.

Bio

Ken Collier retired from Social Work practice, then academic work on social policy and university administration in 2005. Since 2006 he became Chair of the Steering Committee for the Red Deer and Area Council of Canadians, past Board Chair of Friends of Medicare (Alberta) and continues writing for progressive activist and research publications. Ken was also President for 8 years of the Society for Socialist Studies.

³ As another example of longevity in this leadership: Melville H. Watkins, "Staples Redux," *Studies in Political Economy*, 79, 2007, pp 213-226.