

Tribute

MEL WATKINS

BY PAUL KELLOGG¹

Athabasca University

When Mel Watkins (1963, 151) warned of the dangers of a “staple trap” looming in Canada’s path, he announced himself as a key theoretician of what has been, without question, the dominant strand in Canadian political economy (CPE). In fact, for many, Watkins’ staple approach has been seen as synonymous with CPE. As well as making key contributions in political theory, Watkins was committed to political practice, being one of the leaders of the Waffle – the most important left-wing challenge to traditional social-democracy of his or any subsequent generation. Watkins’ theory and practice deeply influenced myself along with many in my generation. Some of us became disenchanted with the nationalism which accompanied much of CPE, and there followed many political debates, at the centre of which were Watkins’ writings. *Escape from the Staple Trap* (Kellogg 2015) is, at one level, a long conversation with Watkins and his CPE co-thinkers. It acknowledges the important way in which CPE shook up old ossified economics, but suggests that the staple trap approach had fallen into a trap of its own making. It is impossible to pour the Global North reality of Canada into a framework developed to understand Global South dependency. Watkins made contributions on many other fronts. We have been challenged this century, by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to come to terms with Canada’s settler-colonial reality. Watkins was an early and passionate advocate of Indigenous rights, more than 40 years ago editing *Dene Nation: The Colony Within* (Watkins 1977). The passing of Mel Watkins is a sad loss for his family and friends, as well as for all those committed to developing left political theory and practice.

References

Kellogg, Paul. 2015. *Escape from the Staple Trap: Canadian Political Economy After Left Nationalism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Watkins, Mel. 1963. ‘A Staple Theory of Economic Growth’. *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 141–158.

¹ Paul Kellogg is Professor and Chair of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies at Athabasca University, and a regular contributor to *Socialist Studies*.

———, ed. 1977. *Dene Nation: The Colony Within*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.