

4th January 2021

In Memory of Professor Sir John Hills: co-founder of the International Inequalities Institute

Professor Sir John Hills, a co-founder and former co-director of the International Inequalities Institute and a leading scholar in the field of social policy, has recently passed away. Although I recall meeting John at STICERD in the early 1990s, when I was still a PhD student, and again decades later when he chaired a lecture I gave as a visitor to the III, I never really had the pleasure of knowing him as well as I would have liked. Those who did know him well over the almost three and a half decades he dedicated to the LSE can speak much more eloquently than me about this great loss to the III, to the LSE and to the academic community more broadly: Please read the wonderful tribute by Mike Savage, Nicola Lacey, David Soskice, Armine Ishkanian and Liza Ryan below.

Francisco H. G. Ferreira, Amartya Sen Professor of Inequality Studies & Director of the III

Many people will have seen the tragic news that John Hills died a few days ago. In such a difficult year this feels like almost the final blow. We wish to pay tribute to John as one of the most remarkable academics we have ever known and worked with. He was utterly fair in everything he did and completely committed to principles of social justice, not just in abstract terms, but also in his daily work. We saw him as the personification of the very best aspects of LSE's Fabian tradition, committed to using academic work not as an ivory tower pursuit but to make the world a better place.

In 2014, in the midst of 'austerity politics' and the increasing academic and public recognition of the ills of escalating inequality, John could easily have taken the view that the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion which he had built over the previous two decades was already a leading LSE force in this arena and that there was no need to develop a brand new initiative. He might also have taken the view that at this stage of his distinguished career there was no need to put his shoulder to the wheel of a brand new, untried, and risky venture. But that was not his way. John did not have a single instrumental or game-playing bone in his body and realised intuitively the value of a new International Inequalities Institute, not housed in a specific Department but working across the whole of the LSE, to raise the stakes of inequality research to an even higher level. Accordingly, he enthusiastically agreed to work with Mike as co-Director of the III from 2015 until he stepped down, in 2018. The deep admiration with which John was regarded across the LSE and the trust which colleagues felt in him as a not only a distinguished scholar but also a generous and gifted institution-builder were the foundation stones on which the International Inequalities Institute was built, from the bottom up, with wide and enduring support.

John was a complete pleasure to work with as co-Director and colleague within the III. We had absolute confidence in him to make the right decisions reached with full consultation. He had no interest in personal self-aggrandizement. It was he who held the initial conversations with Atlantic Philanthropies and inspired the vision which was to lead to their major investment in the Atlantic Fellows Programme for Social and Economic Equity (AFSEE), in fact the largest gift the LSE had ever received. The time and effort which he put into this initiative was staggering; John's extraordinary work ethic sustained him under what to most of us would have seemed an impossible burden. Even when working under enormous pressure, he was unfailingly kind, courteous and cheerful, a twinkle in his eye betokening a keen sense of humour beneath the surface of his quiet authority. And of course – utterly unselfish as he was - he never drew attention to his pioneering role nor claimed any kind of proprietary rights over how AFSEE should develop.

John had no time for petty careerism and was entirely committed to doing the right thing for its own sake. This informed his own actions. He shunned the kind of academic globetrotting that he saw as environmentally damaging and refused to commit to international travel as a normal part of academic life. He was utterly loyal to the LSE, yet when he disagreed with the actions of senior management, he was utterly fearless in making his views clear, without a care for any retribution he might personally experience. Time and again we witnessed his generosity and kindness to students, academic and professional colleagues. He joyfully shared in the occasional pleasures and commiserated with the daily frustrations of those around him. He was a truly outstanding man who will be deeply missed by everyone at III, and by all the many students and colleagues who have been inspired by him over many years. More than that: in the already grim year of 2020 this is the most devastating news.

Mike Savage, Professor of Sociology, and Director of III 2015-2020

Nicola Lacey, School Professor of Law and co-convenor of the III doctoral programme, 2015- 2020

David Soskice, School Professor of Government, and co-convenor of the III Doctoral programme, 2015-2020

Armine Ishkanian, Associate Professor in Social Policy and Executive Director, Atlantic Fellows Programme in Social and Economic Equity, III

Liza Ryan, Institute Manager