

# John Grieve Smith (2 November 1927–13 February 2017): A memoir and a tribute

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John Grieve Smith, one of the UK's most influential economists, died in his 90th year on 13 February 2017. John and I became close friends soon after we both returned to Cambridge in 1982, John as Senior Bursar of Robinson College, I as University Lecturer in the Faculty of Economics and Politics and Fellow of Jesus College. We had many discussions on economics and economic policy, usually at and after lunch at Robinson or Jesus. We exchanged comments on papers and we authored together a critical paper on Gordon Brown's economic policies when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, 'The economic policies of Gordon Brown and the Treasury: Stability for what?' It was published in *Soundings*, a left of centre journal, in 2001. In the introduction to *The Making of a Post-Keynesian Economist*, a selection of my essays published in 2012 by Palgrave Macmillan, I wrote that

John ..., my long standing friend, [had] fought the good post-Keynesian fight through the barren years of Thatcherism and, even more upsetting, those of Blairism and Brownism. ... Evidently a leading British economics journalist thought our essay ... the best critique of Brown's (read Ed Ball's) approach and policy he had read ... John must have the lion's share of credit for I was a very junior partner. (p. 4)

John 'read for' (Oz term is 'did') the Economics Tripos at Cambridge, graduating in 1949. His College was Clare and his undergraduate supervisor was the redoubtable Brian Reddaway. He absorbed Brian's down-to-earth, back-to-first principles approach to economic theory and policy, to which he coupled his own passionate hatred of injustice, especially when it arose from malfunctioning of the economic system.

John held important posts in the British civil service and industry. He started his working life in the Cabinet Secretariat in 1949 and then moved to HM Treasury. Subsequently, he was the Senior Planner at the UK Atomic Energy Authority (1957–1961), Head of the Economics Division of the Iron and Steel Board (1961–1964), Under-Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs (1964–1968), Director of Planning, British Steel Corporation (1968–1981) and Industrial Management Teaching Fellow, City University Business School (1981–1982), before returning to Cambridge in 1982.

John was a prolific publisher. His most important books, I think, are *Full Employment: A Pledge Betrayed*, published by Macmillan in 1997 and its sequel, *There is a Better Way. A New Economics Agenda* (Anthem Press, 2001). He also edited and contributed to many other books and reports and chaired ad hoc working groups, producing reports on economic policy, for example, *An Agenda for a New Bretton Works* (International Papers

on Political Economy, 1994), *The Challenge of Longer Life: Economic Burden or Social Opportunity?* (Catalyst, 2002), and he co-authored *Pension Promises and Employment Rights* (Institute of Employment Rights, 2004).

From first to last, John regarded full employment as the moral starting point for all package deals of economic policy. One of his last, possibly his last, publication was the lead chapter, 'Ending mass unemployment', in Tanweer Ali's and Diamond Ashiagbor's edited volume, *Full Employment Revisited: Essays on the Economy, People and Fairness* (Work Forum, 2014). I remember vividly how John inspired and thrilled the audience of research students and others at a seminar at Queens' in the early 1990s with his impassioned remarks about the absolute necessity to make full employment the top priority. It reflected what we wrote in the essay on Brown that his 'policies ... faithfully reflect[ed] the prevailing neo-liberal orthodoxy' (*The Making of a Post-Keynesian Economist*, p. 215).

John was an exceptionally kind and caring person, as is Jean, his wonderful wife of many years. Like Jean, he behaved selflessly in his personal dealings with family and friends alike. He was a *good* man in the same sense as Beckett Standen, Keynes' 'one-armed shepherd, now turned cowherd', described Maynard Keynes to Roy Harrod (RF Harrod, *The Life of John Maynard Keynes*, Macmillan 1951, p. 650). It was a great privilege to have known him.

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