

Tribute

## REMEMBERING MEL WATKINS -- NO NARROW NATIONALIST

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For as long as I have been living in British Columbia, I've had this "fast canoe" trinket hanging on the lamp on my desk. This First Nations token was given to me by Mel and Kelly when I left Toronto for BC in the early 1990s, when we had all just come out of the bruising of the initial free trade struggle. The outcome of the Free Trade election of 1988 accelerated globalization and Canada's integration into the US economy. The impact was fast and nasty, with outcomes that escalate with the "America First" policies of Donald Trump. During a time like the current pandemic the profoundly self-centred actions of the US would not have surprised Mel.

Those of us against the first free trade agreement (FTA) had been well taught by Mel's understanding of the impact of US imperialism on Canada. He had given us a way to theorize staple development (as derived from Harold Innis) to show how it ensures economic instability in a resource-export dependent economy in modern times. Mel was a *political economist* (not simply an economist) because he understood the basic power issues that are at the heart of any economy. Any market economy best meets the needs of a certain class, and that is the class that owns the resources and industries, and the class that hires others to do the work. The interest of this class



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creates the disjuncture between what people need and what they get. For most of us in the anti-free trade movement, this kind of analysis motivated our critiques and activism. It was not at heart a “Canada First” movement, as a purely nationalist one would be, but had a much more nuanced appreciation of the complexities of living in the shadow of a bully.

Mel was an unusual academic in lots of ways. Like most, he was intellectual and smart, but he was different in that he was willing to not simply “profess” but to be actively engaged in the crucial implications of his research. This benefited Canada most notably by giving us a way to look at ourselves in the context of how we developed and what counts as progress.

He was also unusual in that he had a delightful wit that simply charmed. He was never mean in his targets, and the target was often himself. At one of the big gatherings of anti-free trade groups from across the country in Ottawa sometime in 1987, Mel was a featured speaker. His long-time persona was as a tall, skinny, bespectacled, somewhat gawky, brilliant and famous academic who championed anti-imperialism, socialism, and Canadian nationalism. But like many of us, as he aged he broadened physically, which he noted in his Ottawa speech: “At least they can’t call me a narrow nationalist any longer.” We loved him for it, and somehow it made us all, from across the country, enjoy each other in that moment too. He had that kind of personality – he was confident, but not preening; funny, but inclusive; quick to share knowledge, but also to listen intently.

Mel had a true gift for public speaking and was able to articulate a progressive analysis in a way that could be widely heard. His activism made it clear he cared about how economic and political decisions affect people. Those in Toronto who worked closely with him knew that he suffered from debilitating bouts of depression, something he did not conceal at a time long before it became more acceptable to acknowledge a disability. Despite this, his consistent energy over long periods and firm connections with people-centred research and economic activism continued to be an inspiration.

To return to my opening mention of the “fast canoe”. It is a Canadian artifact, a marvel to watch, more complex than it seems, and one that requires stamina and considerable skill from its paddlers, especially over rapids or in bad weather. It can be fragile, but with proper care can be effective for a long time. A metaphor for Mel Watkins – as either the paddler or the canoe? Maybe both.