

## Tribute at Michael Lipton's funeral: 18 May 2023

Simon Maxwell

We were at a Brighton Festival concert yesterday evening, and it was really strange to look down from the balcony and not see Michael and Merle in their usual places in the third or fourth row of the stalls. The concert began with *The Lark Ascending* by Vaughan Williams, an ode to the English countryside which spoke to us of Michael's interest in rural development; and then after the interval, the Festival Chorus sang Vaughan Williams' *Dona Nobis Pacem*, a song cycle about war and peace, which ends with the soprano sending the word *pacem*, peace, quietly and beautifully into the night. It felt very appropriate.

Anyway, we are here to mourn, remember and honour Michael. . . .

Ideally, there are always three points in any intervention, but, you know, this is Michael, so there will be four. In true Michael style, there may also be some sub-paragraphs, and some sub-sub-paragraphs. No footnotes, though, on this occasion.

I'm not going to read out Michael's cv, let alone offer a seminar on his work. I have heard him do that (give a seminar) at a funeral! There have been several obituaries, and IDS has a memorial page, bringing together many memories and anecdotes about our inspiring, far-seeing, kind, witty, and let's be honest, occasionally eccentric, friend and colleague. I particularly like Mick Moore's story about Michael's secretary at IDS spraying lavender into his room early in the morning, to induce calmness. Probably, we all needed that.

Michael's long career at IDS and at the University of Sussex are on the record, as are his assignments in Botswana and at the World Bank, and as a Division Director at IFPRI in Washington. His academic contributions are too numerous to mention, from the *Optimising Peasant*, through *Urban Bias* and the Green Revolution, his major contributions on poverty, his long-standing interest in land reform in Southern Africa, and his more recent work on Malthus. He was rightly honoured, in 2003 as Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George, in 2006 as a Fellow of the British Academy, and in 2012 with the Leontief Prize, named for the Nobel laureate. That prize was designed to recognize outstanding contributions to economic theory that address contemporary realities and support just and sustainable societies. Absolutely right for Michael.

But where did all this come from – and this is the first of my four points. How did the son of a Jewish emigre from Hamburg, forced to abandon a career as a lawyer in 1933 and find a new life in the UK, including by the way, serving in the British Army during the Second World War and becoming a naturalised British citizen only in 1947, find himself on a path which led through school in London, then Balliol, All Souls and MIT, to a lifetimes' work on rural poverty in the developing world? Michael himself credited field work in Kavathe village in Maharashtra, but I think we find an earlier influence, as is true for most of us, in the inspiration of a great teacher – in Michael's case the eminent development economist Paul Streeten, with whom he studied at Oxford. Our teachers shape us.

Michael himself became a great teacher, handing on the torch to others, as many have said. His contribution was both formal and informal: formally, supervising 25 PhDs, and via innumerable lectures, seminars and presentations; informally, in pointed contributions and corrections when other people were presenting (and when he wasn't playing virtual chess

with Robert Cassen at the seminar table). Who among us can still use the word 'data' in the singular, or talk about 'poverty alleviation' when we should say 'poverty reduction'?

Underpinning Michael's success as a teacher was his prominence and passion as a researcher. The breadth of his reading and understanding were always immense, and the bibliographies at the end of his papers a source of wonder. That point probably needs to be substantiated with a footnote, but not today. I remember Barbara Harriss-White once saying that people rarely read anything more than five years old. Not Barbara. And certainly not Michael.

IDS when I first studied and worked there in the 1970s was graced by many big figures in development: Dudley Seers, of course, and Hans Singer, of course, and Richard Jolly, of course, and Ron Dore, and Robert Chambers, and Emmanuel de Kadt, and Robert Cassen, and Carlos Fortin, and many others, some of whom were not so famous then, but are now, and are here. It was both intimidating and inspiring to walk past the name plates on the doors. Michael was absolutely a member of that intellectual pantheon – building the foundation on which development studies still stands today. Research matters in our world. As Kurt Lewin famously said, 'There is nothing so practical as a good theory'. Michael knew that.

But here's my third point. Michael was determined not to allow research to be left languishing on the page. Development studies, if nothing else, is about praxis, putting ideas into action. Michael was committed to policy and to change. He worked in India and Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, in Ethiopia and Sudan and Kenya, in Botswana and Sierra Leone, and of course in South Africa. His work helped real places and real people. Many of the memories people have shared about Michael tell stories about the impact of his work.

My fourth point about Michael, though, was that his research and practical contributions were often carried out with others. Many of us will have co-authored papers with Michael, often on one or another aspect of poverty . . . reduction. Michael's book with Richard Longhurst, *New Seeds and Poor People*, is a classic on the Green Revolution. He worked with Emmanuel de Kadt on health and nutrition, with John Toye on aid, with Martin Ravallion and Rob Eastwood on poverty policy and other things, and with teams of collaborators on large projects investigating grain storage or putting together village studies. Many of you who worked with Michael are here. I remember being told by a very distinguished academic when I first arrived at IDS that 'if you want to succeed here, do your own thing and don't collaborate'. You will have to check the bibliography to see who said that. I didn't follow that advice, and nor did Michael.

There was one collaborator who was more important to Michael than any other. That was Merle, who he met at Chatham House, fell in love with at first sight, and married in 1966. They collaborated intellectually, especially in work on South Africa, but more than that, lived as soul mates, sharing huge challenges, especially when their daughter Belinda was born deeply brain-damaged in 1971, and building a life in Brighton with friends, music, books, wine, and running – and family life with Emanuel, and later with his own family. No-one who attended Merle's funeral in October could fail to have been moved by Michael's tribute. He said 'Merle and I had a deeply happy marriage; fascinated and dedicated to each other, our minds, our work and our tastes.'

Michael's life exemplified values that we all can and should live by: love for family; empathy for others; a concern to leave the world a better place; and a commitment to performing all that to the best of one's ability.

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