

Obituary: James Mirrlees



James Mirrlees died on August 30, 2018

Sir James Alexander Mirrlees [FRSE FBA](#) (5 July 1936 - 30 August 2018) was a [Scottish](#) economist and winner of the 1996 [Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences](#). He was [knighted](#) in 1998. Born in [Minnigaff, Kirkcudbrightshire](#), Mirrlees was educated at the [University of Edinburgh](#) (MA in Mathematics and Natural Philosophy in 1957) and [Trinity College, Cambridge](#) (Mathematical Tripos and PhD in 1963 with thesis title *Optimum Planning for a Dynamic Economy*, supervised by [Richard Stone](#)). He was a very active student debater. One contemporary, Quentin Skinner, has suggested that Mirrlees was a member of the [Cambridge Apostles](#) along with fellow Nobel Laureate [Amartya Sen](#) during the period.

Between 1968 and 1976, Mirrlees was a visiting professor at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) three times. He was also a visiting professor at the [University of California, Berkeley](#) (1986) and [Yale University](#) (1989). He taught at both [Oxford University](#) (1968–1995) and [University of Cambridge](#) (1963–1968 and 1995–).

During his time at Oxford, he published papers on [economic models](#) for which he would eventually be awarded his Nobel Prize. The papers centred on [asymmetric information](#), which determines the extent to which they should affect the optimal rate of saving in an economy. Among other results, he demonstrated the principles of "[moral hazard](#)" and "optimal income taxation" discussed in the books of [William Vickrey](#). The methodology has since become the standard in the field.

Mirrlees and Vickrey shared the 1996 Nobel Prize for Economics "for their fundamental contributions to the economic theory of incentives under asymmetric information".

Mirrlees was also co-creator, with MIT Professor [Peter A. Diamond](#) of the Diamond–Mirrlees efficiency theorem, which was developed in 1971.

Mirrlees was emeritus Professor of Political Economy at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. He was the Distinguished Professor-at-Large of the Chinese University of Hong Kong as well as University of Macau and in 2009, he was appointed Founding Master of the Morningside College of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Mirrlees was a member of Scotland's Council of Economic Advisers. He also led the Mirrlees Review,

a review of the UK tax system by the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

His Ph.D. students included eminent academics and policy makers like professor Franklin Allen, Sir Partha Dasgupta, professor Huw Dixon, professor Hyun-Song Shin, Lord Nicholas Stern, professor Anthony Venables, and Sir John Vickers. He was also enormously influential for many of our colleagues at AMSE, notably those working on Public Economics.

James Mirrlees was the keynote speaker at the 2004 the conference in public economics, the Journées d'économie publique Louis-André Gérard-Varet, organized by the Aix-Marseille School of Economics (Greqam-Idep).

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