

Reay Atkinson

Mr Chancellor,

Reay Atkinson's name is not well known to the North East population and yet his influence is written through our recent history and our rebirth like Blackpool through rock. Reay Atkinson was born and raised a Geordie with his family home in Gosforth. He attended Gosforth High School and read History at what was then Kings College Durham, graduating in 1950. Like so many contemporaries, his academic progress was interrupted by the war and he spent three years from 1943 to 1946 serving with distinction in the Royal Navy.

He joined the Civil Service initially as an inspector of taxes and progressed rapidly up the ranks. Working under Ken Baker he was responsible for the introduction of computers and information technology. Such was his achievement he was promoted in the 1970s to represent the Department of Trade and Industry in the North East as their most senior member in the region. His work was pivotal in attracting Nissan to set up in Sunderland, in retrospect probably the most influential recent event in our regional regeneration. He was awarded the Companion Order of the Bath in 1985 and in the following year became the founding chairman of the Northern Development Company, later to be absorbed into One North East. His resolve, strength of character and wit

were put to the test as he forged an alliance between industry, government and the unions. His northern roots and a willingness to use liberal interpretation of civil service rules (he was given to say that London was a long way from Newcastle) led some in the capital to worry that he had gone native. I suspect he had never stopped being a native.

Reay now lives near Alston where his family have had a country connection for many years. He loves the hills and used to love walking them until the early onset of hip problems curtailed his mobility. These challenges never slowed him or diminished his famous work ethic. He was also famous for having a fiery temper, the effect of which on his team was enhanced by his tendency to use the handle of his walking stick to apprehend them as they passed his door.

In my enquiries I came across an apocryphal story which illuminates his determination; during the war he was injured and found himself allocated in a triage to the group being cared for by the priest. Presumably feeling this would not enhance his prospects for remaining in the land of the living, when not being observed he reallocated himself by crawling over to the other group. The proponents of the benefits of greater choice in healthcare would no doubt approve.

In addition to serving on the Court of Newcastle University since 1991, and for many years chairing the University's Careers advisory Board, Reay also played a major role in the establishment of our sister institution Northumbria University, serving as Chairman of the Board of Governors from 1989 to 1996. Subsequently, he was Chairman of Trustees at the Northern Rock Foundation for 4 years and has now served for 15 years as vice-chair of the governors of Barnard Castle, thereby continuing to find an outlet for his prodigious organisational skills.

In addition to being a skilled orator himself, Reay Atkinson is well known for having little time for waffle so I will rest my case before he finds a walking stick with which to remove me.

Mr Chancellor, Reay Atkinson is and has been a courageous warrior. He fought in the Navy, he continues to fight the restriction of a physical impairment but of greatest significance this evening is his lifelong fight to rebuild our region and allow it to stand proud and strong as he has done as an individual. I am proud to present him to you as a recipient of our University Fellowship.

Citation by Professor John Burn