

In Memory of Gavin Mooney

Turning Dismal Into Humane

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Gavin Mooney, pioneer health economist, controversialist, and public intellectual, was born in Glasgow on October 30, 1943, and died with his partner Del Weston on December 19, 2012, under dreadful and tragic circumstances. He grew up in a socialist home and remained fiercely committed to the redress of inequity throughout his working life. He was 69 when he died.

He embodied distinctive characteristics of the Scottish Enlightenment: Adam Smith's morality of resolve and sympathy, David Hume's habits of scepticism and recognition of the importance of human "passions," and Thomas Reid's common sense were all living parts of Gavin's underpinning philosophy. He admired and absorbed the ideas of many others, particularly the capabilities approach of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum and the health philosophy of his close friend and colleague Uffe Juul Jensen in Denmark.

Strong views about welfare, justice, and disadvantage powered Gavin's fervent and committed approach to the problems of health economics. He taught us about opportunity costs, about vertical and horizontal equity and the distinction between equity and equality. He confronted us with the realities of justice, its strict and foundational demands. He believed in the

capabilities of peoples everywhere and in the duty that every community bore to allow those capabilities to be realised. Redress of disadvantage was Gavin's greatest dream.

But while he admired dreaming (he co-edited a book in honour of John Deeble called *Daring to Dream*), he was at heart an activist. He taught his brand of health economics to students in many countries. He helped indigenous groups toward communal action and found educational and academic opportunities for indigenous scholars. He was admitted to tribal membership in Western Australia. He developed a close relationship with the health economics department at the University of Capetown, which awarded him an honorary doctorate in 2009. He was a public intellectual, both nationally and internationally, an argumentative Scot who enlivened public discourse. Organisers of meetings and seminars would often ask, "Where would Gavin fit best?"—because they knew how stimulating and relevant his talk would be. They knew also that he would present his audience with awkward moral challenges that provoked uneasiness, self-questioning, and, often, resistance and argument. But argument was his metier. He believed in multidisciplinary and dialectic, which he saw in effective action with Jensen in Aarhus in Denmark. He could sustain his arguments amid fellow economists, philosophers, politicians, policy-makers, medical specialists, or anyone else with an interest in his favourite area of social justice.

Gavin never chose the smooth or easy road, and his life was punctuated with setbacks and interruptions.

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Like Adam Smith, his morality was Stoic in its commitment to consistent strength amid opposition, yet full of the sympathy for others that Smith explored in *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*. Perhaps less like Smith, Gavin's commitments made him at times rather more passionate than Smith's "impartial spectator." It came as no surprise that he and Del became so preoccupied by the welfare of the globe, making practical in Tasmania their interests in conservation, climate change, and the just distribution of resources. Nor was it surprising to see how strongly Gavin's interest in communitarianism grew and how much he came to see the power of community juries as means of gathering and expressing community insights and preferences. His last book (of more than 20), *The Health of Nations*, crystallises these intellectual developments and defends them against many of the standard critiques.

Gavin could be as prickly as a porcupine, but his anger was consistently directed against two things—what he judged to be injustice and what he saw in others as indifference to injustice. He memorably savaged two eminent speakers at an international meeting because they had dismissed as unrealistic the claims of an earlier speaker that global poverty could be ameliorated with remarkably little impost on the wealthy Western world. Gavin spared them not, neither did he hold back on a more general critique of the meeting for its Western liberal prejudices. He used his Glaswegian accent to good effect at such moments, seldom raising his voice but modulating it

from steady rationality to quivering passion as circumstances demanded. Like so many Glasgow natives, he had a splendid turn of phrase, a self-deprecating humour and a sharp perception of the weaknesses and inconsistencies of counterarguments.

This all meant that he was not universally popular. Some critics said that his rhetoric seemed at times to run ahead of his logic. Anyone who is outspoken draws that criticism, but Gavin rose well above the jibe. He was a rare example of a public intellectual with integrity in Australia. If you seek his monument, look around you at the students he taught, the people he influenced, his international reputation and recognition, his impact on Indigenous academicians, his innumerable publications, lectures, and media appearances. An obituary by Cam Donaldson in the *Herald Scotland* described him as "a truly global academic." His students are his legacy around the world, and he leaves behind him an enhanced understanding of the nexus that must exist between health economics and health ethics (he once expressed the desire to create a "humane economics" for health care to replace the conventional "dismal science"). He leaves behind also many people who regarded him as their friend, their intellectual catalyst, and their sounding board. Whether you agreed with him or not, you have to mourn his loss. In Glasgow patter, "He was wee, but he was tough," a character with intellectual and moral stature whose loss deprives us all of opportunities for mental and moral engagement, humour, and friendship.