RON JOHNSTON

Ronald John Johnston

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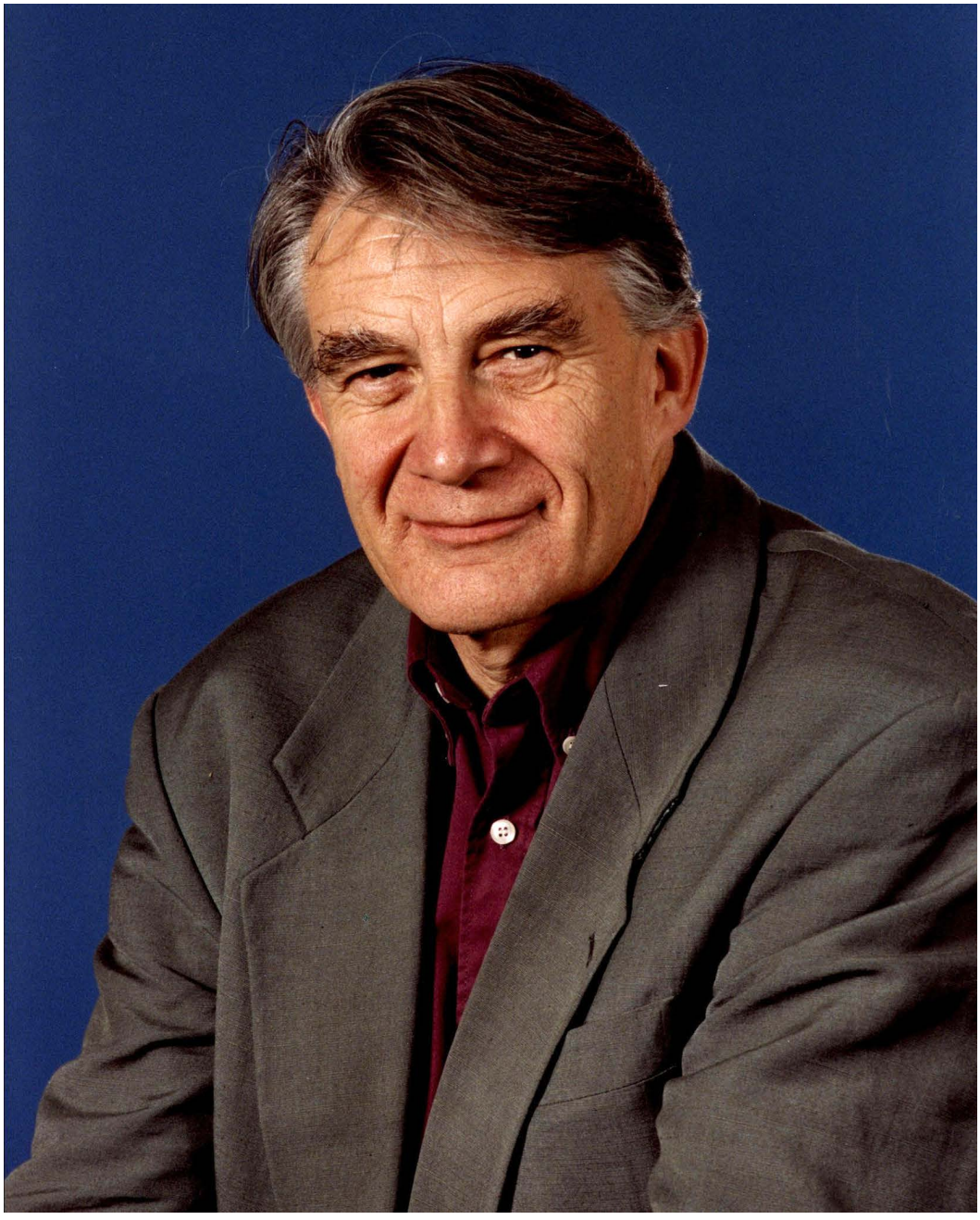

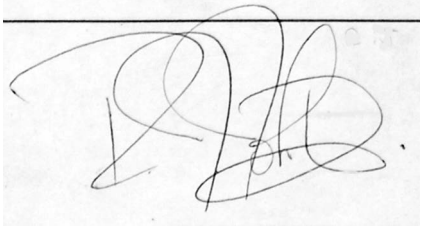

Ron Johnston was one of the leading human geographers of his generation. A remarkably energetic, prolific and intellectually curious scholar, over the course of his long research career he authored 40 books (several of which went into multiple editions, and were widely translated), more than 800 refereed papers, and many more book chapters, reports, and popular pieces. He also edited more than 40 other books. Ron was an early advocate of quantitative geography who took a keen interest in the intellectual development of his subject. In an age of increasingly narrow academic specialism, his interests were wide-ranging, including research on such diverse subjects as world trade patterns, church bell ringing (outside his academic life, he was a well-known and accomplished campanologist, and he claimed his best-selling book was his 1990 *An Atlas of Bells*, written with Graham Allsopp, John Baldwin and Helen Turner) and home advantage in professional football. But he was particularly known for his major contributions in urban geography, political geography (especially the analysis of electoral systems), his passionate use of empirical evidence to evaluate theory and policy, the intellectual history of human geography and the promotion of the discipline.

Born in 1941, Ron grew up in Chiseldon, a Wiltshire village just outside Swindon, where his parents ran the local Post Office. For much of his early childhood, he was raised by his mother and grandparents: his father, serving in the British army, had been captured in the fall of Singapore and spent the remainder of the war as a Japanese PoW. One of Ron's earliest memories was of being introduced to him by his mother in late 1945. Appropriately for a future geographer, Ron retained a sense of identity with his Wiltshire roots throughout his life. This manifested itself in a variety of ways, not least his remarkably inventive ability to find ways of using Swindon as an illustrative example in talks and conversations on almost any subject, and in his life-long (and often unrewarded) support for Swindon Town FC.

Success in the 11+ examination took him to the Commonweal Grammar School in Swindon, where he was a good pupil, even though (much to his amusement in later life) his final pre-sixth form school report declared him to be 'Cheerful but irresponsible'. Maps proved an early fascination, and geography was his favourite school subject. Encouraged by his Geography master, he applied and was accepted to read the subject at Manchester University, beginning his BA there in 1959. While there, he met his future wife, Rita Brennan, a fellow student: they married in 1963.

Ron made his first tentative entry in the academic world in 1962. After graduating in the Department of Geography at Manchester University he attended the Geography Section of the British Association Conference held that year in the city and started his research MA in the department in the autumn. This timing is very important for Ron's subsequent career: geography was in the throes of its 'quantitative revolution'. To begin a research career in these circumstances was very exciting and yet quite limiting. Ron was to exploit the latter quite brilliantly later in his career.

British Geography departments in the 1950s and through much of the 1960s taught a very traditional form of geography based upon the concept of the region, where knowledge about a place, both physical and human, could be synthetically assembled. This regional geography depended on research in systematic geography (specialist knowledge ranging from geomorphology to economic geography). In practice the latter work was conducted largely without thought for subsequent synthesis but it retained an inferior persona. The quantitative revolution that emerged from North America in the late 1950s swept away this way of thinking. Named for bringing statistical methods into research, it was much more than the introduction of new numerical analysis. It produced a 'New Geography', fundamentally re-orientating the discipline from idiographic description of regions to a nomothetic study of spatial organisation.

But the diffusion of these ideas was relatively slow to begin with and this was to create a generational divide. Ron's MA dissertation was on rural towns and their service areas. He was able to build his ideas on previous empirical research in systematic geography but as soon as he started reading the latest literature he found central place theory, a generic way of explaining service patterns. This theory had not been mentioned in his undergraduate course. So here was Ron doing MA research in a completely different way to his erstwhile teachers, now his academic advisors but without relevant knowledge. This is not necessarily a difficult situation, but it is an unusual one: new young geographers reinventing their discipline!

The quantitative revolution came with a very compelling narrative: it was saving Geography as a university discipline by moving it from an art to a science. The old regional geography was not up to the modern task of creating real scientific knowledge and had to be dispensed with. Geography now had a research frontier where journal papers built upon one another, pushing knowledge of spatial organisation incessantly forward. This was the exciting bit – participating in an intellectual revolution. Hence Ron's PhD research (at Monash University) was on the spatial structure of a city, Melbourne, using the theory and methods of factorial ecology, a very popular approach in the 1960s.. Again signalling a key break with the past: regional geography had had little or nothing to say about cities. This was the academic world in which Ron established himself as an up-and-coming and, certainly by the early 1980s, a world-renowned geographer. His new-found reputation was based upon a string of conceptually sound and empirically robust books covering a wide range of human geography: *Urban Residential Patterns* (1971), *Spatial Structures* (1973), *The World Trade System* (1976), *Geography and Inequality* (1977, with Brian Coates and Paul Knox), *Political, Electoral and Spatial Systems* (1979), *Geography of Elections* (1979, with Peter Taylor), and *City and Society* (1980).

Being part of a revolution provides a cloak of certainty over research: quite simply the new way is the right and proper way to do research. But inevitably a new generation comes along to spike this assuredness. Hence in the 1970s the spatial quantitative approach itself came under critical scrutiny and was found to be wanting. Attacked from radical and behavioural perspectives, the now not so new geography was revealed to be positivism, a very narrow view of science. Stripped of its autonomous knowledge assumption with its grand theory-making, Geography like all other knowledge was recognised as a human product of an imperfect world. Goodbye certainty.

Ron's response to this career-threatening development was twofold. First, and quite creatively, he used Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions to re-interpret Geography's quantitative revolution. Periods of certainty about the way forward in academic disciplines were paradigms, and revolutions in thought were paradigm shifts from one scientific consensus to another. He used this in his *Geography and Geographers* (1979) to provide a guide to the changes in the way Geography had been practised since 1945. This book is probably Ron's most influential, going into seven thoroughly revised editions (the latter ones with James Sidaway), making Ron the discipline's great chronicler. This was combined with other discipline-defining contributions such as the *Dictionary of Human Geography* (1981, various co-editors with fifth edition, 2009: amazingly, Ron wrote in the order of 740 of the dictionary entries over that period). The *Dictionary* was augmented by an enduring concern for the nature and vitality of his discipline represented by his editing *The Future of Geography* (1985) and *A Century of British Geography* (a British Academy Centenary Monograph, 2003, with Michael Williams). Ron is undoubtedly the most influential geographer of his times.

Second, Ron was much more than a guide to the discipline. His use of Kuhn was a masterstroke: this put the quantitative revolution in its place without totally dismissing it. This enabled him and others to continue doing relevant research by adhering to the specific strong point of the quantitative-spatial approach, its rigorous empirical methods and way of thinking. This inherited toolset was a means to produce relevant and practical research, to continue a vibrant research career. In Ron's case this involved a focusing of the range of his research interests to largely two important public policy matters: elections and their organisation, and inequality and segregation. In both cases his researches had direct inputs to policy-making and practice in Britain. Another outstanding contribution: he showed Geography to be useful outside the academy.

These shifts in Ron's research focus roughly coincided with moves in his academic career between universities. If his Manchester MA and his Monash PhD had fostered his interest in the new approaches, he grew increasingly dissatisfied with some of the work in which he was then engaged. Discussing some of his early work 20 years later,

he felt he had done 'lots of little empirical pieces, few of them containing more than a simple analysis of a small data set on a trivial hypothesis'.[1] A move to New Zealand in 1967 to take up a lectureship in Geography at the University of Canterbury (then one of the leading departments in Australia and New Zealand) brought him into the company of a group of congenial and collegial – and research-oriented – colleagues. There, he deepened his interests in theoretical as well as methodological approaches to research and added to his rapidly growing corpus of published work. Promotion came quickly: in 1968, he was made a Senior Lecturer and by 1973 had become a Reader.

Some of the work Ron began at the University of Canterbury was to inform his empirical research for much of the rest of his career. For instance, an encounter with Kenneth Cox's 1969 paper on the neighbourhood effect in voting (which provided a theoretical explanation for why voters might be influenced by the views of fellow residents in their local area, producing communities which tend to vote together) interested and troubled him.[2] Initially sceptical, he set out to disprove Cox's theory empirically. But his analysis confirmed the theory's predictions – sparking his career-long research interest in electoral systems and voting behaviour.

The more radical approaches entering the discipline in the early 1970s also intrigued Ron and seemed to offer a firmer and more wide-reaching theoretical and explanatory footing for his work than the approaches he had encountered up to that point. David Harvey's seminal *Social Justice and the City* (1973) was a particular influence, and when Ron moved back to the UK in 1974 to take up a Chair in Geography at the University of Sheffield, it formed the basis of a new course he taught (titled 'Spatial systems and society' after the then head of department objected to the original title of 'Social justice': Ron taught what he intended regardless). That new, more theoretically informed, approach underpinned much of his subsequent research and writing – not least in *City and Society* (1980, 2nd edition 1984), *The American Urban System* (1982), and *Geography and the State* (1982).

For a period in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Ron combined his existing research on urban social geography and electoral geography with work on the political geography of public policy, researching the geography of government spending and resource allocation in Britain and the USA. Sometimes patterns of resource allocation followed patterns of need: sometimes they were informed more by calculations of potential political advantage for the government or for individual politicians – the politics of the pork barrel. Much of this work is summarised in *Geography and*

[1] R.J. Johnston, 'A foundling floundering in World Three', in M. Billinge, D. Gregory & R. Martin (eds), *Recollections of a Revolution: Geography as a Spatial Science* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 43.
[2] K. Cox, 'The voting decision in a spatial context', *Progress in Human Geography*, 1 (1969), 31–118.

Inequality, Political, Electoral and Spatial Systems and *The Geography of Federal Spending in the United States of America* (1980). The complex mosaic of local government in the USA also proved a fascination, not least in terms of how the incorporation of municipal areas could be used to define and redefine local government jurisdictions in order to control and segregate populations. This formed the subject of his 1984 book *Residential Segregation, the State and Constitutional Conflict in American Urban Areas*.

It was another Sheffield undergraduate course, on the history of human geography, that spurred Ron's interests in the development of the subject and in its philosophical underpinnings. *Geography and Geographers* emerged from his thinking and preparation for this course, its Kuhnian structure in part an attempt to systematise and explain to students how academic debates moved forward.

Human geography was becoming increasingly diverse in the late 1970s and 1980s as interest in social theory grew within the discipline (a process that has continued apace since then). The relatively simple story of a discipline moving from a descriptive 'regional' focus to a more analytical 'quantitative' one, and then on to a more 'radical' account of social processes, was no longer sufficient. Researchers increasingly followed a range of different paths. Quantitative, behavioural and radical geographers were joined by others drawing inspiration from following humanist, phenomenological, feminist, post-structuralist and other traditions. *Philosophy and Human Geography* (1983, 2nd edition 1986), which also emerged from Ron's 'history of human geography' course, was an attempt to explain to undergraduates how different theoretical and philosophical 'traditions' within geography saw the world, and the consequences that had for the nature of geographical research.

Spurred on by the 'social turn' in the discipline, Ron sought (notably in books such as *On Human Geography* (1986) and *A Question of Place* (1991)) to clarify his own philosophical position throughout the 1980s and early 1990s – both for himself and for others. Anthony Giddens' structuration theory and versions of Roy Bhaskar's critical realism seemed to offer ways forward. People's choices and decisions might be affected by various structural constraints and possibilities. But they were not entirely determined by them either – agency remained important (and could in its turn help reshape and reconfigure the structural conditions). Social structures were not immutable. This was quite a substantial step away from the search for fixed 'universal laws' of society which had driven the early quantitative revolution. But (importantly for Ron) these approaches avoided a drift into a post-modern vision in which only competing interpretations of the world were possible and in which there was no way to adjudicate between rival interpretations. They held on to a notion of a real world which could be researched, and which could be apprehended and understood, even if knowledge remained partial and contingent.

Importantly, too, they stressed the importance of geographical and temporal context in human affairs. Whereas more economistic accounts tended to see people as isolated rational decision-makers, structuration and critical realism (and related approaches) emphasised the situated and relational aspects of life. People were influenced not only by their personal circumstances and views, but also by what was going on around them – in their families, their communities, their workplaces, and so on. Place (as Ron would often say) matters.

That concern with the role of geographical context had underpinned Ron's work on electoral geography since the late 1960s. From the late 1970s on, this became the main focus of his empirical research (bringing with it a growing reputation in international political science to complement his standing in human geography). Three main areas dominated that work: voter behaviour; party campaigning; and electoral redistricting. His 2006 book, *Putting Voters in their Place* (written with Charles Pattie) summarises the main themes of his electoral work after 1980.

As discussed earlier, the neighbourhood effect was an initial impetus for work on vote choice. In the 1960s and 1970s, influential theories suggested that class formed a particularly salient cleavage in the electorate. Working class manual workers, it was hypothesised, would vote predominantly for parties of the left while middle-class white-collar workers and professionals would lean mainly to parties of the right. Ron's analyses of constituency voting trends in British elections during the 1970s and 1980s showed that not only did the geography of the vote in Great Britain follow the geography of social class (the more working class the area, the higher the Labour vote share; the more middle class, the higher the Conservatives' support), but that this class cleavage was not spatially uniform. In particularly working-class constituencies, Labour did even better than might be expected given the national class cleavage. And (*mutatis mutandis*) the same was true for Conservative support in predominantly middle-class constituencies.[3] These patterns were consistent with the predictions of Cox's neighbourhood effect theory. As William Miller (who noticed the same patterns) noted, those who lived together (in the same areas) seemed to talk together about politics – and undecided voters were more likely to be won over to the locally dominant political party than to its rivals.[4]

But changes in politics and society from the mid–1970s onwards meant that social class was becoming a weaker predictor of individual party support. In part, this reflected a generational shift, captured in the famous *Affluent Worker* study in the late

[3] R.J. Johnston, 'Contagion in neighbourhoods: a note on problems of modelling and analysis', *Environment and Planning A*, 8 (1976), 581–6; R.J. Johnston, 'The neighbourhood effect won't go away: observations on the electoral geography of England in the light of Dunleavy's critique', *Geoforum*, 14 (1983), 161–8.

[4] W.L. Miller, *Electoral Dynamics in Britain Since 1918* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 65.

1960s, which interviewed workers in a car factory in southern England.[5] Most workers leant towards Labour, as class voting theory would suggest. But their motivations differed. Older workers, who had grown up during the Great Depression, tended to support the party based on their class identity. Younger workers in the factory, who had come of age in a period of post-war affluence, also leant towards Labour, but for instrumental reasons. Their support was conditional on the party delivering better conditions. That mattered, as it opened up the possibility they might shift their support to another party, should Labour prove unable to offer continued improvement in living standards. Ten years later, Mrs Thatcher's Conservatives made just such an appeal, aiming their message that 'Labour isn't working' at (among others) aspirational skilled working-class voters.

But the appeal of the Thatcher message was not likely to be spatially even. It had greater resonance in more prosperous parts of the country than in less prosperous areas. And this was exacerbated as regional economic divides began to widen rapidly in the 1980s. That implied a potential for substantial geographical variations in class voting, which (if members of the same class increasingly diverged politically, depending on where they lived) might help account for the weakening effect of class as a predictor of vote at the national scale. But how to show it? Survey data could not pick up fine-grained geographical variations, as national surveys did not have sufficiently large local samples to do so. And while aggregate constituency level analyses could draw on election results and on constituency class profiles from Census data, they could not provide constituency-level measures of class cleavages (such data is not gathered in the UK – or, indeed, in any other democracy). Some other method was needed if analysts were to estimate how the class cleavage varied from place to place.

Conversations with his Sheffield colleague Alan Hay introduced Ron to a possible solution: entropy maximising, an estimation method developed by Alan Wilson of Leeds University. Basically, the approach used known constraints – the national class cleavage at a given election, drawn from national survey data, the election results in each constituency, and (from the Census) the class profile in each constituency – to calculate small 'c' conservative estimates of the class cleavage in each constituency. The results were summarised in *The Geography of English Politics* (1983). The national class cleavage had indeed broken down – but not in the same ways everywhere. In Scotland, Wales and the industrial North of England, working class voters still cleaved to Labour – but so too did increasing numbers of middle-class voters (particularly those working in the public sector professions). In much of southern and suburban

[5] J. Goldthorpe, D. Lockwood, F. Bechhofer & J. Platt, *The Affluent Worker: Political Attitudes and Behaviour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

England, meanwhile, things were moving in the other direction, as skilled manual workers increasingly switched their support to the Conservatives.

The insight which helped explain those regional shifts in class voting came from emerging political science research on economic and valence voting. On numerous issues (often termed valence issues), most voters want the same outcomes (prosperity, security and so on), but are often not strongly ideologically tied to particular means of achieving these ends: what matters for them is effective government performance. They punish governments that fail to deliver adequately on these valence issues by voting against them, while rewarding governments that seem to succeed with their support. In the (now infamous) words of Bill Clinton's 1992 Presidential campaign, 'It's the economy, stupid': governments that preside over rising prosperity are more likely to be re-elected, and those that preside over declining prosperity risk being kicked out of office. Ron realised that voters' perspectives on governments' performance would likely be influenced not only by national economic trends but also by what was happening in their localities and regions. And, given the very different economic trajectories of different parts of the UK through the 1980s – deindustrialisation and decline in the industrial heartlands, rapid growth in the service sector south – perceptions of government success or failure might well be very different in different parts of the country. Analyses of elections from the 1980s onwards (originally summarised in his 1988 book, *A Nation Dividing?*, written with Charles Pattie and Graham Allsopp, but further expanded in his studies of subsequent UK elections over the next 30 year) proved the value of this insight.

A clear implication is that particular geographies of electoral support, even if relatively long-lasting, are not immutable – as Ron chronicled in his analyses of the UK's electoral geography throughout the remainder of his career. By the 2010s, his work was analysing declining Labour support in previous 'traditional' heartland areas like urban Scotland (where the SNP has eclipsed Labour) and the industrial towns on northern England – presaging the so-called 'collapse' of the so-called 'Red Wall' of traditional Labour constituencies in the urban Midlands and north of England in 2019, when many of these seats went from Labour to Conservative control.

Increasingly, Ron's electoral work drew not only on ecological data (analysing constituency trends), but also on survey evidence, often combining the two to put individual voters in their local contexts (as in innovative work he conducted on so-called 'bespoke neighbourhoods', linking survey respondents to very local census information).[6] This allowed him to explore neighbourhood effects in greater detail,

[6] e.g. R.J. Johnston, K. Jones, R. Sarker, C. Propper, S. Burgess & A. Bolster, 'Party support and the neighbourhood effect: spatial polarisation of the British electorate, 1991–2001', *Political Geography*, 23 (2004), 367–402.

showing that many voters were indeed influenced by the views of those around them. People whose friends and (especially) families and fellow housemates leaned towards one party were themselves more likely to switch their votes to that party than were those who either did not discuss politics with their peers or whose networks were politically diverse – confirming a key mechanism behind the neighbourhood effect.[7]

Another aspect of Ron's psephological work examined party election campaigning, particularly at the constituency grassroots. When he originally embarked on this work, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the accepted wisdom in British political science was that the advent of national televised campaigns in the late 1950s had put paid to local campaigning as an effective tool of electioneering. Voters, it was argued, experienced the campaign increasingly through the national media and elections turned on nationally uniform swings. Constituency campaigns, in this view, did little to affect the outcome of elections: at best, they provided a harmless though inconsequential outlet for local party activists' energies, giving them something to do while the serious business of the campaign took place elsewhere. Using information every UK election candidate must declare on how much they spend on their election campaigns as a proxy for campaign effort, Ron challenged this accepted wisdom. In fact, as he showed in publications like *Money and Votes* (1987) and *Money and Electoral Politics* (2014, with Charles Pattie), the harder candidates campaign, other things being equal, the more votes they receive. The effect – generally stronger for challengers than for incumbent candidates and parties in a seat – is not huge. But it is large enough to make the difference between winning and losing in closely fought constituencies. Not surprisingly (and as Ron was also able to show), the major political parties focus their constituency campaigns accordingly, putting more effort into their battles in marginal seats than in seats where they were likely to either win comfortably or stood little realistic chance of winning. When he began work in this area, Ron was one of only a very small number of researchers challenging the orthodoxy that local campaigns did not matter. But that changed as his work made a major contribution to overturning that orthodoxy. Studies of local campaigning are now mainstream in UK political science, and his work on the subject is seen as pioneering.

The third major strand in Ron's electoral work focused on perhaps the most overtly geographical aspect of electoral systems – the definition and occasional redrawing of the constituency map. Party support is not spread uniformly in most countries: parties tend to be stronger in some areas and communities, weaker in others. So how the map of electoral districts interacts with the geography of party support can have an

[7] See e.g. R.J. Johnston, K. Jones, C. Propper, R. Sarker, S. Burgess & A. Bolster, 'A missing level in the analysis of British voting behaviour: the household as context as shown by analyses of a 1992–1997 longitudinal survey', *Electoral Studies*, 24 (2005), 201–25.

important impact on the outcome of elections, particularly (though not exclusively) in plurality electoral systems like 'first past the post', used for Westminster elections. Even if no voters change their choices, shifting the boundaries of constituencies can change the election outcome. And there is very unlikely to be just one obvious 'solution' to how a constituency map should be redrawn. Electoral redistricting is an example of the well-known MAUP – the modifiable areal unit problem. In any given redistricting, there is a potentially huge number of alternative ways of redrawing the electoral boundaries, all consistent with legal constraints that might be set on the process (such as requirements on how equal electorates should be). Each different map of districts can create a different election result. In countries where politicians are in control of drawing the map of electoral districts, unscrupulous individuals and governments can exploit this to ensure they increase their chances of winning seats and reduce their rivals' chances – a process popularly known as 'gerrymandering'.

But even where (as in the UK) the responsibility for designing the constituency map is the responsibility of a scrupulously independent and non-partisan body (in the UK, the job is undertaken periodically by Boundary Commissions for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) and the political implications of drawing that map in one way rather than another are not allowed to affect the process, redistricting still has political consequences. As a country's population geography changes over time (population grows in some areas relative to others), existing electoral districts become increasingly uneven in size. Voters living in districts with smaller populations have more electoral influence than their peers in more populous districts (which can lead to malapportionment – if one party is especially popular in the less populated districts and its rival is more popular in the more populated ones, the former party gains an advantage). Hence there is a need to review the boundaries of the electoral districts periodically, in order to equalise (as far as possible) their electorates and to counter the effects of population change on parliamentary representation.

However this is done, it is liable to be electorally consequential. In the UK, for instance, population change over much of the post-war period meant that over time northern urban and inner-city constituencies (where Labour tended to dominate) lost voters relative to southern and suburban (and generally more Conservative) areas. As a constituency map aged, therefore, there was a tendency for Labour to gain an advantage relative to the Conservatives, as it took fewer votes to win in a Labour than in a Conservative seat. Periodic boundary reviews, conducted by the independent Boundary Commissions, redressed the balance by allocating more seats to areas gaining population, and fewer to those losing population. So the Conservatives tended to look forward to boundary reviews while Labour tended to fear them.

Understanding the operation and effects of boundary reviews is therefore important. Electoral redistricting was a recurring theme in Ron's research for 40 years,

from the early 1980s till his death in 2020, and was the central subject of his final, posthumously published, book, *Representative Democracy?* (2021, with Charles Pattie and David Rossiter). An initial focus was on redistricting as an example of the MAUP. Working as his research assistant in the early 1980s, David Rossiter wrote a computer program which could identify all possible sets of constituencies consistent with some simple but plausible constraints. They were able to show, for instance, that there were over 15,000 different ways of distributing Sheffield's 29 local government wards into the six constituencies the city was entitled to, all of which would have produced coherent seats with electorates within around ±8% of the city average. While most solutions would have resulted in five seats for Labour and one for the Conservatives, this was not true in all cases – and some would have seen the city return three MPs from each party!

When the Boundary Commissions began their Third Periodic Review in 1980, Ron and David Rossiter presented evidence to the public inquiry into the proposals for Sheffield (their alternative configuration of seats was accepted). This led to an approach from figures in the Labour party who (fearing they would lose seats as a result of the review) were planning a judicial challenge to the Boundary Commissions' new seats for the 1983 election. They appeared as expert witnesses in the resulting case. Labour lost. But their reputations as experts on boundary reviews was firmly established among academic election analysts, practising politicians, and members of the Boundary Commissions.

Ron analysed and commented on every UK boundary review between the Third Periodic Review and his death. His 1999 book *The Boundary Commissions* (with David Rossiter and Charles Pattie) is arguably the standard work on the subject. It provided both a detailed history of approaches to redrawing the UK's constituency map from their earliest origins, and a close analysis of the Fourth Periodic Review, which took place in the early 1990s, creating the seats used in the 1997 General Election. All aspects of the review process were analysed: the politics behind the legal frameworks guiding redistricting; the work of the Boundary Commissioners and their teams; the public inquiry process (through which members of the public and political parties attempt to have some influence on the outcome); and the electoral consequences of the revised boundaries which emerge from the process. This connected with his work on electoral systems more generally, and in particular on electoral bias – the extent to which an electoral system systematically favours one party rather than another and how that is affected by boundary reviews (the subject of 2001's *From Votes to Seats*, written with Charles Pattie, David Rossiter and Danny Dorling, and 2021's *Representative Democracy?*).

This was not only an academic, but also an applied interest. Ron served for two years as a Deputy Electoral Commissioner for the Boundary Committee for England

(overseeing redrawing local government and ward boundaries). He was a trustee of the McDougall Trust (a charity promoting the public understanding of electoral democracy) and a member of the Law Commission's Advisory Group on Electoral Law Reform. And he advised the Boundary Commission for Bermuda on redistricting when a new electoral system was proposed there in the early 2000s. When the Conservative party began to consider legislating to revise the rules governing UK boundary reviews prior to the 2010 election, Ron was one of the experts the party called on.[8] Several aspects of the 2011 legislation (which still – with minor amendments – governs the process in the UK) can be traced to his work and advice. But he also identified potential flaws in the new legislation, and gave frequent evidence to parliamentary committees and to other bodies during (and after) the passage of the Bill on ways in which some of the more disruptive aspects of the new rules could be mitigated – effort recognised by the Political Studies Association when it named him its Political Communicator of the Year in 2011. He was respected and trusted by all sides of the debate, and was invited to give evidence again in early 2020, when new legislation slightly amending the rules was due to go through parliament. Sadly, he died shortly before he was able to do so.

Ever energetic and curious, Ron was not just an intellectual historian and psephologist par excellence, for he also found time to pursue other research interests into his later career. He developed an interest in the politics of the environment and of global crisis, and in particular the challenges created by the need to find solutions to global problems in a world in which states were key actors. How would it be possible to co-ordinate global efforts to deal with environmental damage on a global scale? What was to prevent some states 'free riding' on the efforts of others, to the potentially disastrous detriment of all – a dilemma famously captured in Garrett Hardin's concept of the tragedy of the commons. As ever, a string of books and papers emerged – notably *Environmental Problems* (1989, 2nd edition 1996), and the edited collections *A World in Crisis?* (1986, with Peter Taylor; 2nd edition 1989) and *Geographies of Global Change* (1995, with Peter Taylor and Michael Watts: 2nd edition 2002). It was in this area that Ron taught a final year course in the undergraduate programme at Bristol, seeing it as fulfilling a need for students who had chosen to undertake a combined programme of human and physical specialisms.

In the new millennium, Ron renewed his interest in residential segregation, a research area which had formed an important part of his early career (in his second

[8] In 2010 Ron co-authored two British Academy policy reports on electoral issues: Simon Hix, Ron Johnston & Iain McLean with Angela Cummine, *Choosing an Electoral System*; Michel Balinski, Ron Johnston, Iain McLean & Peyton Young with Angela Cummine, *Drawing a New Constituency Map for the United Kingdom*. See also Ron Johnston & Iain McLean, 'Individual electoral registration and the future of representative democracy', *British Academy Review*, 19 (2012), 58–60.

book, published in 1971, *Urban Residential Patterns*, he had examined in detail the work that had been done on the differentiation experienced by urban sub areas). With Jim Forrest and Michael Poulsen (friends and colleagues from his Antipodean days), he worked on discrimination against migrant groups and the development of ethnic and racial segregation in cities in Australia, the USA, the UK and elsewhere. Joined by colleagues in Bristol (including Kelvyn Jones, David Manley, Richard Harris and Simon Burgess), he extended that to look at the effects of residential segregation on segregation in schools and on educational performance. This work was in part concerned with the development of new quantitative techniques to assess the changing degree of segregation and to do so at multiple scales simultaneously.[9] This brought a range of new insights including overturning the long-held 'stylized fact' that the greatest segregation was to be found at the smallest scale.[10] This research was also used to challenge political statements arguing against Trevor Phillips (a former head of the Commission for Racial Equality) that the UK is 'sleep walking to segregation', finding that ethnic residential segregation in London for example is decreasing, and they disputed that Muslim ghettoes are developing in British cities, and that Australian suburbs are being 'swamped' by Asians and Muslims. They also deployed this methodology to assess the degree of electoral segregation in the form of polarisation in the USA, finding that presidential elections were increasingly ones of local landslides and ever-increasing spatial sorting at multiple scales, with potential deleterious effects on civic engagement.[11]

Ron delighted in getting his hands dirty with detailed empirical analysis. Much of this was quantitative and given the nature of his undergraduate degree was largely self-taught. He openly acknowledged that he had learnt a lot by having to teach techniques to others, and his 1978 *Multivariate Statistical Analysis in Geography: A Primer on the General Linear Model* is, judged by the number of citations, one of the more influential of his books, being reprinted multiple times. At the start of his career, he had to write his own programs (in FORTRAN) to undertake the analyses he wanted, and he remained a wizard at using *SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)*. Data preparation and initial analysis was not something delegated to the junior member of the team (indeed there often was not a junior member of the team) and he

[9] e.g. K. Jones, D. Manley, R.J. Johnston & D. Owen, 'Modelling residential segregation as unevenness and clustering: A multilevel modelling approach incorporating spatial dependence and tackling the MAUP', *Environment and Planning B: Urban Analytics and City Science*, 23 (2018), 367–402.

[10] D. Manley, K. Jones & R.J. Johnston, 'Multiscale segregation: multilevel modelling of dissimilarity – challenging the stylized fact that segregation is greater the finer the spatial scale', *Professional Geographer*, 71 (2019), 566–78.

[11] R.J. Johnston, D. Manley, K. Jones & R. Ryne, 'The geographical polarization of the American electorate: a country of increasing electoral landslides?', *GeoJournal*, 85 (2020), 187–204.

delighted in sharing what he had found. We have already covered some of his quantitative outputs in urban and political geography, but he would be stimulated by what he came across in everyday life and therefore made all sorts of telling contributions in all sorts of areas. To take a single example, the Minister of State for Schools had commissioned research to compare whether GCSE results (usually taken at 16) were as good as AS-level results (taken usually at 17) as a predictor of whether students would go on to achieve a 2.1 or above at university, finding that degree performance can be predicted to a similar level of accuracy based on GSCE grades alone. Using a Freedom of Information Request and dogged persistence, he obtained the exact same data on 88,022 students and the re-analysis found missing data, sample bias, poor research design and that one in five students could have their chances to fulfil their potential on a degree course damaged.[12] He was passionate that quantitative methods should be widely taught in geography degree programmes as this would allow students to become better active citizens and that they should be a vital part of any critical geography.[13]

Ron's extraordinary research productivity would have more than filled most normal careers. But somehow he found time to engage energetically in an immense amount of the 'good citizen' work on which academia depends, but which is rarely adequately acknowledged (and which, in these research assessment obsessed times, can even be discouraged). Increasingly from the mid–1970s on, he took on a remarkable range of academic leadership roles while maintaining his prolific research activities. The list of committees he sat on (and often chaired) is dizzyingly long – and Ron was almost invariably a very active and involved participant. Some of that work was aimed at supporting the wider research community of which he was so active a member. Within academic geography, for instance, he played an active role in learned societies in New Zealand (where he was a member of the Council of the New Zealand Geographical Society between 1968 and 1974, during which time he also edited the Society's journal, *New Zealand Geographer*) and the UK (he was first elected as a Councillor of the Institute of British Geographers in 1977). Actively involved in the running of the IBG, he served as its Honorary Secretary (1982–1985), Vice President (1988–90) and President (1990–91), and at various times chaired the Institute's study

[12] R.J. Johnston, D. Manley, K. Jones, R. Harris & A. Hoare, 'University admissions and the prediction of degree performance: an analysis in the light of changes to the English schools' examination system', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 70 (2016), 24–42. Two associated blogs are illuminating and well capture Ron's distinctive 'voice'. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/statistically-flawed-evidence-on-the-relationship-between-school-and-degree-performance/; https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/07/30/replicating-government-commissioned-research/

[13] R.J. Johnston, R. Harris, K. Jones, D. Manley, C.E. Sable & W.W. Wang, 'One step forward but two steps back to the proper appreciation of spatial science', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 4 (2014), 59–69. A much-expanded text is to be found at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261062153

Groups for Urban Geography, Quantitative Geography and for the History and Philosophy of Geography. He also served as Chair of the College of Academicians for the UK's Academy of the Learned Societies in the Social Sciences, and was for many years a member of grants boards and peer review colleges for the Social Science Research Council and Economic and Social Research Council. In the early Research Assessment Exercises (the precursor to today's Research Excellence Framework), Ron was an assessor on the Geography panel, a task for which he was perfectly suited given his extensive knowledge of the breadth of human geography. Between 1976 and 1986, he served on the Joint Matriculation Board, representing Geography in discussions over A-level examinations and syllabi in England. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, he was a member of the Council for National Academic Awards, the body then charged with validating the degrees awarded by English Polytechnics.

A co-editor of the leading journals *Progress in Human Geography* (from 1979 till 2006) and *Environment and Planning A* (1979–2004), Ron served on a number of other journal editorial boards (including *Political Geography Quarterly*, *Electoral Studies*, the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, *Urban Geography*, and the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*). Unlike some senior (and not so senior) colleagues, he was also a very frequent referee for a remarkably wide range of other journals. Though requests to review papers were very numerous, he rarely turned them down. A beneficiary of others' peer reviewing efforts, he saw this as a key part of academic work and was often scornful of those who felt they were too busy or important to respond to requests to review but still expected their own work to be reviewed to a high standard. This, he felt, was another tragedy of the commons in the making, and one which potentially undermined the integrity of academic research. He was decidedly not a free-rider, invariably and promptly returning thorough, thoughtful and insightful reviews. He was consistently a *Top Peer Reviewer* as recognised by the *Web of Science*.[14]

Ron was also generous with his time and input. Colleagues and students who asked for advice on their work, their careers, their lives (and there were many) were not turned away. No matter how busy he was, he made time to provide extensive and constructive feedback when his advice was sought: remarkably, this more often than not was sent within a day or two. Over the course of his career, he acted as an external examiner on around 56 occasions (14 outside the UK), and was in demand as an external assessor for other departments and universities (a task he undertook on around 71 occasions, half of which were for institutions outside the UK). He undertook a very sizeable and often unseen workload of assessment for appointments, promotions, fellowships, research grants, prizes and departmental reviews. He never

[14] https://publons.com/researcher/496437/ron-johnston/

based his judgements on reputation alone, reading the material and 'outputs' widely before coming to a balanced conclusion.

For much of the 1980s and early 1990s, Ron took on increasingly senior academic management roles. Over the course of his career, he sat on (and often chaired) just under 100 different university committees and sub-committees. A member of the university Senate from his arrival in Sheffield in 1974 till his departure in 1992, he served as Head of Department for Geography in the early 1980s, before becoming a member of the University's Academic Development Committee (the main planning body for the university at the time) from 1982 till 1992 (acting as its chair for much of that time). The 1980s were difficult years for UK higher education in general and for the University of Sheffield. Resources were scarce and pressure was on to do more with less. Opportunities for new investment were few and far between as resources stagnated or even declined. As chair of ADC during such a challenging period, Ron was involved in often difficult discussions with colleagues around the university as budgets were cut and departments restructured. Ron approached this work with patience and humanity, gaining the respect of colleagues throughout the institution – but it was a stressful and difficult time.

From ADC, Ron became the university's Pro Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (1989–92), effectively the deputy to the Vice Chancellor. This came with added responsibilities for designing and overseeing the university's strategic plan and of navigating the institution's way out of the cash-strapped 1980s into a renewed phase of expansion. In doing so, he played an important part in making Sheffield a centre of research excellence.

The next obvious move was to become a Vice Chancellor, and in 1992 Ron left Sheffield to take on that role at the University of Essex. The new post brought new opportunities, but also new challenges. While he liked the institution and made many friends there, university administration was becoming increasingly burdensome and frustrating. As the senior manager and the public face of their institutions, Vice Chancellors carry considerable responsibility, but are often more constrained than is generally understood. Inevitably his research output (though still remarkable by normal standards) suffered, to his chagrin. At the same time, the 'diplomatic' aspects of being a Vice Chancellor (representing the institution in the wider world) grew. Increasingly, the strain took its toll. In 1995 he made the difficult decision to step down as VC, taking early retirement from the post.

On appointment to Essex, and with an eye to life after his academic career, Ron and Rita had bought a flat in the Close of Salisbury Cathedral. Having left Essex, they moved there permanently, taking him back to his Wiltshire roots. This was a happy move, with the added bonus of allowing him to joke about being a neighbour of former Prime Minister Edward Heath, who also lived in the Close.

'Retirement' proved a very short-lived experience. Freed from his responsibilities at Essex, Ron was quickly offered and accepted a Chair in Geography at the University of Bristol, home of one of the most important Geography departments in the world. Though he had kept his scholarly career alive throughout the years of senior university management, this brought him back almost full-time to the research work he so enjoyed. He responded with typical energy and enthusiasm, building new research partnerships and friendships. Bristol provided a very congenial and collegial academic home for the remainder of his life (he remained on the staff until his death). The quantitative human geographers and their postgraduates met weekly and he was always there, presenting, critiquing and supporting the work of the group.

Never the tidiest of people and something of an academic hoarder (old books and offprints were rarely discarded, drafts of papers and piles of computer output from projects conducted years before were retained), Ron's office in the Bristol Geography Department was a remarkable sight – and something of a health and safety hazard. A large, high-ceilinged room, it was crammed. Innumerable books stood two-deep on the specially reinforced floor-to-ceiling shelving (and more books were laid on top of those that had been shelved). Every other surface in the room – floors, tables, chairs, filing cabinet tops – was covered in teetering piles of papers, offprints, printouts and notes, often several feet in height. In the middle of the chaos sat Ron, hammering away on his computer keyboard, answering emails, analysing data, writing papers, calling friends and colleagues around the world. He was indefatigable; and he could rapidly put his hands on what you wanted amidst the apparent chaos.

Ron's academic and professional reputation brought a number of prestigious awards. Over the course of his career, he received several of the top prizes available for academic geography. He was awarded the Royal Geographical Society's Murchison Award in 1985 for services to political geography, and the same Society's Victoria Medal in 1990 for his 'contribution to human geography'. He was likewise honoured by the Association of American Geographers (AAG) awarded in 1991 for his 'outstanding contribution to human, political and economic geography and for his work on the history and nature of geographical thought'. Almost 20 years later, in 2010, he also received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the AAG; a very rare accolade for a non USA-based geographer. And in 1999, he was the tenth recipient of the Prix Vautrin Lud, the most prestigious international accolade for an academic geographer and often described as Geography's Nobel Prize. His contributions were also valued outside the disciple, twice winning prizes from the *Market Research Society* for 'Innovation in Research Methodology' (2006) and 'Best paper published' in the society's journal (2019), as well as the previously mentioned Politics/Political Studies Communicator of the Year in 2011,

Ron was awarded honorary doctorates by four universities. Essex made him a Doctor of the University in 1996 and Monash awarded him an LLD in 1999. The Universities of Sheffield and Bath awarded him honorary DLitts in 2002 and 2005 respectively. In 2011, he was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to scholarship.

A founding Academician of the UK's Academy of Social Sciences, Ron was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1999. Typically, he threw himself into the activities of both organisations. To take just one example, for over a decade he edited the British Academy's *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows*, as well as contributing memoirs for deceased fellow Geography FBAs.[15]

Throughout it all, Ron continued to research and write with undiminished energy and insight. In the last weeks of his life, he was discussing future research plans with colleagues, drafting new papers, completing what turned out to be his final book – and preparing to get involved once again in the public and parliamentary debate around changing the rules for parliamentary boundary reviews. His sudden and unexpected death came as a huge shock to his family and his many friends.

Undoubtedly one of the outstanding figures in modern academic geography, Ron was a formidable scholar, highly esteemed and respected by the many who encountered and benefited from his work. He not only contributed importantly to the many specialist fields in which he worked but he also helped shape how geographers think of their subject and how it has developed. No mean achievements.

But Ron was also a remarkably human (and humane) colleague. Lacking in pomposity, he wore his considerable distinction lightly. A passionate, kindly and warm man, he was generous with his time and his ideas, particularly to younger colleagues, many of whom benefited from his support, mentoring and advice. This was invariably offered with a remarkably light touch, making the recipient feel an equal, and generally leavened with a hefty dose of humour. He was a very convivial (and sought-out) companion at academic meetings and conferences. His penchant for *soto voce* asides, jokes and puns made sitting near him in seminars and committees a risky business if one wanted to maintain a straight face: laughter was rarely far away. He was also remarkable for his willingness to learn from, and to acknowledge his debts to, others, at whatever stage in their careers. And he was a loyal, loved and dependable friend to very many, maintaining close contacts and active, long-running collaborations with many colleagues and former students from all stages of his career. After his unexpected death, many tributes (both public and private) commented not only on his academic achievements and contributions, but also on the loss of a close and valued friend.

[15] Ron served on the British Academy's Publications Committee 2005–10.

This memoir has focused largely on Ron's academic career and achievements. But it would not be complete without acknowledging the absolutely central place his family occupied in his life. His marriage to Rita was long, happy and the bedrock to his adult life. He took immense pride in her achievements (prior to her retirement, she held university posts in adult education at Sheffield and Bath) and in those of his children, Chris (now a logistics expert and a company vice-president for Sodexo) and Lucy (a Professor of Psychology and Pro Vice-Chancellor at Murdoch University in Perth, Australia). He is survived by Rita, Chris and Lucy and by his grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Note on the authors: Charles Pattie is Professor of Geography at the University of Sheffield. Peter Taylor is Director of the Globalization and World Cities (GaWC) research network, Emeritus Professor at the Department of Geography and Environmental Sciences, Northumbria University, and Emeritus Professor at the Department of Geography, Loughborough University; he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2004. Kelvyn Jones is Professor of Human Quantitative Geography at the University of Bristol; he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2016.