

Obituary: James Robert Flynn (1934-2020)

James Flynn, who died on 11th December 2020 aged 86, was world renowned for his pioneering work on the 'Flynn Effect', the discovery that average IQ scores were rising by about 3 points per decade across the twentieth century. Though others had noted similar gains (Lynn, 2013), it was Flynn who brought together all relevant data, presenting the situation in the US based on IQ test standardizations (Flynn, 1984), followed by his widely cited study 'Massive IQ Gains in 14 Nations' (Flynn, 1987).

Continuing to research this area for the rest of his life, Flynn concluded, in his book *Are We Getting Smarter?* (Flynn, 2012) that the Flynn Effect did not mean that we were becoming more intelligent at all. Rather, as societies industrialized and became more scientific, they forced their citizens to increasingly do what Flynn called 'scientific spectacles'. People were compelled to think in a more scientific, analytical fashion, meaning that their scores on certain cognitive abilities that are weakly correlated with general intelligence, such as those measured by the *Similarities* test of the Wechsler scales, were pushed to their phenotypic maximum. This had happened so rapidly that they showed up as an overall IQ score increase, regardless of what was happening to general intelligence, including those aspects of it that are rarely measured by IQ tests. In his 1987 article, Flynn suggested that IQ tests measure something that is weakly correlated with intelligence because he thought it was absurd that real intelligence should have risen so much. It seems that only later on he realized that some important aspect of intelligence had indeed been rising, and that this was important for the kind of complex economy that we have now, with its many highly specialized roles. He realized only some years after discovering the Flynn effect that civilization depends on the maintenance of high intelligence. Indeed, Flynn accepted that general intelligence actually appeared to be decreasing, praising a book on this topic. There was, in many Western countries since the 1990s, evidence of a 'negative Flynn Effect' with IQ scores dropping; some correlates of intelligence having been in decline for much longer (Dutton & Woodley of Menie, 2018, back cover). In 2018, he co-authored a study of this (Flynn & Shayer, 2018).

In a time in which research on intelligence and race is increasingly 'controversialized', with academics losing their jobs simply for touching upon it (Woodley of Menie et al., 2018), Flynn remained the 'honest liberal' until the very end. Flynn was a convinced environmentalist when it came to the causes of race differences in IQ, but always argued his case reasonably, being open to the possibility that he was wrong and being willing to learn from those with whom he

disagreed. His book *Race, IQ and Jensen* (Flynn, 1980) was a careful attempted refutation of Arthur Jensen's (1923-2012) argument that race differences in IQ were caused primarily by genetics (Jensen, 1969). The two scholars conducted a friendly correspondence. Jensen claimed to be very grateful for the critique, and he honed his ideas accordingly (Otago Bulletin Board, 18th December 2020). Jensen's findings caused a huge backlash from Marxist ideologues, to the extent that Jensen required security on campus in 1969 and was advised to move house (Pearson, 1991, Ch. 4). But despite the risks of evoking the ire of the leftist mob, Flynn not only collaborated with academics smeared as 'racist' but even wrote Jensen's obituary in *Intelligence* (Flynn, 2013).

Indeed, Flynn had long been concerned about the decline of free speech in academia as it became taken over not by honest liberals like himself, but by zealous members of the new religion of Multiculturalism, with its environmentalist dogmas and perception that heretics are wicked (see Dutton, 2020). Flynn's original area of specialism was political philosophy and he wrote a number of books critiquing ideologies such as postmodernism. These included his work *How to Defend Humane Ideals* (Flynn, 2000), in which he argued in favor of a more equal society, though also against nihilism and totalitarianism. In 2010, in his book *The Torchlight List*, Flynn proposed that you can learn more from reading important works of literature than from attending university (Flynn, 2010a). Most recently, in September 2019, Flynn went public about how his book defending free speech, especially at the Woke-run universities, originally entitled *In Defence of Free Speech. The University as Censor*, was pulled at the last minute by UK-based Emerald Publishing, supposedly because they were concerned that the book might break the UK's hate speech laws. The book simply went through the recent history of universities increasingly repressing free speech, from the McCarthy Era to the widely documented Multiculturalist repression today (Flynn, 24th September 2019). The book was duly published, by a braver publisher, newly titled: *A Book too Risky to Publish: Free Speech and Universities* (Flynn, 2019). This was particularly personal for Flynn because, as a young academic in America, he had been subject to academic persecution himself.

James Robert 'Jim' Flynn was born in Washington, DC, on 28th April 1934 to Catholic, Irish-American parents. His father, Joseph Roy Flynn (1885-1955), was a newspaper editorial writer (according to the 1940 census), originally from St Genevieve in Missouri. His mother Frances 'May' Scot (1891-1983), from Hannibal in Upstate New York, was a former schoolteacher. Flynn was raised in Washington, DC, along with his older brother Joseph Henry Flynn (1922-2011) who later became an academic chemist, with a PhD in Chemistry from the Catholic University of America (Flynn, J.H., 1992). Though influenced by what he

called the ‘humane ideals’ of Catholicism, Jim Flynn lost his faith quite young, telling an interviewer, ‘I won an essay contest at the age of 11. As an award, they gave me the *World Book Encyclopedia*. In reading it, I found there was a more scientific explanation of the world.’

Initially wishing to be a physicist or a mathematician, Flynn decided he wanted to study political science as it had a direct application to people in the real world. He attended St. John’s College High School in Washington, DC, which was a military school, and the University of Chicago (*Who’s Who in New Zealand*, 1991). There, the lecturers ‘encouraged you to believe that if you are interested in fundamental problems, they were usually cross-disciplinary, and that if you were incisive enough, you could read across disciplines and get a good amateur competence.’ This attitude came in handy later when Flynn moved over into psychology, about which he had previously read very little. Flynn told an interviewer that in researching his book critiquing Jensen, who ‘was not racist’ but whose views deserved to be examined: ‘I was looking at publishers’ manuals and stumbled upon IQ gains over time. That, of course, became an avocation for me (laughs), for the next 30 years . . . I had never taught a psychology course or read a psychology text. However, I was good at math. I saw no reason why I could not chart IQ gains over time, and make the changes in the theory of intelligence that were necessary’ (Jacobsen, 1st August 2014). Gaining a scholarship, Flynn completed his PhD at the University of Chicago in 1958 (Otago Bulletin Board, 18th December 2020). It was entitled *Modern Thomism and Democracy* (Flynn, 1958).

While studying, Flynn was active with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and he also became a member of the Socialist Party of America. Bravely, he had done this during the Cold War ‘Red Scare’ in which anti-Communists, spear-headed by Senator Joseph McCarthy (1908-1957), were attempting to drive Communist sympathizers out of public life and especially out of academia (see Fried, 1991). In 1957, Flynn took a job teaching at the University of Eastern Kentucky, but there he became involved in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a civil rights organization active in the then segregated American South. Flynn’s activities were reported to the college president who forbade Flynn from addressing students about these issues. At Easter 1961, Flynn and other CORE members were picketing a chemist who would not serve blacks in Richmond, KY, when they were stoned by a white mob, and Flynn was assaulted while the police stood by. Flynn had arranged an interview with then Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson (1908-1973), who was coming to address the college on 1st June 1961. This infuriated the college president, who refused to allow Flynn time to conduct the interview. Considering

his position terminated, Flynn took a job at Wisconsin State College. Leaving Richmond on 1st June, however, he was arrested on trumped up charges of speeding and held for six hours (Flynn, November 1962), he suspected over concerns he would cause trouble over Johnson's visit (Downie, September 2019). In 1962, he took a job at Lake Forest College, near Chicago. The following year, Flynn was sacked from this position due to a combination of his work as a peace activist, his membership of the Socialist Party, and due to a lecture he gave on socialized medicine (Otago Bulletin Board, 18th December 2020).

Flynn was picketing outside Glen Echo Amusement Park in Maryland, which only allowed whites to enter, in 1960, when he met an 18-year-old Ashkenazi Jewish woman called Emily Fay Malkin, who was also protesting. Malkin, a student at George Washington University, was also from Washington, DC. Her father, Leon Malkin (1910-2009), was a sometime member of the Communist Party. He and his wife, Martha Nusbaum (1913-1983), were also members of the Young People's Socialist League. They came under surveillance from the FBI from 1953 onwards after Martha had organized a vigil at the White House against the execution of the Rosenbergs for spying for the Soviet Union. James Flynn and Emily Malkin married in 1961 and their eventual children were raised Jewish (Schudel, 20th December 2009; Smith, 11th July 2012; *The Afro-American*, 2nd July 1960). Flynn first became a father in 1962 to Victor, who is now Professor of Mathematics at Oxford University (Downie, September 2019). In 1963, after several failed attempts to get an academic job in America, the 29-year-old husband and father decided to move his family to New Zealand where he would teach political science at the University of Canterbury as Lecturer and then Senior Lecturer (Otago Bulletin Board, 18th December 2020).

In New Zealand, Flynn could pursue his left-wing causes more easily. In 1967, he published his first book: *American Politics: A Radical View* (Flynn, 1967). In the same year, he moved to the University of Otago, where he was appointed Foundation Professor of Political Studies and was Head of Department, positions he occupied until his official retirement in 1996. His radical book on US politics was followed, two years later, by a book on American civil rights: *The Negro Revolt* (Flynn, 1969). His daughter Natalie, now a clinical psychologist, was born in 1970. Flynn advised Labour Party Prime Minister Norman Kirk (1923-1974) on foreign policy in the early 1970s and, in the 1990s, was one of the founders of New Zealand's 'Alliance Party', an alliance of socialist parties to the left of the mainstream Labour Party. Flynn stood unsuccessfully as a parliamentary candidate for the small Alliance Party in 1993, 1995 and 2005, and in 2008 he was the party's finance and taxation spokesman. Flynn's wife occupied herself as a journalist, science teacher and lawyer (Otago University, 16th April 2019).

Upon his retirement, Flynn collected assorted accolades including Otago's Distinguished Research Medal, an honorary doctorate, and Fellowship of the Royal Society of New Zealand. Flynn was, after all, 'New Zealand's most quoted scholar' (Otago Bulletin Board, 18th December 2020). Outside of academia and politics, Flynn was a keen runner. In the 2020 'Otago Interclub Track and Field Meeting in February he finished second in the men's over-50 grade 200m, posting his best time of the season of 57.95 seconds, and was first in the men's over-50 400m sprint' (Otago Bulletin Board, 18th December 2020). He was also an amateur poet and, in 2010, self-published a volume of poetry entitled, *O God who Has a Russian Soul: Poems about New Zealand and Its People* (Flynn, 2010b). But it was within academia that Flynn was invaluable. In retirement, he also held forth on more controversial areas, insisting that society was potentially in serious trouble because clever women don't have enough children (*New Zealand Herald*, 8th July 2007).

I never met Flynn, but he peer-reviewed many of my papers on the Flynn Effect; always signing his reviews and never failing to be cheerful, reasonable, thorough and extremely helpful. He assisted with my book on intelligence decline, *At Our Wits' End: Why We're Becoming Less Intelligent and what It Means for the Future* (Dutton & Woodley of Menie, 2018), and gave it glowing peer-reviews for Oxford and Cambridge University Presses, though in both cases Flynn was overruled by the same ideologically-motivated negative peer-reviewer. Flynn was part of a dying breed: a left-wing academic who had reasoned his way to a left-wing perspective, was motivated by truth not merely ideology, accepted that he may be wrong, believed he could learn from those with whom he had academic disagreements, and believed that though they are wrong, they are nevertheless motivated by the pursuit of truth rather than by heresy and evil.

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