

[NOTE: In one of my classes for undergraduate economics majors,](#)  
*I asked students to outline the life and ideas of any economist of their choice.*  
*Here is one sample essay*

## **Lant Prichett**

Lant Prichett is a developmental economist at Harvard University and a visiting lecturer at Oxford University. He is also a consultant for the World Bank and many other agencies.

Born in 1959 in Utah, he was raised in a Mormon family and did missionary work in Argentina from 1978 to 1980. Soon after completing this Christian missionary work, he enrolled in Brigham Young University and graduated with a B.S. in Economics in 1983. Thereafter he entered MIT, obtaining a PhD in Economics in 1988. One of his mentors was Lawrence Summers, president of Harvard University and a leading economist for the World Bank. He was also influenced by the philosopher, John Rawls (1921 – 2002), who studied the relationship between political freedom and social equality. Rawls believed that if social equality became too disparate, political freedom would also tend to shrink. In short, when the gap between rich and poor is too big, democracy becomes untenable.

At first Prichett held fairly traditional beliefs about economics, but gradually he came to realize that traditional economic remedies seldom worked well in most third world situations. In fact, in many cases they merely increase the public debt and augment poverty. Prichett eventually came to believe that the best solution to reducing world poverty was to increase labor mobility. Those ideas are stated clearly in his first book, *Let Their People Come: Breaking the Gridlock on Global Labor Mobility* (2013). Although he is personally in favor of fairly relaxed national borders to permit the free flow of labor across countries, Prichett is also realistic enough to concede that this is not yet politically feasible in many countries. The election of populist leaders such as Donald Trump and Boris Johnson makes it all too clear that many people in developed economies such as the US and UK are afraid of liberal immigration policies. As a result, Prichett advocates short term visas for both skilled and unskilled workers. He likens current labor laws to “apartheid on a global scale” and notes how the low birth rates in many developed economies are creating labor shortages. In effect, Prichett is proposing a plan in which affluent societies would create a sub-caste of foreign workers who are excluded from its ranks, similar to what currently exists in Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. Although a few foreign workers do manage to become permanent residents in their places such as Japan, the linguistic, cultural, and financial hurdles to doing so are often daunting. Prichett acknowledges that this proposal to issue short-term working visas is not ideal: personally he would like to open the doors to citizenship more and enable permanent residence in developed economies to become easier. However, he is pragmatic and feels that imperfect solutions are better than no solutions. In 2013 he stated, “I am promoting a solution the formal world does not want for a problem the formal world does not want to admit that it has.”

In addition to researching issues about labor mobility, Prichett has also examined how education in the first world and third world differs. In 2013 he published *The Rebirth of Education: Schooling Ain't Learning*. That book notes how increases in years of schooling for students in poor countries does not necessarily translate into greater

gains in education, learning, or achievement. Too often, ostensible “education” is in fact a mimicry of learning. In many developing countries school structures have been built and teachers being are drawing salaries. However, in some cases there are incentives for teachers actually avoid teaching needed course content in public schools, encouraging students to enter their private (and lucrative) cram schools after regular school classes are over.

Not all people have been appreciative of Pritchett’s ideas. Jeffrey Sachs has criticized his proposals to loosen immigration, fearing that they might result in greater labor exploitation and lower wages for unskilled workers, further widening income gaps.

Conversely, Pritchett has also criticized a number of economists. He felt that the contributions of Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer -- the 2019 Nobel laureates in Economics -- were hardly worthy of a Nobel prize. In his view, merely testing various economic interventions without considering how they may (or may not) be useful prior to the tests is not an optimal use of resources. Pritchett has also criticized Jim Yong Kim, a Korean-American physician and anthropologist presided over the World Bank from 2012 to 2019. In his view, Kim lacked sufficient training in economics to successfully run that organization.

At this time, Pritchett is at Oxford University conducting research on education, global inequality, politics and economics. In addition to supervising some graduate students, he is an advisor for the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER). Earlier this year he co-authored *Building State Capability* with Matt Andrews, which examined why some countries have managed to break out of the poverty cycle while others remain trapped in seemingly endless poverty.

- Tim Newfields

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[821 words]

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