

## Basil Yamey: A Recollection

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I have not forgotten the first time I met Basil Yamey, even though it is now over 50 years ago, in March 1968. It was my first visit to LSE and I was to be interviewed to be an Assistant Lecturer in Economics. Basil was the Chair of the Interview Board. I cannot remember many of the questions asked, they could not have been on my research because at that stage I had not done any, having only graduated the previous summer. (There were in those days no job market papers or seminars expected of applicants.) I remember only being asked whether I would be able or willing to teach Public Finance. I'm sure I said yes, though I was never actually asked to do this.

Basil was at that time Head (then known as Convenor) of the Economics Department. The structural reorganisation of LSE into Departments was quite recent Basil being only the second person to hold that position. The first was Ely Devons, now legendary for having reinvigorated the Department, through the recruitment of three superstars of that era, Harry Johnson, Frank Hahn and Terence Gorman (from, respectively, Chicago, Cambridge and Oxford). They brought with them a commitment to academic excellence, international recognition and open competition. For academics it meant 'publish or perish'.

Convenors had then (as Department Heads have now) a fixed three year term of office, but Basil's three years were amongst the most momentous in the development of the Department. Lionel Robbins had been appointed Professor of Economic Theory in 1929, and had remained its leading figure until the 1960s. While Robbins's pre-eminence in economic theory in 1929 can hardly be questioned his enormous contributions to public life during the war and in the post-war period had led to a relative neglect of academic matters including the Department at LSE. The Department was a bit moribund but reinvigoration is often painful, particularly for people who find themselves in the wrong place. In 1969 five junior lecturers were up for tenure, none was successful.

Basil was able to manage this process of adjustment with wisdom and humanity. Not only did he insist on such traditional virtues as fairness, consistency and due process, but he also always offered support to the individual as part of the LSE community. No-one was allowed to feel they were not valued personally even if their work fell short of the Department's objectives. While this period was sometimes characterised as a 'reign of terror' it could never have been described as a 'reign of terrorists'.

These years were also difficult ones for the School, with 1969 the peak year of revolutionary fervour amongst the students, supported by academics some of whom were members of the Economics Department. Again Basil's commitment to fairness and individual respect helped ensure the Department was able to operate reasonably effectively despite these conflicts. I recall Basil asking me about a particular student. I said this student had been particularly offensive to me on some occasion. Basil's response – 'I'm not going to punish a student for being rude to you' – was not just good tactics but based on his principled respect for others and their rights.

After the trauma of these early years when everyone was drawn into School and Departmental politics, life returned to more normal academic activities at the end of the 60s, and as a junior academic that meant teaching and research. I did not see much of Basil after the early years but the qualities of collegiality and courtesy which he brought to his position remained an inspiration to me, not least during my time as Departmental Convenor some 30 years later.