

Basil Yamey

**Steve Nickell**

I joined the LSE Economics Department in 1970 and was there for fourteen years. As it happened, these were the last fourteen years of Basil Yamey's long membership of the department. In the early 1970s, my mentors were Frank Hahn and Terence Gorman and it was from the latter that I developed a picture of how the Department worked, Terence being notably indiscreet. The department was run by the Professors of Economics, many of whom were people of great distinction who held extremely strong views about everything. These included not only Terence and Frank but Harry Johnson, Peter Bauer, Peter Wiles, Michio Morishima, Amartya Sen, Alan Walters and others of equal distinction but perhaps less forceful in putting forward their opinions. What I learned from Terence was that it was Basil Yamey who kept the show on the road. His charm, diplomacy and integrity enabled him to persuade everybody that appointments, tenure decisions and promotions must be based only on academic excellence not on which tribe people belonged to, how old they were or who was their patron. This modus operandi was relatively unusual in UK economics departments in the 1970s (see, for example, Partha Dasgupta's description of the Cambridge Faculty at the same time in his obituary for Frank Hahn). It served LSE economics well and has continued, more or less unchanged, to the present day.

The first occasion that I was involved with Basil on official business was in the later 1970s when we were on the interview panel for a lectureship in industrial organisation. One of the candidates was Janet Yellen, whose husband (George Akerlof) had been offered a Professorship. Basil gave her a pretty hard time but we ended up offering her the job and rightly so in my view.

By 1979, I had been inducted into the Professorial priesthood and so I was able to watch Basil operating at first hand. At this point the School was hit by a financial disaster because the new Tory government announced that they would cease paying universities £3000 per annum for each overseas student but, by some curious logic, universities were only allowed to charge the students a maximum of £2000 per annum in fees... Since LSE had more overseas students than any other academic institution in the UK, this was a very serious problem. Luckily, with Ralf Dahrendorf as Director and Alan Day, a professor of economics, as Pro-Director, the School decided to expand its way out of trouble, taking on more overseas students and refusing to put any kind of freeze on salaries or promotions. The former put a great strain on the Economics Department, where a large number of overseas students were located. However with his friend, Peter Bauer, as Convenor of the Department, Basil and the rest of us were able to resolve most of the problems and continued to hire and promote relatively freely solely on academic merit. By the time Basil and I both left the Department, things were back on an even keel.

From my vantage point, it seems clear that Basil Yamey was a key figure in ensuring that LSE Economics Department became the most prestigious in the UK and in laying down the template for this to continue.