

IN MEMORIAM: SIR JACK HIBBERT (1932–2005)

Sir Jack Hibbert, a long-time member of the Association and ex-Director of the Central Statistical Office (CSO) and Head of the Government Statistical Service in the United Kingdom from 1985 to 1991, died recently after a brief illness.

Jack Hibbert was educated at Leeds Grammar School and the London School of Economics. After national service in the Royal Air Force he joined the Exchequer and Audit Department in 1952, and transferred to the Central Statistical Office in 1960. In the CSO he worked in several fields of economic statistics including public expenditure, capital formation and balance of payments. He was promoted to Chief Statistician in 1970 and was appointed assistant director (Grade 3) of the national Income and Expenditure Division in 1977. After a period on loan as a consultant to OECD and Eurostat in 1981, he returned to join the Department of Trade and Industry as head of statistics. Margaret Thatcher approved his appointment to succeed Sir John Boreham as director of the CSO and head of the GSS in August 1985.

Jack Hibbert took over the CSO after four years of cutbacks reflecting the Rayner review of statistics, conducted under the ethos that only government should be considered as customer for official statistics. But 1986 and 1987 saw a drop in the perceived quality of the national accounts and main measures such as GDP growth. Incoherence between the measures of output and expenditure allowed a picture of the economy to be presented which suggested weaker demand growth than would prove to be the case. The government of the day cited these statistics as misleading when asked to explain its handling of the economy, and the Treasury and Civil Service Select Committee recommended “a thorough review into the operation of various Departments involved in the collection of national accounts statistics.” This review took the form of an efficiency scrutiny, and a team of officials led by Steven Pickford of HM Treasury carried it out.

The review made 17 recommendations concerning the collection of statistics, 14 aimed at future improvements and five concerning the organization of statistics. An important recommendation was that the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) Business Statistics Office and other parts of the statistics compilation process in DTI should be merged into an expanded CSO. Creating the CSO as an agency of the Treasury also meant that the Chancellor was now the Minister ultimately responsible for the CSO rather than the Prime Minister. As part of his evidence to the Select Committee, Jack was quite clear that if he were in the unlikely position of being pressured by a Minister to do something he thought improper, he would tender his resignation.

The mergers occurred in July 1989 and the CSO grew from just under 170 staff to around 1,000. To quote from the official history of government statistics, *Keeping Score*, “This was probably the most dramatic development to have taken place in the history of the CSO since its birth in 1941. It brought together in a single

organization the work of collecting a wide range of economic and financial statistics with the work of compiling the national accounts. It enabled the CSO to determine priorities which were more focused on the requirements of the national accounts.”

Jack had several meetings with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, after the merger. Jack indicated that the Chancellor “has confirmed his interest in improving the statistics we issue, and this is the major task in the months ahead.” Jack said, “We have emerged from our re-organization with our reputation, integrity and objectivity not only intact but enhanced.”

In 1990, with John Major as Chancellor, an initiative was launched to improve the quality of statistics in three areas—services, companies, and balance of payments. And crucially, the CSO was invited to consider the case for the wider use of statutory surveys.

Sir Jack must go down as making and implementing some of the biggest changes in the history of British official statistics. The greater centralization of economic statistics and the subsequent expansion of the CSO was unparalleled in its short history. Sir Jack’s aim was to make substantial improvements in the national accounts to meet the needs of its principal users. He took a number of steps, supported by the Pickford Review and the subsequent “Chancellor’s initiatives” to make substantial improvements in the national accounts to meet the needs of its principal users. In 1989 and 1990, he oversaw the introduction of a number of steps to improve the quality of the raw data, to improve the coherence of the accounts by moving input–output balancing to a more central role, and to provide a more customer-focused service to users.

Jack was an active member of the IARIW, being a council member in the 1970s and contributing regularly to conferences and the journal publication. His comments on Usher’s article “The Measurement of Real Income” in 1977 were typically incisive and measured.

Jack Hibbert was knighted in 1990, and retired in 1992 after 42 years as a civil servant. In his farewell note, he said in typically modest but characteristically straightforward fashion, “I do not feel it would be unfair to claim that, in fact, we have put into practice during this recent period many of the things which, in the past, others have talked about but not actually managed to put into effect. The reorganization and bringing together of the Central Statistical Office and the Business Statistics Office into a single department and the work on setting up an inter-departmental business register, rather than simply saying it would be a good idea, are two examples of what I had in mind.”

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