

Digby Jones

Former Director General of the UK's Confederation of British Industry

Digby Jones was born into business. Some of his earliest memories are of life in a busy corner shop where he lived with his mother and father and older sister. The shop was, he says, "within a spanner throw of the Austin" in Alvechurch just outside Birmingham. He remembers fondly pressing his nose against the shop window watching the new Minis leave the factory destined for showrooms across the UK and the world. It was here he learnt the first rudiments of business – important values that were never to leave him.

He discovered the importance of good customer care at an early age and the concept of profit and loss, the very essence of good business management became an everyday reality for the young boy. And when, in the mid-sixties, the supermarkets began to move to the area, he also learned about the vulnerability of business.

At the age of 10 his parents sold the shop and his father became a full-time student, living off a grant, before he finally qualified as a Probation Officer. His mother worked as an Assistant Physiotherapist at the local hospital. It was at this period of his life when Digby first became aware of two very different aspects of the public sector.

The young Digby showed early promise. He attended Alvechurch Primary School from where he won a scholarship to Bromsgrove School, a Public School for Boys. He enjoyed his school life and worked hard. He played rugby and hockey for the school and ultimately became Head Boy. Ambitious and full of life he was not averse to the occasional prank, but this cost him dearly a few days before he was due to leave school when he was expelled for "streaking around the quadrangle" for a bet.

For much of his childhood money was scarce, but the Jones children had a good life with "much love" and "lots of laughter and fun". This, he says, made him appreciate the importance of family values as well as good money management.

Life in the corner shop also made him very aware of community. Where he lived almost everyone relied on "the Austin" in some way. On payday, families would come into the shop and spend their hard earned cash. When times were hard they spent less, which taught him how this affected everyone, not least his own family. During his three years with the Royal Navy Digby learnt about leadership, teamwork and the importance of constant communication.

His graduation from University College London was followed by 20 years with Edge & Ellison, a Birmingham-based firm of lawyers, where he worked his way up from Articled Clerk to Senior Partner. During these years he was intimately involved in all aspects of business from running the firm "as a business" to recruiting and managing several hundred employees. It was here that he developed a vision of business and its role in society, and began to believe firmly in socially inclusive wealth creation.

In 2000 he joined the CBI and was able to put some of these ideas into action. During his six and a half years as Director General he became known in the public arena especially for his candid, forthright attitude in his many media appearances.

He campaigned relentlessly on a range of issues including the move from traditional manufacturing of commodities to value-added, innovative products and services. He also lobbied against protectionism protesting that "it is a scourge which may well find short term popularity but inhibits growth, reduces wealth and oppresses the weak".

His views on the Public Sector remain a subject of great debate. He has stressed that, "if fundamental reform does not take place, from working practices right through to pension provision, we will end up with an ever-diminishing private sector trying to pay for, and provide pensions for, an ever increasing and inefficient, unproductive, self-interested public sector".

In 2005 he was knighted for his services to business and became Sir Digby Jones in the Queen's New Years Honours List.

When he left the CBI in 2006 he spent the next 12 months in the private sector as advisor to Deloitte and Barclays Capital, held a variety of non-executive board roles, and was the unpaid UK Skills Envoy. In this role he became outraged about the levels of adult illiteracy and innumeracy in the UK, and made the point that we

cannot hope to have a safer and healthier society if people lack self-respect or aspiration.

In July 2007 he was appointed Minister of State for UK Trade & Investment and became a life peer taking the title, Digby, Lord Jones of Birmingham Kt. Forthright and, as ever, loyal to British business he spent the next 15 months "doing it in a different way". He did not join the party of government and without the ambition to progress in politics he concentrated on the business of promoting Britain across the world, travelling to 31 countries in 45 overseas visits.

Now, in addition to his role as an active crossbencher in the House of Lords he serves as Chairman of Triumph Motorcycles Limited, Chairman of Grove Industries, Corporate Ambassador for Jaguar Cars and JCB. He is an Advisor to Babcock International Group plc and Chairman of the Emergency Services Advisory Board of Babcock International Group plc. He advises in a number of other paid and unpaid roles, fulfilling his vision of promoting socially inclusive wealth creation. Digby travels regularly across the UK and overseas, runs his own business and his fulfilment is complete when Leicester Tigers and Aston Villa win their matches. He has many plans for the decades to come.

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