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A conversation with Dr. Ivan P. Fellegi

Edward J. Chen and Erin R. Lundy[1]

Abstract

Ivan Fellegi is an expert in statistical science and a public servant who was the Chief Statistician of Canada from 1985 to 2008. This article briefly recounts his early life, long-spanning career and influential research contributions. It includes an interview conducted in February 2017 to mark the 60th year of service of Ivan Fellegi's career at Statistics Canada.

Key Words: Evidence-based decision making; Management of statistical organizations; Official statistics.

1. Introduction

Dr. Ivan Peter Fellegi is a Hungarian-Canadian statistician and researcher who was the Chief Statistician of Canada from 1985 to 2008. A statistician and a public servant who has dedicated his long career to serving the Canadian public, Fellegi has published academic and research papers about various aspects of statistics, probability, mathematics, the social and economic implications of statistics, and the management of statistical organizations. Under his leadership, Statistics Canada was twice recognized by *The Economist* as "the best statistical agency in the world" (The Economist, 1991 and 1993).

Fellegi's notable research contributions include work on design of multi-stage rotating panel surveys, response variance, automatic editing and imputation, record linkage and statistical confidentiality (see Appendix A). Two of his collaborative research papers, "A Theory for Record Linkage" (Fellegi and Sunter, 1969) and "A Systematic Approach to Automatic Edit and Imputation" (Fellegi and Holt, 1976), earned the distinction of being listed among 19 landmark papers in survey sampling identified by the International Association of Survey Statisticians (IASS, 2001).

This article provides a profile of Fellegi's early life, long-spanning career and influential research contributions. It includes an interview conducted in 2017 and as well as tributes from fellow public servants and statisticians. The rest of the article is structured as follows: Section 2 consists of a biography of Ivan Fellegi, Section 3 reproduces an interview from 2017 and the article concludes with a collection of tributes in Section 4.

2. Biography

Ivan Fellegi was born in Szeged, Hungary in 1935. Although he would later develop a passion for mathematical statistics, his first love was literature and poetry. At age 14, he became the youngest member

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of the Hungarian Writers' Association. Prior to taking his entrance exams for university, he changed the trajectory of his studies from literature to mathematics. At that time in Hungary, his "bourgeois" family origins would have barred him from entrance to university. However, exceptional students were allowed university admission regardless of their family background. Despite encouragement from his professors to pursue studies in literature, Fellegi decided that the safest route would be to take his examination in mathematics based on the logic that mathematical answers were far less open to interpretation than literature (Statistics Canada, 2018a). In 1953, he successfully obtained one of the top five scores on the national mathematics exam in Hungary and was admitted to Eötvös Loránd University (the University of Budapest).

Fellegi had started his fourth year of studying mathematics when the Hungarian Uprising was defeated in 1956. His mother arranged for a sympathetic physician to provide a medical certificate indicating her son had tuberculosis so that he could travel to the border area near Austria, ostensibly to receive treatment. Unfortunately, the pre-arranged smugglers were unavailable but several local teenagers, aided by a local woodcutter, agreed to lead him and his cousin to safety away from the Russian patrols. The pair trekked the mountains through cover of darkness until they made it to safety at the Austrian border. Shortly thereafter, Fellegi arrived in Ottawa, to join his elder sister.

Despite not having yet mastered English or French or being a Canadian citizen, his training in mathematics and probability led Fellegi to a job at Statistics Canada (then known as the Dominion Bureau of Statistics) and the discovery of a love for statistics. Instead of following his sister's and brother-in-law's advice to pursue a career as a physician, Fellegi decided to enroll in mathematics at Carleton University. As a newly arrived refugee, Fellegi worked at Statistics Canada during the day and completed his studies with night courses. In 1958, he became the first Carleton University student to receive a Master of Science degree. He continued his studies at Carleton University and pursued a doctoral degree in mathematical statistics. As there was no curriculum for his program at the time, his studies were largely self-guided. Upon completing his doctoral studies in 1961, he became Carleton's first Ph.D. graduate (see Figure 2.1).

During this period, Fellegi continued to work at Statistics Canada. The year after his graduation, he became chief of the Sampling Research and Consultation Section which was responsible for the methodology of the Canadian Labour Force Survey. Further promotions followed, and in 1965 he was appointed Director of Sampling Research and Consultation Staff, before becoming Director General of the Methodology and Systems Branch in 1971. Two years later, in 1973, he was promoted to Assistant Chief Statistician. During his tenure as an Assistant Chief Statistician, he took a leave of absence in 1978 to work for the United States Commission on the Reorganization of the US Statistical System as established by President Jimmy Carter. This experience served him well when he returned to Statistics Canada and was later promoted to Deputy Chief Statistician in 1984.

Figure 2.1 Ivan Fellegi stands outside a Carleton University building, displaying a banner to celebrate Carleton's 75th anniversary. The banner depicts Fellegi's photo and the years in which he obtained his degrees

On September 1, 1985, with close to 30 years of experience, Fellegi was appointed Chief Statistician of Canada (see Figure 2.2). One of his first actions was to ensure the agency's public communications were more accessible. He believed that Statistics Canada's results should be put in a real-world context conveying the story the data had to tell (Katz and Willig, 2013). Throughout his career, Fellegi emphasized the importance of sound methodology and integrity from his staff.

Fellegi announced his retirement as Chief Statistician of Canada on February 15, 2008, after 23 years at the helm of the agency. As the leader of the national statistical agency, he had an impact on the development and advancement of statistics in Canada, both through his pioneering research in survey methodology and his promotion of research and evidence-based decision making. After retirement, he was appointed as Chief Statistician Emeritus of Canada and continued to serve Canada on a voluntary basis (Statistics Canada, 2018b).

Figure 2.2 Official portrait of Chief Statistican of Canada (1985-2008), Ivan Fellegi

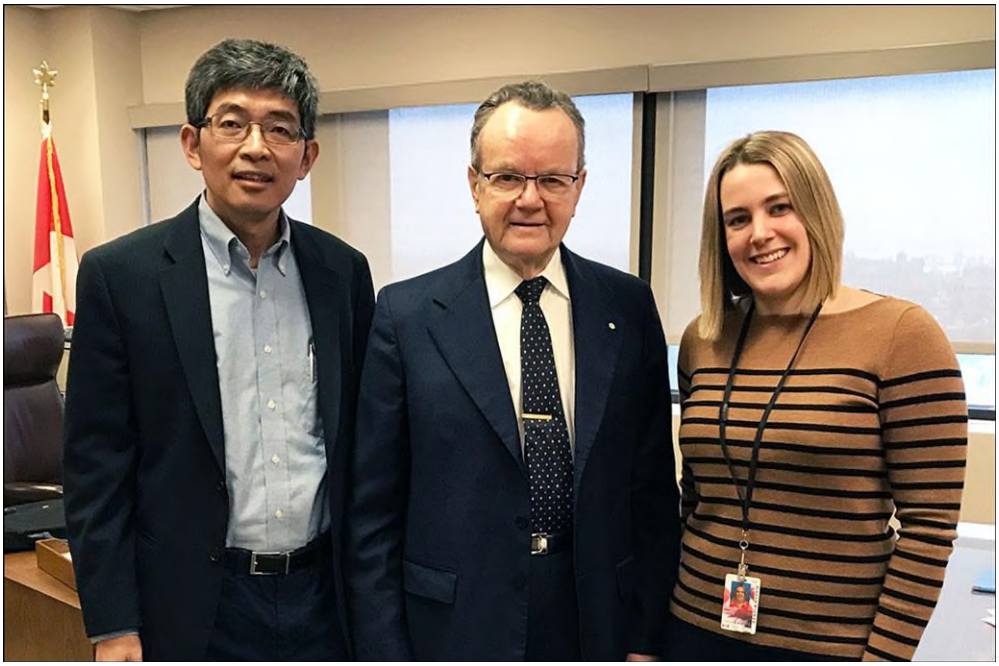
Fellegi's impact and contributions extend beyond Statistics Canada. He has been recognized in Canada and around the world (see Appendix B) for his contributions to the field of statistics and public service. Internationally, he chaired the Conference of European Statisticians of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe from 1993 to 1997 and was the inaugural chairman of the Statistics Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). As such, he played a key role in coordinating the (overlapping) mandates of the OECD Statistics Committee and the Conference of European Statisticians. At different periods of his career, Fellegi served as President of the International Statistical Institute (1987-1989), the International Association of Survey Statisticians (1985-1987), and the Statistical Society of Canada (1981). He contributed to a number of international statistical projects, including work on the United States Census through the National Academy of Sciences as well as leading Statistics Canada's international cooperation efforts in the modernization of the Chinese national statistical system. Following its transition to democracy, Fellegi provided advice on statistical matters to his native Hungary, and in 2004 he was awarded the Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary. He was also asked to review the statistical systems of Switzerland and Portugal.

He attributes much of his success to the love and support of his family, including the love of his life, his wife Marika Fellegi, and their two daughters, both of whom have gone on to become successful medical professionals.

3. Interview to Mark 60th Anniversary at Statistics Canada

February 2017 marked the 60th anniversary of Ivan Fellegi's career at Statistics Canada. To mark this occasion, Edward Chen and Erin Lundy sat down with the former Chief Statistician for an interview to discuss his career, his contributions to statistical science and the agency, and his life since his semi-retirement in 2008 (see Figure 3.1). The following is an account of that conversation.

Figure 3.1 To mark the 60th anniversary of Ivan Fellegi's career at Statistics Canada, Edward Chen and Erin Lundy sat down with the former Chief Statistician for an interview in February 2017



Edward and Erin: *We read in an article that was published by the Statistical Society of Canada newsletter (Bellhouse, 2004) that you were admitted to medical school at the University of Ottawa. While you were waiting to go to school, you started working at Statistics Canada in February 1957. Would you please describe how you started your job here?*

Ivan: First of all, I should say that I became a statistician almost by accident because back in Hungary I wasn't supposed to go to university due to my bourgeois background. I managed to get into university by winning a national competition in mathematics where the grand prize was admission to the university. When I came to Canada, my sister, who had already been in Canada, said "this is your opportunity to be what you want to be". I didn't know what I wanted to be – but why not medicine? I applied to the University of Ottawa and was accepted to the pre-medical school. In the meantime, I needed money; I was a penniless refugee!

I heard the Government of Canada was looking for mathematicians. I applied and I was referred to the Dominion Bureau of Statistics for an interview. I brought along my transcripts and was interviewed by **Doug Dale** who was in charge of a small methodology unit. I didn't understand much of his questions because my English was fine so long as it was spoken by another Hungarian. I must have nodded at the right times because he hired me (but really, I think it was mostly because of the famous professors whose names were in my transcripts).

My intention was to start Medicine in the fall, but I found the work here really interesting. Instead, I decided to enroll at Carleton University for my graduate study and stay at Statistics Canada if they would let me take some time off for courses. I was the first and, at that time, the only Master's student at Carleton and later their first PhD graduate. Statistics Canada was very good to me, so I stayed here for the next 60 years.

Edward and Erin: *You officially retired in June 2008 after 51 years of service at Statistics Canada – 23 years of those as Chief Statistician of Canada. It is hard to summarize your contributions and the influence you continue to have on Statistics Canada. Would you please discuss a few of your major contributions during your career?*

Ivan: I want to mention four areas. First of all, when I came to Statistics Canada the methodology function was restricted entirely to the Labour Force Survey. I contributed considerably to the establishment of methodology as a fundamental discipline of Statistics Canada that underlies almost everything that we do. I do not know how much of it would have happened if I wasn't here. At any rate, I am proud of my role as the flagbearer for methodology. I was directly involved with leading the methodology function from very early on in my career. There are few statistical offices with really well-established methodology functions and Statistics Canada is a world leader in that field.

The second one is in the area of Social Statistics. When I became Assistant Chief Statistician in charge of social statistics, we had justice, health and education statistics divisions but all their surveys were institutional surveys (schools, hospitals, etc.). There was not a single survey that looked at the impact those institutions had on individual people and on the Canadian population. By the time I left in 2008, we had a very well-established Social Statistics program−one that really tried to assess, on an ongoing basis, the impacts of these institutions.

A third area I have to mention is the increase in analytical capacity at Statistics Canada. People, by and large, consume information, not raw data−and information is the result of analysis. Of course, there is no good analysis without good statistics. I think I was instrumental in creating and strengthening the analytical capacity in the agency.

Perhaps the thing I am most proud of is our innovations in the area of human resources (HR). Good human resource management is the cornerstone of success in any organization. Yet, there was no systemic approach to human resource management when I became Chief Statistician. We established an HR planning function, a recruitment and development program designed to hire and retain the best and brightest, created

a comprehensive training program from scratch, and established the Training Institute as well as a broad, career-development program. Many of these initiatives were also adopted by other government departments.

Previously, there was a tradition that you started out in a division and 30 years later you retired from that same division. This created vulnerability in that when a survey, for whatever reason, had to be cancelled, the people associated with that program didn't have other marketable skills. In my first act as Chief Statistician, I wrote a memo to staff saying that I would implement a no-layoff policy, but you had to help me by being ready to acquire new skills and be willing to move around as needed. We established a program of rotating the non-specialist staff around so that they acquired a wide set of skills and capabilities, while at the same time we recognized and nurtured our specialists.

To this day, what I am most happy about is when, eight years after my retirement, employees stop me in the streets or in supermarkets, to thank me or just shake my hand and ask me how I am doing.

Edward and Erin: *During your career, you conducted foundational research into survey methodology while balancing the demands of your management roles. How did you find the time to do research? And how should research be conducted in organizations like ours?*

Ivan: My research was always part of the work I was doing. It arose out of important problems that Statistics Canada was facing. I found time to do research because I had to find time. I was seized by those research problems, and I had to solve them to my satisfaction.

It is important, in my experience, that applied research arise out of real-world issues that need solution. You should try to find not an *ad hoc* solution to these issues but, if possible, a theoretically sound solution which is a lot more general and, importantly, much more likely to be optimal. As well, research should be done by people who really are devoted to it and who are willing to be seized by the research problem. I believe very strongly that there should be a professional research organization that is supported.

Edward and Erin: *You continue to be active and maintain an office here at Statistics Canada (see Figure 3.2), coming in almost twice every week. What else have you done since your retirement?*

Ivan: I am on a National Academy of Sciences panel in the United States that is advising the Census Bureau on their 2020 Census plans. As part of this work, I am involved in chairing a group that works with the US Census Bureau on how to improve self-response and how to leverage administrative records as part of the next census.

Of course, I come in here and welcome anyone who is interested in my views on either professional issues or career advice. I have been around long enough, and I love to share my experience.

Edward: *Thank you very much for the conversation! This is almost the end. I remember I met your wife and two of your three granddaughters in 1995, when your family members came to a summer picnic at the Tunney's Day Care and spent time with us. How are your granddaughters now?*

Figure 3.2 Chief Statistician Emeritus of Canada, Ivan Fellegi, in his office at Statistics Canada

Ivan: They are doing well and are through various stages of work and study. One granddaughter is a geographer. The middle one received her Master's degree in Mathematics from Oxford University last year. She is the only one of the three who is in mathematics. The third will graduate this year from Mount Allison University in New Brunswick.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that Statistics Canada will always be my second family.

Edward and Erin: *Again, thank you for your time, Dr. Fellegi. You certainly have had a long and accomplished career. Please extend our best wishes to your family members.*

4. Tributes

To highlight his impact and career, senior managers at Statistics Canada as well as experts in the area of statistical research paid homage to Ivan Fellegi with the following tributes:

Anil Arora, former Chief Statistician of Canada

"What does one say to a milestone that is so momentous, that by all reasonable standards, it is unfathomable to most? Sixty years of loyal, dedicated and exceptional service to the Canadian public service and to an institution that symbolizes the very essence of an elite democratic institution–to say it leaves one in awe of your immense contributions is in itself an understatement.

You have touched the lives of so many individuals and organizations. You have influenced the direction of the country. You have mentored so many. Above all, you have touched the hearts and minds of so many who try to carry on in a very small way, the journey you have laid out, and the path of fulfillment.

I consider myself so fortunate to have had the chance to learn, to observe, to emulate, and to walk in your shoes. Even after nearly 35 years observing and contributing in some small part to this institution, I discover the wisdom of your decisions, the foresight, and your influence both domestically and internationally.

Thank you for your guidance and friendship. It is a privilege and an honour. All the best of health and happiness to you and the family always."

Charmaine B. Dean, Vice-President, Research & International, University of Waterloo

"Dr. Ivan Fellegi was a legendary figure in Canadian Statistics. It is widely known that his career at Statistics Canada spanned a remarkable sixty years, including 23 years as Chief Statistician. This would be an impressive legacy for anyone, but it is particularly impressive given that he began his career as a newly arrived refugee from Hungary.

Dr. Fellegi presided over Statistics Canada during challenging times but managed to make transformational changes to the organization. He was a visionary but also a practical leader, making sure that the right supports were in place when needed. Importantly, he deeply valued the privacy of Canadians and took the responsibility to protect their personal information with the utmost seriousness.

I will remember his legacy through a more personal lens. Dr. Fellegi always went above and beyond in the role, engaging regularly with the international statistics community and lending his support to the Canadian Statistical Society. He was also a superb mentor and gave generously of his time to help develop new talent. Dr. Fellegi's impact will be felt for decades to come."

Don Royce, former Director General, Methodology Branch

"It is well known that Dr. Fellegi was Chief Statistician from 1985 to 2008. What may be less known is his work as a brilliant mathematical statistician in the earlier part of his career. He made important contributions in virtually every area of statistical methods.

Although I served as Director General of Methodology Branch from 2005 to 2009, and was nominally the head of statistical methods for the agency, I was under no illusions about who was Statistics Canada's real expert on statistical methods.

What I appreciated the most about serving under Dr. Fellegi was his understanding of the role of statistical methods, and knowing that I could always count on an open and collegial discussion with him to help us arrive at the best approach for Statistics Canada to take."

Rosemary Bender, former Assistant Chief Statistician, Analytical Studies, Methodology and Statistical Infrastructure Field

"It was a true pleasure working under Dr. Fellegi's leadership for most of my career at Statistics Canada. He has been an inspiration for so many of us, whether discussing methods and quality assurance at the office or leading new initiatives abroad for international collaboration and assistance.

I have warm memories of chats with Dr. and Mrs. Fellegi and wish them both well as we celebrate these remarkable 60 years."

Peter Morrison, former Assistant Chief Statistician, Social, Health and Labour Statistics Field

"I, like so many who have had the privilege of working with Dr. Fellegi over the years, was always inspired by his vision for Statistics Canada and the workplace he built–one characterized by integrity, respect and professionalism.

He instilled in us how important our work was to the lives of individual Canadians–no matter what position we occupied within the agency. It was a message that I continued to share with others throughout my career.

I wish Dr. Fellegi many more years with Statistics Canada."

André Loranger, Chief Statistician of Canada

"Reflecting on my new role as the recently appointed Chief Statistician, I am deeply inspired by Ivan Fellegi's legacy and his transformative impact on Statistics Canada.

Ivan fostered a culture of rigorous methodological standards and continuous improvement. His leadership in implementing advanced statistical methods and ensuring data quality has become the cornerstone of our operations and the foundation for maintaining public trust and credibility.

Ivan's influence extended globally and is reflected in his numerous awards, international roles, and significant contributions to the global statistical system. His leadership in international statistical circles served to elevate our agency to global prominence.

As I strive to build upon Ivan's legacy, I am reminded daily of the principles he championed: excellence, innovation, and integrity. His impact on Statistics Canada is immeasurable, and his legacy continues to guide and inspire us in our mission to provide high-quality statistical information to Canadians."

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

A. Selected Scientific Publications

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B. Career Highlights

Chief Statistician Emeritus of Canada, 2008 to present.

- Outstanding Career Award from the Public Service of Canada (2017), Government of Canada.
- Chief Statistician of Canada, 1985–2008. During his tenure, the statistical organization was ranked twice by *The Economist* (1991 and 1993) as the best statistical agency in the world.
- Honorary doctorates from University of Ottawa (2008), Université de Montréal (2002), Université du Québec (Institut National de la Recherche Scientifique, 2002), Carleton University (1999), McMaster University (1997), Simon Fraser University (1995).
- Honorary member of the Statistical Society of Canada (2008), honorary member of the International Statistical Institute (1993), honorary fellow of the Royal Statistical Society (1978), elected fellow of the American Statistical Association (1965).
- Order of Merit of the Hungarian Republic (2004); member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.
- Outstanding Achievement Award of the Public Service of Canada (2002), Government of Canada.
- Career Achievement Award of the Canadian Policy Research Initiative (2002).
- La Médaille de la ville de Paris (1999).
- Order of Canada, Officer (1998), Order of Canada, Member (1992).
- Gold Medal of the Statistical Society of Canada (1997).
- Robert Schuman Medal of the European Community (1997).
- Chair of the Board of Governors, Carleton University (1995-1997).
- Chair, Conference of European Statisticians of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (1993-1997).
- President of the International Statistical Institute (1987-1989), President of the International Association of Survey Statisticians (1985-1987), and President of the Statistical Society of Canada (1981).
- First master's degree recipient (1958) and first doctorate degree recipient (1961) from Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.

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