

Clip 11 – Minister for the Arts

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From: James Cox meets Jennie Lee, 22nd June 1982

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James Cox: And then of course the Labour Government did come into being in 1964, Harold Wilson, got back in to power, and you were appointed Minister for the Arts. Now was that, again let me put it bluntly, some people would say that was a sort of pay-off to the memory of Nye Bevan.

Jennie Lee: Yes! My friends were totally indignant. I was offered the lowest form of rank, and they said this is Harold Wilson trying to win Nye Bevan's shadow on the cheap. But what Harold said to me was this was a new job, a pioneer job, and if I would tackle it, he would back me. I said, "Well Harold, I'll get all the money I can from the treasury, but I'll take it on provided you'll say I can get a bit more". He promised and he kept his promise to me so that I was justified in taking it on and I'd just like to say this – the first thing I had to do was to rescue Covent Garden, and the National... and Aldwych and a great many of our great London institutions from debt. I did that quite deliberately because I knew that if we let standards drop at the centre, we would never build them up anywhere else. You would not have had your Scottish Opera or your Welsh Opera if I had surrendered to the bullying or seducing that tried to make me lower my standards.

James Cox: Ah now we've started lots of hares there, lets pursue them one by one. First of all yes, money – there's a lovely story about you saying the kind of art I like is that and you're pointing to a graph on the wall, a chart on the wall showing how the money for the arts had gone up and up, doubling pretty well every year.

Jennie Lee: We trebled the amount of money to the arts. We started regional associations, a housing fund but I always had my father and Aneurin Bevan at the back of my mind. I deeply resented any idea that there was a certain level of the perfection for a few well-heeled people and that anything was good enough for the rest.

James Cox: Some people would say of course that government spending on the arts is a) frivolous and b) unnecessary because they arts should be able to fund themselves. What would your answer be to them?

Jennie Lee: Well of course this is illiteracy of the worst kind. How can you have a great opera company, a ballet company, how can you have a Barbican, how can you have a National Theatre, how can you have our great museums and galleries? What we ought to do, what we started doing from 64-70 was to provide the bone structure from central and local government funds. Then you welcome in the arts, as in the health service, any individual who wants to give voluntary help, any business large or small that wants to help, but that should be the icing on the cake. But there's not a country in the world that can maintain great opera companies or great theatre without subsidy.