

## Open Forum 2 (1975)

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### **Jennie Lee:**

We always start, it's a kind of hallowed beginning, about a speech made by the Leader of the Opposition then, Mr Harold Wilson, on September 8<sup>th</sup> 1963 in Glasgow. He wasn't so ingenuous as to think when he made that speech that he was inventing the mass media. A great deal of educational work had been done at all levels - at all the lower levels - for infancy, for the younger years, adult education and the rest of it, and done in very many parts of the world. But in 1963 we were leading up to the 1964 General Election and he was very much at that time in love with the concept of the technical revolution, that we were all going to become richer and happier and life made easier for us by a more intelligent use of modern techniques. And in that mood he visited Moscow and Chicago and there he was inspired by the concept of using the mass media, radio, television, films, the cassettes coming on and all the rest of it, in order to make available to an immensely wide public the higher levels of education. No compromise, no academic compromise on the university stage.

Now you may wonder why as he cared so much for this project, that a Junior Minister - because Minister of State sounds very grand, but a Minister of State in a Ministry of Education and Science is a Junior Minister - why I was asked to carry through this project. Particularly as I was already a cuckoo in the nest in the DES, not welcomed at all, because they felt they had enough children before I arrived, and I was not doing any straight-forward work of an under-secretary, I was totally, as you know, engaged in beginning to promote the arts. And I was able to survive only because I was, I negotiated my money directly with the Treasury and I dealt only with the Prime Minister. Now, I mention that because it was a lead-in to what followed.

Now when Harold Wilson made his speech in '63 then formed his government in '64, he was very keen to promote this concept of an Open University. But he found that he could get no response at all from either the senior officials or ministers in the Department of Education and Science. He found he couldn't get a kind look from either the senior officials or the ministers in the Treasury. He found that among his Cabinet colleagues that he himself had appointed, that there was either total indifference or a rather supercilious hostility. But the curious thing about this, this hostility, was that it did not follow the normal left/right divisions inside the Labour Party. Dick Crossman on the left was just as unimpressed, to put it gently, as Roy Jenkins and Tony Crosland on the right. So here was your poor Prime Minister anxious to go ahead with a scheme which he deeply believed in but how was he going to, how could he set about it? So I was a kind of last resort. So he comes to me and he says "For God's sake get this thing going!" And I said "Right, Harold, but on the same terms as we worked together in promoting the arts. That I deal only with you and I negotiate directly for the money with the Treasury and you help!" And, fair's fair, both in The Open University and before that, on the arts side, he never let me down. But I'm only showing you the difficulties... there's no such thing you know, as a Prime Minister being able simply to press a button and get his own way because whenever public expenditure is involved then it has got to go, it's got to have the sanction of the Treasury ministers, then it has got to come and it's got to have the sanction of Cabinet, and if there's a consensus of opinion on his side in Cabinet, well you can go ahead. But if there's not a consensus of opinion, Prime Ministers are not dictators in this country.