

D208_06_clip3 - Setting up the OU

In: 00:04:37

Out: 00:07:17

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Harold Wilson: I was anxious to bring Jennie into the picture because I'd always felt, and Nye Bevan had always felt, she'd been overshadowed by him and that was why she'd not been a Minister before. And I put her, at first, in Education and gave her a free hand. The Education Department didn't want to know about this idea [The Open University].

Jennie Lee: He said 'For God's sake, take this on. I can get no help, no response, from either the ministers or the senior officials in the Department of Education and Science' and I said, 'Well Harold, I shall do it, but on the same terms as promoting the Arts', which was, although de jure I was a Junior Minister, de facto I dealt only, directly with the Prime Minister, the Treasury. We made the same arrangement about The Open University. There would never have been an Open University if we'd gone along conventional channels.

Ralph Toomey: There was, at first, I think in the Department, a great deal of scepticism about the Jennie Lee project for an Open University, and there's no good denying it, a sort of lack of enthusiasm. I don't think—, it wasn't because the Department didn't see the increasing importance of radio and television for educational purposes because they'd been working on a scheme themselves for some years. And the idea of this scheme was to launch an experimental service of education and television. But when Jennie Lee arrived in the Department, I mean she simply scrapped the existing scheme. She told everyone to throw them away and start again.

Jennie Lee: My first step was to engage a table for two on a side wall in the Member's Guest Room in the House of Commons, and I picked off, one by one the people who I wanted to be on my original Advisory Committee and I knew – after all I'd been through the mill, I'd taken my Arts Degree and my Law Degree and all the little bits and prizes – I knew the racket. And so, I was quite certain that if we were going to have a university that didn't insult people, that made no compromise on standards, I would have to out snob the snobs.

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Jennie Lee: Remember, my great asset was I had the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson was at the height of his powers then, we'd been out of office for so many years and all our idealism was to make the best of the Arts and the best of Education more widely available. And he kept his word to me. I disagreed with him on many other things, but I must say that when I was fighting the Treasury and couldn't get enough money and then I had to go before the full Cabinet, the Treasury Ministers, poor devils, would be against me because they'd have to do the addition sums.

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Ralph Toomey: If you want to pinpoint a time when there was a crucial commitment by Government to The Open University, it was in fact, when the decision was taken to set up the Planning Committee – this is the Venables Committee – because at the same time, money had to be allocated

to support the work of the committee in the first place but also, I mean, to prepare the initial stages of The University, appoint staff, get the preliminary buildings done and that kind of thing.

Jennie Lee: Sir Peter Venables was the Chairman of the Planning Committee and he looked square like this, and he stood square like this, and he was pushed and pushed and pommelled in order to reduce standards for adult education. He resisted that and he just stuck to his guns. He said, 'My instructions are to establish a university, making no concessions on standard'. And with Peter in the Chair and then of course, here's the Planning Committee here—, I was out of it now, remember, the Political Minister stands back.

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