

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

**Name: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS
MCKIBBIN OXFORD _INTERVIEW ORIGINAL AUDIO 1 OR
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S1 00:00:15:24

Uh, Henry Pelling is one of the leading British historians of the labour movement, has worked both on the history of the Labour Party and on the history of trade unions, but has gone beyond that. Working on British general elections, the social geography of elections, and also American history. And I wondered if we could begin at the beginning. You began by reading classics at Cambridge. Did part one. Why then did you switch to history for part two?

S2 00:00:44:07

Well, it was really because of the intervention of the war. I somehow thought that if I was going to do research of any sort that it would be more interesting to work on the contemporary period rather than the past. This was, I suppose, the effect of the war itself and that the whole German archives, for instance, were free to be, Although as it turned out, I worked on British history and not on not on as I had thought originally I would work on, not on European history.

S1 00:01:12:23

Was.

S2 00:01:13:06

The Sometimes I regret the fact that I didn't have to go into Venetian history, which would have enabled me to go and sit in Venice and work on the on the economic archives there, which would be very pleasant.

S1 00:01:25:21

But was the social experience of the war in any particular way important and pushing you in this direction or not?

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S2

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Not specially, I don't think. No. Originally I read classics only because of my parents. Wish they wanted me to become a lawyer. And I gradually discovered when I was in Cambridge that having belonged to the Union Society, I was not a very good off the cuff speaker. And so I didn't see a future for myself in, in in in the law. But my my grandfather, my maternal grandfather had given his first brief to Lord back in head on as a solicitor on the Liverpool Circuit and that I was supposed to follow in the path of Birkenhead. In fact, you see, I was born in Birkenhead and brought up at the same school as he was.

S1

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But the decision to work on the early history of the ILP was not in any way influenced. At least you don't think it was by a sort of wartime democracy or a feeling of an interesting kind of progressive politics?

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I was interested in politics. I was interested, yes, I was interested in the Labour Party victory in 45. I had been in the army in Germany at the time of the election. I'd been actually election returning officer there for my unit. So I suppose that did help. Yes. And what happened was that Professor Postern of this university, who was a medievalist, really was lecturing on 19th century economic history of Britain. And they went to his lectures and eventually I asked when I did fairly well. In the end, I discovered I had a research studentship for at least two years. I said to him, What should I do research on? I'm interested in leftwing things. And he said, Well, why not do a history of the Communist Party? So I said, I think that'd be too difficult and too controversial at the moment. Besides, you couldn't get the evidence. Yes, that was before well before the the Khrushchev revelations of 56, of course. And of course it did become possible to do and I did later on the history of the Communist Party. But at that time I thought it was impossible. So he said, Well, why not do the ALP, which hasn't been done. So I decided to do the ALP. So I brought out my original proposition for research was a history of the ALP from 1893, which it was founded to 1932 when it dissuaded affiliated from the Labor Party. That was my original project.

S1

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And that just got out of hand. Did it? I mean.

S2

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It became too much when I when I went on with the research, I discovered that it was too big a subject. So I gradually cut it down. First of all, to 1918 is Terminal point, then to 1914 with in consultation with my supervisor, who was Denis Brogan then to 19 six. And finally the thesis I submitted was on the origins and early history of the ALP 1880 to 1900.

S1

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And what was your attitude to the government at the time? I mean, you were favourably disposed to the government, Yes.

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And of course I saw something of my I sort of microcosm of the Labor Party in the University Labor Club. I saw that there were very many different motives among the members of of the Club for Belonging interested me that these different motives, which I thought needed further exploration. That was one thing. People go in for politics for different reasons. I want to work, work out what they were, how they came together.

S1

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Right. And did you have any I mean, given the experience of many of your generation, did you have any encounter with Marxism and were you influenced by it or did you reject it on thinking about it, or did you just pass it by?

S2

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I think I was influenced by Marxism, certainly as a tool for economic history especially. I remember when I was first in undergraduate, the Cambridge University Socialist Club, which included the Communists, produced the the Christopher Hill's book English Revolution 1640 to 1940. That book was being sold as being by a very able young graduate of Oxford Research, Fellow of Oxford. And I read that with interest, but I was put off joining belonging to the Socialist Club because it it was communist. I didn't agree with the Communists, especially in this period of the Cold War, 1939 to 41. I mean, the period of the the Cold War, I should say that the ponyboy perhaps, but but of course the communists were against the war, right? Till 41 when Russia was invaded. I didn't like the way that simply followed the communist line. Yes, the Russian line.

S1

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In the introduction to your thesis, which eventually became in a modified form, the origins of the Labour Party, you thank particularly Dennis Brogan as your supervisor and as a Briggs. And I wondered what how these two influenced if they did the final outcome.

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S2 **00:06:17:21**

Well, Dennis was my supervisor, but he was not in fact a very great help to me, but I felt I had to put in a courtesy thank you to him.

S1 **00:06:24:22**

So, I mean, he just I.

S2 **00:06:26:05**

Think that was more or less more courtesy than anything else. But I went to see him. He was always wrapping up or undoing parcels and things, not paying very much attention to me. But the only thing he could do. He was interested in French and American history. Not really in British history at all. The only thing he did do was he gave me a good many introductions in Scotland. France, for instance, to Patrick Dolan, who was then who had been prominent in the ILP in early years and was then I think, had just retired from being Lord Provost of Glasgow.

S1 **00:06:55:18**

And he's a Briggs and Briggs.

S2 **00:06:57:07**

Well, did me the courtesy of reading the whole thing and I was in Oxford and that that of course. I'm sure that Briggs was mentioned in my thesis.

S1 **00:07:06:23**

In the in the origins of the Labour Party, in the public.

S2 **00:07:10:07**

That's a different matter. Yes. Yes. But I think that was because he did the courtesy of reading the the the manuscript before it went to press.

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Yes. I mean, one of the I don't know how you feel about it now. One of the criticisms that was made of the origins of the Labour Party or has been made is that you were never quite certain in your own mind as to the role played by the Socialists as against the trade unions. Yes. What in retrospect, what do you think of that criticism?

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S2 **00:07:35:20**

I think that's a fair criticism. And I think, of course, the trouble is the evidence of that in that period is very strongly in favour of the socialists and you don't get very much on the trade unions side. And if I were to do it again, I would try to do find much more, get very much more research on the on the trade union side and and make it much more, much more fuller, much fuller on that side than it is now. Yes, I think that is a fair criticism that I was a little bit doubtful about that and a little bit taken by the evidence. I mean, the papers was so interesting. Yes, that's an interesting group of people that were very well worth. Right. Writing them up and fully in full. Also, of course, the Socialist League was very interesting, too. I went to Amsterdam to get the Socialist League papers and I was putting together their bits of paper which had been torn in four torn across in four. When the Socialist League was disbanded. The Socialist League was disbanded in 1891. Well, rather, I don't think, but I think it was more or less disbanding what happened was that they were afraid of an anarchist. They were afraid that the police would they were anarchistic. They were afraid that police would suddenly raid them and take off the whole lot. And so what they did was they bundled all their papers together and tore them into four pieces and put them into sacks. And these sacks were in fact bought by an Austrian socialist for five shillings a sack and cut it off by him to the German Socialist archives. And he then eventually they at the time of the Hitler takeover in Germany, the German socialist Social Democratic Party's archives went to Amsterdam. And so they were in Amsterdam till till till 1940. Then they came to London, to Oxford. In fact, for five years they went back to Amsterdam and still nobody touched them. And it wasn't. I was touching them for the first time in 1947 or so, reading these papers, which had never been touched before, and putting together various letters which had not been put together at all. I don't think they'd been put together even now, except Edward Thomson, of course, did some work on them for his life of William Morris. Yes, but I'm not sure about how far they've been put together even now.

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I mean, I can see that haven't.

S2

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Been published in full.

S1

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They would be very attractive to you and I can see why you went in that direction.

S2

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If you could pick out the I could pick out the correspondence of Maurice very easily. His writing was distinctive and so was Bernard Shaw. A good many Bernard Shaw letters were there. I was rather cross with the man who became the editor of the editor of the Collected Letters of Bernard Shaw that he didn't, in fact, do more with these papers. He didn't use them at all, but still, he was interested really? Only in the literary side. Yes.

S1

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I mean, apart from doing more on the trade unions, would you now think you would do if you were to start it again and considering what an influential book that has been, is there anything else that any other approach that you would now take that didn't occur to you when you publish the book in the late 1940s?

S2

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No, I think I think it was fair to to do an examination of the socialist started. But simply to emphasize that I did emphasize, of course, that the number of socialists involved was really quite small and they were mostly London based. Yes, I think that was bound to say they had an important role in the creation of the Labour Party and the origins of it. So it was worthwhile putting some emphasis on them. To be sure. Half the book, I think, ought to be ought to be inverted, that I'm not sure that I feel that there was any other special emphasis that I would have changed. No, I don't think so.

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S1

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Do you think, uh, this was one of the things that obviously preoccupied you when you wrote the thesis, then you wrote a well-known essay on it. Do you think there was any point at which the working classes could have been accommodated within organized liberalism at, say, in the 1880s or 1890s? Was there a crucial point?

S2

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Yes. Well. I think and I actually said in the book that that I thought the important thing was the non-recognition by the liberals of payment of members of Parliament. If they had done that, they might have cut off the enthusiasm of the Labour members to send with trade union funds only.

S1

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Yes.

S2

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That's it's possible, but it's not not certain. Even so, because of course comparisons with America come in there, I think.

S1

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Yes. I mean, you think that so it is possible that the Liberal Party might have developed a bit like the Democratic Party?

S2

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Yes.

S1

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Um, whereas you tend to argue and that that that essay in popular politics that the changes really are rather structural ones. And the implication is that you thought then there's probably not much the Liberal Party could have done about it, but you think it still was more contingent than that? Yes.

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S2

00:12:26:22

Yes, Yes. I think I think well, one can never foresee what's going to happen. I think I certainly think there was a possibility that it could have all been headed off, as it were.

S1

00:12:37:01

Yes. I wonder if we could turn into your interest in American history, because at the early 1950s, um, I think you went to the States and I wondered, did you become interested in American history precisely because of these kinds of comparisons, or was it because you had to teach American history or what?

S2

00:12:53:22

I think because I decided that when I was in Oxford, I had to teach a special subject. And the subject that was going in the 19th century, on the whole, the Oxford History School was very old fashioned. They had very few special subjects in the 19th century even. And there was this American subject on slavery and secession, which I got interested in. And so I also another thing was that at Queens College, where I was then a fellow, I always had an American colleague every year, a different American colleague, every year visiting professor from the United States, Harmsworth professor. And on the whole, they were very generous people. And they used to say, Well, of course you've come to the States, come and visit me. And so I did get an interest in American history. I think from that, from that some are very distinguished men. Of course, some men came to us. And so to some extent also I took part in the formation of the British Association for American Studies in a conference in, I think, 1952, in Cambridge, which was held in Saint John's College, my old college. And this was a great experience for me because because we had many distinguished American professors who came especially for the conference and we had a good discussion of American history, many fields of American history there. And that really started me off in a big way on American subjects. I was interested in comparing the development of the American left with the British left in the late 19th century and 20th century.

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S1

00:14:26:16

You said that is say something that distinguishes you from someone like Eric Hobsbawm. It's quite clear that his comparative interests are primarily on the continent. The to some extent elsewhere where you always are with the United States. And I wonder, do you think there is a quite distinct Anglo-American political culture which is separate from continental developments or. I think so.

S2

00:14:48:14

I think probably so. That must be so to some extent. Although of course there are many contrasts between the United States and Britain as I found it when I got there. Well, partly when I got there, partly before I went there, but especially when I got there, I noticed that in many ways they were ahead of us in respect of, I mean, more progressive in the political sense in having free education, for instance, to a much greater extent than we have not having this private sector in the same way there is a private sector, but it didn't quite as strongly, strongly developed as in Britain. And on the other hand, of course, the idea of nationalization in America is very difficult because all the states have their separate powers. And the contrast between that and and the federal system and the British centralized system is very marked. So the idea of a socialist party developing in America with with on the lines of a of a socializing party, a party which believes in nationalizing parts of industry and so is very unlikely in the United States.

S1

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When your first year in the state of Wisconsin.

S2

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Is that right? The University of Wisconsin, which happens to have a very good links with with the left wing, left.

S1

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Wing movement, I wondered.

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S2

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Whether that was I chose it deliberately at that reason.

S1

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And those links were still quite strong. Were you?

S2

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Yes, Yes. 1 or 2 of the professors there who I met were very closely they were all liberals with a small L that say they were on the radical wing of the Democratic Party, as I think mostly of the arts. People in the United States are still, but it's especially marked in the University of Wisconsin, which had a very strong socialistic tradition, I would say, for itself, for itself as a community, The community of Wisconsin, they put a lot of money into into their into their universities, tremendous amount of money. And they were they were very intelligent people who were working there, I thought. And they had this this succession of professors of economics. In fact, Eli, Eli and Selig Perlman were interested in the history of trade unionism and the history of socialism. And they had links with Britain. They managed to they they continue to. They continue to collect. They continue to get reports on what was going on in in England from people like Ramsay MacDonald and Heinemann and so on. Lots of these papers were collected in the in the library of the University of Wisconsin Historical Society, which was a separate body. And that's a great, great guild of research one could do on these papers in comparing the British and American left.

S1

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Right. And your interest in, uh, American trade unions was partly from the material that you saw at Wisconsin. And that tradition, was it? Yes, yes, yes.

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S2

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Of course. I was later invited to write a History of American Labor in a series of books edited by Dan Boston, who was then a professor at Chicago who I met, who had met at some point, I think probably at a historical conference in Chicago of the American Historical Association in 1940, 53in the first place.

S1

00:17:59:19

And do you think do you think American trade unions, um, took a very distinct path from from British trade unions? Have I mean, would you say let's say the developments of the 1930s sent them in directions which British trade union movement didn't go?

S2

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No. Of course, in 1930, the development of American unions seemed to suggest they were going to become more like us than otherwise. But the word contrast, of course, they never in fact established a separate party. But in the 30s it did look look as if they were going to much more. Now, that's more then than earlier. And before that they'd been. It's been such a purely craftsman movement. Yes, it seemed very unlikely they would ever develop such a thing.

S1

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Well, I suppose the development of the Roosevelt and Democratic Party to some extent lends support to your earlier view that you could have a Liberal Party with very close links with the trade union movement, with a labor union movement, and still hold together.

S2

00:18:57:10

Yes. Yes.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S1

00:18:59:01

You coming back again to your, um, British history? You wrote, I suppose, really? What was a successor volume to the origins of the Labour Party with Frank Bailey, which does have much more trade union history. Um, yes. When you wrote that with him, were you conscious of any of these problems with the origins of the Labour Party? I mean, did you deliberately choose to write more and trade union history than you might otherwise have done? I think so, yes.

S2

00:19:26:18

Of course. Frank had done a lot of work on the history of the of the on the papers of the of Herbert Ladner. Therefore on the liberal side of the relationship between the Liberals and the Labour Party and what was known as Herbert, what we call the Herbert Gladstone Pact, the Entente, we call it the Entente. Entente sort of paralleled the entente cordiale the entente between the two parties, which came into operation in 1906, an electoral alliance. And that was really why we came to collaborate. That was the origins of it. We also managed to work together. Tell you about because we were sometime living in the same house, I don't think it would have been anything like AZT if we haven't been at least for one long vacation. We were living in the same house in London, and we could we could we could work in separate rooms and give chapters to each other. And that was an important feature of liaison, though at the last moment I remember that Frank said, I said to Frank, You've got a few corrections to make on this in this volume, your final corrections. So will you bundle up and send it off as a parcel to MacMillan's? So he said, I've never made up a puzzle in my life. So I finally had to make up the parcel and send it off myself.

S1

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Did you ever think of writing a third volume? I mean, one that went.

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S2

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Yes, I did. There was a man called Poirier who was working on the same period, and he seemed to be interested in following up from 1906 onwards. And so I, I really decided at that point I ought to leave it to him if he was willing to do it to carry on from 19 six hundreds. Of course he didn't. In fact, you as the the papers at Transport House which we managed to get at all the same, he was obviously onto them by the time we published our book, more or less simultaneous with his. And so I didn't see why why his his book shouldn't be a successor and fill the gap between 96 and 14, for instance, and perhaps possibly even go further. So at that point, we I really decided that I didn't really want to go beyond beyond 19 six with this history of the Labour Party. That was the only reason why otherwise I would have done. Thing.

S1

00:21:36:03

Did you, uh, when you wrote your history of trade unionism, did you ever think of doing a book, something like, say, Clegg, Fox and Thompson? I mean, a very large and detailed history of British trade unionism in the period?

S2

00:21:52:04

No, no. I was asked to do that book by Jack Plum, who was then editor of the history series for Penguins, and I thought it was a one off job only, which I did without without press research. And therefore it was not. It was not I'm not really I didn't intend to do a fully detailed work. No, I never had the idea of doing what Clegg and Thompson did.

S1

00:22:19:19

I mean, you've kept that up to date. Um.

S2

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As you revise it.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S1

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As you revise it. Does your view about the trade unions change markedly from, say, now almost 30 years on, I suppose, from when you originally wrote it?

S2

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I think the trade unions have changed and so I think my views have changed, too. Yes, But I think that the winter of discontent was a great blow to the trade union movement generally. And therefore, I think that my degree of sympathy that I expressed to the trade unions early, earlier was perhaps somewhat has somewhat been somewhat diluted since then. And how far do you may come out in my list latest provision of it?

S1

00:23:00:09

And how far do you think, say the winter of discontent was a discontinuity in trade union history? Or how far do you think it was determined really by, I don't know, the last hundred years, the last 50 years and its perfectly natural product of of what happened.

S2

00:23:15:07

I think it was probably the natural product, but but it did show that the trade unions had got a very great deal of power. I thought and perhaps too much power in in the state. And therefore it probably ought to be reduced by some sort of legislation. So I became in favour of more or less, not precisely the Thatcher legislation, but gradually I thought the introduction of trade union democracy was quite a good idea to the extent that it has happened in recent years.

S1

00:23:40:12

Why do you think these changes took place? Is it a change in the elites of the trade union movement or is it. Was it the expansion into new areas of the economy? That's because they were given.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S2

00:23:52:06

Great powers in the 1970s, which really were almost overreaching. And because some of the big unions were exceptionally powerful and not really terribly democratic, I mean, Transport General Workers Union was all right under any. Bevin But under successive successive leaders, it's become a rather bullying union, I think bullying, bullying other trade unions as well as bullying. The country generally. And there was a point, after all, he had to propose he proposed a a budget which was conditional upon the regions accepting a certain degree of of wage restraint. Now, that was extraordinary thing to do, to make the whole thing the whole budget depended upon what the trade unions decided.

S1

00:24:37:06

Well, I suppose it's arguable. And if you look at the relationship between the Labour Party, the historic relationship between the Labour Party and the unions, that something like that was always on the cards. And it's perhaps surprising that these sorts of interventions didn't happen earlier.

S2

00:24:50:14

Yes, I think that's true. Yes. Yes. It may be so. The trade unions were very loyal to Attlee. Of course, in the in that period in the 1940s. And he what he said they accepted and they were also loyal to Bevin, of course, who transferred to the political side of the movement. But then when Bevin died, of course, I think, I think we had to change the Transport and General Workers Union, especially having been a right wing union, which ceased to be so and became rather leftwing, refused to accept wage restraint. That, of course, was a rather difficult problem for future government Labour governments to survive, to deal with.

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S1 **00:25:28:21**

And do you think the loyalty that the Union showed to the Government, say between 47 and 50 over things like wage restraint was because they felt a greater identity between themselves and that government than than happened in the 1970s? Yes, I.

S2 **00:25:41:16**

Do. Certainly, yes.

S1 **00:25:43:22**

And why, then, do you think that sense of identity broke down?

S2 **00:25:52:21**

It's I think it's simply an evolution of development of the time. As time went on, things gradually, gradually changed. I wouldn't say there's any special reason for it other than the passage of time and the evolution of events, I suppose.

S1 **00:26:11:11**

Well, on balance, do you think that the British trade unions are going looking at it historically now, British trade unions encouraged or almost dispersed working class consciousness? I mean, would you thought they were, on balance, more unifying than sectarian all the other way around? You suggest your comments on the winter of discontent. You think the sectarian tendency is now very strong. Yes. Um, but making historical judgment, what would you say?

S2 **00:26:40:10**

I mean, I think that is the judgment I would make.

S1 **00:26:44:04**

And presumably the Labour Party necessarily has suffered from that.

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S2

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Yes. Yes. Of course, I have ceased to belong to the Labour Party. I used to belong to it until 1981, then went off with David Owen.

S1

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Did you always vote Labour until then?

S2

00:26:57:08

Yes, I did. Except on one occasion when there was such a demand was standing for Cambridge University and I didn't think he was such a good would be a very good MP, so I didn't vote for him. Actually voted Conservative in that case. It's the only time I voted conservative in my life. That was a by election.

S1

00:27:13:01

Um, that's rather surprising, actually. I mean, I could see my liberal, but voting conservative either. I don't think.

S2

00:27:17:16

There was a liberal candidate at that time and I've gotten.

S1

00:27:19:15

Now. But on the whole, then you would say that your political affiliations are to a kind of Attlee Gaitskell lite Labour Party?

S2

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Yes, I think so. That's probably still true.

S1

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Um, I wonder if we could.

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S2

00:27:32:24

Accept, of course, since I can hardly claim Attlee or Gaitskell, of course, for the present SDP naturally. In fact, the curious thing was when the European when the European election was when the European referendum was taking place, the the European movement took over the National Liberal Club headquarters. I belong to National Liberal Club as a member and they they labeled one entrance to the house at the Attlee house, which I thought was absolutely absurd. Exactly. Of course, very hostile to the idea of entering Europe. Of course, he was a man of his time. That's totally understandable, really. But whether he would have changed in respect in this respect, I don't know. I doubt it.

S1

00:28:15:08

Were you in favour of entering Europe?

S2

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Yes, I was. Yes.

S1

00:28:19:12

Um, you published in the late 1960s, about 1969, a collection of essays, *Popular Politics*, which was, I thought, a really rather powerful critique of certain kinds of Marxist or semi Marxist traditions in British historiography. Um, and that they also seem to be a conceptual defence of an empirical tradition, if you like, in a way that perhaps you hadn't done before. And I wonder if we could talk about two essays in particular. The first was on the *Labour Aristocracy*, where you were critical, particularly very hobsbawm analysis, and the second one on working classes and social reform. Taking the first one when you wrote that, was it simply because you felt that the data simply didn't support this sort of semi Leninist view, or did you set out to combat it on a more theoretical level?

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S2

00:29:14:01

Why did you get the theoretical? In fact, I left Eric Eric's article a long time before I came and wrote this article, which in fact criticises it a long time. But I did think that he was taking not Marx's line, but Lenin. Lenin, of course, I don't think just understood the British labelled so far as insofar as whereas Marx and Engels, I think, did understand it very much better. They lived in England for a very long time. Lenin only lived here for about a year. I think he got the wrong end of the stick in many ways, and his concept of of the labour aristocracy was wrong, I think, absolutely wrong. And so that was really what he was criticising in, in that essay. But I didn't write it, I think, until about ten years after Eric had first published his article. I mean.

S1

00:29:59:16

Why did you write it then? Was it just because you.

S2

00:30:02:05

Just because I gradually got worked up on the subject, I suppose very gradually. But I had been doing a lot of other things in the meantime.

S1

00:30:09:12

I mean, do you think it's wrong because the notion is wrong or was it wrong simply because the evidence didn't support it? I mean, if the evidence had been better, let's say.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S2

00:30:22:10

Well, if the evidence had been better, of course I would have accepted. But it seemed to me that there were so many errors of British labour history where it simply didn't apply among the miners. For instance, you can't say there's an aristocracy among the miners in the sense that they form a separate union, for instance, from the less paid, less paid colleagues. They all belong to the same union, the who was in the same union as the surface workers. There's no distinction between them. And also it tends to be a situation in many in many professions, many occupations where the worker tends to be well paid in the middle years of life, poorly paid, perhaps at the beginning and poorly paid at the end of his life. And so there's a gradation of of of of of respectability and affluence. Also, of course, the the Booth Survey of London shows that there is this distinct little group of people who are doing not doing poorly, not doing terribly poorly, but well above the level of sustenance, which wouldn't really fit into this category, this sharp difference between the aristocracy and the rest. I think the aristocracy, the idea tries to draw a line between. The section of the working class, but you can't really do, in fact, because Rawdon Harrison had just written a book called Division of Labor. I think these divisions can be too rigidly drawn very often. Many of the labor districts are in fact, rather in a position of being rather on the on the margin of of of aristocracy, even if they're over it at the time they drop out of work or they become unemployed for a time or they are short working or one thing or another, they don't get the full amount that they're supposed to be getting. If you take the whole rates of pay. So it didn't seem that the that the the the idea worked out very well in practice in the late 19th century, even when we're supposed to be working out.

S1

00:32:23:04

I suppose it's partly used to explain the absence of what you might call revolutionary politics. Yes. In Britain. Yes. Before 1914. Yes.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S2

00:32:30:16

If you that again, I think is a mistake, because the revolutionary concept of politics does not depend upon the wealth of in fact, you have a revolution of rising expectations among the working class as well as among other groups of the population. And in fact, the better off people are, the more the more they expect to get in in political terms as well. So, in fact, the more most active have been the most active members of the Communist Party, for example, there are from the Labour aristocracy, what might be termed as the struggle for the better off engineers, for instance. All the same are many occupations where you can't draw a line. Of course, people said that when I wrote about the Labour Party, I was having tried to have it both ways. I was saying, Of course it is true that some labour aristocrats do very well and therefore that politically speaking, they are that most revolutionary. Well, but also I was at the same time denying the whole concept of the Labour Party. Now, of course, what I am trying to I don't deny there is a sense in which you can speak of the labour aristocracy existing. There's no doubt about that. And in fact the term occurs quite early in the 19th century in pre Marxist works. It occurs, I think in about 1820. People speak of an aristocracy of trades and so I wouldn't deny that for a moment. But the question is whether you can say that that these people have different different characteristics, political character, especially of a of a complacent of a of a of accepting character. That's that's the thing that I deny.

S1

00:34:17:14

Yes. Yes. I mean, I think you say something like insofar as there was a Labour aristocracy, it was likely to be more revolutionary than less.

S2

00:34:25:15

Yes. Yeah.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S1

00:34:27:11

Given the, in your view, the apparent absence of a labour aristocracy, why would you think historically that the British working class politics did remain contained within the system as clearly they did? Why the parliamentary let's say parliamentary politics retains such a hold over working class politics?

S2

00:34:46:09

I think it was partly due once. You don't if you don't have revolution for a long, very long time, you go on not having a revolution. I think that's part of it. People just have an established tradition of relatively peaceful life. And also, of course, another thing is that London is a very long way from the main industrial areas of the country. London, the main industrial areas of the country were in the north and it was very long way. If you want to march down to London and have a demonstration, you had first you had the the the black courtiers who tried to march from Manchester. Well, I mean, they they they they didn't get there. They mostly scattered on the way. They had their blankets over their shoulders, but they didn't weather nothing. Not the reason why we don't get revolution in this country is the weather is not good enough. You need a good deal of hot weather to have a revolution.

S1

00:35:35:03

The Russian Revolution was in the winter.

S2

00:35:37:21

But the Russian Revolution also took place in wartime when the Russians were losing the war. Very obviously.

S1

00:35:44:23

Um, the other essay I think that excited most.

S2

00:35:47:21

Went over.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S1

00:35:49:11

Well. January, February. Um, the other essay that excited this contention, if you like, was the one that argued that on the whole, the working classes are favorable to social reform only after they've occurred rather than before. And that was replied to in several senses. And I wonder in retrospect whether you think or how far do you think the replies are valid or how far you would hold your original argument?

S2

00:36:12:08

I'm not sure what you think of as a reply, but we'll say.

S1

00:36:16:02

That things are.

S2

00:36:16:24

Well. But then I think more or less in some ways confirmed what I was saying. She didn't really she didn't really reply to me. She was to some extent confirming what I was saying. I wouldn't say it was in any sense hostile to what I was saying.

S1

00:36:30:03

Well, I mean, one argument might be that, okay, though, you might be able to demonstrate that at certain levels there is working class apparent hostility, a certain kinds of state intervention, say, associated with the criminal law or the police. Why is it then that so many working class organizations like trade unions, do seem to be favorable to social and political reform? And how does one explain that kind of discrepancy? I take it that's what she was concentrating on?

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S2

00:36:58:14

In a sense, yes. Obviously, there are some working class organizations which are favorable to reform, but the question is how many and how strongly? That's that's the question really. I form my my view is, after doing a great deal of work on the social geography of British elections. Yes, I read the great many newspapers and read many reporters reporting on how people were voting and why. I gradually came around to the view from that that if you looked at elections very closely, they were not the working class as a whole were not attracted by the ideas of, for instance, Joseph Chamberlain, who had quite relatively revolutionary ideas about what ought to be done about extending reforms for the working over the agricultural working class, for instance. And this doesn't didn't seem to me to work out in practice. And in fact, some of their some of the talk at the 1885 election, for instance, was actually raised by the by the Tories as derision. I mean, he some people thought that the idea of giving three acres in a cow was absurd. If the ordinary working party didn't want it, it was it was impossible. So that began to make me think about these things. That was that was why I wrote that essay. In fact, if I hadn't done my own research, if I had applied to research assistants to do my work at that time, I wouldn't have got two books out of one subject, which I did at that time. One was the Social Geography of British Lectures. The other was the popular politics. Yes.

S1

00:38:37:18

And if you'd thought in those terms about whether and under what circumstances the working classes support social reform or socially progressive policy, would you have written the origins of the Labour Party or your thesis or thought about it also in different terms? Would it have been more, I don't know, pessimistic than optimistic?

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S2

00:38:59:09

I don't think has immediate application of that. That was an alliance of socialists and and new women and various discontented groups who wanted representation in parliament for different reasons. And that again, you see we get the compatibility between various groups who are in the Labour Party. It's one reason for examining it. I mean, the trade unions were not because we're not very much in sympathy with with the socialists. In the early years of the century, most trade unions were not very few. Some trade unions actually belong to the ALP, but they tend to be the minority of them until after the end, after the end of the First World War. And then of course the change a little bit, but not all that much. Even then, in fact there was a sort of labour ism which I think one can speak of rather than socialism with the categories of the trade union movement.

S1

00:39:55:07

Why? I mean, you cited some reasons in your essay as to why social reform might be unpopular. And one of them was, let's say, the Association of State Intervention with Police Enforcement. What other reasons would you would you like to isolate?

S2

00:40:14:24

I think there was a suspicion of the state because of the poor law. The way in which people came into contact with the state was through the poor law. And this did not seem to be a very friendly relationship at all. People are very hostile to the going on, going on, the ball being put in these institutions. And that, I think, was the main contact that they had in those days. And so they wanted people wanted to keep out of the polo institution as far as they could.

S1

00:40:42:00

I mean, how far do you think, say today the present government might be able to go in significantly dismantling the NHS, given your argument that these things do become popular after the. Yes.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S2

00:40:52:17

Yes. I certainly argue that the various people pieces of social reform become popular after the event, after they've been enacted, and that's been successful due to a number of reforms. I don't think the National Insurance was all that popular to begin with because it involved a short term contribution without very much immediate gain. But the National Health Service has been a tremendous, tremendously popular thing in this country, I think will remain so. I don't see that being being extinguished in the near future, even though that there may be cuts in it in some ways for the time being at least.

S1

00:41:29:00

So your views about both these essays have not really changed very much since you wrote them. Um, you spoke of the social geography of British elections, and I wondered if we might talk about that. Um, did you ever think, first of all, why did you decide to work on this? Was it you mentioned in the introduction the influence of Andre Siegfried, and I wondered whether you ever thought that kind of a study was possible in England given the different kinds of electoral.

S2

00:41:58:06

I thought it was worth seeing how far we could go with it. And of course that one can take it to a certain extent, but not all that far. On the whole, the French statistics are better. Bye bye, bye bye department. And you get a lot of figures by department. And so.

S1

00:42:17:09

And commune too, I suppose. I suppose it's much easier.

S2

00:42:19:13

I think so, yes. I thought it was worth seeing how far one could go.

S1

00:42:23:18

And did this come from the interest in the unions and working class history, or were you otherwise influenced?

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S2 **00:42:29:14**

I think it was partly from that, yes, partly from that direction.

S1 **00:42:34:16**

And you did all.

S2 **00:42:35:13**

I want to see how far there was. There was a transfer from liberal liberalism to Labour also doing during those years. I thought that was a critical years in British history, being 1885 and 1914. And nowadays I think people are more interested in the in the period 1900 to 1930 perhaps.

S1 **00:42:56:10**

And did you did all the research for that yourself?

S2 **00:42:58:10**

Yes.

S1 **00:42:59:22**

Is it also true, just as a matter of interest, that you finance some of that research? And I read that you'd find in some of that research by wins on election bets. Is that true?

S2 **00:43:10:08**

Well, I did I did have wins on election bets. I did bet on elections. I thought it was a way of of trying to confirm my own judgment as a as a political theorist or not political behaviourist, as you say, to see how things. And in fact, in the early days, it was very easy to make money out of election bets betting, for instance, Ladbrokes in 64, but not terribly clued up about the value of opinion polls, for instance. So that was just tended.

S1 **00:43:36:11**

To follow the opinion.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S2

00:43:37:03

Polls. Yes, one could. It's it's easier to, of course, with referenda, not so easy not to not not quite so easy. But elections in general, especially the parties are closed. And if there are three parties, it becomes even more difficult. So I'm not sure that I've got to make much in the future on this From this source.

S1

00:43:55:15

Are you happy with the result? I mean, now with the social geography, what do you think? It might have been better to have concentrate on particular regions rather than doing a national study?

S2

00:44:05:06

No, I set out set a certain fashion for people to study separate regions. Indeed. But of course some people try to do it for the following period, which I thought was was not. So because you had a three party situation between 19 1918 and 1939 that was not so easy to to to get that very difficult to define precisely what was happening locally. But a couple of research to demand did study. Three students of mine in fact did study of regional. I warned them against it anyway, but they insisted on doing it. They did studies of one did West Midlands, one did East Midlands, one did London, London area.

S1

00:44:43:18

Successfully, do you think?

S2

00:44:45:14

Well, none of them resulted in the book.

S1

00:44:48:11

Yes.

S2

00:44:49:07

Do you think that? I think one of them could have been a book? Certainly.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S1 **00:44:53:04**

Do you think the study confirmed your view that the this period, 1886 to 1910 was a a kind of watershed?

S2 **00:45:00:06**

Yes, it was. It was a period when there was a clearly defined two party system, 1885 to 1910. So that was it was good for that purpose.

S1 **00:45:11:24**

Mm. Um.

S2 **00:45:14:14**

And because the Irish were separate. I didn't. I didn't study Ireland. I simply left Alan out. But of course, Irish issues came into British politics as well, actually.

S1 **00:45:24:04**

Do you think if the franchise had been more or less the same as it was after 1918, there would have been any significantly different movements of electoral opinion in that period? Or do you think the results probably pretty, pretty much would have been the same?

S2 **00:45:38:13**

I think it would have been the same. In fact, of course, there is a certain degree of controversy about exactly what happened in 1980, as you know. And it may be that not very much changed in 1918 in respect of the proportion of people who were able to vote.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S1

00:45:54:12

Um, and I take it, therefore, that one of the consequences, perhaps unintended, of this book was to make you feel not so much that working class politics was futile, but it was less likely to lead to its own consequences than you thought it might otherwise have done.

S2

00:46:11:19

Yes. Yes, I suppose so. That would be true. Yes.

S1

00:46:16:11

Um.

S2

00:46:17:13

Of course. The interesting thing was in doing that book, one was able to discover all of a sudden certain things standing out. For instance, one could see the corrupt boroughs standing out, those slightly corrupt boroughs, and they've stood out from the rest because they didn't have the the swing, that electoral swing. David Butler had taught us all about electoral swing, and I applied that idea, although I didn't entirely agree with David on all points because he didn't believe in regional variations, which I felt was quite important, especially in this period before 1914. But you could see where little boroughs which didn't act, react according to the rest of the pattern, and they were ones, in fact, there was corruption one could find out from other sources. And so that was rather interesting confirmation of my approach.

S1

00:47:04:02

I thought yes. And the next I suppose the next major book you wrote was the biography of Churchill.

S2

00:47:12:19

Yes. Though I did write a little book on Britain in the Second World War. Oh, yes. Was quite important in triggering off my life at Churchill.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S1

00:47:19:00

Well, I wondered perhaps we could then come to that, because you actually do face up to this question Under what in that book, under what circumstances social reform might become popular. And you have a chapter on on the relationship between war and social reform. I mean, do you think that it's those kinds of circumstances which make people support social reform rather than others? Did you conclude in the end that the war was responsible, in effect, for the Labour victory in 1945?

S2

00:47:47:07

No, I but what I think is that in both wars you had a reaction against the government which was in power at the at the beginning of the war. The reason of that was that what happened was on both occasions, the Liberals first of all, the Liberals were in power in 1914, then the the Conservatives were in power in 1939. And the reaction against them was because they hadn't in fact built enough battleships and well, not battleships so much as tanks and hadn't rearmed enough, although all the same, the people who took that view had been responsible for this situation. It was the electors who were responsible for relatively poor preparation for the war. In both cases. All the same, they they at the end of the war, they said, oh, the politicians must be to blame. And so they blame them. That was really what happened.

S1

00:48:38:03

Do you think that could that can explain the enormous swings to Labour and say, the West Midlands or the London? Well, if you.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI
S2 **00:48:44:07**

Look at the enormous swings, Labour didn't get a majority of the vote in 1945. It was simply what happened in 45 was simply what was to be expected. In the end, after 35, the 35 election was decisive, which really knocked the Liberals out. Yes. After that, you were bound to get reaction. A swing of the pendulum, but a very big swing. Yes, big, big swing. But all the same, it's been ten years since the previous election and people are fed up with the existing parliament. And I think that was what happened. Of course, I was criticised by Paul Edwards in a review of my book on the Labour government's for saying that it was the pageant that did it all because he thinks it was some great, massive, massive evolution of social reform during the war. I don't believe that was true. It is true. But some aspects of social reform which came out from the effective organisation of the government and also of army operations, for instance, the planning which meant D-Day, for instance, but carefully planned. And that was that that was that was something which did suggest to people that that the government, the government could also be better organised, more thorough in future and depend less on private enterprise. And of course the very successful Russians also meant that that that was people had denounced the Russian regime as likely to collapse at the first blow in 1941. And it didn't. They went. Tom fighting and eventually winning against the Germans. That was tremendously important, I think, as a factor, external factor in the in the in the in the Labor success in 45. The first thing was that that the vote was transferred not to the communists in Britain, but though the communists did do better, much they had many more members in 45, they had in 39 many more members. But all the same, they still got some blame, obviously, for having been against the war between 39 and 4041. So they regard as being a representatives of a foreign power and not really a distinctively British party, not a British Socialist party. The Socialist Party, if there was one, was the Labour Party.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S1

00:50:53:00

But but those remarks do suggest that you think there were certain specific aspects to the war which contributed to the Labour victory, like people seeing how the state can actually organize or the experience of the Russians. That's true. Which is more than just a swing of the pendulum, presumably. Yes.

S2

00:51:10:03

But I think there would have been a swing of the pendulum all the same. If the election had come earlier, then there'd be no war if the election would come early. I think, again, the same thing might well have happened. So you would at some point or rather, because after all, we really we really depend upon a two party system and the two parties alternate in government. So at some point, rather, Labour would have had a reaction against national government and Labour would have won more seats and perhaps a majority. If you got a majority of only 50, it's enough to carry a carry on for quite a long time. If you have a majority of 150, some of it is wasted of course.

S1

00:51:47:15

But you're sceptical about the notion that there was something in the Second World War, I don't know, a climate of opinion or a social experience that that made people peculiarly sympathetic to progressive politics in the way they weren't before or afterwards.

S2

00:52:00:13

I think it meant for a certain section of the middle class, but I don't think it meant for the mass of the population.

S1

00:52:05:08

The So the big swings in the London suburbs, let's say, are partly to be explained on those grounds. Yes. Um, but there were also big swings in working class constituencies.

S2

00:52:15:22

Well, yes, that's true.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S1

00:52:17:18

And how, how you would simply explain that on.

S2

00:52:21:16

Don't forget that quite a lot of middle class people who live in working class suburbs, working class areas as well, was it I think I think the pressure on them to vote Labour was very strong. Yes. And of course, another point is, of course, during the war, as it was noticeable at the end of the war, that the the the soldiers voted left. But then young men always do vote more left. That's been the case of any in every election since 45. So I don't think anything special has to be read into that.

S1

00:52:53:11

So it is then partly generational. I think that the ten year gap means.

S2

00:52:56:19

The opinion polls, which are held during the war, were held in civil population only, not not among the soldiers. So I don't believe that made the great difference. I guess some people say that Roe Butler was the great difference was the Abacha lectures, which officers gave. I gave some of those lectures myself to soldiers, and the soldiers himself were in fact inclined to go to sleep in the lectures. That's not entirely my fault. The fact of the matter was, mostly these lectures were mostly given when the soldiers were in training, and if they had a hearty morning exercise out on out on the on the on the square or anyway, out, outside, out of doors. Then they went into a lecture room. The obvious thing to do was to go to sleep. It was difficult to keep awake when you. So I don't think that was an important factor. Also, if they had felt they were given a given a propaganda, they would have reacted against it.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S1

00:53:51:16

So there was no way that you would have, when you were serving would have been able to sense any kind of commitment to progressive politics among soldiers. I mean, you just don't think there was.

S2

00:54:03:07

I don't believe it.

S1

00:54:03:22

Yeah.

S2

00:54:04:08

And of course, Angus Calder produces the argument in his book *The People's War*, that the Eighth Army was very leftwing. He quotes some poems written by a man called Hamish Henderson, who was a Scotsman, who was, in fact an undergraduate at Cambridge with me. And he he wrote a poem about Stalin being a decent chap because he smokes a pipe. And. Whereas the taxi drivers CAF and this absurd poem, which was actually written when he was an undergraduate. Yes. Not members in the eighth Army at all is quoted because he later on published a book of eighth Army verse which includes this poem.

S1

00:54:39:14

Um, did you anticipate the Labour victory?

S2

00:54:43:07

No, I don't think very few people did in my. You didn't? Not even Labour leaders It after all, I think the only person among the Labour leadership who did was Herbert Morrison. I think he had high hopes.

S1

00:54:56:09

Were you aware of the opinion polls or did you not know that they existed then?

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S2

00:54:59:15

I don't think I knew, no, I don't think well, the thing was about the opinion polls. Well, notice them. But thing was, one always thought that Churchill at the end of the war would have the same sort of victory as George. But he would. Get the credit for the victory. That was what one thought. One. After all, it's still true that opinion polls are not all that reliable for what's going to happen two years hence or one year hence even, or six months hence. Especially when a general election comes along. A by election by elections also can be very misleading. They can lead to a tremendous swing. And then when the electors think, do we really want to replace this government, they may have second thoughts. So I don't think it's a very good guy.

S1

00:55:37:13

What strikes me from looking at, say, diary reaction to the by elections in the period I say conservative MPs, they're always they're actually appalled by the results. Yes. They then say if this goes on, we're in terrible trouble. Yes. But there's still surprise by 1945 when it actually does happen.

S2

00:55:52:08

Exactly. Yes. Yes, I can understand that reaction. I think that went for most. After all, the Lord Beaverbrook Daily Express predicted a conservative victory of about 80. Now, he was no very good guide. But Churchill himself also expected victory about that.

S1

00:56:09:07

Yes, this will all be. MacCallum told me that he always thought Labour would win simply because he believed the opinion polls and he accepted the existence of the opinion poll and he thought they were right.

S2

00:56:19:09

He was almost unique.

S1

00:56:21:00

Ahead of his time, not.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S2

00:56:21:22

Quite unique, but almost unique.

S1

00:56:23:05

Um, you said it was a result of this, the writing of the history of the Second World War. You became interested in Churchill. Yes. Um, that was the only reason. Was it?

S2

00:56:31:04

I think so, yes. I hadn't been terribly friendly to Churchill as a politician. I respected his great service during the war, but I thought it was a bit out of date. Of course, is outlook to things, but actually writing a life of him. I was puzzled by his role during the war and how he got this great eminence. And so I thought that needed more explanation as a result of my writing this little book on Britain in the Second World War. Yes, I wanted to explore his his views and ideas a little bit more. And if you do, if you write a life of man, you would tend to get friendly to him, more so than if you don't. I mean, you get a certain sympathy with him. I probably wrote a much more friendly life of Churchill that he deserved. In fact, yes, I think if I were doing it again, I would try and point out some of the points of difference, which I feel with his attitude. For instance, I now think that he made a mistake of the whole Gallipoli business. That was a ghastly mistake because even if it had been successful, it wouldn't let it lead anywhere. I think also I think that his actions in 1918 and 19 were quite wrong, but he was a great advocate of the intervention against Russia, which hadn't got nowhere. I was, of course, the soldiers who were being sent. There were volunteers, but but they went even so with some reluctance, I think. Yes.

S1

00:57:55:01

Well, since you started writing history, I mean, there have been immense changes in the way in which historians have approached social and labor history. One last question, then. On balance, do you think we've gained or lost by this change?

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI

S2 **00:58:09:07**

You mean by the development model? For instance, more.

S1 **00:58:11:15**

Social history, more a more social way of looking at institutions?

S2 **00:58:14:12**

It's been more development of econometric history.

S1 **00:58:18:05**

No, I wasn't thinking of econometric history because that.

S2 **00:58:20:10**

Has developed a great deal.

S1 **00:58:21:10**

That has indeed. But so a more social approach to the history of trade unions. Yes.

S2 **00:58:27:19**

And you can show what you mean by that, because I'm not quite sure who has written about the social approach to, well.

S1 **00:58:32:13**

Let's say take writing trade union history, as it were, through work processes like Richard Price has done with the builders. I mean, do you think that that's a gain or a loss?

S2 **00:58:42:04**

Yes, I think there may be some gain to it. You mean work control? Yes. Yes. Yes. That's something of that. Yes, It's new, new, new approach. Somehow, I suppose I wrote my history of trade union is a very large a history of the institutions of trade unions as such rather than a study of. But of course they are political institutions. Yes. And they do operate in the political world and they have this great importance in the in the Labour Party, among other things.

Clip: PELLING HENRY_HENRY PELLING WITH ROSS MCKI