

Jennie Lee's Scottish Socialism

Scottish Labour politician Jennie Lee was born on this day in 1904. Inspired by her family's mining history, she spent her life fighting for working people – a fight which included co-founding Tribune.

Jennie Lee (1904-1988), Minister for the Arts, announces the decision to set up the Open University in September 1967. Credit: Evening Standard / Hulton Archive / Getty Images

The following is an edited extract from My Life With Nye, Jennie Lee's memoir, first published in 1980.

In the North Lanark by-election a Tory majority of 2,028 was transformed into a Labour majority of 6,578. Any Labour candidate would have won the seat in the political atmosphere in the west of Scotland at that time, but the party managers were leaving nothing to chance. All the leading members of the party flocked to my support, as a General Election was due any moment, and North Lanark became a preliminary trial of strength. The Tories could not attack me on account of my youth for all the political parties were angling for the flapper vote.

When the General Election came, women between twenty-one and thirty years of age would be voting for the first time. I now had my first encounter with party managers; they had written an election address for me, but when I read it in the spartan Glasgow hotel where accommodation had been found for me I tore it up.

I can see now that they had a case. The miners' vote could be taken for granted; it was the middle- and lower-middle-class voters we had to impress, so my university background was written large and my mining background played down. But I was not having it. This was a reversal of my values. So, labouriously, with the cold marble slab of the washstand as the table, I rewrote my election address.

Our next collision was when I was told I would be introduced into the House of Commons by Miss Margaret Bondfield and the Chief Whip, Tom Kennedy. Again, I was not having it. I had no grudge against either of them, but I did not know them personally and had already arranged for my grandfather's lifelong friend, Bob Smillie, to be one of my sponsors. The other was James Maxton, an ILP friend I had known from my childhood.

When I arrived in London in the early hours of the morning on the day I was due to be introduced into Parliament, nearly the whole of the Trevelyan family was waiting for me on the station platform. Even earlier they had gone to Coven Garden, and off we went to Great College Street in triumphal procession, the Trevelyans carrying boxes of fruit, flowers and vegetables on their heads...

As soon as I had an independent roof over my head, I was ready for battle. Alas, the 1929-31 Parliament was downhill all the way. In 1930 we lost one Scottish Member who could have given effective leadership to the left of the party.

We were mourning the death of John Wheatly. As Minister of Health and Housing he had been the outstanding success of the 1924 Labour Government. MacDonald, in

1929, fearing his robust, competent, socialist approach, excluded him from his cabinet. It may very well be that, even with Wheatly, the tides of timidity and reaction would have been too much for us.

It never occurred to me, when I rose to speak in Parliament for the first time, to keep the convention of being non-controversial. I was in too big a hurry to say what I had come there to say. Winston Churchill was at that time Chancellor of the Exchequer and I directed my attack mainly against his Budget proposals.

Later in the day, in the Smoking Room, he came over to me and congratulated me on my speech. He assured me that we both wanted the same thing, only we had different notions of how to get it. The richer the rich became, the more they would be able to help the poor. That was his theme and he said he would send me a book that would explain everything to me. The book duly arrived. It was *The Great Omen* by Garet Garrett, a right-wing economist who was despised by most of us for his extreme views...

I returned from a trip to Vienna during the summer recess sunburnt and refreshed, ready to resume the serious business that was the central purpose of my life. But the friends I came back to in the villages of North Lanark had not been away anywhere. No refreshment for them. Just the daily grind, day in, day out, year in, year out. Our only hope was to work to the limits of our strength to persuade Parliament to come to their aid.

But the parliamentary atmosphere after the summer recess was just as discouraging as in the earlier months. We on the left urged pressing ahead with basic socialist measures, accepting defeat from the combined Tory and Liberal vote, then going to the country in circumstances in which we could evoke the enthusiasm and hard-slogging support of the grassroots 'faithful' who carried the brunt of electioneering. MacDonald, Snowden, Thomas, the majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party, took a very different line. They were determined to soldier on, jettisoning most of their election promises and trusting that the electorate would understand they were forced to do so because they were only a minority Government...

One of the people I met for the first time in that 1929-31 Parliament was Aneurin Bevan. It was conceded on all sides that the rapier thrust of his deadly attack on Lloyd George was the most brilliant of the speeches made by any of the newly elected Members. One summer evening, when the House was sitting late, we walked to the far corner of the Terrace, talking as we leaned together over the parapet. We were comparing notes.

In spite of his brilliant parliamentary debut and his left-wing stance, I was in two minds about him. For one thing I did not like some of the company he kept. He delighted in the Beaverbrook menage and talked exuberantly about slumming in the West End. Was he too clever by half? Would he stand the pace of had he the makings of another [Victor Grayson](#)?

That summer evening I came to know him better. We had all the time in the world. It looked as if it was going to be an all-night sitting. Comparing notes, I could tell him of the stand my father took during the First World War, of the active part he had played in the miners' Reform Committee Movement and of his sceptical syndicalist outlook.

I had often heard him say, 'It all comes off at the point of the pick,' and he would refer to Parliament as 'the gas-chamber'. Aneurin Bevan, although belonging to a younger generation, had become involved in trade union and political affairs at such an early age that he had one through every one of those experiences.

But we had been defeated on the industrial front in 1919, 1929, and 1926. We were both now pinning our hopes on political action. We were eager to test to the full the possibility of bringing about basic socialist changes by peaceful, constitutional means. If we could avoid direct industrial confrontation, leading to a civil war in which our side almost certainly would be the weaker, that would be a consummation devoutly to be wished. Some other countries had no choice, Russia for instance. But maybe our people could be spared the agonies of civil war. Even Lenin had said that in England this might just be possible.