

## **Tribute to Lord Asa Briggs**

Memorial Service at All Souls, Langham Place, London  
2016-10-04

Sir John Daniel

*Vice-Chancellor, The Open University: 1990-2001*  
*President, The Commonwealth of Learning: 2004-2012*

Lord Briggs was Chancellor of The Open University from 1978 to 1994, serving with three of its first Vice-Chancellors: Lord Walter Perry, Sir John Horlock and me. We met regularly as he presided, in his genial and unstuffy way, at OU degree ceremonies all over the UK. During lunch, as was his habit at hundreds of similar events, he asked his table companions to sign his menu, so gathering data for future social history.

His impact on my life began much earlier, for he played a crucial role in launching The Open University in the 1960s and The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) 20 years later.

Asa described the 1960s as one of those 'rare decades when education was a focalising issue that captured the headlines'. It was, in Noel Annan's words, 'the golden age of the don'.

Nevertheless, as the archaic term 'don' suggests, the concept of an Open University faced widespread opposition: from the press; the existing universities; many politicians and much of the civil service. But Asa, as a fully engaged president of the Workers' Educational Association had, in the words of Raj Dhanarajan, the second president of COL, 'a deep understanding of those denied the experience of education generally and higher education particularly'.

On the OU Planning Committee Asa helped bridge the divide between enthusiasts and critics. He promoted multidisciplinary Foundation Courses and a liberal modular system. Through his special interest in communications and the BBC he was able to broker the unique OU/BBC partnership that endures to this day.

Being part of the creation of The Open University was, Asa once said, 'the most interesting thing I've ever done'. How appropriate that the OU has established the Asa Briggs Chair in History, together with a fully funded PhD studentship!

Today, when millions study abroad, it is hard to recall that in the 1980s the Commonwealth was concerned about a decline in international student mobility. The Commonwealth Secretariat asked Asa to explore the idea of moving the courses to the students instead. His report, *Towards a Commonwealth of Learning*, complemented Canada's preparations for the 1988 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Vancouver. They duly established The Commonwealth of Learning and named Asa as founding chair of its Governing Board.

Although comfortable with ceremonial he did not stand on ceremony. When the Board first convened in Barbados a Caribbean downpour flooded our meeting room during lunch. Asa simply took off his shoes and socks and chaired for the afternoon in his bare feet.

He used to say that one of his life's goals was to 're-draw the map of learning'. Through The Open University and The Commonwealth of Learning he helped to create a new map of learning for the 21st century. The beneficiaries of those two institutions, who now number in millions, owe him a great debt. We treasure his memory.