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The Briggs Lecture

Re-drawing the Map of Learning

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Introduction

It is a singular honour to give the Asa Briggs Lecture at this 8th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning. As you have heard, Asa Briggs, Lord Briggs of Lewes, died earlier this year at the age of 94, so this is the first Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning to be held after his death.

The customary practice, when you give a lecture named for a distinguished individual, is to say a few words about their life and achievements before addressing a topic close to their own interests. I shall follow that formula, but with the difference that in this year of his death I shall comment more extensively on Asa Briggs' life and work and link it particularly to the themes of open learning. I do so with great affection. Lord Briggs of Lewes - sometimes referred to jokingly by his friends as 'Lord Briggs of Heathrow' because of his love of travel - had a considerable influence on my own development.

In the 1960s he was involved in the planning of the Open University, which was the guiding star of my career long before I became its Vice-Chancellor in 1990. Twenty years later he contributed to the creation of this Commonwealth of Learning through a report for the Commonwealth Secretariat that was titled, presciently, *Towards a Commonwealth of Learning*. That report converged with work that the Government of Canada had done to prepare for the 1987 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) held in Vancouver.

You will understand, therefore, that it was a great privilege to be asked by Lady Briggs to give one of the tributes to Asa at his memorial service in London last month. Among his many other achievements Asa Briggs wrote a five-volume history of broadcasting and the BBC - which took him more than 30 years to complete. The service was held, appropriately, at All Souls, Langham Place, the church next to the BBC.

Asa was born in the Yorkshire town of Keighley, in the north of England, then a town of woollen mills. Asa is a Yorkshire name, although an unusual one. For academia, media

and politicians in Britain in the late 20th century there was only one Asa and I shall simply call him Asa today.

My commentary will not be uncritical - Asa would not have wanted that - but we always forgave him for the frustrations he caused us by his ceaseless activity. The word 'hyperactive' was not part of the common vocabulary 50 years ago, but when Asa demitted office as head of Worcester College, Oxford, the official college record noted: 'One always sensed that there were never less than three balls in the air though usually only one of them was visible'.

One of his successors commented, less kindly, that Asa treated Worcester as "just another airport lounge". But, as his obituary in *The Independent* newspaper observed: 'both in quantity and in quality – the two do not always go together – his output in the written word, and in broadcasts and lectures, was awesome. It is doubtful whether Briggs ever spent a truly idle moment in his life'.

Asa used to say that one of his life's goals was to re-draw the map of learning. I adopt this goal as my title today: *Re-drawing the Map of Learning*. I shall note in passing how Asa pursued the categories of openness in learning that form the slogan of The Open University: "Open as to People; Open as to Places; Open as to Methods and Open as to Ideas".

Asa was born in 1921, the son of William Walker Briggs, a skilled engineer, and his wife, Jane, who came from a family of Yorkshire farmers that had been forced to leave the land during the Depression and eke out a living as greengrocers. "We were not straight working class, but very near to it," Asa would say.

Asa the Student

In those days, Keighley Grammar School would send seven or eight boys each year to Oxford or Cambridge. In 1937, at the age of 16, Briggs was accepted as a scholar by Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge to read History.

It was said that he was the youngest undergraduate since Oliver Cromwell. His tutor said to him: "You're only a baby, Briggs – but since we are sure there is going to be a war, we would like you to complete your degree before you are called up for military service". He did so enthusiastically.

The story goes that as he was reading an essay to his tutor he banged the sofa in excitement so hard it released clouds of century-old academic dust. He retained that enthusiasm for ideas and that power to banish inert dust for the rest of his life.

He also completed his degree more than expeditiously. Asa took Firsts in both parts of the History tripos, graduating in 1941, and simultaneously took a degree in Economics at the London School of Economics. He achieved the rare distinction of obtaining two

degrees in successive weeks – one in History at Cambridge and the other, an external degree in Economics, at London, taking Firsts in both.

His openness to methods was already patent. An unrelated Victorian entrepreneur named William Briggs had set up the University Correspondence College (UCC) in Cambridge in 1887. In commenting on a manuscript of the history of this College Asa wrote:

“I actually did some marking of scripts for the UCC when I was a very young new Cambridge graduate in 1941. I was not only a Cambridge graduate in history, but also a London University graduate in economics. Taking advantage of the wartime presence of the London School of Economics in Cambridge, I took the two degrees in parallel, the London one called ‘external’. I did not dare tell my Cambridge supervisor in Sidney Sussex College what I was doing or I would have been forbidden to do it.

“I took the London degree not solely because of the conviction that I held then that I should learn Economics. A school friend of mine, who did not go to university, decided to take an external London degree immediately after he left school in 1938, and in a comradely spirit, I decided to share the experience with him. He turned to the UCC for courses and in talking to him about his studies I had the benefit of sharing them without paying for them. When I told this three years later to an able and enterprising man working for the UCC, who asked me to mark scripts and pass on guidance to the UCC students, he considered sensibly that this was a great advantage.”

Asa the Soldier

Asa's career then took a very different turn, challenging him to be open to new methods and ideas.

In 1942 he joined the Army and was recruited the following year to work at Bletchley Park, the codebreaking base, made famous recently by the film *The Imitation Game*. He worked as a cryptographer and later described Bletchley as his ‘second university’. His agile mind proved ideal for the deciphering work – long hours and no mistakes tolerated. Asa told an official Bletchley chronicler, “What those years did for me, and I was very grateful for, was that we were all thrown in at the deep end”.

The codebreaking at Bletchley was kept secret for many years after the War and Asa never spoke to anyone about it, not even his wife, for 20 years. He recalled modestly that he had been “the youngest warrant officer in the British army – which entitled me to wear a peaked cap and draw a captain’s pay”.

His work, alongside that of Alan Turing in Hut 6 – the section that deciphered Enigma machine messages from the German Army and Luftwaffe – was to prove decisive for an Allied victory. He worked principally on signals traffic from the Mediterranean, using the “Bombes”, Alan Turing's proto-computers, which allowed them to read enemy signals, and also assisted in the plan to dupe the Germans into thinking D-Day would be carried out somewhere other than Normandy.

It was a demanding work schedule and Asa enjoyed the spirit of informality (no uniforms) and the equality of the place. "Except, he noted, "towards Alan Turing, whom we all deferred to because he was clearly a genius." He said that he felt very privileged, when others were being shot at, to be in a country house surrounded by pretty girls. He ended the war, improbably, as a 24-year-old regimental sergeant major.

Asa the Teacher and Scholar

On demobilisation Briggs briefly returned to teach history at his old school in Keighley before being offered a safe seat in parliament for Labour in the 1945 election as well as posts at both Cambridge and Oxford.

He chose Oxford, and became a fellow of Worcester College, initially teaching philosophy, politics and economics rather than modern history. During this period he spent time proofreading and correcting Winston Churchill's *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* and in 1952 published a groundbreaking *History of Birmingham*.

This was typical of Asa's lifelong habit of taking unfashionable topics and making them fashionable. He followed this up with *The Age of Improvement*, soon required reading for generations of students, and then *Victorian People*, the first of what would become a trilogy, with later volumes on *Victorian Cities* and *Victorian Things*. But he became convinced that it was not enough to look at the history of particular cities to understand the Victorian environment. It was equally important to understand the role of public and expert opinion in forcing through change in public health and other areas. Through this he became interested in general questions of social and cultural history.

Until the 1960s and 1970s, social and cultural history was a relatively neglected sub-branch, derided by the political and constitutional historical establishment. Asa was one of a group of post-war historians who moved the discipline into the academic mainstream and institutionalised it in university courses, bringing to bear other disciplines such as demography, anthropology and archaeology.

In 1960 Asa attended the annual conference of the Workers' Educational Association, of which he was president for nine years, showing an openness to people that was remarkable for an Oxford academic in those days. In his tribute to Asa our former COL president, Raj Dhanarajan, remarked that Asa had "a deep understanding of those denied the experience of education generally and higher education particularly".

It was at that time that he started work on *A History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*. The first volume appeared in 1961 and the fifth and last in 1995. When he began, colleagues were baffled by his interest in what they saw as a relatively trivial subject. But by the time he had finished media history was itself a large and growing industry, and few historians would dispute his assertion that broadcasting was, as Asa said "in the forefront of social and cultural changes which it both registers and

influences". To write the history of broadcasting in the 20th century, he believed, was "in a sense to write the history of everything else".

By this time Asa had considerable heft in the academic world. In 1961 he was one of the first staff recruited to the new University of Sussex where, after serving as professor of History, dean of Social Studies and pro vice-chancellor, he was appointed Vice-Chancellor in 1967.

Asa the Vice-Chancellor and Chancellor

He embraced the interdisciplinary ethos of the new university with enthusiasm, and was notably successful in dealing with the wave of student unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was said that Asa coped better with the Daniel Cohn-Bendit Tendency than any other Vice-Chancellors of the day, with the arguable exception of Noel Annan at University College London. The name Daniel Cohn-Bendit may not mean much to many of you - he is now a respectable member of the European Parliament - but I recall him clearly as the leader of the student uprising at the University of Paris, where I was doing my doctorate in 1968.

One of Asa's qualities, perhaps crucial to a successful vice-chancellor, was the capacity to make transparent decisions and stick to them.

His relations with contumacious late-'60s students were encapsulated in the episode when he was being shouted down during a lecture on the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. He said, "If you continue to interrupt me, I will stop lecturing forthwith. If you desist, I shall take questions at the end of the lecture on France and Prussia, and any other matter, particularly including the running and governance of the University of Sussex". I call this being 'open to people' in a sensible way!

With this combination of academic credibility, familiarity with workers' education, deep knowledge of broadcasting and a track record as an administrator it was not surprising that Asa was appointed to the Planning Committee of the Open University in 1967, where he chaired the Sub-Committee on Students and Curriculum. In that capacity he promoted multi-disciplinary foundation courses and a liberal modular system.

He was not hidebound by academic traditions and, in retrospect, one of the Planning Committee's most significant proposals was that 'the University as whole should be responsible for the nature, content and teaching of each Course offered by the University – not individual academics or departments. Flexible project groups in the production of learning were the basis of the Senate decision to create Course Teams'. Walter Perry, the OU's founding vice-chancellor, always considered that the course team was the OU's most important innovation and the key to its success.

Furthermore Asa's close connection with the BBC as its historian ensured his support for the historic partnership between the BBC and the Open University that endures to this day.

Having played a major role in its establishment as the major institution for adult learning in the UK he was a natural choice to serve as The Open University's Chancellor from 1978 to 1994. In this capacity he worked with all of the first three vice-chancellors, including myself. I much enjoyed supporting him 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 such meals during his long career, he asked his table companions to sign his menu, thus gathering data for future social history.

Despite all these commitments there was no let-up in Asa's writing. He once said that he was unhappy if he ever wrote fewer than a thousand words a day. His interests ranged from Victorian social reformers to Doctor Who, and he believed that the key to understanding the values of a different age and culture was not just art and literature, but also the ephemera of everyday life such as newspapers, popular songs and consumer goods. His writings are remarkable not only for their range and quantity, but also for opening up previously neglected areas of study, and their readability.

"As an historian", one reviewer wrote, "Briggs reminds one of one of those tramps who can often be seen rummaging in municipal dustbins, carefully smoothing, folding and packing away things that they find. His books are always overweight, stuffed with minutiae, which any self-respecting graduate student would throw away. And that is their glory!"

Asa and The Commonwealth of Learning

You all know, of course, that this is called the Briggs Lecture because Asa played a key role in the creation of COL. Today, millions study abroad and 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 chair a working group that would explore the idea of moving the courses to the students, instead of having the students move to the courses, and, more generally, to "report on the potential for Commonwealth co-operation in distance education".

Asa's starting point was that we were living in "a time of convergence between the world-wide need to extend and develop educational opportunities and the world-wide expansion of communication channels through which such needs could be met". Knowledge could be open in new places. Hilary Perraton, who was a member of the group, noted that Asa "demonstrated his well-honed skills in drawing out ideas from a diverse international group, his mastery as a writer, and his willingness to take on too much".

Although the report of the Briggs group was titled *Towards a Commonwealth of Learning*, foretelling the name that would be used when COL was created, what the report actually proposed was called *The University of the Commonwealth for Co-operation in Distance Education*. Its key proposition was that 'any learner anywhere in the Commonwealth shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any *bona fide* college or university in the Commonwealth'.

Meanwhile, Canada had been preparing for the 1987 CHOGM. It happened that Canada hosted both the CHOGM and the Sommet de la Francophonie in that same year. Prime Minister Brian Mulroney wanted Canada to propose initiatives linking communications and ODL at both events. At the time I was president of Laurentian University in Ontario and I did some work with a group set up by the Government of Canada through its Department of Communications to prepare a proposal for the CHOGM. This involved using satellite technology to beam courses around the Commonwealth.

The Briggs Report and Canada's proposal converged at the 1987 CHOGM and, inspired by the enthusiasm of India's Rajiv Gandhi in particular, the Heads approved the creation of the Commonwealth of Learning. They did not say much about its mandate and structure. This was left to a working group, which I chaired, that produced an action plan in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding that Commonwealth governments signed in late 1988 and COL was established.

In his excellent *Reflections on Ten Years of the Commonwealth of Learning* our second president, Raj Dhanarajan, notes how the mission and methods of COL changed radically between the CHOGM and the MoU. This happened because the international development agencies of Canada, the UK and other Commonwealth countries had not been much involved in the preparations for CHOGM. Once the project was approved, however, it was natural that they should play a key role and they saw the world rather differently from the Briggs group and the Canadian Department of Communications.

It is something of a caricature, but you could express it as the difference between giving people fish, through delivery of ODL courses, and teaching them to fish so that they could produce the courses for themselves. The key aim of COL was expressed as 'assisting with the creation and development of institutional capacity in distance education in member countries', which is what COL has been doing ever since.

Although the change of orientation was not greeted with enthusiasm by some of the university representatives on the Briggs Committee - or indeed on my Working Group - Asa remained the individual whose name was most closely associated with the creation of COL. Moreover, Asa was a pragmatist who appreciated that setting up a university as an intergovernmental organisation, rather than as part of a national university system, would not be straightforward.

Asa was thus the natural choice to be the first chair of COL's board. He brought his usual zest to the task and encouraged the staff with his energy and enthusiasm each time he flew in. He would loosen his tie and roll up his sleeves and get on with the job. Indeed, I remember that at the Board's first meeting, held 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.

This was a man who was completely unstuffy, hugely interested in and encouraging towards other people, a lover of good food, fine wine and stimulating company, and a tremendous party-giver. He listed his recreations in *Who's Who* as "memories of travel and of great lunches and dinners".

Asa's output remained undiminished. After his 90th birthday he completed three books and when my Open University colleague, Eleanor Milburn, went to see him two weeks before his death his greatest regret was that he would not be able to finish the book that he was then writing!

Asa was a great man and we are all very fortunate that he chose to devote some of his abundant intellectual and physical energy to open learning. Indeed, he once said that being part of the creation of The Open University was "the most interesting thing that I ever did".

Asa and the 'Four Opens'

What is his legacy? Let us review the 'four opens' that I quoted earlier.

Asa's readiness to open up higher education to more people was unusual in his day. He once commented that the 1960s was 'one of those rare decades when education was a focalising issue that captured the headlines'. Noel Annan called it 'the golden age of the don'.

But as the archaic word '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. Most of Asa's fellow vice-chancellors of the new UK universities of the 1960s thought that the job of expanding higher education had now been done - even though fewer than 10% of school leavers had access to universities and there was almost no provision for adults. But Asa, as a fully engaged president of the Workers' Educational Association, interpreted openness and expansion in a much more catholic manner and pushed the radical idea that The Open University should have no academic admission requirements.

He pursued his belief that education should be open to places by promoting the capacity of broadcasting to reach everywhere and nurturing the partnership between The Open University and the BBC. While this partnership has mutated over the years as both the OU and the BBC have evolved it remains a robust arrangement. It is the foundation of the

OU's world leadership in the provision of free media through broadcasting, its OpenLearn website and its FutureLearn MOOC consortium.

Asa promoted the same conviction through the report *Towards a Commonwealth of Learning*. The Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth is a lovely example of taking the courses to the students rather than the other way around. I don't know if Asa ever took a MOOC, but I have taken 16 of them myself and I am sure that this new tool for channelling courses using video, audio and print all over the globe must have delighted him.

This was also linked to his openness to methods. Where Asa stood in the debates at Bletchley Park between those who believed, with Alan Turing, that only a computing machine could do the job, and those who sided with the conventional cryptographers I don't know. Indeed, I believe that by the time that Asa arrived Turing's 'Bombes' were already functional. Asa was fascinated by new communication methods. Somewhat ironically, however, while you certainly could not call him a technophobe, he did not consider that many modern inventions were for him. He didn't drive and I believe that he always wrote in longhand, usually with a pencil.

Of his openness to ideas there can be no doubt. I have noted how, time after time, Asa made unfashionable research topics fashionable by the quality of his scholarship and his writing. I do not know how he assessed, with hindsight, the changes to the organisation of the curriculum that he and his colleagues made at the University of Sussex. Noel Annan, another great academic leader of those times, commented in his book *Our Age* that: "In retrospect how timid the innovations of the new universities look, how traditional the spread of subjects and how marginal the institutional change that substituted schools of study for departments".

I suspect that Asa may have relished being given a second try at redrawing the map of learning through the design of the Open University's curriculum. Its multi-disciplinary Foundation Courses, developed by teams to ensure both diversity of approaches and balance of interpretations, must have pleased him immensely.

In summary, Asa Briggs, through The Open University and The Commonwealth of Learning, helped to create a new map of learning for the 21st century. His openness to people, places, methods and ideas should inspire us all. Today, in too many places, the trend is to close, not to open. We should treasure the memory of Lord Asa Briggs and follow his example.