

**U DX262**

**Letter from Harold Laski**

**1946**

**Biographical Background:**

Harold Joseph Laski was born in Manchester in 1893, the second son of Nathan Laski and his wife Sarah Frankenstein. His father was a cotton shipping merchant, a leader of the Jewish community and a Liberal. Harold Laski was educated at Manchester Grammar School and studied eugenics under Karl Pearson at University College for six months in 1911. He met Frida Kerry, a lecturer in eugenics, and they married in that year, just as he began an undergraduate degree in history at Oxford University. Frida Laski lectured in Glasgow and she and Harold Laski were destined to have a distance marriage in its early stages.

In 1914 Laski was awarded a first class honours degree and the Beit memorial prize. He worked for a while with George Lansbury on the Daily Herald. When the war broke out he failed his medical and in 1916, the year his daughter Diana was born, he was appointed lecturer in modern history at McGill University, Montreal. In 1916 he joined the staff of Harvard University and there associated with Oliver Wendell Holmes and Felix Frankfurter, both of whom went on to be appointed to the Supreme Court. He was friendly with Franklin Delano Roosevelt and there is a letter in the collection from this former United States president. In 1919 Laski was savagely attacked for his sympathy with the Boston police strikers and he turned his back on an American academic career, taking a post at the London School of Economics in 1920.

Harold Laski became professor of Political Science in 1926 and held this post at the London School of Economics until his death. He retained an interest in American political thought and excited controversy when he took a Marxist approach to American politics in 'The American Democracy' (1948). He is supposed to have seen in America, more acutely than England, the struggle between capital and labour. Laski was a prolific writer of works of political philosophy and political theory. His other works included 'Studies in the problem of sovereignty' (1917), 'Authority in the modern state' (1919), 'A grammar of politics' (1925), 'Democracy in Crisis' (1933), 'Parliamentary Government in England' (1938) and Reflections on the constitution (his Simon lectures at Manchester University which were published posthumously in 1951).

Harold Laski was also involved in Labour politics and was friendly with Ramsay MacDonald through the 1920s. In 1923 MacDonald offered him a cabinet post if he would stand for parliament, but he turned down this offer as well as a further offer of a seat in the House of Lords made in 1929. In 1931 he became disillusioned with Labour Party politics and his friendship with MacDonald came to an end. From that date he extended his Marxist philosophy, arguing for the rest of his life that social revolution was inevitable. In 1932 he joined the Socialist League and in 1937 took part in a joint effort with the Communist Party and the Independent Labour Party in an attempt to form a Popular Front against the government of Neville Chamberlain. He was on the executive committee of the Fabian Society through most of the 1920s and 1930s and was a close friend of both Leon Blum and John Strachey of The Left Book Club. Between 1934 and 1945 he served as an alderman on Fulham council and was chairman of the libraries committee. In 1937 he returned to the Labour Party fold, joining the executive committee and he served on this until 1949

During the second world war Laski suffered a nervous breakdown as a result of overwork and over-commitment. Despite this he chaired the Labour Party conference in 1944 and was chair of the National Executive committee from 1945 to 1946. During the 1945 election he undermined the leadership contest of Clement Atlee and the Conservative press (and Winston Churchill) were quick to demonise him. He took out a libel case against one of the

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papers and this hung over him during a year of travel in 1946, on trips made with Denis Healey, the new International Secretary. He lost the libel case and the costs of £13,000 came out of public donations. Never a healthy man, his health failed further, but he continued to overwork, attending 40 meetings in 30 days during the February 1950 general election. A month later he contracted influenza and died. His influence persisted, through past pupils and friends, like John Saville who helped acquire his papers for the Brynmor Jones Library. In 1954 the Harold Laski Institute of Political Science was opened in India. Frida Laski outlived her husband by over a quarter of a century.

### **Custodial history:**

Donated by Dr David Harris, East Grinstead, January 1992

### **Description:**

Copy of a letter from Harold Laski that was pasted into Laski's book 'The Danger of Being a Gentleman' by the recipient

**Extent:** 1 item

### **Related material:**

Papers of Harold Laski (and Frida Laski) [Ref U DLA]

Papers of Granville Eastwood relating to Harold Laski [Ref U DES]

Essay on Harold Laski by Ralph Miliband [Ref U DX241]

English Constitution, notes from lectures at LSE by Harold Laski [U DX320]

### **Access conditions:**

Access will be granted to any accredited reader

U DX262/1	Photocopy. ALS. Harold Laski (Fulham, London) to A de Hegedus The letter, which was pasted into Laski's book 'The Danger of Being a Gentleman', thanks him for the copy of his new book; the 'Soviet Union's attitude to nationalism' 1 item	24 Mar 1946
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