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David Butler

Life story interview with Paul Thompson

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Principle investigator's thematic highlights

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Sir David Butler

Interviewed by Paul Thompson

23 September and 28 October 2014

1. Deep Academic Roots

My father had been a Mods Scholar at New College, and then he succeeded A.E. Houseman as Professor of Latin at University College, London, in 1911. During the War, he married a student of his – my mother, Margaret Lucy Pollard, daughter of A.F. Pollard, the historian – and he bought a house just off Gordon Square, three minutes walk away from the University [of London]. They raised four children there in the inter-war period, we just didn't move house or anything. And it was a very solid background. My sisters went to St. Paul's Girls' School, my brother and I went to St. Paul's, Colet Court, and then St. Paul's. (p 1)

Well, obviously I'm from [an] overwhelmingly academic background. My great-grandfather, George Butler, was born in 1774, before the American Revolution, and he became Headmaster of Harrow at 25 years. He had four sons, two of whom became headmasters and dons, and my grandfather, A.G. Butler, went from Rugby to Univ, and then became a Fellow of Oriel and stayed there for 60 years, but broke away to be the first Headmaster of Haileybury in the 1860s, for five years, and then he came back to Oxford. Because dons couldn't marry, he didn't get married till 1877, and my father was born in Oxford, in 1878 – before the internal combustion engine! His father had been born before the Great Reform Act.

So we stretch back a very long way, academically, and really, there were no near relatives who weren't dons. Two of my father's three sisters became Fellows of St. Ann's, and being an academic was a solid part of the background. (p1-2)

On my father's mother's side, Harriett Jessie Edgeworth was a niece of Maria Edgeworth the novelist. Her mother was Scottish. Her father, though, Michael Pakenham-Edgeworth had been an Indian Civil Servant, and an enterprising pioneer in photography and some bits of botany. He gets into the DNB for having stopped for three hours in Aden, on a ship, filled up with coal, going to India, and he discovered, I think, 34 unknown species of plants. Of course, no good botanist had got into the hills just behind the coaling section.

So that is the background. No aristocratic origins, but solid comfortable middle-class.

On my mother's side, middle-class/working-class, small tradesmen there, but by the time - both my parents were totally brought up in academic households. (p 2)

Would you say that any of this amazing constellation of relatives was a particular influence on you?

No. I don't think they were. If anyone was, it was my Pollard grandfather, who was a great Tudor historian, but also a great politician in the study of history. And we joke about my birth, but in, in fact my grandfather stood for, when there were University seats, stood as a Liberal candidate for the University of London in 1922, '23 and '24, and in 1924 he was on a lecture tour in America when... there was a sudden General Election. My mother was looking after the correspondence – it wasn't very arduous being a candidate in that situation. But still, the Election was on October 25th, 1924 I think. I was born on October 17th, but my mother brought me into the world while, in a sense, running an Election! I don't think that this is all that important, but I can joke about that being how I started being a psephologist before I was born!

So I don't know, the world was full of academic people, it seemed to be quite normal to be an academic. But I didn't have any plans to be an academic really. (p 4)

2. War Service

I was there from the age of almost 19 to almost 21... But it's supposed to be a traumatic and my thoughts hardly ever go back to it. I was extraordinarily young and innocent. It was an astonishing thing, and I can never understand how the troops I commanded could tolerate it. They were battle-hardened, they'd been through the Western Desert, they'd been in the Normandy Landing, and here was this extremely green young man commanding four tanks and 20 people. Mercifully, I didn't manage to kill any of my people, I didn't do anything very stupid I thought - it was just the end of the War, and everything was going right. I was in battle, I suppose, for only about three days – under fire, where there were things banging around. But I'd been terrified that the War was going to end before I could get into it. I was very enthusiastic. (p6-7)

3. Onto Electoral Television

Well, February 1950 ... The BBC was going to put on an Election Night programme that had never been done before on television, and radio had always been extremely dull, just reading out the results in a totally formal way. The wonderful lady, Grace Goldie, who was then Deputy Head of Current Affairs at the BBC, had the idea of having a good Election Night programme. She asked [Ronald] MacCallum, because MacCallum had written a book on the '45 Election, to come on the programme. MacCallum, knowing that he didn't know anything about figures, said he wouldn't come on it unless I could be there, sitting beside him.

So I got involved in Election Night preparations and the like, and then suddenly I was on the screen - I'd hardly seen any television at the time – I was on screen on the 23rd February, 1950, available when results came in. And I found that I could talk, spontaneously, about them – I was doing, in front of a camera, what I would have been doing if I'd just been alone at home, or with friends at home – interpreting the election results. And it was thought to be a success. So I stayed doing Election Night television at the BBC, beside the anchor man, for the next ten Elections, and my last performance – one on telly – was 1979. But from 1950 to '79 I was a sort of fixture there.

It was a great help to me. I wasn't a great person at television, ... but it meant that I was known to the political class. When, later on I was spending a lot of time writing books on General Elections and thinking about British politics, I had an entrée simply because I was known as a television person, as a pundit on elections, and thought to be learned in a way I certainly wasn't. So that well, in a sense, changed my life. It opened doors for me... It really, it was just a very exciting thing to do... One didn't need to sleep, one could go through for 36 hours without stopping, and would be - totally excited, totally immersed in all that was happening, and knowing that one was doing something one was qualified to do. (p 8-9)

4. Developing Electoral Statistics

Were you using your statistical knowledge in the [1950 television] programme?

Statistical knowledge - it wasn't statistics so much, I mean, I just could work out a percentage. I could say, “This is larger than last time”, or “lower”, or “behind last time”. Or – “it's different in the North and South”. It was very very elementary, it was not clever statistical

stuff of the sort that is done by people – some of my pupils – nowadays. I admire what they do, and know that it was beyond my, quite beyond my capacity. But I just had the great luck of being first in the field. Nobody else had done this sort of thing before and I did it. (p 9)

I did the Statistical Appendix for the 1945 book - for MacCallum, and Herbert Nicholas who wrote the 1950 book, I did the Statistical Appendix to that myself, and I did it again in 1955... In 1959 I subcontracted it. ... It was a kind of tribal thing that moved around, but it got into the hands of people who were much more competent than I in playing around with the figures. If you look at the appendices you will see the progression in sophistication. I was the midwife of it in the sense I encouraged them to go ahead, and then criticised what they wrote. (p 11)

We started [the national electoral surveys] in 1963, and did five nationwide sample surveys between 1963 and 1970 – the first nationwide academic studies of elections. And that came out as *Political Change in Britain*. (p 10)

5. Donald Stokes and Political Change in Britain

There was one very very good book that I produced, and I didn't produce it, none of the genius in it, but *Political Change in Britain*, which I wrote with Donald Stokes, out in Michigan he was then, and we published in 1969, and a second edition in 1974. But all the good ideas in it came from Donald Stokes, who was just a very clever, very courteous, wonderful American. I was quite a good manager and book producer. He was a perfectionist, and the book would never have been published if it hadn't been for me. But on the other hand, that was simply my drive, and we got to finish it. (p 10)

Donald Stokes... knew about survey work in a professional and technical way in that I didn't begin to, and he also knew about statistics. He was a wonderful person – very wise and learned, but very slow and measured, infinitely courteous person. So we lived together as neighbours and shooting across the Atlantic. He came to England for each of the elections, and several months attached to them, and I went over to America, deserting my family for two weeks at a time, about 10, 15 times between 1963 and 1972, (p 15)

Donald Stokes, my co-author, was ... the cleverest man I've ever worked closely with, and all the quality of *Political Change in Britain* comes from him. What I was was really a production manager. I could write some of the stuff perfectly well, sometimes I wrote rather

better than he did, I think, but essentially he was the person who designed and shaped the book... But it was much the biggest and most important book, still in print after 40 years. (p 27)

Can you give an example of the sort of new ideas that he brought in?

Well, I think the most central one was the inheritance of political allegiance. If you want to know one thing about how somebody will vote, rather than ask about their social classes, you should ask how his parents voted. When we did it, we found that of those who – in the sixties – of those who remember both Mummy and Daddy as voting Conservative or Labour, 92% were voting as they remembered their parents voting when they were growing up. It was inherited like all sorts of other social customs we inherit from our parents. (p 11)

6. “Swing”

I have been responsible for two words in the Oxford English Dictionary, and I didn't invent either of them! But the first word is “swing”. Now, people talked about the swing of the pendulum in an election, two elections back into the 19th century, but they hadn't systematised it at all, and I was the first person to make it a systematic thing. There are various ways of defining “swing” - but essentially this was the percentage movement between one election and the next in each constituency, or in each region, or nationwide. And “swing” was the key thing in my appendix to *'45 Election*. (p 19)

I could do [the calculations] myself, or I had somebody - I didn't use a slide rule. I had one or two, and in the end, five or six Nuffield students who would sit just a way away, and tell me the percentage in passing. In the early days of television, a great virtue was that they had to put the results, to show the results. They couldn't set them up electronically, the facility wasn't there, so they had cards – pre-prepared cards – with the names of the candidates, and they just had to ink in the figures. But the ink took 30 seconds to dry, and in that 30 seconds, the swing figure could be calculated by somebody quickly with a slide-rule and so one could, the moment a result came on air, say, “And that's an exceptionally big swing”, or “That's a very small swing”, “That's the biggest swing we've had yet so far”, “That fits the general pattern”, “Confirms the nationwide swing - which must be about three per cent

to Labour”, or “Three per cent to Conservative”. One could do all those things very fast, and the people in the BBC thought one was very clever. Doing it was extremely primitive and elemental but it worked, and seemed to make those programmes be well thought of. (p 22)

7. “Psephology”

The other word I put into the English language, I much regret, is “psephology”. ... MacCallum was dining at Corpus, and with Frank Hardie the President, and his brother, who ... were both classicists... MacCallum said, “We seem, at Nuffield, to be making a habit of the study of elections, we'd better have a word for it”. And Hardie said, “Why not call it 'psephology'?”, because the Greeks dropped a seahorse, a pebble, into an urn in order to vote, in Athens, in the fourth century BC, and so there it was. And when we were working on the 1950 Election, we developed the word, “psepho-analysis”, “psephyatria” and so on! It was just a silly academic joke! (p 19)

The first time the word appeared in print, ... the word based on the Greek “psephos” for a pebble, [was in] the first chapter of my first book, *The British General Election of 1951*. ... It was a harmless joke, but and I, on the whole, regret it. Psephology is just like psychology with an “ep” instead of a “yc” in the middle of the word, and it has some of the verbosity that many of us associate with quite a lot of people who go under the general “psychological” label. And I rather regret it. But I can't help it, I mean, it's there, and it's been made a joke word. (p 12)

8. The “Cube Law”

The “Cube Law” comes in in October 1949. I'd just taken up my Studentship at Nuffield, and looking up everything. I looked up the Royal Commission on Electoral Systems, published in 1910, and I found somebody, a man giving evidence quoted his friend, “The mathematician, Major McMahon had suggested that if votes went as A is to B, seats would go as A cubed is to B cubed”. Nuffield didn't have a building then, we had rented a couple of houses in North Oxford, and I went, by myself, and worked on the old-fashioned calculating machine, and found that the cube law worked over the last three elections. Seven seats, three seats, and one seat, as a prediction majority from the percentage of votes cast, and I published this – I mean,

it had remarkable consequences for my life, really. (p 22)

9. Interviewing Political Elites

So there I was! I'd hardly seen any television, but I went to Alexandra Palace, and was there on Election Night in February, 1950. And I was typecast for the job. I reacted to things, I turned them into percentage terms, I talked quite fluently about it, and they seemed to like it, and I went on for the next 30 years, being the principal statistical commentator on television, on election results - which was an enormous help to me, in going around doing political interviewing...

That meant I became known and it made it much easier over access to all sorts of politicians, high and low, going around talking to constituency agents, and also talking to party leaders, and getting them to talk, and gradually discovering how freely they would talk if you asked sensible questions and they knew you were not going to, you were not a vicious journalist who was going to write it up in any way that would be embarrassing to them in the short run, and anything you wrote was only going to come out well after the election. All that came by some lucky chance. (p 21)

We found that we could talk to almost anyone because they knew that we were not partisan, we were neutral, and if we talked to them before an election we weren't going to publish anything during the election, we would only write about it after the election. And we developed considerable skills, I think, in sometimes sending out our texts, sometimes our interview notes, to people after we'd interviewed them – not often that - but more often when we were writing the book, we would send out our texts to quite a large number of people, particularly *apparachi* in head offices, and get back their criticism. We had to resist any attempts that they sometimes made to manipulate our text, but we it saved us from factual error, and quite often gave one fresh insights into what had happened, because we were being published. And we managed to develop this reputation for neutrality – I think quite early on, which has survived since. (p 13)

On the idea that one couldn't talk about “haute politique”, I discovered – very much I was shown by Tony King – that almost any politician would grant time if they were told it was deep background, it was not for verbatim quotes, and it wasn't going to appear till after the election. People would talk. One, that they could talk, and they talked, very often, with

extreme freedom, about the follies of their colleagues, and why things were going wrong, had gone wrong, and so on, and therefore one discovered one could do the “haute politique”. (p 26)

I have, in Nuffield, at the moment, about eight yards of big thick volumes of interview notes, some of them are very trivial but they are all authentic, all were done on the day of interview, so to speak. They are a major historical source, I think, because of their obvious authenticity. They're not totally reliable, because if you'd interviewed - on the whole we didn't tape them – well, we never taped them really – but we sometimes scribbled down a mnemonic or two, but quite often one did it from mnemonics and memory at the end of the day, and I certainly couldn't guarantee that we never transferred an anecdote or a thing from one speaker to another! And so I have this sort of health warning about them. Nonetheless, they are an important source, and quite a lot of people have asked if they can see them, and I let them see them, and they're still strictly, as it were, confidential. They treat them as deep background, they're not to be quoted. I don't want them to be cited as such. But several major biographers of politicians have had some little tribute in the preface to help from Sir David Butler, you know, that sort of thing... They're going to go to Bodley. (p 16)

10. On Comparative Government

When I first went to America in the autumn of 1947, to Princeton... I was going to go to America to see how another country ran its politics. And when I got to Princeton, I conscientiously translated everything I heard from America and Britain, and then suddenly, about six weeks after I got there, I had a sort of Road to Damascus experience, and I said, “This is all wrong. America is totally different. It's no use doing these comparisons, just look at America in its own right”. And I did that, I stopped translating, and I stopped comparisons. I was thoroughly sceptical about comparative government for 20 years, until I went to Australia, and suddenly found that my British questions were very good questions to ask in Australia, and to some extent later on when I went to India. So I'm not against comparative government now, but I did spend ten years railing against the idea that you were going to learn a great deal about one country's affairs by looking at another country's affairs. (p 24)

11. Turning points in the conduct of elections

The turning point in elections, for me, was 1959. Now, in 1959 the Conservatives, slightly unexpectedly, got re-elected with an increased majority... Up till 1959, the BBC had had a monopoly of broadcasting, and it was desperately frightened of being partisan, and so it cut out all reference to politics during elections. Churchill could, in an election speech in 1951 could suggest a summit meeting – that was not referred to. Everyone around the rest of the world it would have referred to, and British newspapers, but not on television news. But by 1959, everything could be - it all hung out. There were party political broadcasts from all sides, and the news was just - it was just a total transformation of the nature of an election. They [had been] very private things, elections, and politicians went around separately - they told me that they didn't talk to each other much. And the whole business [of] central control and managed and manipulated election only began to come in then. Morgan Philips, the General Secretary of the Labour Party, started having press conferences. Before, they'd just been the routine thing, saying, "So and so's going to speak now", but Morgan Philips made actual strong political statements, and in the first week of the 1959 Election, there was more coverage of the Labour press conference in the *Daily Telegraph* – a strongly Conservative newspaper – than there was anything the Conservatives did. The Conservatives ran hard to catch up in the latter part of that Election.

The style of the electioneering was different. It's gone on being changed with all sorts of electronic and other devices that have come into elections over the last 50 years. But the quantum leap was between '55 and '59, (p 28-29)

12. The need to mix methods

Looking at the work you do, there seem to be these two very different sides. One of the statistics, the psephology, and then you've got the personal encounters, the interviews. I wonder whether you could say a bit about how those two relate in your work?

Well, in a sense they've gone in opposite directions. In 1954 I remember seeing something in the press describing me as "Britain's foremost electoral statistician". Well, I'm totally

unqualified, mathematically – I can work out a percentage and have some feel for numbers, but I never got to calculus or anything like that – and it's easy to be first in the field of one! I had no competitors. Very quickly, in the later fifties and onwards, people much cleverer than me, and much more mathematically competent, took over.

But I had been unhappy about it, because I think that “If it can't be put, set out numerically, it's not worth saying” - that has been a trend which has worried me. And I am very conscious that I'm much more of a historian caring about character and personality having an influence on our accounts, and while I was trying to make the coverage of elections more statistical in the early fifties, ever since then I've almost been fighting, “Don't let the statisticians take it over from you”. Because [while] a great deal of it is statistical, and analysed statistically, a great deal of it is not. It is personality, public relations, inter-relations and things.

Some of that can be measured, but it's not to be dominant. I cannot believe that you and I would be sitting here today if Churchill had not taken over in May 1940. If Churchill had dropped dead, or Halifax had become Prime Minister, there would have been some deal done with Hitler, and the whole history of the world would have been different. So I want to think about people who are running things, and how good or how bad they are. (p 29—30)

You could say that, with Political Change in Britain, because you had those surveys and people's opinions, you were interweaving the two sides? That's mixing methods, isn't it?

It was. It was. One was mixing two lines of approach, the straight sociological and historical approach, and one was trying to find common elements. (p 31)