

A Constitutional Socialist

By

Richard Johnson

A new biography of Peter Shore rediscovers the life of a parliamentary radical who fought any attempt to weaken the political strength of working people.

If Peter Shore is known for anything now, it is for one speech which he gave at the Oxford Union in June 1975. Broadcast live on national television, Harold Wilson's trade secretary delivered a stunning denunciation of British membership in the European Economic Community (EEC). Resurrected during the 2016 Brexit referendum, Shore's oration was lauded in the Eurosceptic press as the 'greatest Brexit speech ever'. It 'will make the hairs on your neck stand up', oozed *Express* writer Lara Deauville.

While Shore's speech at the Oxford Union was characteristic of his great oratorical talents and passionate beliefs about British democracy, an overemphasis on this one intervention has led many to miscalculate Peter Shore's place in Labour Party history. Few today could name the roles he held on the Labour frontbench over a twenty-year period, despite being shadow chancellor and shadow foreign secretary in this time. Even academic experts underestimate how close Shore was to becoming Labour leader. A new biography by Kevin Hickman, Jasper Miles, and Harry Taylor — tellingly the first biography of Shore ever written — acknowledges Shore's (unjustified) obscurity in its subtitle: *Labour's Forgotten Patriot*.

'Undoubted Courage'

Peter Shore's defining characteristics were detectable from a young age. His teachers at his grammar school in Liverpool praised his 'intellectual and moral integrity', 'unusual powers of mastering detail', and oratory. Even critics admired Shore for his 'undoubted courage'.

Yet these aspects of his personality also proved to be his greatest limitations. In 1984, at the age of 100, Manny Shinwell was asked why Peter Shore had not become Labour leader. Shinwell, who had known every leader since Keir Hardie, felt that Shore undoubtedly had the ability and the intelligence for the job, yet something was missing. Shinwell thought: 'Shore has got everything but the one thing that's necessary to be leader — to be spectacular'.

There is something in Shinwell's observation. While Shore's Oxford Union-inspired image is of a rabble-rousing

firebrand, he was self-effacing to a fault. He placed personal integrity above all else, even refusing to open a constituency office because he believed it to be a wasteful, taxpayer-funded self-promotion. Such bewildering sentiments infuriated his local constituency party which repeatedly attempted to deselect him, with a commentator eulogising Shore as ‘a man clearly identified as a potential leader of the Labour Party, but whose integrity blinded him to the need to cultivate support’.

Shore’s political career set off rapidly. After a decade working in the Labour Party’s central office in Transport House, his long-time friend Tony Benn helped Shore find a seat in Stepney, to which he was elected in the 1964 general election. Shore had helped to write Labour’s winning manifesto, and he was the principal author of the party’s manifestos in the subsequent two general elections.

As soon as he arrived in Parliament, Shore was appointed by the new prime minister Harold Wilson to be his personal private secretary. Within three years, Shore was in the Cabinet. While continuously derided as Harold Wilson’s protégé or, less favourably, ‘favourite poodle’, Shore demonstrated a constancy — some might say inflexibility — of principle which put him worlds apart from the Labour prime minister. Wilson was a notorious shapeshifter and political manipulator; Tom Swain, a former miner and Labour MP, felt that he was so devious that ‘if Harold swallowed a sixpence, he’d shit a corkscrew’. Shore, on the other hand, could not — or, more accurately, would not — compromise his beliefs, even if it meant making himself very unpopular. Shore admitted in his diary ‘I could not, on major issues, say what I do not believe in’.

This sometimes meant biting the hand that fed him. Shore enraged Wilson when he spoke forcefully in Cabinet in the late 1960s against Barbara Castle’s ‘In Place of Strife’ White Paper, which was designed to limit strikes. After Shore’s critique won the day and Castle and Wilson were forced to abandon the reforms, a humiliated Wilson vowed that he and Castle ‘will never forget Peter’s speech on industrial relations’, venting to Social Security Minister Dick Crossman that Shore was ‘no good’. ‘I’ve over-promoted him’, he cruelly jibed.

The Power of Parliament

Today, Labour has been captured by constitutional liberals who sing the praises of the very devices which would constrain the power of a majority Labour government from implementing a socialist programme — or make a majority Labour government impossible altogether. Proportional representation, federalism, a powerful upper chamber, an empowered judiciary, European constitutional strictures, and an independent central bank are all broadly endorsed by the party’s leading lights.

Shore represented a different tradition of socialist constitutional thought which has sadly been almost entirely eradicated since the New Labour years. Like many other constitutional socialists in Labour’s history — not least Attlee, Bevan, and Benn — Shore understood that the old British constitution, with its absence of codified checks and balances, provided enormous potential for a socialist party. A party which could secure a majority in the lower chamber of Parliament could rule the country with virtually no limitations whatsoever: no senate to block its legislation, no president to veto it, no judge to overrule it as ‘unconstitutional’, and no non-socialist coalition partners with whom to compromise. He put it succinctly: ‘I did not come into socialist politics in order to connive in the dismantling of the power of the British people’.

No constitutional change posed a greater threat to the old British constitution than entry into the European Economic Community in 1973. At the time, Shore was shadow Europe minister and led Labour’s opposition to Heath’s entry. He condemned it as a ‘Magna Carta of business freedoms’, liberating business ‘from state intervention and public control’. After Labour came to power in 1974 and offered the British public a referendum on membership the following year, Shore campaigned across the country advocating the No (Leave) position. At a referendum event in Swansea, he asked:

‘Have we so abandoned confidence in ourselves and hope in our future that we are ready to submit to the

presumptuous powers of the Brussels authorities? ... That we are so weak and powerless that we must accept the terms and conditions, penalties and limitations, almost as though we have suffered defeat in war?’

Liberal commentators have misread Shore’s belief in the power of the British constitution as a form of little England isolationism — with Edward Pearce scornfully accusing Shore of ‘huddled, Union Jack keening’, but this condescension could not be further from the truth. Shore’s internationalism transcended Europe; his constituency in Stepney was one of the most racially diverse constituencies in Britain, with about one fifth of the UK’s Bangladeshi population living in or around the area. Shore was fiercely condemned by Jim Callaghan’s political advisor Bernard Donoughue for his persuading the Cabinet to extend child benefit to children of immigrants, a position which Donoughue called a ‘crazy decision’ which ‘basically means half a million children of Asian immigrants’ would get support.

On the Frontbench

However, for Shore’s political courage and philosophical brilliance, his record in ‘applied’ politics is patchy. Shore was a superb backbench performer, especially in opposition. But when it came to parroting the government’s line from the front benches, he faltered. Crossman described Shore as ‘one of the most catastrophic failures in the House of Commons and no good at the Despatch Box’. He failed to make many major policy contributions in his early Cabinet career, partly because of the posts to which Wilson had appointed him.

In 1967, Wilson made Shore the secretary of state for economic affairs. However, it was a department Wilson wished to abolish. After serving as its last minister, Shore was punished for his stance on ‘In Place of Strife’ by being demoted to a non-portfolio position and the deputy leader of the Commons. Under the Tories in 1970 and 1974, he redeemed himself by his opposition to the government’s entry into the EEC, but after Labour returned to power he found himself constrained as trade secretary — trade policy had largely been transferred to the EEC, and the British government could no longer make its own trade agreements.

It wasn’t until Wilson’s departure in 1976 that Shore had a powerful policy brief with political autonomy. The new prime minister, Jim Callaghan, appointed Shore to be environment secretary, which included housing. Shore had his chance to leave a major policy legacy when he considered allowing council tenants to buy their council house. Shore recommended that councils decide on a local basis whether to sell council housing stock, while also requiring them to ensure such sales did not deplete socially necessary supply. Shore’s policy failed to capture public imagination in the way that Margaret Thatcher would in 1980 with her much more sweeping (and socially irresponsible) ‘right to buy’ policy, which abandoned commitment to maintaining the existing supply of social properties.

The fall of the Labour government in 1979 corresponded with the rise of Shore’s political fortunes. After losing power, Callaghan promoted Shore to shadow foreign secretary. When Callaghan announced his decision to retire as party leader eighteen months later, Shore was positioned as the leading soft-left candidate against right-winger Denis Healey. Michael Foot, the *éminence grise* of the party’s left of centre, ‘thought Shore stood the best chance of defeating Healey’, assuring Shore of his personal support, while the young MP Jack Straw felt that Shore was ‘the obvious choice as party leader’.

In the meantime, forces mobilised in a ‘Draft Foot’ effort. The unions were unhappy with Shore’s fierce criticisms during the Winter of Discontent, where he was vocally aggrieved by municipal gravediggers refusing to bury bodies while in dispute. Some MPs on the left were put off by Shore’s conversion to multilateralism. After returning from a lecture on Jonathan Swift in Dublin, Foot conceded to their demands and announced his own leadership bid, effectively destroying Shore’s prospects. But Foot was gracious in victory and Shore magnanimous in defeat. On the night of his victory, Foot invited Shore to dinner at his favourite restaurant, the Gay Hussar in Soho. As the two men became increasingly well-lubricated, sang songs such as the Italian labour movement anthem ‘Bandiera Rossa’ and the ‘Red Flag’ late into the night.

Almost a Unique Club

This marked the climax of Shore's political career, and while he did stand for leader again in 1983, his star had already faded. He left the shadow cabinet in 1987 and retired from the Commons in 1997. Ennobled that same year, Shore spent his final years in the House of Lords decrying the euro, which he believed would be a catastrophe. On this point, he was joined by London MP Jeremy Corbyn, who spoke alongside Shore against the euro on several occasions.

Shore was high-minded, bright, courageous, and ultimately self-destructive. Equally, while never selfish or arrogant, he was not always an easy person to warm to. He could fly off the handle, sometimes in unexpected ways. He was tribally Labour, viewing the Liberal Democrats as 'vile'. Disdaining breakaway parties of the Left and Right, he argued that the Labour Party holds 'the title deeds to democratic socialism in Britain'. A left-of-centre party without working-class support, Shore felt, would be 'otherwise rudderless and disparate', defined only by 'Euro-fanaticism, the transfer of ambitions and allegiances from Westminster to Brussels'.

On 12 July 2001, Shore gave one of his characteristically fiery speeches in the House of Lords against the euro and central bank independence. His final words were a riposte against Gordon Brown: 'I belong to that small group of people — we are almost a unique club — that does not yet believe that the economic judgment of the chancellor is wholly infallible. We think that he may have made a great mistake in separating fiscal from monetary policy'. Shore sat down, collapsed, and never recovered. He died in hospital a few weeks later, aged 77.

Kevin Hickson, Jasper Miles, and Harry Taylor's 'Peter Shore: Labour's Forgotten Patriot' is [now available](#) from Biteback.

About the Author

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