

# Blair Dead. Benn Alive.

Four years ago, Tony Benn's politics were pronounced dead along with him. Now they reign.



Tony Benn listens to the proceedings at a meeting at Transport House, Bristol as Labour candidate in the Bristol southeast Parliamentary. Harper Collins / [chrishallamworldview.wordpress.com](http://chrishallamworldview.wordpress.com)

March 14 marks the [fourth anniversary](#) of Tony Benn's death. A long-time Member of Parliament, Tony Benn was for many years the most prominent politician of the [Labour left](#), whose opposition to neoliberalism, globalization, and militarism brought him international recognition. A [mentor](#) to current Labour leader [Jeremy Corbyn](#), his career was defined by his opposition to the party's slide [to the right](#) in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

[Like Corbyn](#), Benn was regularly pilloried in the media as an extremist whose policies were unrealistic. The fact that Benn kept a detailed diary throughout his political career was an excuse for the writer of his [obituary](#) in the *Guardian*, Brian Brivati, to compare him with Samuel Pepys — “someone who described an age without ever having shaped it.” While he would be remembered as a great parliamentarian, Brivati surmised, “He will be forgotten as a practical politician and a political thinker.” But, contrary to the *Guardian*'s assertions, the years since Benn's passing have made clear just how relevant his ideas were for anyone aiming to implement left-wing policies today. In many ways Benn's vision of socialism has outlived Tony Blair's [New Labour](#) politics — and precisely because it was more practical and less utopian. Focused on popular rather than parliamentary sovereignty, Benn championed new models of nationalization that would set up non-bureaucratic enterprises accountable

both to consumers and workers; proposed the taxation of financial interests in order to fund social services; and became the spokesperson for the movement for greater democracy [within](#) the Labour Party.

In 2018, with [Jeremy Corbyn](#) leading the Labour Party, each of these issues is of pressing concern to [the movement](#) that has sustained him — a mark of the enduring legacy of Bennism.

## **Benn as a Practical Politician**

Benn was an unlikely spokesman for socialist ideas. Born Anthony Wedgwood Benn, he was to have become Viscount Stansgate after the death of his father, who had been made a Labour peer by [Churchill](#). But after a long campaign against elevation to the House of Lords, which brought him up against both the ruling class and the Labour establishment, Benn was able to renounce his peerage and participated in the 1964 Labour government.

He did not start off his political career as a radical socialist. As a new MP in the 1950s Benn was a Gaitskell supporter, with a Labourist faith in nationalized industries and centralized planning. He was, however, a persistent challenger of Tory foreign policy in support of the postwar colonial independence movement, expressing internationalist attitudes common among earlier generations of radical democrats. His fight to divest himself of his peerage was in line with the cultural and social changes of the 1960s: the decline of deference, the rise of an individualism that undermined traditional loyalties.

His struggle revealed to him the way the establishment maintained its control of the state, and, according to his biographer, Robert Jenkins, “led him to embrace the hopes of a New Britain on which the Labour Government of 1964-70 was elected.” He was appointed Postmaster General in Wilson’s first government which connected him directly to the technological advances which were challenging both existing work practices and an archaic political system. After becoming Minister for Technology in 1966, Benn’s experience of bankrolling corporate mergers in order to achieve economies of scale convinced him of the futility of this form of state intervention, given the intractable structural problems underlying the industrial decline it was meant to solve.

His disillusionment with Harold Wilson grew after the government’s deflationary policies forced cuts in public spending. The Labour Party had grown out of touch with an era of turbulent student protests of the period, the [civil rights movements](#) in the US and Northern Ireland, the May 1968 general strike in France, and the continuing [Vietnam War](#). At the same time there was a growing strike movement that had surged out of the control of union officials. In an effort to overcome the gulf he perceived between the party and those who had voted for it, Tony Benn called for workers to be directly involved in decisions that affected their lives:

Much of the industrial unrest — especially in unofficial strikes — stems from worker resentment and their sense of exclusion from the decision-making process. We are moving rapidly towards a situation where the pressure for the redistribution of political power will have to be faced as a major political issue.

The failure of the government's attempts to restrain unofficial strikes after union opposition to legal sanctions marked a turning point in his thinking: he characterized it later as the realization that "wages were not just a matter of economic policy — they were also about power and the workers' relationship to power." He wrote that it was in this period "that my own radicalization took shape, and I began, while still an active Minister, to formulate policies which were more explicitly democratic and socialist." While Labour was in opposition during 1970-74, Benn began a reassessment of the party's corporatist policies, having experienced first-hand the influence of multinational corporations, international finance, and US policy on British economy and politics. His analysis of the failure of consensus politics and its connection to the changes technology was making in society enabled him to articulate the concerns of an embryonic new left within the party seeking to answer the problems of the decline of the British economy and the failures of the Labour government. In their seminal history of this movement, Leo Panitch and Colin Leys explain that Benn was to become the new left's preeminent spokesperson because of "his remarkably early perception of the political forces that would eventuate in Thatcherism, his understanding of the limits of parliamentary socialism as practised by the Labour Party, and his articulation of an alternative conception of socialist practice." He was inspired by the resistance of Upper Clyde Shipbuilders workers to the threatened closure of the yards in 1971, and in turn supported their campaign and occupation. He told parliament: "Over the years I have seen the labour force on Clyde about-turn from a defeated, demoralised and divided group engaged in demarcation disputes and unofficial strikes into a determined and responsible body of men welded into unity, into defending the public assets which have been made available to them by this House. ... The men have rediscovered by what they have done their self-respect which they never had under private management in the past." According to Panitch and Leys, "Benn's immediate support not only upset the parliamentary leadership ('Wilson nearly murdered me' he said later) but also the TUC hierarchy ('Feather was furious, absolutely wild with anger that I was talking to shop stewards when he was trying to get the whole thing stopped. It made you wonder...') But his contacts with the stewards had already been extensive by virtue of his responsibility for shipbuilding in the Labour government, and soon after UCS was put into receivership he had led a march of 30,000 through the streets of Glasgow." Crucially he took up the new left critique of the narrow statism of Labour's nationalization tradition through his association with Ken Coates and the Institute for Workers' Control, which connected him with workers' initiatives to defend jobs at GEC in Liverpool and at UCS. This marked a fusion of Benn's political development with the militancy of the most advanced elements of the shop stewards' movement, and he became a determined advocate for industrial democracy. Benn embraced the radical proposals for an interventionist economic strategy originating from the party's policy and research department which became incorporated in the 1973 party manifesto. The manifesto proposed to re-industrialize Britain through import controls, planning agreements between the state and leading companies to govern investment, and a national enterprise board (NEB) that would act

as a state holding company and a means of public investment in profitable industries. Explaining his support Benn famously called for “a fundamental and irreversible shift of the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families.” Although in fact moderate in scope, it encountered strong opposition from British business; the details of the proposals were not as important to it as the reflex of the ruling elite to defend “managerial prerogatives.” Short-term profitability and suppression of unions took precedence over a long-term plan that attempted to address the structural weaknesses of the British economy — even though it was based on European state models.

Resolutions adopted by the party conference and what the parliamentary leadership would support diverged sharply. The Left aimed for a mass campaign to mobilize public approval for the policy, while the leadership wanted to first water it down and then to ignore it. The internal battle was thus twofold — one over the National Executive Committee’s (NEC’s) economic plans and another over the implementation of decisions democratically arrived at by conference. Wilson immediately disavowed the proposal for the nationalization of twenty-five major companies, although even when this was dropped the manifesto was more radical than the Right could stomach. After Heath was brought down by the miners’ strike, a minority Labour government was elected in March 1974 which returned Benn to the Ministry of Industry, and for a short time he and Eric Heffer were able to campaign for the implementation of the industrial policy, using the state’s resources to offer support for workers’ initiatives in the struggle against redundancies and factory closures. This encouragement from within the government led to groups of trade unionists coming forward with plans for reorganization of production, such as the famous Lucas Plan. The chronicler of the Plan, Hilary Wainwright, comments: “without political support it is unlikely that the [Lucas] shop stewards would have felt confident of selling something as bold as the alternative Plan to their membership. The membership needed to believe there was a chance of success, only then would they support radical proposals like the alternative Plan. This explains why in the first year and a half of the last Labour government — while Tony Benn and Eric Heffer were in the Department of Industry — numerous groups of workers came forward with proposals, usually in response to an immediate crisis.”

Benn sought to channel union militancy into a political struggle for greater power in industry and the state. However, the rest of the cabinet were furiously opposed to Benn’s politics, joining with the Treasury and hostile civil servants in a hysterical attack on the industrial strategy. At the same time, the more political shop stewards remained a minority in the trade unions and struggled to overcome workers’ suspicions of new nationalization plans, while the union leadership did little to advocate for the industrial policy.

When Benn finally presented his Industry Bill in March 1975 he called it a plan for “far reaching democratic socialist reforms affecting the relations between the community, management and workers and ... designed to deal direct with the problems of manufacturing industry that lie at the root of Britain’s present industrial and economic weakness.” His objective was to extend industrial democracy to make

firms accountable and “bring about the shift in the balance of power towards working people” needed to overcome industrial problems. However, Wilson and the cabinet immediately diluted the proposals, making planning agreements voluntary and, in the event, ineffective.

Benn’s experience with Brussels bureaucrats as a minister in 1974 had convinced him that the Common Market was based on free-market orthodoxy and was inimical to democracy in its member states. His concern to sustain the democratic nature of parliamentary rule motivated him to establish another constitutional precedent by pressing for a referendum on the Market. However, in the event the vote went against the Left’s position of withdrawal, and Wilson was emboldened enough to demote Benn: although union leaders prevented him from being sacked outright, he was shifted abruptly to the Department of Energy in June 1975.

Now a dissenting minister in the government, he supported wholeheartedly the rank-and-file campaign for democracy within the Labour party, as a strategic goal important in the ultimate aim of democratizing the British state. He used his ministerial position as far as possible to campaign on this issue — the Freedom of Information Act is part of his legacy. He was guided in this by his acute perception of the danger to the labor movement posed by the Tory Thatcherite wing in the context of the continuing economic crisis.

After Wilson resigned in 1976, Benn contested the party leadership in order to openly advocate for change in economic policy, open government and a bigger role for MPs, turning to the experience of the 1945 government and the writings of Clement Attlee to find arguments for the extension of public ownership. The election was eventually won by Jim Callaghan; Benn continued to campaign for constitutional reform within the Labour party and the accountability of the parliamentary leadership to the party membership.

In 1976 the pressures from the Treasury to capitulate to the market and abandon government efforts to boost the economy was bolstered by the claims of monetarism. Benn attempted to counter this ideological influence by presenting an alternative economic strategy that would avoid proposed cuts in public spending, but in the face of fears of a collapse of sterling Callaghan and the rest of the Labour cabinet determined that the cuts should be made, the priority of full employment should be abandoned, and Benn’s proposals for selective restrictions on trade and capital flows repudiated so as to obtain a massive loan from the IMF.

The plan Benn presented was devised by a team of socialist economists led by Francis Cripps, entailing popular participation in a “new kind of economic management,” with much public education to encourage the active involvement of people in the politics of the economy. This presented “a direct challenge to the combined power of the Treasury, the Bank of England and the City, committed as they were to a deflationary policy that was dependent on a fall in real wages and further cuts in public expenditure.”

The internal party battle over constitutional reform now focused on the NEC’s draft of the election manifesto that called for the abolition of the House of Lords, a wealth tax, compulsory planning agreements, and the nationalization of the construction industry.

However, the final manifesto was based on a new draft hurriedly put together by Callaghan, using his prime ministerial authority to excise any mention of the party's democratically agreed policies and essentially to promise the electorate a return to the failed corporate consensus — in contrast to the Tories' radical proposals of tax cuts and limits to union power.

The union leaders could not sustain their support for the government's incomes control policies, but maintained their partnership with the government out of fear of a Thatcher electoral victory. They were unable to contain a new outbreak of rank-and-file militancy among the lowest-paid workers in the public sector, and the confrontation between the government and its own supporters in the "Winter of Discontent" fatally weakened it.

After the 1979 electoral defeat, Benn concluded that the government had failed to take the opportunity of implementing fundamental change because of the undemocratic nature of the party structures and leadership. He told the party conference in October that the belief that the mixed economy could sustain full employment and rising public expenditure had turned out to be an illusion. The possibility of governments being able to manage their economy had been negated by the growth of international financial power, as well as "the biggest acceleration of technical change the world has seen for many years, with the microchip cutting a swathe through administrative work and modernisation transforming the factories."

While it appeared that the Left was strengthened within the party after Thatcher's victory, its policy victories faced an immediate counterattack, although the Right's only political alternative to Thatcherism was a return to the failed Keynesianism of the early 1970s. Defying an appeal for unity from Michael Foot, Benn stood against Denis Healey for the deputy leadership, losing by a narrow margin after several Tribune MPs, including Neil Kinnock, abstained.

Between 1981 and 1983 the Labour right launched a campaign of vilification against Benn and the new left, using their contacts with the media, as Eric Shaw pointed out, "to discredit and isolate the left by tarring it with the brush of extremism, hence the imagery of 'bully boys', the analogies with Eastern Europe and the accusations of intimidation and brutality." Kinnock rode the tide of this right-wing counterattack to supply the deciding vote on the NEC not to endorse gay rights activist Peter Tatchell as a candidate, responding to pressure from the press, the Right, and the breakaway SDP. Although the 1982 conference endorsed left policies, the Right took control of the party through initiating a witch hunt against Militant as a surrogate for the Left in general.

The [1983 election program](#) contained many elements of the Left's alternative economic strategy: it aimed to counter the Thatcher-initiated recession with an £11 billion "emergency programme of action," incorporating massive investment in industry. Import duties and exchange controls would be re-imposed to "counter currency speculation and to make available — to industry and government in Britain — the large capital resources that are now flowing overseas." A national investment bank would put resources from North Sea oil revenues into industrial priorities, and a new national oil company would begin to bring the North Sea oil industry into public

ownership. Privatized industries would be re-nationalized, and “significant public stakes would be taken in electronics, pharmaceuticals, health equipment, and building materials; and also in other important sectors, as required in the national interest.” It was a realistic attempt to deal with the economic crisis. However, the party leadership and administration only half-heartedly campaigned for it, allowing Thatcher to dominate the election with her jingoistic celebration of the Falklands War. After the 1983 defeat the “soft left” around Tribune magazine aligned itself behind the Kinnock-Hattersley leadership, blaming the left-wing manifesto and advocating a political move to the center. Kinnock then began to centralize policy decision-making in his own office, relegating Benn and his parliamentary supporters (including Jeremy Corbyn, [Diane Abbott](#), and John McDonnell) to the back benches. From there Benn continued to campaign with extra-parliamentary groups, helping to organize the Chesterfield Socialist Conferences in an attempt to create collaborative links between the extra-parliamentary left and activists in the Labour party. He gave unequivocal support to the 1984-5 miners’ strike, condemning the “plague on both your houses” stance taken by Kinnock, and repeated left calls for a general strike, but failed to support Ken Coates’ urging of a political campaign on the NEC that would connect the strike with Tory cuts in welfare.

Benn continued to criticize globalization in parliament and to stress the importance of social movements outside of the political system. As an extension of his lifelong campaign for constitutional reform, he proposed the Commonwealth of Britain Bill in 1991 — replacing the monarchy with a presidency, an elected second chamber, equal gender representation in parliament, and a Charter of Rights including the right to a home, work, health care, and education. At this time the Left was increasingly marginalized by Kinnock and then by Tony Blair, under whom discussion of socialism was actively discouraged. But Benn’s support for the revolt against Thatcher’s poll tax, and his principled opposition to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, won him wide-ranging support within the Labour party and the public.

He was an acerbic critic of Blair’s New Labour, characterizing him as a conservative who was repudiating the achievements of the 1945 Attlee government: “Full employment, the welfare state, social equality, the NHS, free at the point of use, and full trade union rights which characterised the government he led, are now regularly denounced as ‘Old Labour,’ the party of ‘Tax and Spend,’ never to return.” Benn did not stand at the 2001 general election, famously saying he was “leaving parliament in order to spend more time on politics,” and shortly after became president of the Stop the War Coalition.

What Benn’s history within the Labour party makes clear is the importance of Labourist ideology to parliamentary rule and the British state. The horrified antipathy of the Labour establishment and the civil service to public participation in the political process, outside of parliamentary elections, reveals their dependence on confining government decisions to an elite of professional representatives, who put the preservation of the political power structure over fulfilling their obligations to the decisions of the party and to the electorate.

## Benn as a Political Thinker

Benn's unique contribution to the socialist ideal was his determined advocacy of direct participation of the population in government. More than that, he constantly formulated policies in such a way as to allow those affected by them to creatively modify their practical application. Perhaps his greatest legacy was his support for extra-parliamentary activism, which [lived on](#) in sections of the Labour left. His openness to the ideas of rank-and-file activists had enabled him to give them a powerful voice in the Cabinet, the NEC, and party conference, contributing to the development of a robust socialist politics.

Hilary Wainwright describes how Benn's approach to government extended political authority beyond parliament. The first "is through the idea of accountability 'to the party and the movement.' The other is through the idea of active involvement in government: his aim is for 'the movement to work enthusiastically for the policies we have jointly discussed and agreed.'" During his brief period as Minister for Industry he began to develop these ideas in practice: preparing government Green Papers for 'meetings with trade-union officials, local authorities, local employer associations, shop stewards and gatherings of working management whose support is essential if our policies are to succeed'; encouraging shop-stewards organisations to draw up production plans that would save jobs and meet local needs to be backed by the government in negotiations with management."

What alarmed British industrialists, she said, was that "Benn, a Cabinet minister, was seeing shop-floor representatives independently; he was going round the country encouraging workers in their demands, building confidence, raising expectations, giving out information. In a sense it was as much Benn's democracy — of a radical kind — as his socialism, in the conventional sense of state intervention, which caused the panic and loss of confidence."

The intensely creative period of the Left in the 1970s was dependent on the synergy of Benn's eloquent presentation of the initiatives of Labour activists with the strength of the shop stewards' movement. Panitch and Leys comment: "The left's project was not utopian: it sought to deal with the world as it actually existed. The project's greatest achievement, however, was its vision of a radical broadening of the public arena, tapping the talent and energy of ordinary people and bringing them into new positions of power and responsibility in the state. No doubt this vision was imperfectly shared, but there is also no doubt that when Benn articulated it he struck a powerful chord."

This is also the context for understanding his fascination with the seventeenth-century English revolution. Beginning in 1971 Benn attempted to develop his understanding of contemporary political battles by mapping the party's right and left wing onto the factions in the Civil War. He noted in his diary that Heath and the City financiers represented the King and Court, the parliamentary party the Presbyterians, and Trotskyist groups the Agitators in the New Model army. "The Levellers are broadly the labour movement as a whole," he thought.

Directly inspired by the Upper Clydeside work-in, he sought to legitimize the rank and file's direct action by situating their struggle in the history of the fight for democracy in Britain. Many commentators have misread the significance of this



radical history for Benn: it was not the source of his ideas, but rather he re-imagined it as containing the potential for labor democracy and workers' control of industry. He wrote:

The Levellers ... represented the aspirations of working people who suffered under the persecution of kings, landowners and the priestly class and they spoke for those who experienced the hardships of poverty and deprivation. ... Their advocacy of democracy and equality has been taken up by generations of liberal and socialist thinkers and activists, pressing for reforms, many of which are still contested in this country to this day. The Levellers can now be seen ... as speaking for a popular liberation movement which can be traced right back to the teachings of the Bible. Benn understood the biblical message to be one of promoting egalitarianism and social justice, a radical protestant interpretation that privileged dissent over received authority, similarly linking back to the English Revolution. He wrote: "The best of the Christian tradition of social action has always been revolutionary, democratic and humane, in challenging wealth, power, privilege and injustice, whether under kings, conquerors or commissars."

His interpretation of morality was distinct from those in the labor movement, like R.H. Tawney, who made a moral critique of capitalist social relations as a justification for social reform by an enlightened legislature. Morality for Benn was not a means of criticizing society so as to illustrate some utopian future, but an ethical imperative to act on socialist principles in the here and now, negating the dualism that had long guided Labour leaders like Wilson or even Bevan. The New Testament call to "love thy neighbor" Benn considered to be an egalitarian imperative to reject injustice, quoting the Levellers' assertion that "in Christ there is neither bond nor free." The socialist interpretation of the Good Samaritan, he thought, is to be "less concerned with the personal salvation of the traveler who was stripped and beaten than with his immediate need for medical treatment, accommodation and food in this world, here and now."

Benn developed the new left critique of the Morrisonian corporatist model of nationalization by [incorporating](#) the idea of workers' control. The early 1970s was a fertile period for rethinking this concept — occupations, cooperatives, the Lucas Plan, were all developed in this era. Previous nationalizations had not changed management, he said: "we will change it by going back to a very basic principle of socialism ... those who invest their lives in industry are at least as strongly entitled to control it as those who invest their money."

As the economic crisis began to bite, factory closures and redundancies across industry resulted in occupations and sit-ins in defense of the right to work. Benn regarded them as experiments in workers' democracy which challenged existing forms of ownership and control. They were important because "they revealed a readiness to extend the vision of labour beyond pay. Men at Meriden or the Scottish Daily News or Kirkby were transformed not by anything that was done by government, but by their readiness to take responsibility." Rather than posing the abolition of wage labor, in a conventional Marxist sense, Benn saw the potential within this movement to "extend the vision of labour beyond pay," to develop

meaningful forms of work that produced goods necessary for society, rather than for profit. In other words, instead of a revolutionary government abolishing it from above, Benn advocated that people should find creative alternatives to wage labor through experiments in workers' democracy — with encouragement and support from the state.

Although the co-ops failed — they could only have had a chance of success in a climate of prosperity — they had demonstrated that industrial democracy could work in practice. Benn concluded: “Workers’ co-operatives could also play an important part in extending the control of people over all the circumstances of their working lives.... A real co-operative option open to workers at the crucial moment during a pay claim, or under threat of redundancy or collapse or a merger, would change their prospects.... I have no doubt whatsoever that those three co-operatives played a tremendous part in boosting the self-confidence of workers by showing them the possibility of another route. Without such practical examples, nothing can ever be done.”

## **An Enduring Political Legacy**

Benn’s great merit was to advocate practical changes in the immediate present that would strengthen the working class and empower the public to decide how society should be improved. Consistently democratic, this posited a far more powerful social force than manifestos or legislation alone. He became the primary advocate for making nationalized industries accountable to workers and consumers, attempting to suggest “practical ways in which many of our existing institutions can be adapted from their present role as props of the status quo. Instead they must become the agents of the profound changes necessary if we are to avert the serious economic and political problems which now confront us.” This meant developing “workmanlike plans” (in Attlee’s phrase) to resolve problems of industry and the economy, and in this way to concretize socialist approaches to dealing with the crisis, involving unions in the process of industrial rationalization.

Robert Jenkins writes in his biography: “The apparent contradictions of [Benn’s] political career can only be fully understood in the context of British history since 1945 and the breakdown of the postwar consensus.” A peer who rejected privilege, an internationalist who later became identified with domestic and industrial issues, a supporter of the mixed economy in Wilson’s first government who in the 1970s became an advocate of public ownership and workers’ control — Benn’s political trajectory expressed the tension between the ideals of the labor movement and his experience in office as the foundations of the social consensus collapsed.

As the class loyalties that formed the glue of the social order eroded in the 1970s militant workers’ shop-floor leaders challenged government attempts at wage regulation. According to historian Kenneth Morgan, “the cohesive civic structure which had sustained Britain during the Second World War ... was beginning to disintegrate.” But this cohesive structure was a class-ridden society stabilized by full employment, government-funded social welfare, and the ability of union leaders to constrain their rank and file.

To transcend this society Benn saw that he needed to campaign for increased democracy at the industrial level, to break through the separation of politics and union organization at the root of Labourism, and to bring on his shoulders the ire of TUC leaders and the Labour right wing. His steps towards winning support for a new consensus were premised on renewing and extending the reforms of the 1945 Labour government. They were ultimately unsuccessful because they meant reasserting state control of the economy — something which neither the Labour Cabinet nor international bankers were willing to accept.

The challenge of global capital is, however, not insurmountable. The assault of austerity governments on social provision has reignited a movement to restore the basic protections of the welfare state, and for government to assert itself against a capitalist class that threatens society's well-being. Benn's posthumous recognition by the establishment as a "national treasure" was based on the complacent assumption that his politics had been erased by the neoliberalism of New Labour. However, the [suppressed socialism](#) of Labour party members, joined by the influx of new members facing the effects of austerity, resurfaced [dramatically](#) with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as party leader a year after Benn's death.

Far from being forgotten, Benn's political thought — his search for alternatives to neoliberal austerity politics, and for "practical ways" to make existing institutions the agents of change — inspires the approach of Labour's new leadership and its exceptionally popular [2017 election manifesto](#), *For The Many, Not The Few*. His biographer Jad Adams considers Benn's greatest continuous achievement to be "the endurance of his challenge to authority ... he repeated the message of popular democracy from the peerage case to the Commonwealth of Britain bill ... He gave people faith in their own power to bring about change."