



Tony Benn (1925 – 2014)

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Tony Benn really did pose a danger to the British establishment; because he continued, even after Thatcher and Blair, to inspire those pushing for radical change.



As the British establishment posthumously patronizes those it went all out to destroy, it's worth remembering Tony Benn's own description of the way ruling elites treat those who lead movements for change: "It's the same each time. First they ignore you, then they say you're mad, then dangerous, then there's a pause and then you can't find anyone who disagrees with you."

We pay tribute to Tony Benn because he really did pose a danger to the British establishment; because he continued, even after the defeats wrought by Callaghan, Thatcher, and Blair, to inspire and provide a focus for forces for radical change. And because we commit ourselves to continue his challenge to the ruling order with a similar lack of fear or deference, as best we can.

The frustration of government

First, let's remember the nature of the threat he represented in the 1970s, when he was Minister of Industry in the 1974-79 Labour governments, before being sacked by Harold Wilson under strong pressure from the Confederation of British Industry and the City. Benn was determined to implement the manifesto on which Labour was elected in 1974.

Implementation of a radical electoral mandate was not what civil servants, fellow Labour ministers, or the CBI were used to. A tacit understanding was built into the

British political system that Labour ministers would come into office with a lot of radical rhetoric — understood as necessary to motivate party members to campaign — but which would soon be abandoned to accommodate to the imperatives of managing a state.

Not so Tony Benn, who was unusually radicalized by the experience of being in government, and trying from within to modernize British industry against the short-sighted, finance-obsessed hierarchies of corporate management in close alliance with the government. Yet while he was frustrated by government, he was inspired by the skills and energies of workers like those in the shipyards of Clydeside, the engineers of Chrysler, British Leyland, and Lucas Aerospace and their struggle to save manufacturing from the company bosses looking for a short-term profit. Moreover, he had inherited the political self-confidence of a long family line of aristocratic public servants and would not to let the feudal deference of the British state stand in his way.

An entry in Benn's diary gives a whiff of the anxiety that his seriousness about Labour's commitments to shifting power to working people was causing in ruling class circles. The diary records that on 27 June 1974, the Department of Industry's permanent secretary Antony Part came, like a message boy of the establishment, into Benn's office, after seeing a speech in which Benn had attacked "industrial policies discussed in the comfortable atmosphere of Westminster, Whitehall, and Fleet Street" and urged wider regional and worker participation.

"You're inflaming people," said Part. "You're raising temperatures."

Benn takes up the story: "'Not at all — I'm using very clear language,' I said. I went over and opened the manifesto. 'The first objective of the manifesto is about a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of wealth and power in favor of working people and their families,' I read. 'Well,' said Part, 'I have never known a minister in the whole course of my life in any party who has been like you.'"

Workers' control

The reason why Benn was seen as a danger to those in the comfortable fastnesses of Westminster, Whitehall, Fleet Street and, it must be added, the City, is not just because he was a determined socialist but because he came to the Department of Industry on the back of a strong movement of industrial workers. Prime Minister Edward Heath had just been defeated by the miners, and the miners' strike in 1973 had been preceded by occupations against closures and redundancies, symbolized by the occupation of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders Yard, which had so inspired Tony Benn.

Benn had an electoral mandate for radical change, but more than that, he had allies in the workplaces of British industry who had the technical and manufacturing know-how of the changes that could really drive technological and economic change — and industrial bargaining power to back their demands.

Across the country, in all the industries that were named in the manifesto as candidates

for public ownership — shipbuilding, aerospace, and, via the National Enterprise Board, machine tools and the British Leyland car company — workplace leaders, were getting organized to make the most of their ministerial ally. Nationalization 1970s style would be pressed below as much as from above.

“Workers’ Control with Management Participation” was the title that shipbuilding workers on the Tyne gave to the plans they submitted through the ever-open door of the Department of Industry. And Tony Benn was in touch with these shop stewards directly, both personally through the Labour Party and through Ken Coates and the Institute for Workers’ Control, who regularly brought these shop stewards together and, with Benn, encouraged their efforts to draw up and campaign for industrial alternatives.

A democracy-driven alternative

This movement for industrial democracy was followed, after it was defeated by the Labour’s parliamentary leadership, by a movement for democratic control of the Labour Party and the British state. Together they represented elements of an democracy-driven alternative to the neoliberalism that was being prepared ideologically in free-market think tanks and Tory Party cabals and tested in practice through the IMF. Market-driven “modernization” was never the only way, but the demonization of “Bennism” prepared the way for Thatcher’s “there is no alternative.”

The defeat of the democratic threat represented by Benn, along with the persistent challenge to profits from labor, is what Thatcher was determined to defeat. When ideas inspired by Benn were developed though Ken Livingstone’s Greater London Council, Norman Tebbit described it as “modern socialism,” adding “and we will kill it.” And they nearly did, through destroying the coal industry in order to defeat Arthur Scargill and the National Union of Mineworkers, the abolition of the GLC and emasculating local government in order to defeat the Left.

But Tony Benn continued to inspire, to educate and to organize. Together with Ralph Miliband and the Socialist Society, he organized the Chesterfield Socialist Conferences in the aftermath of the 1984-5 miners strike. The conferences, attended by thousands of activists from a wide range of organizations, were a bold attempt to bring together the radical left inside and outside the Labour Party, across unions and communities, for serious policy discussions as well as to coordinate campaigns. There were working groups on alternative economics, philosophy, constitutional reform, the environment, and Europe. The conferences created networks of collaboration that exist to this day, though could not by themselves overcome the sectarianism which has dogged the Left.

Never giving up

Whatever the setbacks, Tony never gave up. He went on to focus his energies and passion on giving an eloquent voice to the movement against the war on Iraq. His tireless work, night after night, weekend after weekend across the country helped to create a deeply rooted anti-war opinion that only last year ensured that they could not

go to war in Syria.

“Free at last!” was the title of Benn’s diaries of the last decade of the 20th century, when he became the people’s politician, free of the constraints of the party whip, loyal to the Labour Party but seeing its local institutions as a resource not a tribe, and always opening out and encouraging other movements and ideas to be invented to face problems and challenges that the Left had not previously understood.

He was sure of his own political roots, in Christian Socialism and the democratic traditions of the English civil war, the Levellers and Diggers. But his commitment to the task of creating a liberated social order made him open to all traditions and ideas that could feed the movement to this end. I witnessed in particular the convergence between his very British socialism and the continental Marxism of Ralph Miliband. I witnessed, too, through the influence of his late wonderful wife Caroline and daughter Melissa along with his respect for Sheila Rowbotham and other socialist feminists and gay campaigners like Peter Tatchell, his engagement with feminism and sexual liberation.

Many of the organizations that managed to grow in the grim years of Blair and then the coalition — Stop the War, the People’s Assembly, not to mention us at *Red Pepper* — owe a lot to Tony’s tireless work. This we must now repay by taking his spirit with us and critically learning lessons from his extraordinary life.

Cross-posted with *Red Pepper*, where Hilary Wainwright is an editor.