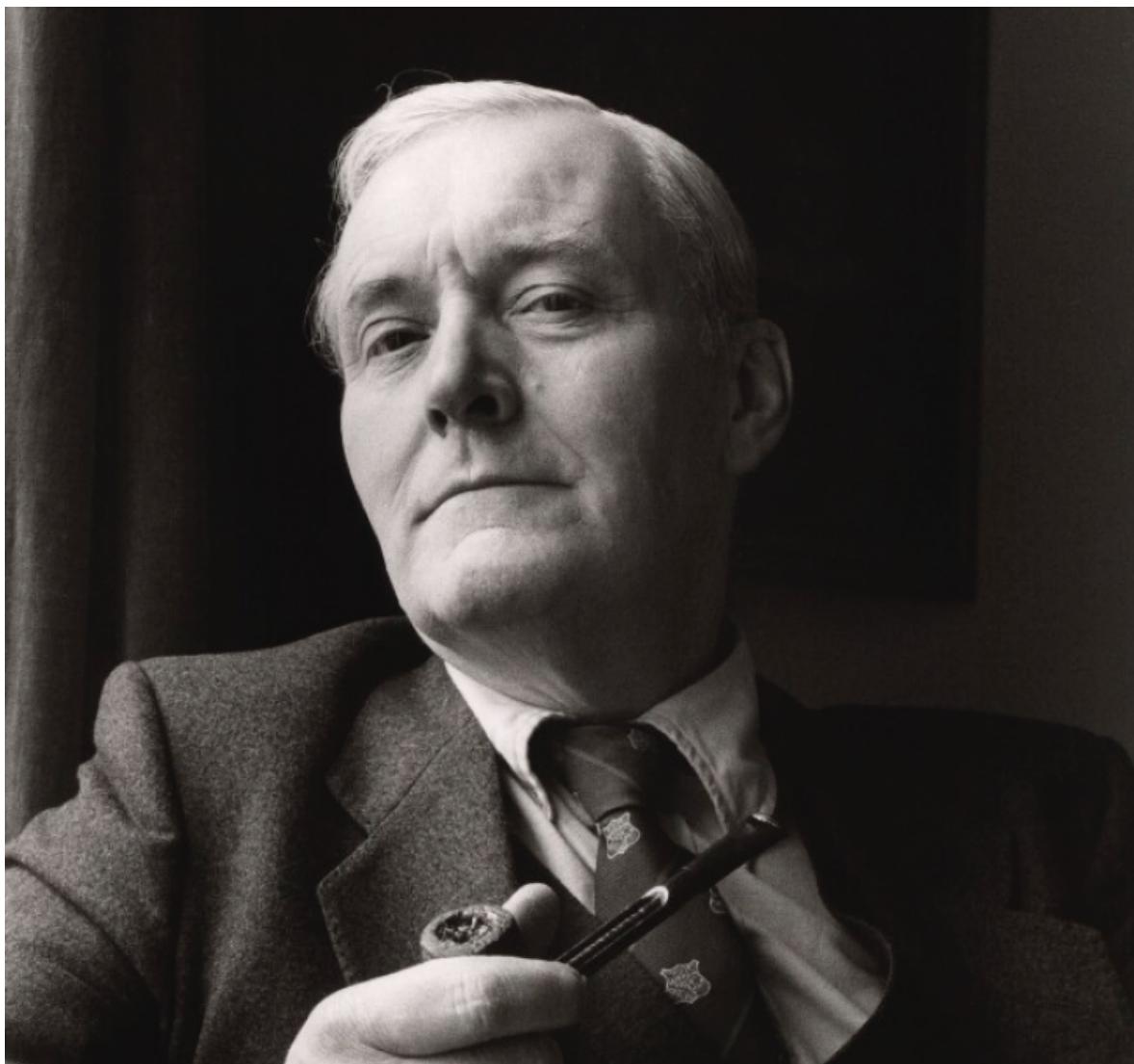


## **Tony Benn's Plan to Democratise Britain – and Abolish the Monarchy**

**Thirty years ago, Tony Benn's Commonwealth of Britain Bill proposed to transform our democracy by devolving power, guaranteeing social rights and abolishing the monarchy – it's time for today's Left to take up its mantle.**



Thirty years ago, in June 1991, Tony Benn first moved the Commonwealth of Britain Bill. The proposal was to transform the United Kingdom into a democratic, federal, secular republic—a ‘Commonwealth’—with a constitution guaranteeing economic and social rights.

The Bill proposed that Britain would become a republic – the monarchy would be abolished, the Royal Family pensioned off, the honours system disbanded, and the crown estates nationalised. It would be truly democratic, with supremacy resting in a

Parliament consisting of two democratically elected chambers.

Today, it is crucial for the Left to recover and renew this vision. At a time when Labour's conversation about constitutional reform is fixated on narrow, incremental amendments, the Bill's anniversary is a reminder of the radical ideas discussed in our not-too-distant past. And it contains plenty of measures of enduring relevance for today's politics.

For instance, under Benn's bill Britain would have become truly federal – its new Parliament would look after defence, foreign affairs, and the Commonwealth economy, all other matters would devolve to the national Parliaments of England, Scotland and Wales; jurisdiction over Northern Ireland would be terminated.

The new Commonwealth would also be secular – the Church of England would be formally disestablished. The Head of State would be a President elected by Parliament. A written constitution codified the powers of government and safeguarded the rights of citizens. It would be the Constitution—rather than a particular family—that all public servants, MPs, and the armed forces would swear to defend.

The Commonwealth Parliament would have a House of Commons and a House of the People. The latter, replacing the House of Lords, would consist of a gender-balanced chamber elected every four years proportionally from among the nations. A President would be elected by a two-thirds vote in both Houses, to play a largely ceremonial role of up to six years, signing bills into law, enacting the will of Parliament in foreign affairs, and signing treaties.

Under the plan, each nation was to have its own Parliament. Unlike the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, which did take shape after Benn's bill, the national Parliaments would have control over everything except defence, foreign affairs, and the Commonwealth economy. Similarly, local councils would be liberated, freed to do anything which did not contradict Commonwealth law.

Benn clearly hoped that this would allow the rebirth of municipal socialism, and his desire to free local councils to build social justice in their communities show the scars of the 1980s battles over the Greater London Council and the rate-capping rebellions. In its final radical proposal, the security services and foreign policy would be brought under greater democratic control. Most foreign policy decisions, such as UN votes and international treaties, would be subject to Commons vote, and it would be unconstitutional to allow the stationing of foreign forces on Commonwealth soil, prohibiting US Air Force bases and subjecting Britain's participation in NATO, for example, to democratic review.

Under the Commonwealth constitution, all the security services would have to justify their further existence and account for their taxpayers' money on an annual basis. The Bill renounced jurisdiction over Northern Ireland within two years, 'allowing the Irish, North and South, to find their own solutions to the problem of their relations.'

Thirty years on, the British state remains in desperate need of democratisation. Benn's solution to this problem was a written constitution that enshrined popular power, and instituted what the bill framed as a 'Charter of Rights,' which go beyond the American constitution in guaranteeing economic and social as well as political rights. The addition of economic and social rights to its US counterpart was explored by

President Roosevelt before his death in 1945. For Benn, the Charter of Rights would ‘set out perfectly legitimate aspirations by which governments can reasonably be judged.’ Freedom of speech, assembly, organisation, religion, and traditional legal rights were all enumerated, and there was the addition of a National Legal Service to provide free legal support at the point of use.

But, crucially, the following social rights would also be enshrined: the right to decent housing, leisure time, access to culture, free healthcare, lifelong education, a dignified retirement, control over reproduction, free childcare, free transportation, a healthy and sustainable environment, and a media ‘free from governmental or commercial domination’. Every citizen would have the economic rights of a living wage, trade union membership, workplace democracy and the right to a sufficient state safety net.

## The Passage of the Bill

As was so often the case for left-wing measures, Tony Benn knew that his bill would not pass – he introduced it several times and it never reached a second reading. But bringing it was not only an attempt to lay out a radical blueprint: it was also an act of political education, informing the people about what a Charter of Rights and a democratic republic could look like, and encouraging collective organisation towards it.

The bill was moved just three years after the publication of ‘Charter 88,’ a cross-party group linked to the *New Statesman* which called for civil liberties to be codified. Benn noted that because Charter 88 had to maintain a coalition of judges, lawyers, Liberal and SDP politicians, as well as Labour establishment figures, it could not advance the argument for economic and social rights.

Charter 88 became Unlock Democracy – a campaign focused primarily on proportional representation (PR) and led by a former Liberal Democrat MP. But while PR, which Benn famously opposed, continues to have numerous support groups within the Labour Party, the more profound transformation proposed by Benn himself finds few champions today.

The prevailing wisdom is that constitutional reform is limited to the fate of First Past the Post, perhaps with further devolution and modernisation of the House of Lords.

This is seen as the likely conclusion of Gordon Brown’s [latest commission](#).

But what is undeniable is the fact that the 2014 Scottish referendum, the strange death of Labour Scotland, and Brexit have forced constitutional matters onto the table. In 2021, two reports were published from the Left – one, a short pamphlet by left figures from each nation, is entitled [Radical Federalism](#), and calls for ‘a modern, collaborative, distributed and open democracy’. It advocates decentralisation of power and a modern, accountable second chamber, and more rights and powers at work.

The second was a report by lawyer Seán Patrick Griffin entitled [Remaking the British State: For the Many, Not the Few](#), commissioned by the last Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn. It closely analyses Britain’s current constitutional contradictions, and argues for some moderate reforms that Labour should call for.

It stops well short of calling for a republican Commonwealth: the monarchy would remain, as would control over Northern Ireland, but as part of a progressive federalism

with the House of Lords being replaced by a senate of the regions and nations. A written constitution and a wide bill of rights—including a few of the economic and social rights Benn proposed—would be established by a convention, and power handed back to communities.

This latter point was also explored by Alex Niven in [\*New Model Island\*](#), who proposed a ‘socialist regionalism’, with a federal system consisting of twelve equally powerful regions across England, Scotland, and Wales. In these contributions, the Left has a strong case to contribute to any Labour Constitutional Review – radical federalism, a constitutional convention, and as broad a suite of rights as can be secured.

However, Benn urged us to go further. Benn argued that a constitution was ‘a means to an end’, a ‘mechanism to advance people’s interests and goals collectively, in determining the kind of society they want.’ The Left should demand the radical constitution to codify and then protect the rights we aim to win; along the way, it would get a sense of its own power.

Of course, economic and social rights would only exist as long as there was a strong labour movement to defend them. They would need to be demanded from below before being granted from on high. Benn wrote his bill, and accompanying book, especially the Charter of Rights, as part of this ‘educational role [...] in raising aspirations’. As part of imagining and bringing about a better society, and building an egalitarian republican consciousness, the Left should take up the case for a Commonwealth, and the founding of a British republic.

It takes up the mantle of not just of Benn, but those such as [\*the Levellers\*](#), [\*the Diggers\*](#), and our most successful revolutionary, [\*Thomas Paine\*](#). They all saw both the danger of latent arbitrary monarchical authority and the power of an engaged, republican citizenry. Our movement once spoke of ‘socialist citizenship’ and must do so again – the only fundamental answer to the contradictory but successful Tory slogans about ‘taking back control.’

As Griffin argues in his report, Britain is making the ‘journey, for some a painful journey, from being an imperial state to becoming a non-imperial, middle-sized European country.’ The monarchy in its current form is imbricated and implicated in colonialism and Empire, as Barbados reminded us when it announced its own transition to a republic last year.

Bringing it to a close is a historic duty for the Left. The ‘painful journey’ is throwing up increased and frenzied nationalism and reaction, but it will also, eventually, challenge the staid, unwritten conventions of the current status quo. We need to meet this inevitable crisis of legitimacy with a vision of our own.

Benn’s bill was seconded by Jeremy Corbyn, a backbencher in 1991. Perhaps it is no surprise that, facing relentless questions over his bow before the Queen and his level of commitment when singing the national anthem, proposing a republic was not considered a priority for the Corbyn project. Under siege, the Labour left tried to win power under the established rules of the game, rather than argue for wholesale changes to the rulebook.

That experiment did not succeed, and the time has come for a left-wing republican campaign which takes up Benn’s Commonwealth as a blueprint, updates it for the

twenty-first century, and leads the way towards a secular, federal republic, guaranteeing broad economic and social rights, as well as climate and racial justice. Proposals like a Green New Deal have become lodestars of the Left, now a British Commonwealth must become another.