

Tony Benn Spent His Life Fighting for Democracy and Socialism

Today would have been British Labour MP Tony Benn's 95th birthday. We remember his contributions to the struggle for democracy and socialism, a struggle that we must continue today.



In the early 1970s, the politics of the New Left activists in the Labour Party were still relatively inchoate. The movement had not thrown up any nationally recognized leaders of its own, nor developed any independent organizational focus. But one political leader heard what the New Left was saying and expressed it in a way that gave it a clearer shape and purpose: Tony Benn.

Tony Benn was able to do this — to become the preeminent spokesperson and interpreter of Labour’s New Left tradition — for a number of reasons: his remarkably early perception of the political forces that would become Thatcherism; his understanding of the limits of parliamentary socialism as practiced by the Labour Party; and his articulation of an alternative conception of socialist practice. It is a mistake to put too much emphasis on the role of any one individual. But it is also a mistake to deny it when an individual’s significance is exceptional — and not least when such an individual, and the politics he articulated, have been systematically misrepresented. Even sympathizers have tended to misrepresent it in retrospect as merely “clinging to the old formulae.”

Although Benn played the leading role in articulating the Labour New Left's politics and getting its agenda debated in the cabinet and shadow cabinet, as well as in the party executive and its committees, the main organizations that composed it were not built around him. Even in Parliament, no "Bennite" faction of MPs emerged, as the "Bevanites" had in the 1950s. (At least not until the Campaign Group of MPs in the mid 1980s, by which point the New Left's project had been defeated.) Benn's role was not as the organizer but as the tribune.

Benn had always been an iconoclast in relation to both the traditional Left and the traditional Right of the parliamentary party — but he had hardly been seen as a dissident, much less a radical socialist. He had stayed in the 1964–70 governments throughout, first as minister for the Post Office and then in the more senior office of minister of technology. But by 1968, in a series of speeches, he had already begun to show clear signs of his passage from radical liberalism to socialism by an unusual route: experience of the limitations and frustrations of high government office.

He articulated with great clarity — and, as it soon turned out, with great commitment — what was at stake in changing the Labour Party, and through it the British state. It was not his espousal of more state intervention (or of Clause IV) that made an impression on the new activists. If this was all there had been to it, he would have appeared indistinguishable from the old Tribune Left, or from the Communist Party. Perhaps only someone who had precisely *not* been integrated into the traditional Labour left could have understood so clearly not just that socialism was the necessary extension of democracy, but also that, *if* democracy was to fulfill its radical promise, then, as he wrote in *Tribune* in 1973, "our long campaign to democratise power in Britain has, first, to begin in our own movement."

In this respect, it was already significant that, whereas Harold Wilson seemed proud to assert that he had never read Karl Marx, Benn was ashamed that he had not done so to any significant extent. He would try to remedy this in the 1970s, even while a minister — reflecting the view he came to by 1973 that a socialist party without Marxism "really lacks a basic analytic core." Two decades later, in reaction to a New Labour leader in the 1990s who peppered his speeches with sneers at Marx, Benn commented: "[W]hen Labour leaders have said that Marx is dead, it's a bit like saying Galileo is old hat, or Darwin got it wrong, or Freud muddled things up."

But Benn's experience as minister in the first Wilson governments did not make him a Marxist. What it did was to make him increasingly uncomfortable with the contradictions between his democratic populist orientations and the technocratic strategy he had helped to construct as part of Wilson's team. He was finding it increasingly hard to escape the conclusion "that parliamentary democracy, which is our proudest boast, is not working in this country."

A Democratic Crusade

Benn set out his thinking in 1970, in a Fabian Society pamphlet entitled *The New Politics: A Socialist Reconnaissance*. Unlike the old Tribune Group MPs who focused on Clause IV, Benn preferred to leave the question of economic policy aside for the moment. For him, the real issues had to do with democracy — not only how to

fashion intraparty democracy so as to ensure that leaders, once elected, still played the role of party leader while they were in government, but also how leaders, both inside and outside the state, could help to build the kind of mass popular support for and involvement in radical social change.

Benn's starting point was the extra-parliamentary militancy of so many new activists, and the meaning this had for democracy. He thought it had been triggered not only by the heightened expectations produced by the rising incomes and collective bargaining strength of the postwar boom, but also by the higher levels of education and training that had improved people's analytical capacities, and by the media revolution that had given people an unprecedented mass of information about current affairs and exposure to alternative analyses of events.

He repeatedly pointed to "the thousands of . . . pressure groups or action groups [that] have come into existence: community associations, amenity groups, shop stewards' movements, consumer societies, educational campaigns, organisations to help the old, the homeless, the sick, the poor or underdeveloped societies, militant communal organisations, student power, noise abatement societies." Benn saw in them "a most important expression of human activity based on issues rather than traditional political loyalties, and [they] are often seen as more attractive, relevant and effective by new citizens than working through the party system."

But he recognized at the same time that this was only one side of the picture. Far in advance of later commentators, Benn noted as early as 1970 an alternative philosophy of government, now emerging everywhere on the Right, [taking] as the starting point of its analysis that modern society depends on good management and that the cost of breakdowns in the system is so great that they really cannot be tolerated and that legislation to enforce greater and more effective discipline must now take priority over other issues. The new citizen is to be won over to an acceptance of this by promising him greater freedom from government, just as big business is to be promised lower taxes and less intervention and thus to be retained as a rich and powerful ally. But this new freedom to be enjoyed by big business means that it can then control the new citizen at the very same time as Government reduces its protection for him.

This was a most serious reaction, Benn contended, to a situation where people were showing that, by banding together collectively in a myriad of new organizations with clear objectives, they could win surprising victories on given issues against large and centralized corporations and governments that were increasingly vulnerable to dislocations. But without a radically different kind of democracy, the structures of power would remain intact: "If the people have so much potential power why do those who enjoy privileges seem to be able to hold on to them so easily? The awful truth is this: that it is outdated concepts of parliamentary democracy accepted by too many political leaders in Parliament and on Local Authorities, which have been a major obstacle."

Throughout the ensuing struggle, Benn continued to insist that he "passionately" believed in parliamentary democracy. In his 1971 Fabian lecture, he said that all the great achievements of the Left had come about by pressures from below that had

made “the parliamentary system serve the people rather than the vanity of the Parliamentarians.” While he showed throughout the 1970s and 1980s that he was prepared to support direct action against laws hampering democratic or egalitarian pressures, he insisted that this did not entail a break with parliamentarism. He was convinced that “the debate between extraparliamentary violence versus parliamentarism . . . is highly diversionary.” Where there was no democratic route to change, there was a moral right to revolt; but where democratic popular organization and parliamentary change were not prohibited, socialist strategists could not pretend these means were ineffectual — to do so was to adopt “the pessimism of the ultraleft,” which he refused to share:

My criticism of those who call themselves revolutionaries is that they speak as though reform had been tried and failed. Reform hasn't been tried . . . I don't think there are any real revolutionaries in Britain. There may be dreamers, but there is nobody on the left who is actually planning and preparing themselves on the assumption that the transfer of power will come by revolution.

The Old and the New

Meanwhile, following Labour's 1970 election defeat, the main focus of the Tribune Group of MPs, and particularly of Michael Foot, was to raise the issue of public ownership again. They returned, in other words, to reviving the old debate of 1959–60 over more or less nationalization, which Wilson had bypassed by attaching the Labour Party to his vision of the “scientific revolution.”

But, insofar as the left-wing Tribune MPs were determined to make a call for more public ownership in the next manifesto the key issue, the question was not about the number of firms to be targeted for public ownership, but how Foot's promise that the conference would force the PLP to “do it” could be realized. Ian Mikardo, Frank Allaun, and Jim Sillars wrote a *Tribune* pamphlet in July 1972 entitled *Labour — Party or Puppet?*

It took up the issue of the accountability of Labour representatives at all levels, including as its “most important proposal” the election of the leader by the whole party at the annual conference, not just by the PLP. This broad line of argument was endorsed by thirty-eight other Tribune MPs, but Foot's name was conspicuous by its absence from the list; this was because he was already in the process of trying to mend the Left's fences with the parliamentary leadership.

Foot strongly opposed an inquest after 1970 into the mistakes of the Labour government. As he explained in 1972: “It was a dangerous moment. The Left within the Labour Party could have demanded a grand inquest on all the delinquencies of 1964–70, could have mounted a furious attack on the leadership.” From the moment when he became Shadow Leader of the House in 1972, his role became one of repairing the frayed bonds of trust between the parliamentary and trade union leaders. His objective was to prevent dissension within the party, so as to present a united parliamentary front against Heath's government, which he saw as the “most hardfaced Conservative government since Neville Chamberlain.” This overarching concern with party unity ultimately led him to oppose, not encourage, the forces that began to try to

change the Labour Party.

Benn, as we have seen, took the opposite tack. He had come to the view that it was necessary to reconceptualize the role of the Labour Party in relation both to the explosion of organizational activism in the country at large, and to the new conservatism that he believed heralded something more profound and more dangerous than a throwback to the Tory Party of the 1930s, let alone than what Heath represented. Insofar as most of the new progressive forces had developed outside the Labour Party, this had much to do with the fact that the party's internal democracy was "riddled with the same aristocratic ideas as deface our national democracy." Benn therefore saw the problem of achieving greater party democracy as crucial. In his Fabian lecture of the previous year, he had already raised most of the reforms proposed in the 1972 Tribune pamphlet. All the sensitive constitutional issues were there: the process for selecting parliamentary candidates; who should elect the leader and deputy leader; the accountability of cabinet members, MPs, local Labour groups, councillors, and trade union delegations ("those who exercise this massive voting power should be accountable to their own members for the use they make of it"). The series of speeches Benn now embarked on, inside the party and beyond it, were to become a hallmark of his style of political leadership. He kept an annual tally of the hundreds of meetings at which he spoke, and it seemed that he partly judged his success as a politician in these terms. This was consistent with the role of motivator and educator, rather than legislator and decision-maker, which he ascribed to political leadership. His leitmotif was giving people a sense of their own power and encouraging them to use it.

Many of the new activists were suspicious of his "conversion," given his association with the previous government. Similarly, when Benn spoke at trade union conferences in this period, his insistence on applying the principle of democratization to their own structures produced some discomfort among his audiences. At the 1972 Trades Union Congress, Benn made the following argument, hardly one the union delegates were accustomed to hearing from a chairman of the Labour Party bearing fraternal greetings to their annual congress:

It is simply not good enough to blame the Labour government or the Parliamentary Labour Party entirely for our defeat in 1970. The trade union movement, with all its virtues, must also accept its share of responsibility. Until very recently, the unions have hardly made any serious effort to explain their work to those who are not union members, even to the wives and families of those who are.

You have allowed yourselves to be presented to the public as if you actively favoured the conservative philosophy of acquisitiveness. The fact that the trade union movement came into being to fight for social justice, as well as higher wages, has just not got across. If the public opinion polls prove nothing else, they certainly prove that. Finally, neither the party nor the TUC has given sufficient support to other movements of legitimate protest and reform . . . The lower paid, the unemployed, the poor, the old, the sick and the disabled, expect the Labour and trade union movement to use its industrial and political strength to compensate for their weakness.

But Benn went even further in challenging the unions. In his 1971 Fabian lecture, he

had explicitly connected the issue of union democracy to that of party democracy. The “same thread of accountability” applied to the unions as to party representatives, and the “same question should be asked about the representative system within the trade union movement in respect of the big political decisions in which they participate in annual conference.”

For a Labour politician to tread onto the sensitive ground of the defects of the unions’ internal organizational structure, let alone their economism, was dangerous indeed. Yet, in doing this, he was to some extent taking his cue from key union leaders. Jack Jones, in particular, was a very vocal advocate of democratization in the party in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and he did not dissent when Benn pressed him on the undemocratic nature of the block vote that the unions still exercised at the party conference, whereby a single union leader cast the votes of all the union’s party-affiliated members.

As the predictions Benn had made in October 1972 came to pass with chilling accuracy, and the Edward Heath government drew to an end in a direct political confrontation with the unions over “Who Governs Britain?,” Benn again revealed the sharp divergence between his strategic approach and that of the rest of the Labour leadership. The shadow cabinet scrambled to get a last-minute form of words from the unions that would promise a clear commitment to voluntary wage restraint. This would have made it easier for them once again to run an election campaign that deflected attention from the underlying issues by merely claiming that Labour would secure industrial harmony and price stability where the Tories could not.

Benn’s own approach was different. He sided with the unions in insisting that wage restraint should have binding conditions attached, to the effect that, in return, the government really would prosecute socialist policies. This was the very thing that made the rest of the senior Labour leadership most defensive in the face of the press and Tory charges that they were beholden to the unions. Benn simply refused to adopt this defensive posture.

What Benn had come to see was that, on the ideological terrain of politics conducted through the mass media, the Labour Party simply could not pretend, in the context of the industrial militancy of the 1970s, that it was not a working-class party. An apologetic and defensive approach to the attack on the unions might work in the short run, but it was bound to make it even more difficult to evolve an adequate long-term political strategy. The search for such a strategy was thus the essential next step for the Labour New Left through the decade of the 1970s.

Man of the Movements

All of the themes that had emerged out of the New Left’s turn to community politics in the early 1970s strongly informed its agenda at the end of the decade. Benn defined the key task after the 1979 election as that of restoring “the legitimacy in the public mind of democratic socialism.” In *Conflicts of Interest*, he wrote that this first of all meant making “the Labour Party reintegrate with other activists with whom we sympathised, such as the women’s movement and the Friends of the Earth”; and he recognized, too, that this had to mean broadening out beyond traditional conceptions

of the constituency for socialism.

As he put it in the preface to the collection of speeches he published during the 1981 deputy leadership campaign, “inequality in Britain is not by any means confined to the class relations deriving from the ownership of capital.” Although this remained “a central obstacle which must be overcome if any real progress is to be made,” it was “a pity that the nature of the argument for socialism should have been so narrowly conceived . . . if democracy is based on a moral claim to equality, the issues opened up are as wide as life itself.” This included women’s inequality as well as discrimination against ethnic and racial minorities and gay people. Benn expressed this in generous, not reproachful or recriminatory tones; his aim was to allow people “to draw new energy . . . to take up the struggle with renewed faith and commitment.”

Given the impact of feminist and black activists on community-level politics through the 1970s, it was hardly surprising that the struggle for women’s and black sections within the party became one of the defining elements of the Labour New Left’s agenda. Ken Livingstone went so far as to credit Benn with “being the first to highlight the need for a wider Labour movement actively encouraging the involvement of women and black people alongside the traditional white male trade unionists.”

In later years, it would be said by his critics that Benn was too narrowly tied to a defense of traditional trade unionism. But this simply ignores his record. It was, in fact, large sections of the Tribune left associated with Foot, not to mention Trotskyists and elements of the old Communist broad left, who were more likely to be suspicious of the vision of the Labour Party as a federation of social movement groups articulated by Benn, the Labour Co-ordinating Committee and the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy activists.

While the others would sometimes actively play on working-class parochialism, Benn was often prepared to challenge it directly, particularly by strongly encouraging trade-union involvement in “the evolution of sensible strategies of development upon which communities depend for their lives and amenities,” and arguing that this depended on forging strong links with activists engaged in anti-nuclear, anti-racist, pensioners’, and women’s issues.

In advancing this argument, Benn was in fact making the most pointed criticism of the trade union leadership’s embrace of corporatism offered by any leading European politician on the Left. Not only rank-and-file workers, he argued, but even capitalists and bureaucrats had become disillusioned with the constraints of corporatism, leaving many trade union leaders alone in clinging to what he described in *Arguments for Democracy* as a “sterile partnership”:

If the trade union movement is seeking to offer an alternative industrial, social and political perspective for the future of Britain, it will be called upon to provide a far more positive and constructive leadership than its critics believe is possible . . . If the sights of the trade unions are lifted above the defensive battles on the industrial front to a bolder perspective, the alliance with the Labour Party will need to be strengthened at every level. But if the lessons of the past are learned, democratic socialism will be seen to be quite different from the consensus corporatism that marked the evolution of

labour power in the post-war years.

But, in rejecting corporatism, Benn was in no way invoking the old dichotomy between reform and revolution. At the 1979 party conference, recommending on behalf of the NEC that conference reject a militant-inspired resolution calling for the nationalization of the 200 leading corporations, Benn described himself as “a Clause IV socialist, becoming more so as the years go by”; but he insisted that if the conference expected the PLP to take its resolutions seriously, then it had also to take the Labour Party seriously, as “a party of democratic, socialist reform. I know that for some people ‘reform’ is a term of abuse. That is not so. All our great successes have been the product of reform.” Taking reform seriously, however, meant coming to terms with,

the usual problem of the reformer; we have to run the economic system to protect our people who are now locked into it while we change the system. And if you run it without seeking to change it then you are locked in the decay of the system, but if you simply pass resolutions to change it without consulting those who are locked in the system that is decaying, then you become irrelevant to the people you seek to represent . . .

We cannot content ourselves with speaking only to ourselves; we must raise these issues publicly and involve the community groups because we champion what they stand for. We must win the argument, broaden the base of membership, not only to win the election but to generate the public support to carry the policies through. This remarkably clear-sighted and thoughtful argument was ignored by the entire mainstream media, including the *Guardian*. Scarcely anyone who did not attend Labour Party conferences, including most of the Left, would have known he had made it. They would have heard it, however, if they were among the capacity crowd of 2,600 at Central Hall, Westminster, who came to hear Benn and Stuart Holland debate with Paul Foot and Hilary Wainwright in March 1980, at the “Debate of the Decade” between the Left inside and outside the Labour Party. The revolutionary socialist groups, Benn insisted there, confused real reform with revolution. Their talk of revolution,

implies, and nobody believes it, that there is a short cut to the transfer of power in this country . . . What the socialist groups really do is to analyse, to support struggle, to criticise the Labour Party, to expand consciousness, to preach a better morality. These are all very desirable things to do. But they have very little to do with revolution.

The socialist groups had to come to see that they too were part of the problem, and that the limits of their own practices, just like those of the Left in the Labour Party, could also be measured in the simple fact that “we do not have a majority of support outside for any of our solutions.” Benn believed that it had to be recognized, moreover, that even those among “the rank and file” who were acutely aware of the inadequacies of the Labour leadership’s policies, and were sympathetic to socialist solutions, were not prepared to agitate for them at critical moments:

The reality is that the rank and file of the labour movement do not want to put at risk the survival of a Labour government. We must be prepared to face the fact that the problem of the balance between agitation and loyalty has got to be solved. Unless we

can deal with that problem we are going to continue to be radical in opposition and somewhat conservative in office.

The Challenge of the Reformer

This was indeed the Labour New Left's central dilemma, made all the more pressing by the fact that the contradiction between agitation and loyalty existed not only when Labour was in office. An agenda for change as extensive as that which was being advanced after 1979 was obviously going to be fought tooth and nail, and the divisions this would engender would have to be at least concealed from public view in good time before the next election if Labour was to have a chance of winning it.

Benn recognized this but hoped that after fifteen months of controversy, during which the New Left would "lay the foundations" of its agenda for change, the party would reunite to "campaign together" for the 1983 election. This scenario assumed that the center-right parliamentarians would be as loyal to the party as the long-suffering rank-and-file activists. It was very soon shown to be a serious miscalculation.

Those "moderates" who stayed in the party evinced a very different mix of loyalty and agitation — and their agitation, unlike that of the rank-and-file activists, had the national media as its amplifier. But their claim that it was impossible to win elections with radical socialist policies was initially dented by the François Mitterrand victory under the *Programme commun* in France. And despite the socialist policies adopted at party conferences, Labour actually ran well ahead in the opinion polls all through 1980 and most of 1981.

However, the social democrats' persistent denigration of the Left through their media allies eventually took its toll on the party's popularity. The problem faced by the Labour New Left in this context was captured by "the usual problem of the reformer," as Benn had identified it at the 1979 conference. Those who set out to reform the party were concerned with keeping it electorally viable in order to protect all those who looked to it to advance their immediate interests; yet if they refrained from trying to change the party, they themselves would be locked into the decay of the system.

It was the most intractable of dilemmas. That Benn was so acutely aware of it, and yet refused to give up, reflected not only the strength of his commitment but the depth of his understanding that accommodating oneself to this "decaying system" (as he saw it, in moral as much as in material terms) was itself no long-term answer. This approach was made all the more poignant by his recognition that the larger democratic socialist agenda could only be realized on the basis of a very protracted and long-term struggle. As he wrote in his diary on the eve of the 1979 conference: "I think we are going to be engaged in the most bitter struggle over the next ten years, and if this [New Right] philosophy gains hold in the public mind then not only might we not win the next election but socialism could be in retreat in Britain until absolutely vigorous campaigns for democracy are mounted again."