

Bevan in a Time of Coronavirus

By

Jon Burke

Aneurin Bevan responded to the deep crises of the 1930s and '40s by making the case for transforming the economy in workers' interests, and ultimately building the NHS. The Left can learn from his example today.

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It is very difficult for someone whose life in politics has been shaped so profoundly by a man of such folk hero proportions to resist the temptation to write yet another hagiography of Aneurin Bevan, more difficult still when doing so for a publication so synonymous with its former editor.

But it is important to resist this temptation, to look beyond the often lonely and hard-won achievements of Bevan in government, the uncommon talent of a man who, despite working under the ground before his fourteenth birthday, overcame his debilitating stutter and lack of formal education to become, in the words of Professor Vernon Bogdanor, “a very fine speaker, second only to Churchill... [though] some would say equal to or even better.” It is important to look beyond these elements of his remarkable story to another Bevan, Bevan the teacher, as Labour and the country once again find themselves at a crossroads.

Part of the problem, of course, is Bevan's peerless record in government as the principal creator of institutions that have achieved such structurally deep, civilising, and lasting effects on this island. Indeed, Nigel Lawson once bitterly remarked that the NHS was “the nearest the British had to a religion.” “They don't believe in God,” he said, but they believe in the National Health Service.” This, of course, has been most recently evidenced by the doorstep displays of gratitude up and down the country towards the NHS workers in whom we've placed so much faith.

That 'our Nye' has attained such unimpeachable status in the minds of so many Labour Party members has, however, had the unfortunate effect of turning Bevan into a cosy museum

piece; to be admired from an appropriate distance, but only examined in detail by experts. This is a grave error. However remarkable Bevan's achievements as a man of Government, it is also his political world view and, to a lesser extent, his performance as a parliamentarian of the opposition benches, to which we should look for inspiration and guidance at this time of national crisis.

Bevan in a Crisis

■ere Bevan alive today, he would undoubtedly recognise many remarkable parallels between the challenges we face and the political world in to which he was catapulted. He had, after all, only been a first-time Member of Parliament as part of minority Labour government for not more than four months when the Wall Street Crash hit in September 1929.

The following ten years – “the locust years” as Churchill later described them – characterised by depression and international turmoil were bruising for Bevan. It is not well known that, driven to despair by an economically illiterate and reactionary MacDonald government alongside the shock of Independent Labour Party leader John Wheatley's untimely death, Bevan almost stepped over the precipice of leaving the party altogether.

It is difficult not to conclude that the bitter experiences of lurching from crisis to ever greater crisis, combined with his own sense of having misstepped at crucial points, did not profoundly impact upon Bevan's worldview. At the very least, these events appear to have helped strengthen and crystallise a pre-existing belief that only through planning and prioritisation of social and economic need could order be extracted from the chaos.

This is reflected in his almost immediate response to Chamberlain's declaration of war when, despite the very real possibility of invasion and defeat, Bevan declared in *Tribune* alongside Stafford Cripps that “it is already time to formulate the essentials of any future peace in the world.”

He was attracted by the radical proposals of the charismatic and energetic then Labour MP Oswald Moseley, and drawn deeper into Moseley's orbit via his personal admiration for friend and mentor, John Strachey. Bevan did not, of course, join the New Party but, had he have done so, he would have almost certainly followed Strachey into obscurity, depriving the Labour Party of one of its greatest talents.

One of the abiding lessons Bevan had learned from this tumultuous period in the Labour Party was the necessity of unity under a first past the post electoral system. As John Campbell noted in his 1997 biography of Bevan, what ultimately held him back from abandoning the Party was “the one absolute and unshakeable fundamental of Bevan's philosophy... that there was no hope for the salvation of the British working class except through the Labour Party and organised labour movement.”

Bevan had looked into the void and concluded that playing a full and active role in ensuring the Labour Party fulfilled its historic purpose was a more certain path to achieving these goals. As he emphasised to Jennie Lee at the time, “I tell you, it’s Labour Party or nothing”.

As the international situation deteriorated further, Bevan and the Socialist League’s non-interventionist response to the invasion of Abyssinia provides us with another insight into the Left’s atavistic propensity for comfortable delusion at times of crisis, the spirit of which is captured to great effect by Orwell’s 1939 *Coming Up for Air*. It was a lesson only later learned by Bevan as he looked on in horror at the party leadership’s initial reluctance to call for support for the Republic as the Spanish Civil War unfolded.

Introversion is a curse that frequently afflicts the Left when the potential mechanisms for resolving a seemingly intractable political problem rub up against how we think our values dictate us to act. The failure to countenance military intervention against Mussolini’s act of imperial aggression was seen as a potential means averting or, at the very least, staving off an even larger conflict, when what it had in fact achieved was to embolden the enemy. The world has a habit of intruding upon us whether we like it or not.

Bevan’s Vision

It is a curious feature of the Left, perhaps related to our general sense of fair play and empathy for others, that looking to the future at a time of crisis is deemed inappropriate, distasteful almost. To openly state that a crisis may be the stepping stone to a more just society is considered heresy.

I will go further and say the Left’s conflation of scheming cynicism with planning for the world beyond the current crisis consistently places it at a disadvantage against right-wing opponents who clearly do not share our aversion.

Bevan was, mercifully, immune to such squeamishness, which enabled him to spend the war years laying foundations for the 1945 Government in his capacity as the de facto leader of the opposition in the Commons.

In her undeservedly forgotten *My Life with Nye*, Jennie Lee states baldly that Bevan “would ask himself, [what] is the maximum I can hope to achieve in these particular circumstances?” The effect of this was that, while Attlee, Bevin, Morrison, and other leading Labour figures found themselves both in the shadow of Churchill and unable, given their status as members of the government, to publicly criticise him, meant that Bevan became the principle parliamentary scrutineer of the war effort and vociferous proponent of the idea that the lives of returning service personnel could and must be better than those of 1918.

The Member for Ebbw Vale may, in the words of Churchill, have been a “squalid nuisance”

but, as Clare and Francis Beckett note in their biography *Bevan*, “if 1945 was not a repeat of 1918, it is partly because people like Aneurin Bevan risked unpopularity and political credibility by warning against it in 1940”.

Though not directly comparable, the Labour Leadership finds itself at the current moment of crisis in a similar situation to that of 1939. Both Keir Starmer and the leadership he succeeded have felt compelled to lend their support to the government, in order to demonstrate national unity and to avoid accusations of political opportunism.

This is understandable but, as Bevan demonstrated to great effect between 1939 and 1945, the Leadership creating space for dissenting voices to ‘go off range’ with the kind of criticism Starmer himself would no doubt like to deploy could prove useful in helping to shape key debates about post-coronavirus Britain. If Starmer wants to play the role of Attlee, he needs an Aneurin Bevan.

Bevan’s growing sense that the only way an orderly and peaceful post-war era could be delivered was through thoughtful prioritisation of the needs of the nation. Publicly-owned, publicly-accountable industries of strategic national importance was one of the most consistent themes of his public criticisms of a war effort led by Churchill, including regular demands for more nationalisation to deliver increased wartime production and efficiency.

Knowing, by 1944, that victory against Hitler was now a question of when, rather than if, Bevan doubled-down on the absolute necessity of not returning to the pre-war status quo in *Why Not Trust the Tories?*. “Whatever merits there may in leaving certain segments of industry private industry...” Bevan declared, “the first consideration is to see to it that the dominant role in society is played by public ownership”.

For Bevan, public ownership was the principal mechanism for averting the tyranny of capital over the working class. It was the embodiment of the view expressed by Thomas Rainsborough at the Putney Debates, that “poverty must use democracy to destroy the power of property, or property in fear of poverty will destroy democracy”.

Bevan carried these values into the Health and Housing Ministry with characteristic energy and, alongside his well-known NHS and housing numbers successes, brought his influence to bear on structurally transformative legislation, such as Lewis Silkin’s hugely influential 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, which reflected Bevan’s belief in solidly-constructed, spacious housing for all.

Delivering things in the *right* way, through a consistent prism of democratic socialist values, rather than merely responding to events, is another feature of Bevan’s outlook on the world, from which the modern Labour Party, and certainly one in opposition, could benefit greatly from. Despite the pressure to build fast after the war, Bevan maintained that “if we wait a little longer, that will be far better than doing ugly things now and regretting them for the rest of our lives.”

Not that Bevan’s belief in doing things with care was in any way an indication of cautiousness. Despite severe materials shortages caused by both the international fallout from

the war, Britain's parlous public finances, and Ernest Bevin's first call on materials for the reconstruction of bombed docks and factories, Bevan managed not only to deliver a National Health Service out of the chaos of a pre-war health system of disconnected charitable, voluntary, and local authority hospitals and clinical approaches, but also scaled-up the delivery of homes from 1,000 houses and 10,000 'pre-fabs' in December 1945, to 227,000 houses and 125,000 pre-fabs in 1948.

Nye also refused to allow the perfect to become the enemy of the good in government, recognising – in a country with a tendency for electing Conservative governments – the importance of doing the socialism that can be done with the time, power, and resources available. As Jennie Lee later recounted of Bevan's attitude to the Health Service challenges still to be overcome despite its imminent launch, Bevan would remark "Let it begin. No future government will dare undo it. The flaws can be put right as the public learns to value it."

Bevan's Lessons

I cannot do justice to what was a genuinely thrilling period of innovation under Bevan. The enduring popularity of the institutions he helped create, sustain, and radically overhaul speak for themselves, and the infectious enthusiasm with which he did so electrified all with whom he worked, including Sir John Hawton, head of the health division in Bevan's ministry, who was "simply bowled off his feet by Nye's vigorous aliveness and determination."

It is a great tragedy that Bevan's untimely death not only denied the Labour Party of, in the words of Professor Bogdanor, "the preeminent spokesman of democratic socialism in post-War Britain and... the great leader that the late-20th Century Labour Party so badly needed but was never able to find," but that he was unable to fully expand upon his philosophy. *In Place of Fear*, published in 1952, was only ever intended to be a primer, though it certainly provides enough of Bevan's insights to draw conclusions about the direction of travel he would be taking at this time.

Bevan would not, I believe, have supported the short-termism of Rishi Sunak's furlough programme, which I have no doubt he would have correctly viewed as both an elephant trap for the Labour leadership and a Trojan Horse for future austerity.

The socialist who emphasised that "man must first live before he can live abundantly" would have recognised that the Tories' new found zeal for public largesse in providing 80% of incomes up to £50,000 was more about sustaining a fundamentally weak economy underpinned by consumption, rather than meeting the needs the nation's citizens.

Bevan, I believe, would have instead committed to ensure that nobody went without food, shelter, or warmth at this time; a course of action that would not only have lessened the

future debt burden associated with the rescue package, but also ensured that it did not help sustain pre-existing income inequalities. Of course, since prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus, foodbanks were booming, council housing waiting lists were interminably long, and fuel poverty was a consistent blight, this superficially platitudinous commitment would have undoubtedly been backed by Bevan for its quietly revolutionary nature.

I also have no doubt whatsoever that it would not have taken the sight of empty supermarket shelves and a chaotically mismanaged and unsustainable food system to reiterate his belief that “if we are not prudent, millions of people will be watching each other starve to death through expensive television sets.”

No, though Bevan would have been making arrangements with food retailers to guarantee equitable distribution, and ensuring a minority of variously scared, opportunistic, and selfish people were prevented from hoarding, he would also be viewing this latest shock as a harbinger of the kind of circumstances that will be increasingly forced upon us by the climate crisis. Crucially, he would be advocating, and, taking, corrective action.

It would have come as no surprise to Bevan to hear the Prime Minister, a man whose only comparable Churchillian quality is his notoriously short attention span, describe the race to develop a vaccine for coronavirus as “the most urgent shared endeavour of our lifetimes” while still allowing the aviation industry to facilitate the free flow of the jet set into the country from coronavirus hotspots, despite evidence from New Zealand strongly indicating that preventing such activities would have saved lives.

Bevan would have wasted no time vociferously contrasting the inaction of the Prime Minister at the stage when it was thought the principle casualty of the coronavirus pandemic would be the sick, poor, elderly, and ethnic minorities, against his zeal for developing a vaccine in the face of mounting aviation industry losses.

Bevan would already be extrapolating from current events to emphasise not only the urgent necessity of delivering a Green New Deal – a Green New Deal he would also be warning requires decarbonisation itself – for the purposes of the complete transformation of land transit and the energy system, and would still be at pains to emphasise these measures as being in no way commensurate with the scale of the crisis faced.

Having witnessed the profound impact of demand-side decarbonisation throughout the pandemic, Bevan would be advocating carbon rationing as the most socially equitable route to rapid decarbonisation. However, the reluctant pragmatist in him would inevitably conclude that carbon pricing, with appropriate exemptions for the avoidance of hardship, would be a politically viable alternative in helping to minimise the impacts of a growing climate crisis that less than six months ago played an instrumental role in wiping out 500,000 creatures in Australia.

He would certainly be advocating the need for radical measures to tackle climate change both domestically and internationally as a politician on an island that imports 50 per cent of its food. And he would undoubtedly be averse to any public bailouts of private companies that

did not meet the pressing need for decarbonisation.

Bevan would understand that securing a sustainable environmental settlement was the fundamental pre-condition upon which all other democratic socialist hopes are dependent. The ex-miner Bevan would not, unlike an alarming number of today's Left politicians, be offering either false hope to tech utopianism or ignoring the canaries falling dead all around us.

As Jennie Lee emphasised in *My Life with Nye*, it is not my duty to maintain that Bevan was always right. While this was overwhelmingly the case on matters of principle, Bevan's analysis was hampered by an excessive romanticism and faith in the idea that socialist institutions can only be developed and maintained through the a priori vision of a class conscious population.

The NHS and, perhaps to a lesser extent council housing, are a repost to that idea. They help sustain socialist principles as part of the national consciousness because they do not rely on faith. They remain demonstrable of examples democratic socialism in practice and, crucially, their effectiveness lies in their non-stereotypically socialist character. Bevan thought you had to believe in socialism to see it. For most people, however, they have to see socialism to believe it.

In one sense at least, Tony Benn perhaps understood the likely enduring appeal of Bevan's achievements better than Bevan himself did. Following Nye's resignation in 1951, Benn remarked that the National Health Service, rather than being an act of luxury socialist largesse, was instead "a practical matter...[of] what we have and can get by way of revenue, [and] how can we lay it to the best advantage of those who need it most."

A final mention must surely go to what Bevan would have to say about the post-coronavirus balance between labour and capital. What Bevan taught us, coronavirus has confirmed; that "we could manage to survive without money changers and stockbrokers. We should find it harder to do without miners, steel workers and those who cultivate the land", though, in all likelihood, Bevan the autodidact would have reconstructed the list somewhat in the sixty years since his death.

Whatever his reaction, as I look out at my neighbours clapping on a Thursday evening, not merely for NHS and key workers, but the social solidarity and mutual aid they represent, it is hard not to conclude that we're all Bevanites now.

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