

Haltemprice and Howden by-election

Britain: Tony Benn defends his decision to back David Davis

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Tony Benn, still the most prominent figure within what remains of the Labour “left,” has written in the *Sunday Telegraph* to justify his backing right-wing Conservative David Davis in the Haltemprice and Howden by-election.

Davis forced the election by resigning as an MP in protest at the passing in parliament of Labour’s bill extending detention without trial for terrorist suspects to 42 days. Benn was one of a handful of Labour time-servers who hailed Davis for championing civil liberties, praising him on Sky News and speaking at what was advertised as a debate to launch Davis’s campaign on June 20.

Given the character of Davis’s politics—and those of Benn—it was appropriate that the meeting was held at Hymer’s College private school, with annual fees of around £8,000 a year and possessing its very own Masonic lodge and Army Cadet Force detachment. Around a hundred people heard Benn say of “David’s courage” in opposing 42 days’ detention that “people will look back in the future and say ‘thank God.’ ”

Writing in the *Telegraph*, a newspaper long associated with the right wing of the Conservative Party, Benn begins by claiming that “Libertarians from the Left and Right sometimes meet in the middle against an authoritarian state.”

He cites as his favoured example of such a meeting of minds his own 1961 campaign to maintain his position as a Member of Parliament when he became the second Viscount Stansgate, after inheriting the position following the death of his father. Benn’s campaign ended with the passing of the Peerage Act 1963 by the Conservatives, which allowed the renunciation of peerages. He was the first to do so.

Benn compares his fight to retain his seat with Davis opposing 42 days. Just how falling foul of his father’s acceptance of a peerage granted by Winston Churchill during the Second World War—which itself expressed Labour’s acceptance of hereditary privilege—was a struggle against an “authoritarian state” is hard to fathom.

Even so, he rewrites events in order to back up his claim that civil liberties supposedly unites left and right “libertarians,” focusing on the fact that “Winston Churchill, the former Conservative Prime Minister, sent me a letter of support for which I am, to this day, most grateful.”

In fact, Benn’s campaign was waged against a Conservative government. And his re-election with a majority of 13,000 in the 1961 by-election was rejected and the seat given to his only rival, the Conservative Malcolm St. Clair. The Tory candidate contested Benn’s victory in electoral court by pointing out that he had put up posters

near every polling station warning that a vote for Benn would be wasted, as he was disqualified.

Benn’s article goes on to state correctly that when Labour MPs “voted to amend the Terrorism Act and permit 42 days in prison without charge, they effectively repealed Magna Carta.” This allowed for people to be “imprisoned for six weeks, then released without charge or trial but also without ever being properly acquitted.” He also draws attention to Davis’s opposition to identity cards as the basis for a “huge database...on which will be gathered every bit of information that it is possible to collect. It may contain your financial status, political opinions, e-mail contacts and more” and the passing of the European Union’s Lisbon Treaty while denying the British electorate a referendum on the issue.

Benn then declares that “the people are sovereign, governments get their powers from us; we do not get our rights from them. This issue is becoming crucial because the centralisation of power to political elites is a threat to our freedom and democracy,” before claiming, “I believe that Mr Davis’s stand may do something to restore public confidence in politics and politicians. If, as is expected, he wins, it will confirm the judgment he made on the 42 days and will also destroy the argument that the public really supports these oppressive measures.”

“If the Lords, as expected, also rejects 42 days, it would be a constitutional outrage to use the Parliament Act to enforce the will of the Commons on the second chamber,” he concludes, “It is on the single, but vital, issue of civil liberties that I decided to support David Davis.”

What does this argument represent, and what would be the consequences of accepting Benn’s reasoning?

Benn’s argument is that working people should register a protest by voting for Davis, in the hope that the government would be shamed into abandoning what would then be seen as a “constitutional outrage.” But the government has already committed one outrage after another. And they have been able to do so because the vast majority of Labour MPs voted for these outrages, and the handful that opposed them did so only to register a similar protest—and always made sure that the government had a majority. Labour passed the 42-days legislation with the support of 9 votes from the Democratic Unionist Party, but only because one after another of the expected Labour rebels lined up behind the government, leaving just 36 voting against.

Benn glosses over the fact that a struggle in defence of civil liberties is impossible unless it is conducted directly against the Labour government. And he maintains a diplomatic silence on the refusal of any Labour MP to even do what Davis has done—resign their seat and

defy the government.

Thus far, two sitting Labour MP's, Bob Marshall-Andrews and Ian Gibson, have, like Benn, publicly backed Davis. They have stated that they can do so without fear of censure because Labour is not standing a candidate. In any event, Marshall-Andrews is standing down as an MP at the next general election. As for the rest of the rebels, there is a deafening silence.

The leading figure within the Campaign Group of Labour MPs is John McDonnell, whom Benn backed to be Labour leader when Tony Blair stepped down a year ago. He last pronounced on the 42-days-detention legislation on June 11, the day it was passed.

Describing the intention of the Compass Group of Labour MPs to vote with the government, he said this "destroys in my view any vestige of credibility those associated with Compass may claim to have to be part of the Left or part of any project to reclaim the Labour party as a progressive force."

"I was," he adds, "scheduled to speak at the Compass conference on Saturday at the LRC/Briefing break out session. I will not do so now. I do not want to be associated with those that are willing to support undermining the basic human rights that socialists have fought and sacrificed themselves to secure and protect over generations. There are some lines in the sand you just do not cross."

Yet it appears that McDonnell has no problems continuing to be associated with the government that is actually doing the undermining of basic human rights. Instead, he merely writes in the June 27 *Guardian* of how Gordon Brown "is relentlessly leading the Labour party to the edge of extinction and yet again Labour MPs and trade union general secretaries appear at a loss to do anything but follow over the electoral precipice."

"It could have all been so different," he continues, if a leadership election had "ensured a real debate on the future of Labour in government and the future of our country" along the lines of his policies.

He claims, without apparent humour, that "British troops would have by now been withdrawn from Iraq and in Afghanistan," "Trident would have been scrapped," the "green revolution would be well underway," the "fairness revolution would be in train to create a fair and equal society," and "The freedom revolution would have already seen the restoration of basic civil liberties and trade union rights. ID cards would have been scrapped and detention without charge would be replaced with a normal rule of law relying upon evidence and court decisions," and so on.

To which one can only reply, "Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!"

The rest of the left have not even been brave enough to draw up such a self-aggrandising wish list, keeping their heads so far below the parapet that the *Tribune* was forced to speak of a "broad reservoir of 'stealth support' for Tory David Davis' campaign" and a "soft rebellion" taking place—so stealthy and soft that it cannot be seen.

It is only this extraordinary level of political cowardice that allows a right-wing Tory such as Davis to pose as a defender of civil liberties. But to endorse such an assertion, as Benn does, merely compounds the treachery of the Labour "left."

Before Labour came to power in 1997, it would have been hard to believe that one day it would be necessary to polemicise against someone on the left seeking to portray Davis as a friend of civil liberties. The Tories were despised as the party of big business that had presided over a hitherto unprecedented assault on the jobs and living standards of the working class, as well as being the authors of numerous attacks on democratic rights.

Even now, despite a repackaging exercise under David Cameron, the Conservative Party is all but indistinguishable from Labour when it comes to economic and social policy. Moreover, the Tories have supported Labour on the wars they waged in Afghanistan and Iraq and the vast bulk of the anti-terror measures accompanying these military adventures.

Benn seeks to draw a veil over such uncomfortable political realities by insisting that he supports Davis "on the single, but vital, issue of civil liberties."

Even on its face, this is ludicrous. Is habeas corpus maintained if people are only locked up without charge for a month rather than six weeks, as Davis voted for? Doesn't Davis's support for the anti-union laws threaten civil liberties? Would Labour's defeat by the Tories be the dawn of a new era of democratic renewal? And what of the broader impact of the actual policies championed by the Tories?

The Associated Press's report of the debate in Hull pointed out that Benn, whom Davis described as a friend "for about ten years," "did manage to make the point that he believed the threat of terrorism would be reduced if troops were withdrawn from Iraq and Afghanistan. Mr Davis smiled as he responded: 'That's a debate for another day.'"

In the name of forging an alliance across the political spectrum on a single vital issue, Benn is attempting to lead working people from one political disaster to another.

Benn retired from parliament in 2001. Now aged 83, he first stood as a Labour candidate in 1950 and took his first seat in parliament a year later as Britain's youngest MP. After a political career stretching back six decades, that he feels the need to back Davis is a measure of how exposed he feels that Labour has become in the eyes of the electorate and how urgent it is to "do something to restore public confidence in politics and politicians."

But his loyalties still lie with the Labour bureaucracy that he has served so well. Last year, he even appealed for Labour to adopt him once more as a prospective parliamentary candidate. By endorsing a protest vote for Davis, he opposes working people taking the only course that offers a genuine way forward—a political break with Labour by the working class and the construction of a socialist leadership to defend civil liberties against all the parties of big business.

That is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party and its candidate, Chris Talbot, in the Haltemprice and Howden by-election.



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