

Veteran Labour “left” Tony Benn dead at 88

15 March 2014

Tony Benn, the former Labour Party MP died yesterday, aged 88. Benn was the figure most closely associated with the left of the party, particularly in the decades since the 1970s.

The tributes to Benn and to his political career, led by Conservative Party Prime Minister David Cameron and across the official political spectrum, have been generally effusive—though occasionally there was the obligatory point-scoring identifying Benn as a “relic” of Labour’s “socialist” past who supposedly made the party unelectable.

In 1999 Benn stood down from parliament after being a Labour MP for 49 years. His departure took place under conditions in which Labour, under Tony Blair, had become an avowed right-wing party of big business, with the handful of “left” MPs still within it reduced to a docile rump. Remaining a party member, Benn declared that to “rebuild the Labour Party is best done from outside”.

He spent his remaining years as totemic figure in an increasingly futile and desperate struggle to preserve the grip of Labour over the working class through forming alliances with sections of the trade union bureaucracy, what remained of his Labour co-thinkers and the various pseudo-left tendencies. These included the Stop the War Coalition, Coalition of Resistance (co-founded by Benn himself in August 2010) and the Trades Union Congress-sponsored People’s Assembly Against Austerity.

These were all meant to prove that there still remained a “socialist” spark that could be rekindled in the Labour Party and trade unions. To them all, Benn brought the essential message that there was no life possible outside of Labour.

As he told the *Guardian* in October last year, “I don’t believe in the idea that you can build a new socialist party... There have been lots of attempts to do it, and they’ve all failed. There is a radical element, and that element ought to be able to live within the Labour party.”

The political failure of all these projects confirms what the *World Socialist Web Site* had insisted on in 1999—that any “attempt to rescue the authority of the Labour Party from outside Westminster is futile.”

So reduced was Benn’s standing in his own party that, by 2013, when the People’s Assembly was founded, he could only muster support from three Labour MPs.

His other ventures were no more salubrious. In 2008 he even allied himself with right-wing Tory MP David Davis, lending credence to Davis’s claim to be the champion of civil liberties and a genuine opponent of the authoritarian legislation being imposed by the then Labour government.

Benn was a famous chronicler of his party and his age. He authored nine volumes of diaries, with the last, *A Blaze of Autumn Sunshine: The Last Diaries*, published in 2013.

The diaries became an increasingly despairing commentary on the hopelessness and failure of his various political ventures. His utterances were reduced to documenting how overtly right-wing the Labour Party had become. One entry in the final volume read, “The private management of failed NHS [National Health Service] hospitals was announced, and it absolutely horrified me. What do you make of a Labour government that denies trade unions their rights, that goes to war and then privatises the NHS?”

In an earlier 2008 entry Benn wrote, “After we lose the election, which we will in a couple of years, there won’t be another Labour government in my lifetime and, indeed, probably not for another 20 years. I feel—I’m so tired—I feel bereaved that the Labour Party has gone that way. It has died. It’s been assassinated by Blair and Brown.”

Yet Benn remained, as he said he would, a member of this right wing, anti-working class organisation until the day he died. When he passed away, it was amid the wreckage of his life-long political project and the perspective on which it was based.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is republishing below an article first posted on the WSWS on July 7, 1999, on the occasion of Benn’s announcement that he was standing down from Parliament.

Tony Benn announces his retirement from Westminster: The end of Fabianism in Britain

By Julie Hyland and Chris Marsden

7 July 1999

Tony Benn, the veteran Labour MP and former Cabinet Minister, has announced he will not stand for Parliament at the next election. At 74 years of age, he is the longest-serving Labour MP in Britain and the acknowledged leader of what little remains of the party’s left wing.

Explaining his decision, Benn listed the issues he had pledged to fight for that now brought him into conflict with his party. These included, maintaining the welfare state, supporting higher income tax to fund public services, opposition to privatisation, higher pensions, restoration of trade union rights, opposition to nuclear weapons and preserving the authority of the United Nations regarding a declaration of war.

“It is difficult to get this across inside Parliament at the moment because politics is reported in such a shallow way,” Benn observed. “The issues that face us are difficult, challenging and interesting—and the level of political discourse is shallow, abusive and personal.”

He told the BBC, “I am not retiring from politics, but I believe the work that needs to be done now to rebuild the Labour Party is best done from outside. If you are in Parliament at the moment you are asked to do a lot of things that run absolutely contrary to the pledges I gave my constituents and to my own convictions. All progress has always come from outside Parliament,” he insisted.

Coming from someone with Benn’s political history, these are remarkable statements. His life has been bound up with the Labour Party and Parliament ever since his childhood. In a recent interview with the *Guardian* he explained: “I was born at 5 to 3 on Friday April 3, 1925 at number 40 Millbank, which is absolutely on the site of the “Millbank Tower” (Labour Party HQ). Next door lived the Webbs, who drafted Clause Four [Labour’s constitutional commitment to public ownership of the means of production]. So on the very same site socialist aspirations were both established and removed. The house was full of politics and I met Ramsey MacDonald in 1930 [the first Labour Prime Minister] when I

was taken to the trooping of the colour.”

Benn’s reference to the Webbs is significant. Sidney and Beatrice Webb were the founders of the Fabian Society, which Benn has been associated with ever since joining the Labour Party in 1942. Emerging in the mid-1880s, Fabianism has largely defined the political physiognomy of the Labour Party. It advocated a type of “evolutionary collectivism” carried out primarily by enlightened sections of the bourgeoisie, in direct opposition to Marxist socialism and the class struggle ideologies that dominated the European workers’ movement.

Speaking about British Fabianism, Leon Trotsky wrote: “Throughout the whole history of the British Labour movement there has been pressure by the bourgeoisie upon the proletariat through the agency of radicals, intellectuals, drawing-room and church socialists and Owenites who reject the class struggle and advocate the principle of social solidarity, preach collaboration with the bourgeoisie, bridle, enfeeble and politically debase the proletariat.” [*Writings on Britain*, Volume 2, New Park, London 1974, p. 48]

Fabianism epitomised this phenomenon. It was, said Trotsky, a concoction designed to weaken the class consciousness of the working class, to act as a counter-pressure against the working class from above, “from the sphere of official British politics with its national traditions of ‘love of freedom’, world supremacy, cultural primogeniture, democracy and Protestant piety.” [*Ibid.*, p. 49]

The Fabians argued against the pursuit of the class struggle, preaching “social solidarity” between workers and employers, who, they said, could be convinced through the force of reason alone. They drew inspiration from a classless view of British history and its traditions of parliamentary democracy. This provided an ideal intellectual vehicle for a sizeable labour aristocracy in Britain—a petty bourgeois social layer cultivated from within the working class through Britain’s exploitation of the colonial peoples. Though the Fabian Society was small, its views became common coin amongst trade union and Labour leaders anxious to preserve their own privileged existence—for whom social revolution was as much of a threat as it was for the bourgeoisie.

Ramsay MacDonald, for one, declared that he belonged to this “new school” of British socialism: “We have no class consciousness ... our opponents are the people with class consciousness... But in place of class consciousness we want to evoke the consciousness of social solidarity.”

Benn’s history is steeped in all these political traditions that found their finished expression in Fabianism: parliamentarianism, liberalism and religion. His father, William—later Viscount Stansgate—was a radical Liberal MP who opposed the coalition between conservatives and liberals and transferred his allegiance to the Labour Party in 1927, declaring that he would just “have to be a Liberal in the Labour Party”. He later became Secretary of State for India in MacDonald’s minority administration of 1929. His mother was a leading Presbyterian. Benn has said he was brought up on the Old Testament, the conflict between kings who exercised power and the prophets who preached righteousness. In the 1970s, he described early British socialist thought as deriving from the Bible.

Benn prides himself on his “historical viewpoint”. Through his father, the experiences of the 1930s became a formative influence on him politically. From this tumultuous decade of fascism, defeated revolutions, depression and war, he developed a loathing for class conflict. This reinforced his belief that parliamentary democracy and social reform were all that stood between Britain and chaos.

When Anthony Wedgewood Benn entered Parliament in 1950 as the Labour MP for Bristol South East, his Fabian views placed him in the party’s mainstream. His early career was distinguished only by the successful fight he waged between 1960 and 1963 to disclaim the aristocratic title he inherited after the death of his father, which disqualified him from sitting in the Commons. At around the same time he

authored a pamphlet on constitutional reform, published by the Fabian Society. This bore the logo of a red tortoise, meant to signify the superiority of gradual change over the hare of revolution.

Benn was a trusted member of the party’s inner circle and he was a speechwriter for Labour leaders Hugh Gaitskill and Harold Wilson. He was a liberal opponent of communism, but argued that it could not be dealt with through repression. At the height of the McCarthy witch-hunts in 1953 he told the BBC: “Fear breeds oppression and if you try to oppress anybody, be they Communists or Fascists or Christians, you strengthen the thing you are trying to stamp out and destroy the thing you are trying to protect.” [*Tony Benn, A biography*, by Jad Adams, Pan, London 1993, p. 101]

In the 1960s and 1970s, Wilson, and his successor James Callaghan entrusted Benn with three cabinet posts. This included his time as Secretary of State for Energy in the 1974-79 government. During the mass strike movement of 1978-79, known as the “Winter of Discontent”, he was charged with approaching the Queen to declare a State of Emergency. But fearing the consequences of this, he relied instead on negotiations with the trade union leaders to bring the situation under control.

He wrote in his diary: “There is a part of me that tells me I am just being sucked into this terrible military operation to hold the working class back. On the other hand, I have to protect emergency supplies and argue for a radical programme for the Labour Party. But there is no doubt I am compromised up to the hilt by remaining in this bloody awful government”.

Following the “Winter of Discontent” Labour was forced out of office due to the well of hostility it had built up amongst workers, and the alienation of significant layers of the middle class. The Tories were swept to power in May 1979, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher. This was a seminal moment for Benn, in which two great concerns came together to dictate a political shift on his part.

Benn believed that the Labour Party was being discredited as a vehicle for realising the social interests of the working class. Moreover, the Thatcher government was intent on dismantling the welfare state and carrying out a monetarist programme of economic deregulation and privatisation. He feared that the next explosion in the class struggle would surpass anything that went before it, and Labour would not be able to keep it within parliamentary channels.

These considerations, together with the split from Labour by the right-wing Social Democratic Party in 1981, motivated Benn to position himself as leader of the party’s left wing. He ran against leading right-winger Denis Healey for the post of deputy leader, losing by less than 1 percent.

This was to be the high point of Benn’s influence inside the Labour Party, however. To his dismay, Labour progressively adapted itself to the Thatcherite agenda, culminating in the ditching of Clause Four and the creation of Blair’s “New Labour” Party. Benn became increasingly marginalised, losing his position on the National Executive and seeing his “Campaign Group” of Labour MPs dwindle in both size and influence.

Benn’s retirement from Parliament reflects deep and growing concerns. A man whose life has been shaped by his striving to preserve the rule of Parliament and the sway of Labour over the workers’ movement senses that his two great political loves are under threat. He has been fiercely critical of the Blair government and its New Labour project. He described the recent setting up of a joint Labour-Liberal Democrat cabinet committee as “the beginning of the end of the Labour Party.”

“It’s being presented as modernisation and reform. Actually, it is complete realignment of British politics.... I think the truth is what this will do is to obliterate debate in Parliament and obliterate choice in the ballot box,” he warned.

Earlier this year he presented a bill seeking to assert the supremacy of Parliament over matters governed by the so-called “Crown Prerogative”, amidst criticisms of the “increasingly presidential nature of the [Blair]

premiership”. His bill sought the transfer of a host of powers to the Commons. These are formally exercised by the monarch, but practically by the Prime Minister, and include dissolving Parliament before the end of a five-year term, inviting someone to form an administration, declaring a state of emergency and declaring war or committing forces to armed conflict.

This latter point reflects Benn’s recent conflicts with the party leadership over the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. He was particularly critical of Blair’s decision to authorise air strikes against Yugoslavia and previously against Iraq without referring to Parliament. He said of the bombing of Iraq last year that its effect “is to destroy democracy in Britain at the very moment we are supposed to be defending it abroad.”

His decision to concentrate his remaining years on extra-parliamentary campaigning followed Labour’s European election debacle, in which its share of the vote fell by 22 points and voter abstention reached an all-time high.

Benn has long believed that, in its lurch to the right, Labour has lost the support of the broad mass of working people. He has called New Labour “the smallest political party that’s ever existed in Britain.”

But his attempt to rescue the authority of the Labour Party from outside Westminster is futile. In the final analysis, the influence of reformism in all its various guises—Fabianism, Labourism and the Communist Party’s “British Road to Socialism”—rested on the ability of the bourgeoisie to grant real material concessions to the working class. Today, however, under the whip of global competition, official politics offers no such prospect. The undermining of parliamentary democracy—and with it Labourism—is rooted in the growing gulf between rich and poor in Britain. The United Nations lists Britain as one of the most unequal societies in the world, comparing social conditions there with those found in Eastern Europe.

This social chasm cannot be bridged through the old political mechanisms; all the more so when it is a Labour government that is presiding over the systematic impoverishment of working people at the behest of big business. Despite Benn’s deep unease, social conflict must inevitably assume more open forms in the coming period, and workers will seek a new political vehicle through which to defend themselves. Just as there is no longer a place in Parliament for Mr. Benn, so too there is no possibility of breathing life into the Fabian corpse.



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