

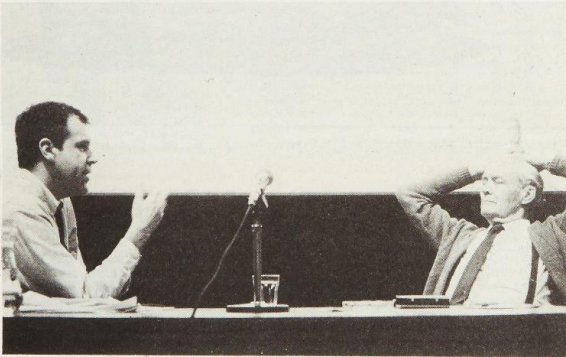
THIS MONTH, TONY BENN PUBLISHED THE THIRD VOLUME OF HIS DIARIES, "AGAINST THE TIDE", COVERING THE YEARS 1973 TO 1976, FROM THE TIME OF THE THREE DAY WEEK AND HEATH'S LAST MONTHS IN POWER TO THE RESIGNATION OF WILSON AND THE FIRST FEW MONTHS OF CALLAGHAN'S PREMIERSHIP. ON THURSDAY 12TH OCTOBER, HE SPOKE TO A PACKED LOGIE LECTURE THEATRE. THEN ON FRIDAY MORNING HE SPOKE TO JERRY WARD OVER BREAKFAST IN THE ROYAL HOTEL ABOUT SOME OF THE WIDER ISSUES FACING THE LABOUR MOVEMENT WHICH THE DIARIES HAVE RAISED.

My first impression of Tony Benn is shaped by the boundless optimism which he radiates at every opportunity. How anyone can be so genuinely enthusiastic about scrambled eggs on toast surprises me, but lets not be too trivial here — Tony Benn is enthusiastic about everything. Meeting people, socialism, arguing, and above all, communicating his ideas and beliefs to a wider audience. Tony Benn likes talking and without doubt he is very good at it. One almost expects politicians to want to talk a lot, but sometimes the case is that they have nothing worth listening to. Not so with Tony Benn, he is informed, articulate, witty, sometimes verbose, but always astute and very entertaining.

Thursday night's session in Logie, where he was "interviewed" by John Lloyd, was an excellent example of this. He was a sharp and practiced practitioner of the art, and he shone, holding his audience for the most part, entranced. Varying at times between a stand-up comic and a political theorist, he delivered some highly entertaining moments.

"She's the most caring Prime Minister I've met - it just happens that she doesn't care for us... I've never attacked people personally, even Mrs. Thatcher—Ted Heath does it better."

and



"You are feeling sleepy"

"George Brown always said you should stand up and be counted—when it came to the point, he couldn't quite manage."

Whilst at the same time offering some insights into the workings of the British State.

"Labour governments are the Intensive Care Units of capitalism. The Establishment doesn't want real change, they would prefer Labour in power as some form of appeasement."

This is where Tony Benn's real value lies. For all his sharpness and wit, his contribution to the political arena is not that of a spanner in the works, or of antagonism for its own sake. He is an outsider, who found himself on the inside of the British Establishment. Because of this he is able to demystify the processes which take place to make Britain run, and this is what his Diaries first and foremost achieve. If one accepts that the Establishment runs Britain for its own ends (and although I am never one for conspiracy theories, there are certain instances when you begin to suspect this is the case), then it is understandable why Tony Benn is regarded as dangerous and is often vilified, even by members of his own party.

In his introduction, he suggests one of the motives behind this work.

"Socialist historians will ask why it was that a Labour Government could have gone down to such a disastrous defeat at the end of the 1970s, opening up a decade of right wing politics. If these diaries serve any purpose I hope it may be to provide some understanding of precisely how that happened. I hope also that they will dispose of the absurd mythology, which has been allowed to develop unchallenged,

that Labour lost the 1979 General Election because it was too radical in its thinking: in truth it was rejected by its own supporters because it had abandoned all pretence to radicalism, and those who had given it its earlier majorities felt disappointed at Labour's inability in office to pursue the policies on which it had been elected."

The central theme of the book and his conversation with John Lloyd was about opening up the processes of democracy. Indeed, this has now become the central theme of his own ideology, making press representations of him as a cross between Stalin and Attila the Hun as archaic and irrelevant. At breakfast the next day, I wanted to get some idea of his more specific ideas on this motion of opening up democracy and this idea of a democratic road to socialism. I also wanted him to explain some more general ideas on his own background and his own road to socialism and where to go from here. I started by asking why there was a great deal of respect from his political opponents.

TB: Oh it's not for me to say what they feel, but I think if you stick to an argument and it's put forward with conviction then whatever the argument may be people will listen and there is

just about room in British politics for that layer of argument to survive, most of it is very superficial and personally, sometimes abusive.

JW: In some ways you had a privileged upbringing, in that you came from a family that had parliamentary experience.

TB: Yes I did.

JW: You went to Public School and Oxford.

TB: I don't know if that was an advantage actually, I mean it was thought so at the time. My kids all went to a Comprehensive School and had a much better education than myself. But of course it is true that from a time when I was very, very young, politics were discussed at home and therefore I have a political memory much longer than most people.

JW: At what stage then did you really become politically active?

TB: Well I campaigned in the 1935 General election when I was 10. What was that, 54 years ago? and ever since then continuously I've been involved more and more actively.

JW: Would you say then that was the starting point or was there some time in your late teens or early 20s that you really started to question?

TB: I can't remember a time when I wasn't a socialist, and I can't remember a time when I wasn't interested in a political life.

JW: There wasn't any actual point that you really did examine your beliefs?

TB: Well I think it's true that if you look at the events which have shaped my opinion, I had,

# Breakfast



"You won't grow up to be Prime Minister if you don't eat up your greens"

as you pointed out, a very protected education. Then the War came, and remember that for my generation the war was a total turnover, everything changed. I went into the Air Force and of course in the Air Force I met a total cross section of the community which I would never have met in my education, and argued with them, and discussed with them, and listened, and learned. So I suppose I became a socialist by experience, though I was born into a Labour family, that would be the distinction.

JW: John Lloyd mentioned that most politicians mellow as they get older, but in your case, you moved progressively to the left.

TB: Yes, but that's because you realise that what you are up against is a much more entrenched and consolidated system than you thought. The normal theory they teach children at school is that the State is neutral, that if you win an election you go there and all the civil servants long to implement your policy. It isn't like that at all. A lot of people start on the left because it offers great career opportunities and move right. I sometimes feel that I'm sitting on the side of a motorway and you see these people flash from left to right. As you get older I think a sense of history, not just of your own lifetime, but understanding as I've come to do as I've got older the enormous struggles involved in establishing Trade Unionism and winning the vote. Nothing can be taken for granted, and they may all be taken away again.

JW: You don't see it more a case of refining your ideas on socialism in the light of your experiences?

TB: Yes, I've seen a lot of life at the top, and when you see it you realise that they are really totally committed personally, institutionally and collectively to prevent any change in the status quo, so unless you're playing a game and thinking, well if I'm clever I'll have a turn in office now and again, you are bound to say, well how can I really change it, because of course the Labour Party was brought into being to bring about real change, it wasn't just to give a few Trade Unionists a turn in Whitehall. I think the purpose of the Diaries in a way, and the reason that I wrote them and the reason that they may be valuable is that they tell in a chronicled and meticulous way why the Labour movement failed to realise its historical objectives. Here we are in 1990, almost, in many respects back where we were in 1900 when Labour representation was set up. Now that is a really important question and it isn't that individuals were traitors and so on; that is to over simplify it. Something else was wrong and one of the things that was wrong was that the Labour movement never actually studied constitutional and institutional questions.

JW: Are there inherent problems with a democratic road to socialism?

TB: Yes I think that's true too.

JW: These issues were never tackled when Labour chose the democratic road to socialism.

TB: I think that is right. People say that Labour is reformist and not revolutionary, the truth is Labour is not reformist, doesn't even try to reform. Labour occupies the seats of office period-

ically but doesn't try to reform. They may improve administratively and introduce Bills that give you the Health Service, but the structure of economic and political power has never been addressed as a problem, and if you raise it people say it's irrelevant. There is a hostility, an active hostility to raising questions which relate to how to overcome the real obstacles that prevent you making progress.

JW: I still get the feeling that these matters aren't being addressed and there is the danger that the next Labour government could go the way of previous Labour Governments.

TB: Oh, I think that is the danger. If you take the paper "Policy Review on Constitutional Questions", I think it has come up with a very superficial thing, it has addressed the question of House of Lords, and so on and so on, and there is a little bit about Civil Liberties, but in general like a lot of other policy reviews it is very, very superficial. It looks good to win an election but doesn't really give you an awful lot to go on if you've won it as to what you do next.

JW: On to the issue you raised last night of people feeling powerless, something encouraged by the right. Would you agree with the idea that right wing politics are about acquiescence and left wing politics are about activism, that voting Labour is more difficult, it isn't just about a cross on the ballot paper every 4 years?

TB: Yes I think that's true. You see the status quo depends upon 2 factors. One is coercion and the other is consent. The level of coercion is always there but normally only comes out when people resist. I mean the miners did do something



"I never knew there was so much in it!"

# with Benn

and immediately the full panoply of State power was paraded against them, and if the consent is withdrawn then the coercion becomes less effective. What we are seeing now, for example, in Eastern Europe is the consent withdrawn from a system that also had a coercive element, but also survived for years by consent.

JW: You don't then have any set ideas on proselytizing other than mobilizing people in these ways you have outlined?

TB: I think you have to go around listening and learning. But I can't tell people to go on strike, I can't come to Scotland and say, you know, it's time the miners went on strike, because even if it worked, which it wouldn't, they would be on strike because they were told to do it, not because they realised that it was the only course of action open to them. But when they take action, you support them, so you both explain the route to their own power, and if they decide to take it you back them, and it may be not a very glorious role, but it is a role which shows a chink of light at the end of the tunnel for people who think that there is no way out.

JW: I still feel that in some ways that there's a whole area of disenfranchised people who feel that politics can do nothing for them.

TB: People don't see much of a connection between what they do and the political process. I think that there is a danger now that all the major parties agree at the top on NATO, Trident, Federal Europe, the war in Ireland, the control of market forces; and we have got to some extent a one party state in Britain, although there are 4 of them and therefore people do not connect their own frustrations with the choice offered to them on polling day, and that is the weakness I think of our present political system.



JW: How do you resolve the paradox that the Labour Party, when it achieves power is fighting the institutional prejudices of the Establishment?

TB: Well I think that when you're there you have to recognise that all you have got is office and you have to use the Ministerial pedestals on which you move and turn them into pulpits. When you get there you have a duty to use power - power gives you publicity, it gives you an audience. If a Minister makes a speech it is well covered. If I make a speech, I might get an inch or two, depending. So I think you have to use power to educate. Now Mrs. Thatcher has done that, she really is a teacher, and if I could repeal all of her legislation tomorrow - I could draft a Bill called the "Mrs. Thatcher Global Repeal Bill" under which every law passed since 1979 will be repealed in 24 hours - there would be people who became Thatcherites through her campaigns who would die Thatcherites in the year 2070. Unless we release into the political debate, a serious educational, analytical argument, we might get a turn in Whitehall, but we will never ever change people's perceptions, and that's why when you get there, it seems to me, that what you say is as important as what you do. It's very complex; the Establishment runs this country with a considerable degree of sophistication and thinking how to remove the obstacles without bloodshed, thinking how to reduce the redoubt and besiege it and capture it is very interesting. And funny enough if you talk about it people are tremendously interested, because they know in their hearts that whoever is there, nothing much changes, and their cynicism is based upon a suspicion which I know to be true.

JW: What we have here is the Civil Service, the

Permanent Secretaries wielding immense power, and whilst governments change, Ministers come and go, the machinery of State doesn't.

TB: Well they do. They have a lot of power but you can defeat them, if you bring things out into the open. Now if you come back to Official Secrecy for a moment, a Minister is told that he has to sign the Official Secrets Act. Ludicrous. And within a secret discussion, nobody else in the Labour Movement or the public ever knows what is being discussed until it's decided. Now the desire for secrecy is supported by 2 groups - strong Civil Servants, and weak Ministers, who don't want the public to know how weak they are, and there are a lot of strong Civil Servants and weak Ministers. The other mechanism they have, of course, is that they have an inside track, and they can get together and get other Ministers to stop you or go to the Prime Minister to stop you so unless you have a pretty sympathetic and active PM, it's very difficult for an individual Minister to win. Not that it's Civil Servants who are too strong, but Civil Servants plus the PM are too strong for an individual Minister.

JW: Did you ever have any revolutionary tendencies?

TB: The degree of reform I favour would be so massive as to amount to a revolution, but they would be done by consent. I can imagine circumstances where if your liberties are totally removed, there was no alternative - as in South Africa.

JW: Even in Great Britain we are looking at massive removal of liberties.

TB: I think you have to fight that. I don't think you should call that revolutionary activities. I think principled opposition to unjust laws like the Poll Tax and so on, which some would say is revolutionary, is absolutely an integral part of the process of change. I suppose, in a way, even though I'm a democrat to my fingertips, the establishment sees what they want to do as a series of reforms that would undermine their power, which it would do, so they would say "here's a revolutionary".

JW: Do you see yourself as a visionary?

TB: I try to look beyond the next by-election or the next budget or the next public opinion poll, to the sort of society which we could build, which we could. I mean we are the first generation in history to live at a time when the technology is available to give everybody a decent standard of life in the world. Before you couldn't do it, no matter who was in office, now you could and therefore the crime of not doing it is far greater. So to that extent I do think you have to have an alternative vision beyond saying "anything they can do, we can do better", which is broadly what the Labour policy review says.

JW: How would you like your legacy to be remembered?

TB: I think broadly I would like people to say he encouraged us. I would think that would be the best thing you could say, so that people feel as a result of listening that they understand they have more power than they thought they had. And I think that would be the nicest thing to say.

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Tell him to his face.**

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