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Tony Benn and the Idea of Participation Transcript

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Tony Benn and the Idea of Participation

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Ladies and gentlemen, this is the fifth of six lectures on post-War politicians who have “made the weather”, and the phrase “making the weather” comes from Winston Churchill, who used it about Joseph Chamberlain, Colonial Secretary at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, because Churchill believed that Chamberlain, although he never became Prime Minister, “made the weather”, in the sense that he set the agenda for the politics of his day. These six lectures are about six post-War politicians who “made the weather”, who helped set the agenda of politics perhaps even more than those who became Prime Minister. The first was on Aneurin Bevan, who was creator of the National Health Service and a prophet of democratic socialism. The second was on Iain Macleod and the rapid decolonisation of Africa; the third on Roy Jenkins, whose legislation helped create what some called “the permissive society” and others “the liberal society”, who played an important role in the European Union and was the prophet of realignment on the left. The fourth was on Enoch Powell, who emphasised the sovereignty of Parliament, both in relation to devolution and in relation to Europe. These last two lectures are on Tony Benn and Sir Keith Joseph.

Tony Benn, about whom I am talking today, is the only one of the six who is still alive, and he is, like Nye Bevan, a prophet of democratic socialism, but his greatest achievements lie, in my view, in the field of constitutional reform.

Sir Keith Joseph, who is the subject of my next and last lecture, laid down much of the ideological framework for what became known as Thatcherism, and some would regard him as the John the Baptist of Thatcherism.

In fact, both Tony Benn and Keith Joseph are key figures of the Thatcherite era. Keith Joseph was one of the most powerful supporters of Margaret Thatcher, and Tony Benn one of her strongest opponents, though always, I should say, as you will see in a moment, a very courteous opponent.

Perhaps these last two lectures are appropriately timed, as we are all attempting to come to terms with the political legacy of Margaret Thatcher.

Benn and Joseph were at opposite poles of the political spectrum, but they have more in common than might appear at first sight, and in particular this: that both of them rejected the post-War settlement, the settlement established by the Attlee Government and continued by the Conservative Governments of the 1950s.

In 1981, Keith Joseph met Benn on a train, and they agreed that the last 35 years had in fact been a disaster...for very different reasons: Keith Joseph because the Attlee settlement was too statist - it had undermined the free market and, in his view, undermined individual responsibility; Tony Benn for opposite reasons, because it had kept the machinery of capitalism intact and had not turned Britain into a socialist country.

Both Benn and Joseph - and in this, they have got something in common with Enoch Powell - are remarkable more for what they said and thought than for what they achieved in office, and I think it is remarkable that, of the six people about whom I am talking, Roy Jenkins was the only one to hold a great office of state - that is the Chancellorship, the Foreign Office, or the Home Office.

Enoch Powell was hardly in government at all - he was in the Cabinet for only fifteen months, a much smaller period than most people imagine. Benn and Joseph were in office for a long time. Keith Joseph served the Cabinets of four Conservative Prime Ministers: Harold Macmillan, Alec Douglas-Home, Edward Heath, and Margaret Thatcher. Tony Benn served throughout the Labour Governments of the 1960s and 1970s: from 1964 to 1970 in the first Wilson Government; then from 1974 to 1976 in the second Wilson Government; and from 1976 to 1979 in the Callaghan Government. But Joseph achieved little in legislative terms, while Benn's main achievements in the field of constitutional reform came from his role in opposition as a campaigner, not from his work in government.

But first, let us hear Tony Benn talking about what he regarded as the mistakes of Thatcherism, as a philosophy. This is from the House of Commons in the early 1990s, shortly after Margaret Thatcher left office.

[Recording plays]

The second thing is, despite the fact we have been told we are an entrepreneurial society, this is a country today that has an utter contempt for skill. You talk to people who dig coal, run trains, doctors, nurses, dentists, tool-makers - nobody in Britain is interested in them! The whole of the so-called entrepreneurial society has focused on the City news we get in every bulletin, telling us what has happened to the Pound Sterling, to three points of decimals, against a basket of European currencies. Skill is what built this

country's strength, and it is treated with contempt! I must confess, the auctioning off of public assets, particularly the latest disgusting Frankenstein advertisements, which told me more about the mentality of the minister who devised the scheme than it did about the sale itself, these are assets built up by the labour of those who work in electricity, and by the taxpayer who put the equipment in, now to be auctioned off at half their price to make a profit for a tax cut for the rich before the next Election comes. If these were local councillors, they would be before the courts for wilful misconduct, and because they are ministers, and then some of them later go on the boards of the companies they have privatised, they are treated as businessmen who know better how to handle it, as members of the board of directors, than allegedly they did as ministers responsible.

Local government has been crippled. Across the river is the London County Council County Hall, the seat of government of the greatest city in the world – empty, to be sold, because the Government wanted to cripple local government, and so indeed they have. The Poll Tax, the centralisation of the business rate, the punishment of the Liverpool and the Lambeth councillors, was to take all power from local government and put it in the hands of a Government that claimed it did not believe in the role of the state. The undermining of the trade unions, with less rights in Britain than they have in Eastern Europe, the tax cuts for the rich and benefit cuts for the poor, the censorship of the media, the abuse by the security services, the restriction of civil liberties...

And when we look back on the 1980s, we will see many victims of market forces. I do not share the general view that market forces are the basis of political liberty. Every time I see a person in a cardboard box in London, I say that person is a victim of market forces! Every time I see a pensioner who cannot manage, a victim of market forces! The sick, waiting for medical treatment that they could accelerate by private insurance, they are the victims of market forces.

And with the disappearance of the Prime Minister, who is a great ideologue – I mean, her strength was that she understood a certain view of life, and when she goes and she has gone, there will be a great ideological vacuum. And it is no good saying we will run market forces better than she did because her whole philosophy was that you measured the price of everything and the value of nothing, and we have to replace that.

I had one experience the other day that confirmed to me in my view that she has not really changed the thinking or culture of the British people. I do not know how many people travel, as I do, on trains, but I go regularly on the trains and I see all the little businessmen with their calculators, working out their cash flow, frowning people, looking and glaring at each other – Thatcherite trains, the train of the competitive society. But coming back from Chesterfield the other day, the train broke down, and it wholly changed! Somebody came in and said, "Have a cup of tea from my thermos," and then people looked after each other's children, and a young couple cooked a meal, and I said, after about half an hour, "How long have you been married?" "Oh, we met on the train!" they said. And a woman said, "Will you get off at Derby and ring my son in Swansea because he will be worried?" By the time we got to London, we were a socialist train...because you cannot change human nature! There is good and bad in everybody, and for ten years, it is the bad that has been promoted and the good that has been denounced as lunatic, out-of-touch, cloud cuckoo land, extremist and militant, and that is what the Party opposite have done. They do not quite yet know. They think it is the retirement of a popular headmistress, under circumstances some might regret. Actually, they have killed the source of their own philosophy and opened the way for quite different ideas!

Well, you can see why he was called Citizen Benn!

But I hope you noticed his very cultivated voice, because, in fact, Tony Benn was born into the heart of the aristocracy of the Labour Party. His father was a Labour Cabinet Minister who became a Labour hereditary peer, and Tony Benn was fond of saying that the normal path of Labour MPs was to begin on the left and end up in the House of Lords. He said he did it the other way round, because he succeeded, in theory, to his father's peerage, but renounced it and then moved to the left, so his path was the opposite.

He was born as Anthony Wedgwood Benn, in April 1935, into a highly political family. His father and both of his grandfathers had been Liberal MPs. His father was William Wedgwood Benn, who was the youngest MP elected in 1906, the year of the great Liberal landslide, and when his father married, in 1920, Asquith, the former Prime Minister and Liberal Leader, was one of the witnesses. The only condition that Benn's father imposed on his wife was that she should abstain from drink because Benn's father was a lifelong teetotaler. Their honeymoon – they were very political – their honeymoon was spent in Geneva, attending the inaugural meeting of the League of Nations.

Benn's mother, Margaret, was interested in theology, and began as an Anglican, but was rebuked by the Archbishop of Canterbury for advocating the ordination of women, and in consequence, she left the Anglican Church and joined her husband's church, the Congregationalists, and became a founder president of the Congregational Foundation.

In 1927, Benn's father left the Liberals and joined the Labour Party, but characteristically, he resigned his seat and sought nomination for a Labour constituency, and was returned as a Labour MP in 1928. In the

second minority Labour Government, under Ramsay Macdonald, he was made a Cabinet Minister as Secretary of State for India, and it was through that that the young Benn, as a young boy, met Gandhi.

Tony Benn was born in the corridors of power. The family lived in Westminster, next door to Sidney and Beatrice Webb, two early socialists, and Benn attended Westminster public school. He was politically conscious from a very early age. When he was 17, he walked into the Labour Party Headquarters in Transport House and joined the Labour Party. But he said he had an experience earlier than that which marked him for life. He said, when he was five years old, he was dangled on the knee of Prime Minister of Ramsay Macdonald, and he says he has never trusted a Labour Leader since!

Indeed, he managed to clash with every single Labour Leader during his time in Parliament, except for Attlee. He clashed with Hugh Gaitskell, with Harold Wilson, with James Callaghan, Michael Foot, Neil Kinnock, John Smith, and Tony Blair.

In 1942, Benn's father was made a peer, so as to improve Labour representation in the Upper House, and in those days, being a peer meant being a hereditary peer. Life peerages were not possible until the Life Peer Act of 1958. So, being a hereditary peer meant one's eldest son would go to the Lords and therefore not be able to pursue a political career. Now, at the time, this did not seem to matter because Anthony Wedgwood Benn was the second son of his father, and the older brother, Michael, intended to enter the church and said he had no objection to his father taking the peerage. His father took the title Lord Stansgate, and he became Secretary of State for Air in Attlee's post-War Government.

Meanwhile, Tony Benn went to Oxford in 1941, but in 1943, at the age of 18, he joined the RAF and learnt to fly. He was sometimes regarded as a pacifist, which he never was. He served as a pilot in South Africa and Rhodesia, and he said that was a great education for him because he saw at first-hand how the native population was treated, and he became a supporter of rapid colonial independence. He said, in his own words: "The treatment of the blacks was appalling. Africa was my introduction to the real world, after having had such a limited education. I learnt an enormous amount, which I could not be learnt if the War had not occurred." He said, "Africa was my comprehensive school."

His father, remarkably, was already serving in the Air Force. He joined the Air Force in 1940, at the age of 63, working in the Air Ministry, and then, at the age of 67, he flew as an air gunner and was mentioned in despatches.

His older brother, Michael, was also in the RAF and was a night fighter pilot who won the DFC for action in North Africa and Europe, but tragically, he was killed in an air accident, not in service, but an accident, in 1944, at the age of 22. This of course was a tragic family event, but it had great political consequences because it meant that Anthony himself was now in line for the peerage and it meant the end of his political career, in theory.

Meanwhile, he went back to Oxford, where he became President of the Union. He later removed the details of his education from "Who's Who", in 1977, shortly after adopting the style "Tony Benn" to replace "Anthony Wedgwood Benn", and education, instead of Westminster and New College Oxford, he replaced it with, "Education - still in progress"!

He married in 1949. He had met his wife the year previously. She was an American student who had come to Oxford for a summer course, and in Benn's own words: "We met in August 1948 and, as I was shy, I did not ask her to marry me for 11 days." He said, "I proposed on a bench in Oxford. I bought the bench and it has sat in our front garden all her life." She died some years ago and he said, "It is now beside her grave."

They have four children and were a highly political family. Benn's oldest daughter was a student at the LSE in the 1970s, and organised a demonstration against him for not doing household chores. She stood in Holland Park Avenue, where Benn lived, handing out leaflets, "End sexism in the Benn household!" calling for a more equal distribution of household work. Benn organised a counter-demonstration. One of Benn's sons, Hilary Benn, sits as MP for Leeds Central, and became a Cabinet Minister under Brown, and is a Shadow Minister under Miliband, and Hilary Benn says he is a Benn but not a Bennite. Benn's granddaughter, one of his granddaughters, Emily, stood for Labour in 2010, for a hopeless seat in Worthing, but at the age of 18, she was by far the youngest candidate in the election campaign. Benn's grandchildren's idea of fun, apparently, was to hold a mock press conference. There are therefore five generations of Benns in politics, as you can see.

After leaving Oxford and getting married, Benn got into the House of Commons in 1950, as a result of a by-election in Bristol South-East, a Labour seat. He managed to defeat, for the nomination, an ex-Cabinet Minister and a former MP, and he was the baby of the House - he was 25. His father said that his own father had become an MP at the age of 42, he had become an MP at the age of 28, and that Anthony had been chosen at the age of 25, so the family seems to be getting more precocious from generation to generation.

When he entered Parliament, Benn was not particularly left-wing. Indeed, in the battle between Hugh

Gaitskell and Aneurin Bevan over health charges, Benn took Gaitskell's side. He said it was a question of priorities and one should not be dogmatic about charges in the Health Service. He was not associated with any faction in the Labour Party in the 1950s, and indeed, he voted for Gaitskell rather than Bevan as Leader in 1955.

He rose steadily in the Labour Party hierarchy and was put on the Opposition Front Bench in 1957, but he resigned quietly in 1958 since he said he could not accept a defence policy based on the use of nuclear weapons.

But he did not associate himself with the left particularly. He became very interested in technology, and was one of the first to recognise the importance of television, and in 1959, he was chosen to chair Labour's Party Election broadcasts, and I will show you the first minute of one of them. It will look rather old-fashioned to you now, but in 1959, it did seem quite a change from the traditional, rather staid format.

[Recording plays]

Good evening. The big news tonight of course is from Washington and Moscow, and later on, Nye Bevan will be talking about it. Then, we shall be going over to Newcastle to join Hugh Gaitskell. But, first, the pension scheme... This has caught the imagination of people all over Britain. The Tories don't like it. Woodrow Wyatt questions Dick Crossman...

Well, Dick Crossman said about Benn, "His enthusiasm is, for me, the reverse of infectious!"

After the election, which Labour lost, at the age of 34, Benn was made Shadow Transport Minister. Indeed, he was the youngest Shadow Minister at the age of 34, and he argued for many things which were later to come about: compulsory seat-belts, harsher penalties for drunken drivers, and MOT tests.

But he gradually turned against the Leader of his Party, Hugh Gaitskell, who he thought was splitting it unnecessarily. He sought a compromise on the issue of nuclear weapons, and when that was not accepted, he again resigned. That was a brave thing to do, as he would need Gaitskell's support for the fight to renounce his peerage. He later said it was a mistake to resign, it was impulsive and it had no effect, and he had learnt his lesson – he never resigned again, even when the Labour Cabinets of the 1960s and 1970s moved in directions that were distasteful to him.

He voted for Harold Wilson in the leadership election of November 1960, which Wilson lost to Gaitskell, and his name was not supported by Gaitskell for election to the Labour Shadow Cabinet. A list of the names was published in the Times, and there were asterisks with the names of the candidates who were supported by Gaitskell – there was no asterisk behind Benn's name.

Benn's father rang him from the House of Lords to say, "I am very glad to see there is not an asterisk against your name. I am so pleased you are not an approved candidate." These were the last words that Benn's father addressed to him, as shortly afterwards, at the age of 83, he had a heart attack and died, and this made Benn automatically a peer.

The day after his father died, he received a letter with his National Insurance cards from the House of Commons addressed to "Lord Stansgate", and he was not allowed into the House of Commons. He called on the Speaker, who said to him, "I have made an order, my Lord, that you are to be kept out of the Chamber." The press called him "the reluctant peer". Benn said that was wrong. He took some blood out in a vial and said he did not have blue blood at all, and that he was not a "reluctant peer" but a "persistent commoner".

He said he was going to fight the automatic accession to the peerage and fight for the right to renounce, and in that, he had support from Winston Churchill, who wrote him a letter saying that he was personally strongly in favour of sons having the right to renounce irrevocably the peerage they inherit from their fathers. Benn said the issue was the right of a constituency to choose whoever they wanted to represent them, and so he resigned his seat and fought a by-election in March 1961 in Bristol, which he won with 70% of the vote.

But he was still not entitled to sit in the Commons, and a Select Committee was set up to consider this issue, and the Select Committee came to the conclusion that no change could be made because they said Mr Justice Dodderidge, in 1626, had said that a peerage was a "personal dignity annexed to the posterity and fixed in the blood". The Select Committee asked the question: had Roger le Bygod the legal right to make a valid surrender of the Earldom of Norfolk in 1302? Benn said that sort of thing would not go down very well in Bristol!

He then called on the Clerks in the House of Lords to discuss what procedures he could adopt, and he said they were very insulted that anybody did not want to be a peer. He said: "If I had arrived with a string around my trousers and a choker scarf and said I was a dustman but thought I had a strong claim to be the Earl of Dundee, I think they would have treated me with more respect!"

As I say, he was re-elected with 70% of the vote, and Churchill sent him £5 towards his election expenses, but he was still not allowed to enter the House of Commons, and his opponent, a Conservative, took the seat, though he had only won 30% of the vote. No Liberal had stood. His opponent was declared elected by an election court. Ironically, his opponent was himself the heir to a peerage, held by his cousin, and Benn said the situation could be most easily resolved if he murdered his opponent's cousin.

Benn persisted endlessly, and in the end, he won, and in 1963, a Peerage Act was passed allowing peers to renounce, and immediately the Act was passed, Benn raced down the corridors to be the first to sign the newly created Register of Renunciation. Oddly enough, only fifteen others did the same in the first twenty years of this legislation.

At that point, Benn's Conservative opponent sportingly resigned, and Benn won his by-election in August 1963. Incidentally, as a matter of curiosity, the title is not abolished, only the requirement to sit in the Lords, so Benn's eldest son, Stephen, will become Lord Stansgate when Benn dies, though he will presumably renounce his title.

But the peerage fight had a very powerful effect on Benn's thinking, in my view, and he said the most important thing with the Establishment was to show tenacity. He said the Establishment could be worn down if you did not give up. He said, at first, when you made a proposal, they would say you were completely mad, you were off your head, they did not take you seriously; then they would say you were simply wrong, it was absurd, and no one could support what you were doing; and then said, well, perhaps you are right, but now is not the right time; and then, afterwards, they said, well, of course, everyone was in favour of it all the time really!

And the same happened with his two other victorious constitutional campaigns: the campaign for the referendum in the 1970s, and the campaign that Labour Party members should be allowed to elect the leader in the 1980s. No one I think now disputes that they are all sensible reforms.

There is another similarity, a rather sad similarity, that all these reforms benefited other people and not Benn, because the renunciation of the peerage enabled Lord Home to renounce his peerage in the same year, 1963, and become Prime Minister when Harold Macmillan resigned, so it got the Conservative Party out of a difficulty, helped the Conservatives. Benn sometimes protested about that, as if the Act had been really just personally for him, but of course, it was not for him, it was for other people as well.

Now, in 1964, the year after the renunciation, Labour won the election, and Benn became Postmaster General, the youngest minister, at the age of 39, and then two years later, in the Cabinet, in 1966, as Minister of Technology.

While he was Minister of Technology, he came to the conclusion that if we were to control modern technology, we needed new democratic machinery. He said, "We are trying to control twentieth century society with democratic tools which were fashioned in the nineteenth century," and he said we needed to do that by finding new instruments of democracy.

Now, 1968 was the year of the student revolt and the years of revolts against elected leaders and non-elected leaders in many parts of the world: the revolt in Czechoslovakia which led to Soviet intervention; a student revolt in France which almost led to the end of de Gaulle's regime; and a student revolt in America which persuaded President Johnson that he could not stand again because of the serious protests of the time.

Benn was one of the first to notice the significance of these revolts and, in an important speech in May, 1968, he said that much of the discontent was a protest against traditional political institutions. He said: "Many people do not think it is responding quickly enough to the mounting pressure of events or the individual or collective aspirations of our community. It would be foolish to assume that people will be satisfied for much longer with a system which confines their national political role to the marking of a ballot paper with a single cross once every five years. People want a much greater say. That certainly explains some of the student protests against the authoritarian hierarchies in some of our universities and their sense of isolation from the problems of real life. Much of the industrial unrest, especially in unofficial strikes, stems from worker resentment and their sense of exclusion from the decision-making process, whether by their employers or sometimes by their union leaders."

Participation was to be a key theme for the rest of his career, to be secured, firstly, by freedom of information legislation, so that people could understand the basis of decisions being made; secondly, by the referendum, and he said that technology now made electronic referendums possible; thirdly, by decentralisation; fourthly, by industrial democracy and worker control, because he said the power of the trade unions at present was a purely negative power, the power to go on strike and dislocate the system - it should be converted into a positive power; and, fifthly, by encouraging the growth of pressure groups to represent the excluded, in particular, ethnic minorities, tenants, consumers and so on. He said: "Beyond parliamentary democracy as we know it, we shall have to find a new popular democracy to replace it. Individuals are demanding the right to renegotiate the social contract on a personal basis, and are thus

providing a completely new dimension and meaning to the phrase "government by consent".

In 1970, the Labour Party was defeated in the election and Benn moved into opposition. He was one of the few Ministers, if not the only one, who left office more socialist than when he joined it. His move to the left after the 1970 defeat, and even more after the defeat in 1979, was attributed by his enemies to opportunism, but it can be argued that it resulted from his analysis of the causes not only of Labour's defeat but of its failure to satisfy its supporters in office. Of course, he was following in the footsteps of his father, who also moved to the left during his political career. Indeed, Benn said that his family had a very unusual gene, which, instead of making them conservative as they aged, made them more radical.

He proposed, in 1971, that there should be a referendum before Britain entered the Common Market, as the European Union was then called, and the first time he proposed it on Labour's National Executive, he could not even find a seconder. But James Callaghan, rather presciently said, "Tony may be launching a little rubber life raft which we will all be glad of in a year's time." What Callaghan meant was the referendum would paper over the cracks in the Labour Party between those who wanted Britain to join or stay in, and those who wanted Britain to leave the European Community. It is the same concept that Cameron is adopting with his proposal for a referendum: it papers over the cracks in the Conservative Party.

Eventually, again through persistence, Benn got his way, and Labour committed itself to a referendum, and Benn was appointed Industry Secretary in the second Wilson Government, in 1974, and a referendum was agreed, together with a constitutional innovation which allowed the minority of Ministers who were opposed to entry into the Community, who thought Britain should leave, to express their own views on that, against Government policy, but only outside Parliament. This put Benn in some difficulty when he was asked questions as Industry Secretary, but he dealt with these difficulties in a characteristically humorous way. He was asked the question: would the steel industry get more or less cash under European Community rules?

Benn said, "I have nothing to add to the speech made in other parts of the country by my Right Honourable Friend, the Member for Bristol South-East!" It took a moment for people to get the joke.

Benn himself was moving against Europe because of a worry about the loss of sovereignty. It was not the worry of the right-wing loss of sovereignty, it was a left-wing worry, that Europe would prevent Britain moving along the road to socialism. He said that required a siege economy, what he called the "alternative economic strategy", with import controls, restrictions on the export of capital, and a policy of national planning. That was the main alternative policy to that adopted by the Labour leadership in the 1970s.

When Harold Wilson resigned in 1976, Benn stood for the leadership and came a respectable fourth, with 37 votes, and switched his vote then to Michael Foot, who was however defeated by Callaghan. Many thought, at that time, that Benn would be a future Leader of the Labour Party.

Callaghan said, rather unkindly, to Benn: "I can see you as Leader of the Labour Party in opposition, and ten years in opposition you will be!" In fact, he was never Leader of the opposition, and Labour was eighteen years in opposition.

In 1979, the Government was defeated, and Benn handed in the seals of office, and the Queen made a comment to him, of a kind, apparently, she usually made, saying that a predecessor, as a resigning minister, had just come in and said what a strain it was and there was some relief to be relieved from the stains of office. Benn said, told her, "Whereas 25 years ago, we were an empire, now we are a colony, with the IMF running our financial affairs, and the Common Market Commission running our legislation, and NATO running our armed forces." He says the Queen quickly changed the subject...!

He decided not to stand for the Shadow Cabinet in opposition, but to try and reform the Labour Party to make it more accessible to its members. What he wanted were three reforms, two of which he secured.

The first was automatic reselection of MPs, compulsory reselection of Labour MPs, so that they remained accountable to their constituency parties and their membership, and they couldn't do what, in his view, they had been doing: following policies in opposition to the wishes of their constituency members. That was agreed by the Labour Party in 1979.

Secondly, he wanted the Leader to be elected not just by the MPs, but by the organisations outside Parliament - the constituency Labour Parties and the trade unions. That was defeated in 1979, but gained victory in 1980.

The third thing he wanted was that the Manifesto, the Labour Party Manifesto, should not be written by the Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet, but by the National Executive of the Party, representing the extra-Parliamentary Party. That was not accepted.

He also committed the Labour Party, in 1980, to widespread and radical reforms: the removal of all American nuclear bases from Britain; withdrawal from Europe, without a referendum; widespread nationalisation; and if there was resistance from the House of Lords, abolishing it by creating a thousand peers.

The compulsory reselection of MPs annoyed, as you can imagine, some of his parliamentary colleagues, and was partly responsible for the growth of a breakaway party, the Social Democrat Party, the SDP, led by Roy Jenkins, another of my subjects, which 27 Labour MPs eventually joined.

In 1980, Michael Foot replaced Callaghan as Labour Leader. Benn did not stand. That was the last election held under the old rules, in which just the MPs voted. Benn did not stand himself, but decided, in 1981, that he would stand for the Deputy Leadership, and he was very narrowly defeated for the Deputy Leadership by Denis Healey, by a whisker. Healey got under 51% and Benn over 49% of the vote, but most of Benn's support came from outside Parliament, from the constituency Labour Parties and from the trade unions, and most of Healey's support came from MPs. It was a narrow defeat, and it was generally attributed to a defection at the last moment by the so-called soft-left, led by Neil Kinnock, who had previously been a supporter of Benn, but who thought that a combination of Michael Foot and Tony Benn leading the Labour Party would condemn it to oblivion, and indeed that it would fall behind the SDP/Liberal alliance, as in fact it almost did, because the 1983 Election was a disaster for Labour. Labour won just 27%, the worst performance it has ever had as a mass party. The Election of 2010, when Labour got 29%, was its second worst performance as a mass party. But that 27% was just 2% ahead of the vote of the Liberal/SDP alliance, and it may well be that Healey's election saved the Labour Party, that they would have come third if it had not been for that.

Both Foot and Benn took the view, from that Election, and quite right I think, that the problem was the Labour Party had been talking to itself about problems that interested itself, the constitutional structure of the Labour Party, rather than to the British public. Benn said later that the trouble with the 1981 Deputy Leadership campaign was that it was directed members of the Party, whereas it should have been directed at the public, but it was a bit late to say that. After all, the Parliamentary Labour Party was answerable to the voters as well as to the Party Conference and the Party members.

As I say, Benn was defeated by a whisker in 1981, but that proved to be the high point for the left, and after that, it was downhill all the way. There was a slow and steady right-wing recovery, until, under New Labour, and policies very different from those Benn advocated, Labour finally won an election in 1997.

But already, by the mid-'80s, Benn was complaining that all his supporters had deserted him for Kinnock, and he said: "I am now alone with Dennis Skinner and the headbangers!"

In 1988, Benn contested the leadership of the Labour Party again, against Neil Kinnock, and won just 11% of the vote, against Kinnock's 89%. This was ironic: his only attempt at the leadership, under the new rules that he himself had supported, and he gained a pathetic share of the vote. The beneficiary of all that was Kinnock, later John Smith, and later Tony Blair, all of whom Benn strongly opposed.

Benn took his defeat philosophically. He said, "I dare say that the General Secretary of the scribes and Pharisees announced in Jerusalem in AD32, "What's the point of following a leader who gets crucified?" He said, "That may have been the birth of the new realism, for all I knew."

He opposed all the wars of the 1980s and 1990s, though not a pacifist. He was opposed to the Falklands War. He was opposed to the Gulf War. Indeed, he met Saddam Hussein to try and get agreement on withdrawal from Kuwait, which he failed to do. He opposed the second Iraq War. Indeed, he was President of the Stop the War Coalition. But his day was now over, and he was overcome by New Labour, and perhaps the final humiliation came in 1995, when Tony Blair removed Clause IV from the Labour Party Constitution.

In 2001, Tony Benn left Parliament for the reason, as he put it, "to devote more time to politics", and in 2003, at the age of 78, in that year, he held 142 political meetings, gave 235 radio broadcasts, and 150 television appearances. The Speaker of the Commons gave him Freedom to use the Commons' Library, the tea-rooms, and to sit in the Peers' Gallery to listen to debates, "without the humiliation," as Benn put it, "of being a Lord".

He published eight volumes of Diaries, just 10% of the total - he had kept a diary, almost the whole period, from 1950, and eight volumes published, but they are 10% of the total, a total of 15 million words, 1.5 million published.

In 2005, he collapsed at a Labour Party Conference after addressing five fringe meetings in a day - he was 80. He was put in an oxygen mask, and his son, Hilary, who was a Labour MP, came to see him, and when the mask was taken off Tony Benn, he said to Hilary, "Now, about your speech in Conference..."

In BBC2's "Daily Politics", in January 2007, he was declared Britain's Political Hero by 38%, in a rather unscientific poll, 38%, compared with 35% for Margaret Thatcher.

In July 2009, he had a pacemaker fitted, and he made the final entry in his Diary. He said, "The battery lasts ten years, so I think it will see me out."

He received an unexpected encomium when, in September 2009, in an interview with me at the Woodstock Literary Festival, David Cameron said that Benn's "Arguments for Democracy" was one of the books that had most influenced him, an unexpected encomium.

But he had just received another encomium, in September 2008, when he said he received a death threat. He said: "I was very chuffed as I have not had one for years!"

He said, "Once I was called "the most dangerous man in Britain", now I am told I am a national treasure."

He said, "That is the final corruption in life: you become a kindly, harmless old gentleman." He said, "I am kindly, I am old, and I can be a gentleman, but I am not harmless."

In conventional terms, Benn was unsuccessful. He was in the Cabinet for nine years, but has no really major legislation to his name. The worker cooperatives he supported all failed. The Industry Bill, which involved greater intervention in British industry in the 1970s also failed, and was repealed and repudiated by Margaret Thatcher. His Alternative Economic Strategy was not tried. His great opponent, Denis Healey, said his one achievement was the Concorde supersonic airliner, which has also now come to an end, his only memorial, as Healey said, "...an aircraft which is used by wealthy people on their expense accounts, whose fares are subsidised by much poorer taxpayers." He failed twice to become Leader of the Labour Party, and failed to become Deputy Leader. The ideas associated with Benn seem to have been totally superseded by Tony Blair and New Labour - difficult to imagine that the policies he supported, of nationalisation, egalitarianism, unilateral disarmament, all those policies, difficult to believe they will ever again form part of the Labour Party's platform.

Where he succeeded was in his constitutional reforms, and he said the key questions to ask of anyone with power, he said there were five questions you ought to ask: first, what power have you got; second, where did you get it from; thirdly, in whose interests do you exercise it; fourthly, to whom are you accountable; and fifthly, how can we get rid of you?

The key theme of his political career is that challenge to non-elected authority, whether in the Labour Party, the leadership, or amongst the MPs, or in the House of Lords, or in what he saw as international capital in the IMF, and perhaps most of all in the European Union, and many people would share his view about the lack of accountability of European leaders.

So, he was a strong constitutional reformer, although one constitutional reform he was strongly against was proportional representation, and he once said to Neil Kinnock, "The reason for that is that, if we had a list system of proportional representation, I would be number 599 out of 600 on your Labour Party list," and Neil Kinnock replied, "Do you want that in writing?!"

The primacy of elected authority was what was important to Benn. As I said, his three major reforms all helped others: the Peerage Act benefited the Conservatives and Alec Douglas-Home; the referendum gave the pro-marketters their greatest victory ever, a two to one majority in the 1975 referendum; the Labour Party reforms benefited Neil Kinnock, John Smith and Tony Blair.

But all of these reforms are now accepted by everyone, whether they are on the left or not. There is no one who now suggests that a hereditary peer should not be allowed to renounce his peerage - indeed, the very idea seems absurd, and I think people here would agree with Benn and say, "Well, we were always in favour of that all along!"

No one now disputes the need, I think, for referendums on major constitutional issues, and I think most people favour one on the European Union, as David Cameron has proposed, and the referendum has had a great impact on British life. It is possible that we would be in the Euro if it was not for the referendum, because Tony Blair wanted to bring us in, but no opinion poll since 1997 has ever shown a majority for joining the Euro, so it is possibly due to the referendum that we have not joined the Euro. Without the referendum, we might have adopted a different electoral system because the Coalition agreed to the alternative vote if accepted by referendum, and it was rejected by referendum. So, the referendum has had a huge impact on British life.

No one I think believes that only MPs should select the party leader. The other parties have adopted the reforms of the Labour Party. The Liberal and Conservative Parties also elect their leader through their party members as well as MPs. Indeed, the Liberals were first in the field, it is fair to say, in 1976, when David Steel was elected leader. But the Conservatives, having opposed Benn very strongly, they also now elect their leader through the machinery of their members as well as Parliament. That is all accepted.

From this point of view, Benn is a living presence and I think will remain so for many years to come. But over and above that, Benn believed that the real function of a political leader was to be a teacher. He once said that he had produced in motion in Parliament that, in one fell swoop, would repeal all Margaret Thatcher's

legislative measures – it would be a repeal of every single Act of Parliament that had been passed between 1979 and 1990. But he said, even if that succeeded, even if it got through Parliament, which of course it would not, he said it would not make any difference because he said, “Margaret Thatcher’s great achievement was not as a legislator or a manager, but as a teacher,” though he disagreed with the lessons she taught. He said, “The problem with the left is it has not had a teacher since the days of Aneurin Bevan.” He said it was better, in politics, to be a signpost than a weathercock, and he said Margaret Thatcher was a signpost – he did not agree with the direction she was going in, but it was a better role to have, and he wanted to be a teacher of the left.

Did he succeed himself in being a teacher of the left, or did he, on the contrary, prevent the left facing the changed conditions of the last part of the twentieth century? Did the left need to overcome his legacy in order to win power, which is what Tony Blair would have said and what Neil Kinnock would have said, or, in the light of the financial crisis of 2007, the problems with the market system, the problems, if you like, with capitalism, will the left return to his ideas? In other words: was Tony Benn a prophet of the future or was he a throwback to an unusable past? Well, that, ladies and gentlemen, I leave to you – thank you.

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