

Ken Livingstone, *You Can't Say That*, Faber and Faber 2011, 720 pages, ISBN 9780571280384, £25.00

This autobiography of Ken Livingstone provides a fascinating account of the life, both personal and political, of one of the most colourful and committed leading figures in the history of the Labour Party. The text is, however, more than an autobiography. It is a vigorous assertion of a radical view of the future of society, based on the interests of working people. He argues for full employment, decent working conditions, social security, good and affordable housing, the protection of civil rights, including the rights of minorities, and the preservation of peace and the end of imperialism.

You Can't Say That provides a lively commentary on many events in Labour's more recent history during the years of his participation. It also offers observations on prominent personalities in British politics, including the labour movement. One of the attractive features of the autobiography is the evident modesty of the author. In dealing with his childhood and adolescence, for example, he makes no exaggerated claims of academic distinction. His progress at school was modest and he does not hesitate to say so. He is content to emphasise the development of his lifelong interest in the world of nature; animals, insects and particularly pond-life. Indeed, one of his early ambitions was to secure employment in zoology. He ultimately trained as a teacher.

Ken Livingstone was born and brought up in a South London working-class family. He was born in 1945. His father was not a Labour supporter. He says of his parents' politics that the only policy of the 1945 Labour Government they supported was the foundation of the National Health Service.

Ken's first political awakening came with the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. The assassination of John F. Kennedy also influenced him. He noted with approval that Roy Jenkins, as Labour Home Secretary, liberalised censorship, divorce, abortion and homosexuality. He was influenced towards the left in politics by two books he read as a young man. The first

was Orwell's *1984* and the second was *From Yalta to Vietnam* by David Horowitz, which 'demonstrated the lengths to which the US would go to overthrow governments to secure economic advantage'. Ken Livingstone adds: 'The US propped up brutal dictatorships as long as they could siphon off wealth or use land for military bases while claiming to defend democracy from communism'.

Ken eventually joined the Labour Party in 1969. He quickly became an active member. In an early contribution to a debate at a Labour Party meeting he called for a reduction in military spending and he opposed any curtailment of trade union rights. His support for trade unionism has been consistent throughout his adult life. He writes also that he was happy to work with Marxist splinter groups 'on issues where we agreed', but he believed that more could be achieved 'if we could radicalise the Labour Party'. Ken was, as he acknowledges, a 'reformist' who believed that the state could manage things better. Revolution was for people who had nothing to lose but their lives.

Earlier in his life – after leaving school – Ken had enquired about possible employment at London Zoo but there were no vacancies. He did, however, obtain employment as an apprentice animal technician at the Royal Marsden Hospital in West London. He preferred to work with animals rather than to join his father on a window-cleaning round.

In 1971, Ken was elected to the Lambeth Borough Council. It was the beginning of his distinguished record in local government. Within the Lambeth Labour Group there was a struggle for influence between left and right. Ken describes himself as an 'enthusiastic participant' in this struggle. He specialised in housing, and many working families had the benefit of his influence. Ken was elected vice-chair of the Housing Committee. John Major, later to become a Conservative Prime Minister, had been the chairman of the Lambeth Housing Committee. Ken speaks well of him and acknowledges that 'he had a reputation for innovation'. He also formed an admiration for Harold Wilson and Tony Crosland among the Labour leaders of the time.

Ken also pays tribute to Ron Haywood, former General Secretary of the Labour Party. From personal experience of working for a short time with Ron I can confirm Ken's opinion. Ron was always helpful to active members. He quotes Ron as saying: 'our problem wasn't reds under the bed but reactionaries in the cupboard'. Well said, Ron!

In 1973, Ken was elected to the newly created Greater London Council. He soon distinguished himself and within two or three years was being considered by some of his colleagues as a possible future leader. He was eventually elected leader when he was only 35 years of age. Changes were made to show that there was a 'new broom'. Among them was the abolition

of the leader's chauffeur-driven car. Ken travelled by Tube. Numerous other changes were proposed to stimulate employment and to cut the price of school meals. There was legal resistance to some of the proposed changes. At one period during his leadership Ken was doing about 300 public meetings a year. Under his leadership improvements were made to the transport system, crime and anti-social behaviour were tackled vigorously, employment was promoted and racial toleration was encouraged.

Within the top leadership of the Conservative Party – notably Mrs Thatcher – there was strong opposition to the policies of the GLC and of its leader. This opposition culminated in the legal abolition of the GLC. This took place at the end of March 1986. After Labour's defeat in the 1983 General Election, the Conservatives had a comfortable majority in Parliament. Nevertheless opinion polls still showed that a majority of Londoners were against the abolition of the GLC.

One important reason why Ken Livingstone decided eventually to accept nomination for a Parliamentary seat was his conviction, based upon experience, that local authority powers and authority were being diminished. Interestingly, in the selection process of the Labour candidate for Hampstead in 1979, where Ken was selected, his opponent was Vince Cable, who later became a Liberal Democrat and is now in the Coalition Government.

There is much else in the life of Ken Livingstone deserving of inclusion in a book review. He has been a Member of Parliament (for Brent East), the Mayor of London, and he has been prominent in the Labour Party not only in London but also at national level. He is far from finished. Later this year he will again be Labour's candidate for the office of Mayor in the capital city.

Space forbids doing justice to the full contribution made by Ken Livingstone. However, it is worthy of special note that Ken is generous in his tribute to the many colleagues who have encouraged him and helped him at different stages in his life. Redmond O'Neill and John Ross are not household names but they both rendered outstanding service. I was pleased also to read kindly references to Ted Knight, the former leader of the Labour Group on Lambeth Council. Ted, as I know from trade union experience, has many attributes.

This is a book that deserves to be widely read.

Jim Mortimer