

History will be kind

*Tony Benn
interviewed by
Tony Simpson*

The Spokesman met Tony Benn at his home in London in October 2011. We had arranged to discuss his long relationship with Ken Coates, and their joint engagement with the Institute for Workers' Control. Tony Benn kindly agreed that excerpts of the interview might also be used as an introduction to a new paperback edition of his book, Speeches, which was edited by Joan Bodington and originally published by Spokesman in 1974, when the IWC was riding high. It's notable that the first selection in Speeches is entitled 'Industrial Democracy and Workers' Control'.

Simpson: Ken Coates was very conscious of the Workers' Control tradition.

Benn: That was where I first got to know him well, when he invited me to a Workers' Control conference, in Nottingham I think.

Simpson: There's a quote in Ken's book *Work-ins, Sit-ins and Industrial Democracy*, which was published in 1981. He was comparing the difference between GEC (General Electric Company) in Liverpool in 1969, and UCS (Upper Clyde Shipyards) two years later. He said that there was a technical difference in the nature of the product, one was producing ships and the other was producing electronic equipment, but he also said that there was an important political difference. The Labour government had fallen and one of its most prominent Labour spokesmen had become convinced that the Labour Party's future depended on its willingness to become the champion of the cause of industrial democracy – he was talking about you. UCS was quite a triumph.

Benn: It was really. They succeeded in keeping the thing going. There was a lot of official support; Harold Wilson supported UCS, and the TUC was quite interested in it.

Simpson: The Scottish TUC ran a conference – it was a kind of inquiry or hearing. You refer to this in some of the speeches in your book.

Benn: Yes and the thing about Ken was that he really was a teacher of all the material you publish now and that he used to publish. He threw light on progressive issues that people may not have understood.

Simpson: I met him as a pupil in one of his WEA (Workers' Educational Association) classes; it was called '*Political Power in Britain*' and this was the autumn of 1979. Of course, it was a very interesting time to be sitting down with him and there he was convincing all these sceptics that what was happening within the Labour Party was for the good, that we were seeking to democratise this Party. In this respect the Institute for Workers' Control was again on a rising tide.

Benn: When I went to the IWC conferences, I noticed that many of the people there were Socialist Workers Party people. I was under extremely heavy criticism for not having done more when I was a minister, and I was slightly worried that I was a symbol of hostility that would embarrass Ken. But he rode over these things perfectly easily.

Simpson: The IWC was a place where the SWP, the International Marxist Group (IMG) and everybody else could actually come and have their say. We would give lifts to the local affiliates or activists in those organisations to various conferences

Benn: In a way, the Stop the War Coalition and the Coalition of Resistance were triggered and to some extent organised by the SWP people, or the ex-SWP people. The conclusion that I came to was that it is possible to be a socialist in the Labour Party, but the Labour Party is not a socialist party!

Simpson: Yes, and I think that's probably why Ken wasn't too distressed when he was expelled, because he was a socialist and his approach was a socialist approach. That's why he was an exciting person to work with because he did open up the possibilities of doing things in a different way. He had a different way of thinking, which is not so widely found these days, and what we're trying to do is to preserve and encourage it.

Benn: I think that if you argue for something but don't add the element of abuse it is possible, even within the Labour Party, to make a bit of progress. It's when political arguments become personal that you set up a lot of resistance. If you can get things going and interest more and more people, it builds up from underneath; all progress is made at the bottom, it's never at the top.

Simpson: Were there other openings for industrial democracy?

Benn: There was the one when I was at the Department of Industry – a

little co-operative I set up called ‘Meriden’ [in 1975 at Triumph Meriden motorcycles near Coventry]. But you can’t lecture people about the need for democracy; either they see the relevance of it and you encourage them, or nothing happens.

Simpson: And that’s really what you were saying in a lot of these speeches, that you can’t actually foist this upon people, it has to come from them – it’s a demand or an aspiration.

Benn: And of course the attitude of the political leadership of the Labour Party to the Trade Union movement is stage one in a way, because if the trade unions feel that they have support from the Parliamentary wing, then that will encourage them to become more imaginative. Otherwise, they just fight on their own in a way that leads to division and no progress.

Simpson: Yes, I was struck by the contrast when you read Ed Miliband’s speeches at the TUC or the Labour Party Conference. Ideas are not developed in these speeches; you have a series of headings with allusions to such things as co-operation or a new bargain. But there seems to be a real dearth of content.

Benn: If you’re a political leader of the Labour Party, and you don’t feel that the Trade Unions are your major allies, and that you must back them up when they take the initiative, you are really cutting yourself off, looking for support from the centre. And the centre never does really come your way.

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Benn: When Blair became leader of the Party, he said ‘New Labour is a new political party’, which is a very bold thing to say – I never joined it, but it was really the beginning of a move by which Blair used the Labour Party for his own advantage ... The Labour Party Conference nowadays is nothing but a press conference for the ministers who attend and a big trade fair.

Simpson: That’s one of the most serious charges that could be made against the Labour Party.

Benn: That it has thrown away its democratic tradition.

Simpson: Yes, and it has extinguished much discussion, debate, as well as human fellowship, which is what brings people together.

Benn: There were fierce arguments about resolutions, but you knew that

if you carried it, it became Party policy, and that protected you if they then abdicated it later, and put the leadership under some pressure.

Simpson: In 1982, you drafted a Bill prohibiting foreign nuclear, chemical and biological military bases in the UK, and it was to do with the conduct of foreign forces and the American influence. It was a part of the European Nuclear Disarmament Campaign. Later in the year, I remember seeing Robin Cook, who was active in END at that time, at the Party Conference in Blackpool. He was a bit perturbed that we had reference to this Bill in the resolution, which was carried by the conference. He said, ‘the first one they’ll arrest will be black American serviceman!’ The Labour Party was actually onside for European Nuclear Disarmament, at the time, and Audrey Wise from the National Executive Committee came to the conferences.

Benn: Actually, the case for nuclear disarmament is so much stronger now than it was then – all of the old moral and political arguments have been supplemented by economic and practical arguments.

Simpson: Yes. If Ed Miliband thought about it, he could get ahead of that argument in the same way he got ahead of the Murdoch argument.

Benn: But in his decision to appoint his own Shadow Cabinet, rather than have it elected by Labour MPs, I can understand why he wanted to be free from the Blairite rump, but at the same time, to reject the accountability of the Shadow Cabinet to MPs is a bit strange really.

Simpson: Yes, and it’s surprising how readily they gave it up. It tells you something about the Parliamentary Labour Party.

Benn: I think that the moves that are going on in the world, the world-wide occupation of capital cities that’s going on now, is part of a stirring which is bound to penetrate the Parliamentary Labour Party from underneath at some stage. The ‘anti-cuts campaign’, for example, has been quite effective.

Simpson: It’s surprising that the resistance isn’t stronger at this point – the onslaughts are so comprehensive. Who would have thought they would not only fragment the health service but also do the same to schools and universities as well?

Benn: Thatcher said that she was the greatest defender of the NHS and that she would never let anyone do anything to it. This is very different from the Cameron line.

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Benn: What do you make of this global movement for the occupation of capital cities?

Simpson: I think it's very interesting that it has kicked off in the United States – 'We're not going to move' – and it seems to me that the United States might be in the early stages of another revolution. I don't know the United States very well – I've been only once – but I've paid a lot of attention to how the US impinges on our life in Britain. I would be interested to know what your views are on what might happen there.

Benn: To mention the word 'socialism' in America is a risky thing to do. When I go there, I could talk about it easily, but I'm not vulnerable to the Tea Party in my local constituency or district. But there is quite an open mind among the intellectuals that you meet and among some American Trade Unions. That could mean something. And the tyranny of the International Monetary Fund, the Central Bank and the European Commission – none of whom are elected – has got us into a position where even quite progressive political parties are moving closer to what is a right-wing solution to all of these problems. So you do wonder whether this movement has some potential for shifting opinion.

Simpson: I was very struck by the state of decay of public amenities in the US – schools, colleges and the rest. It was the Boston Social Forum in 2004, which was just before the Democratic Convention. I stayed with a family (which included a teacher), and she was saying that the library budget had been cut several times, and the buildings were in need of repair. I think Coca Cola had a target to get 30% of the liquid intake of 16-18 year olds, and you could see it in the vestibule of the college. There were these ranks of Coca Cola machines, and also water machines, because they (Coca Cola) were selling water as well. Then there's the extreme poverty with people living under the flyovers, which must be much worse now.

Benn: That situation with the flood in Mississippi – you saw all of these poor, black Americans and it could've taken place anywhere in Africa, and you realise what a large percentage of people in America are on food stamps, or some form of low-level public assistance.

Simpson: My other impression of the US is that, in places, it is socially quite innovative, in that there is a sense of collective self-organisation, 'do-it-ourselves' activism, which is the same energy that drives the impulse to workers' control, that drove Upper Clyde Shipbuilders.

Benn: The end of the Cold War has made that easier because, if you talked about these things during the Cold War, then they said you were a Communist, and I think it's harder to write people off now for left-wing ideas in America.

Simpson: It seems to me that Barack Obama and his team are very much out of touch.

Benn: Yes, I agree with that, and I'm a bit disappointed. I never knew how much would come of it, but I thought that it was a very attractive campaign, and he beat George W Bush; then he made an approach to Russia, and made speeches about Palestine, and I thought something might happen. But now I think that he's a bit of a broken tool.

Simpson: On the question of occupation of capital cities, it's not actually confined only to capitals. There are people camping out elsewhere in San Francisco and Chicago as well, I believe. I went to Japan in August 2011 for the World Conference Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs, which they have every year in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Benn: Yes, on 6th August – I went to one of those once.

Simpson: It's a really powerful experience. You forget what it might mean, but after Fukushima, and the very high levels of nuclear contamination that are now being recorded in that part of Japan, it was a very telling time to be there.

Benn: There was a referendum against nuclear power in Italy.

Simpson: In Italy, there was a referendum that was against, and I think Germany has decided at Parliamentary level to phase out. France hasn't turned yet, as far as I know.

Benn: The French are very, very strong in nuclear power.

Simpson: I think there is a growing movement against, but it's the French who will build new reactors in this country if they get the chance. The extraordinary thing is that the Coalition Government has said not to worry about Fukushima, but to go ahead with the reactors as long as it doesn't cost too much – I think that is the position.

Benn: My view on nuclear power when I was put in charge of it as

Minister of Technology was that it was cheap and safe and peaceful. And I learnt by experience that it isn't cheap; in effect, it doesn't include provision for the storage of nuclear waste; and it isn't safe – look at Chernobyl; and it wasn't peaceful because, actually, the whole basis for nuclear power in Britain was to provide and have a nuclear relationship with America, under which they let us have the weapons and we let them have the plutonium from our nuclear power stations. And so I was converted completely in the other direction.

Simpson: The United States does have a disproportionate influence on affairs in this country.

Benn: Oh yes, very much so. The 'Special Relationship', and so on.

Simpson: It seems to me to be an abusive relationship, in fact.

Benn: The day I was elected to Parliament for the first time (which is a day I will never forget, the 30th November 1950), Harry Truman made a speech saying that he might use atomic weapons in the Korean War, and Attlee actually flew straight to Washington and stopped it. Later, Eisenhower didn't support us and forced Eden out. And then, at the time of the Vietnam War, Wilson absolutely refused to supply even a band of Scottish bagpipers to go to Vietnam, and that's the real basis of the 'Special Relationship', candour between friends. But we are very dependent on the Americans, for their nuclear weapons, and I think that is a factor that influences all Labour leaders in anything that might lead them into conflict with the Americans.

Simpson: That's a case of the 'Emperor's New Clothes', because they could well do without the next instalment on Trident. It serves no military purpose, as Mountbatten said. It was actually Ralph Miliband, Ed's father, who discussed with Ken Coates the European Nuclear Disarmament approach. In the late 1970s, Edward Thompson approached you to lead a campaign against cruise missiles and their installation in this country. Edward and Ken talked to Ralph and, between them, came up with this idea of a broader European Nuclear Disarmament approach. Politically, it was very significant; and I think, in some ways, it helped to create the context for Gorbachev's emergence in the Soviet Union, and the subsequent Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which removed cruise missiles and SS-20s, among others.

Benn: I think that any international campaign for a progressive purpose,

whoever you're working with, adds enormously if you've got more countries involved.

Simpson: The reason I mention the Japanese is because the contacts I made there, who had been visiting the United States, have been joining the occupations in San Francisco and Chicago, which are sympathy actions with the occupation of Wall Street. This idea is bouncing around the world in different places; there's an occupation in Nottingham outside the Council House in Old Market Square – it's fairly modest, but it's an expression of solidarity. I think what it does is expose the fact that people have realised that there is the 1 per cent who are extremely rich and look after themselves, and then there's everybody else. These are very powerful statistics. We used to say, '7:84' [7 per cent of the population have 84 per cent of the wealth]; now it's '1:99'.

Benn: That is a class element coming into discussions now, which I haven't seen at the level it's going on now for a long time.

Simpson: The class is much broader, and I don't think there's been any cogent political response to it, that I have seen as yet.

Benn: If you talk in class terms, it's an acute embarrassment to the Labour leadership, and to Miliband; therefore, they can never quite identify themselves with movements of the kind that are progressive in character.

Simpson: Ken Coates was rather well-disposed towards Ed Miliband.

Benn: I voted for Ed. I thought he would be a better bet than David. He worked in my office, doing work experience years ago.

Simpson: He came to Nottingham with his father, Ralph, in the 1983 election. Ken was standing in Nottingham South and Ralph was on the doorstep for half an hour talking to one family, and Ed was running from door to door. We reminded Ed of that when he came to Nottingham during the leadership election. I feel that he has heard a lot of the arguments about workers' control, about what went wrong, about democracy. But his formation has been governed more by his experiences in the 'Blair machine', and it seems to me that, underneath it, there's the possibility of somebody with rather more decent instincts. I think that has shown itself over Rupert Murdoch; he did very well in handling that and he didn't just do it in interviews; he did it in the House as well, and wrong-footed Cameron at every turn.

Benn: Ralph, whom I knew very well, once said to me, ‘My boys say to me, “Dad, if we did what you want us to do, would it work?” And I used to say, “Sometimes my children say that to me as well”.’ That suspicion of a radical idea of a certain element is a problem. You have to overcome it by showing that it does work and that you can make a lot of friends this way and make a bit of progress.

Simpson: Ken did try to make contact with Ed, because Ed also showed courage in standing for the Leadership against his brother. That took some pluck.

Benn: He won because he appeared to understand what was going on in the country.

Simpson: Yes, that’s right. He wasn’t supposed to win, of course; and that did create a little bit of space for a short time. What will happen now – who knows? But I do wish that he would address the nuclear weapons question.

Benn: So do I.

Simpson: Because Trident is seen publicly as so pointless.

Benn: Well, we can’t use it, we don’t need it, we can’t afford it and we don’t actually have it because it’s American.

Simpson: Yes, and they may build it to a specification that they won’t be able to use in the boats the British Government are building. It’s completely at the discretion of America.

Benn: The Americans want us, not because they need us in economic and military terms, but because if an American president can say he’s working with the British, then that makes the prospects of succeeding rather greater. After Vietnam, they were very frightened of being alone.

Simpson: I was reading an article by Amanda Bowman from Atlantic Bridge, Liam Fox’s organisation. It seems it was principally a US-based thing and Liam Fox was the UK end of it. She wrote this article in the *Washington Times* at the time of the general election of 2010, saying how Cameron’s election would be important for the United States for a number of reasons. She said that more than a million Americans work in the United Kingdom – I’m not sure

whether that figure's right – it sounds very high to me. Clearly, this organisation had the role of smoothing Cameron's path in the United States.

Benn: I think one of the reasons why Cameron wouldn't want to cross Barack Obama would be in case it interfered with the supply of weapons, and of course, the Tea Party group in America are based on the Boston Tea Party as a sort of revival of the anti-colonial liberation movement. It's quite interesting.

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Simpson: I get the increasing impression that we need a European Network for Peace and Human Rights again. Ken started this in 2002 when you came to Brussels and I'd like to try and revive that partly to resist the expansion of NATO – Sweden is expected to join. I have been trying to find people in Sweden who would campaign against it and they said they tried but they couldn't convince people to do so. I was told Norway was the 'good boy' of NATO by some Norwegians. I don't buy that. Actually the Norwegian air force was bombing Tripoli; they were also using their maritime aircraft.

Benn: In this recent event?

Simpson: Yes. They were using the maritime planes to monitor the long coastline. The British services train in the north of Norway. They have radar trained on the Russian missile testing sites. It is an important part of the so-called 'Missile Defence' infrastructure. I don't want Sweden to go in that direction and I don't think it would be good for Europe if Sweden does go further in that direction. The reason I don't think it is good for any of us is because it is about surrounding Russia. It is about intimidating Russia. They would say it is about containing Russia if they were candid, but they probably wouldn't be that candid.

Benn: The trouble is that Yeltsin and the Gorbachev crowd really began to introduce neo-liberalism into the old Soviet Union.

Simpson: Yes, indeed.

Benn: And although I am all in favour of good relations with the Russians because I think the Cold War was a total diversion from what had to be done, it might be difficult to find a progressive point of contact. It might be that it would be seen as just absorbing the old Soviet Union into the European Union.

Simpson: Russia is enormous. It is one seventh of the land area of the planet. I think it would be difficult to absorb into anything. It is just enormous, but it has common interests. Its people have the same needs and the same motivations. It is true that there has been the most extraordinary neo-liberal explosion and some of the people who have enriched themselves now live in London and probably launder their money through the City. My impression is that British policy towards Russia, Foreign Office policy, is two pronged. On the one hand it is publicly hostile, I think, but on the other hand it is more hospitable to Russian capital and to some of those who have fallen out with Putin.

Benn: It is encouraging the very same tendencies.

Simpson: I can understand the Russian alarm at being encircled in the way that they are. Now that Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia are all part of NATO, and they were pushing for Ukraine and Georgia to go in that direction as well, which was a much more pivotal development.

Benn: I always hoped that China might turn out to be a progressive influence but I am not sure how easy it would be to bring that about.

Simpson: Ken always had some hopes of China. It is certainly a powerful influence.

Benn: Oh yes, the shift to the East in global terms is on a huge scale.

Simpson: Ken took a keen interest in Bukharin.

Benn: I remember, yes.

Simpson: And eventually Bukharin was rehabilitated; I think it was 1989. His son, Yuri Larin, is a celebrated artist now in Russia. Ken met Su Shaozhi, the Director of the Institute of Marxism, Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, and Su translated his book about Bukharin into Chinese. Of course, Bukharin was an advocate of the new economic policy and the operation of the market within certain limitations. China has gone way beyond that now. I know Ken was somewhat ambivalent about whether what he'd done was beneficial or not in the greater scheme of things.

Benn: Someone will pick it up and be influenced by it. I think to get the name of Ken and Ken's contribution known more widely would encourage

a lot of people, and so this should be a popular book. He was a teacher really, wasn't he, at heart?

Simpson: Yes.

Benn: That was his start as a WEA teacher. Has anything ever been written about Ken?

Simpson: No that I am aware of. I don't think there has been any kind of comprehensive assessment of his life and I'm not sure we are in a position to do one yet because there are quite a lot of aspects of his life that we don't know about, particularly during the 1950s and early 1960s. The thing about Ken was he would always take on the big issues and he wasn't afraid of them. There was extraordinary courage.

Benn: And imagination.

Simpson: Yes. He would make things easier because he expressed them in human terms. 'Think globally, act locally' was really a very appropriate motto for him. He had an appreciation of formation, by which I mean political formation. He would look to see where people's roots were and where they had come from and this would help him, for example, to understand the French Socialists and their various groupings. He always spoke in the collective, it was always 'us' and 'we'. I remember the IWC was attacked on Question Time one night by a retired general – you were on the programme – and you said you would come back to this question about the IWC. It was attacked for being subversive and encouraging strikes and all kinds of things. You gave a very passionate defence of the work of the Institute for Workers' Control because it was in that spirit of personal liberation and it was to do with people's direct experience.

Benn: And encouragement.

Simpson: Yes. In the 1973 strike there was all this work the IWC did on the coal stocks. It used to be said that the IWC knew more about the coal stocks than Heath did. I don't know whether that was true or not but the outcome was successful. How do you remember Ken now?

Benn: I knew of him earlier, obviously, and during the coals stocks thing I think we made a lot of use of that during the campaign. I knew his name

and a little bit of him and then when I went to Chesterfield he approached me and we had long talks and I was much encouraged by it and I co-operated in some of the projects he had in mind and I believed very strongly in him. I was very sorry he got expelled from the Labour Party, although I understand why, but I felt that he had been picked out.

Simpson: There was a democratic issue, which was to do with the closed list system for electing members of the European Parliament and that was all about controlling who got in. Although he wasn't going to be standing again himself he had a fair point to make on that question.

Benn: I remember him making a passionate speech at Chesterfield Labour Party on that question at the time, which I noted in my diary. He was a friend. I think of him as a friend, somebody I trusted and encouraged me. We could discuss things together and I think history will be very kind to Ken. I think he will be seen to have had a much more important role than people understand.

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