When we heard, one bright Friday morning in March 2014, that Tony Benn had died, Michael Coates remarked how he remembered seeing Tony at Burford for Levellers’ Day, in May 1976. Michael had gone there with his father, Ken Coates. Spokesman later published a pamphlet of Benn’s speech that day, The Levellers and the English Democratic Tradition, which continues to resonate, so we decided to reprint some excerpts to mark Tony’s death. As Ken Coates wrote in his brief introduction:

‘Burford Church overflowed to hear Benn relate the experiences of the Levellers to the movements to extend democracy in today’s society and the struggle to make the powerful institutions which govern our lives accountable for their actions.’

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We are here today to honour the memory of Private Church, Corporal Perkins and Cornet Thompson – three English Levellers executed in Burford churchyard in 1649 for their political activities; to recall the beliefs of the Leveller movement of which they were members; to consider the origins, development and contribution that that movement has made to British democracy and socialism; and to discuss together, in the democratic manner of the Levellers themselves, the relevance of their teaching to our society 325 years after their death.

First, one word of warning: I am no historian and in speaking of the Levellers I cannot claim any academic authority. Any errors must be put down to my ignorance and I hope will be excused.

The issues raised in the historic conflict
between Charles I, resting his claim to govern Britain on the Divine Right of Kings; and Parliament, under its Speaker Lenthall, also a Burford man, which represented – albeit imperfectly – a demand for the wider sharing of power, remain alive in British politics to this day because they concern the use, and abuse of state power, which is a subject of universal and continuing relevance. But the history we learned in our schools was not written to bring out, with equal clarity, the underlying arguments about liberty and equality, and the role of the Levellers who espoused them during those years of revolution. This we are only now rediscovering for ourselves.

The Levellers grew out of the conditions of their own time. They represented the aspirations of working people who suffered under the persecution of kings, landowners and the priestly class and they spoke for those who experienced the hardships of poverty and deprivation.

The Levellers developed and campaigned, first with Cromwell and then against him, for a political and constitutional settlement of the Civil War which would embody principles of political freedom that anticipated by a century and a half the main ideas of the American and French Revolutions. The Levellers advocacy of democracy and equality has been taken up by generations of liberal and Socialist thinkers and activists, pressing for reforms many of which are still strongly contested in our country to this day. The Levellers can now be seen, not only as having played a major role in their own period, but as speaking for a popular liberation movement that can be traced right back to the teachings of the Bible, and which has retained its vitality over the intervening centuries and which speak to us here with undiminished force.

The Levellers found spokesmen and campaigners in John Lilburn, Richard Overton, William Walwyn, Gerrard Winstanley the True Leveller or Digger and others. These men were brilliant pamphleteers enjoying a short-lived freedom to print, publish and circulate their views at a time when censorship was temporarily in abeyance. They developed their own traditions of free discussion and vigorous petitioning and used them to formulate and advance their demands. These demands included the drafting of a major document called ‘The Agreement of the People’ which outlined a new and democratic constitution for Britain. The preamble to the third draft of this Agreement, published on May 1 1649, runs as follows:

We, the free People of England, to whom God hath given hearts, means and opportunity to effect the same, do with submission to his wisdom, in his name, and desiring the equity thereof may be to his praise and glory: Agree to ascertain our Government to abolish all arbitrary Power, and to set bounds and
limits both to our Supreme, and all Subordinate Authority, and remove all known Grievances.

And accordingly do declare and publish to all the world, that we are agreed as followeth,

1. That the Supreme Authority of England and the Territories therewith incorporate, shall be and reside henceforward in a Representative of the people consisting of four hundred persons, but no more; in the choice of whom (according to natural right) all men of the age of one and twenty years and upwards (not being servants, or receiving alms, or having served in the late King in Arms or voluntary Contributions), shall have their voices;

The Levellers held themselves to be free-born Englishmen, entitled to the protection of a natural law of human rights which they believed to originate in the will of God, rights vested in the people to whom alone true sovereignty belonged. These sovereign rights the Levellers held were only loaned to Parliament, to be elected on a wide popular franchise, who would hold them in trust.

The Levellers also believed passionately in religious toleration and rejected oppression by Presbyters as must as by Priests, wishing to end the horrific record of executions, burnings, brandings and banishments that Christians had perpetrated on themselves and others that has led to the martyrdom of thousands of good Catholics and Protestants, dissenters, Jews and Gentiles alike.

The rank and file within the New Model Army spoke through Adjutants, Agents or Agitators (hence the special odium attaching to that word in the British establishment to this day) and they wore the sea-green colours that are still associated with incorruptibility. They demanded and won – for a time – democratic control of the Armed Forces and secured equal representation on a Grand Council of the Army sharing decisions with the Generals and Colonels, known to them as the Grandees. They regarded the Normans as oppressors of England and the King as the symbol of that Conquest who was buttressed and supported by land-owners who had seized much land once held in Common, land that they argued should be restored to Common ownership.

They argued for universal state schools and hospitals to be provided at public expense three centuries before our generation began, so painfully, to construct the Welfare State, the National Health Service and the Comprehensive School system against so much resistance.

The Levellers distilled their political philosophy by discussion out of their own experience, mixing theory and practice, thought and action, and by doing so they passed on to succeeding generations a formula for social
problems of NATO

progress from which we can learn how to tackle the problems of our time. The Levellers won wide public support among the people as a whole; and though Cromwell and his Generals ultimately defeated them, their ideas still retain a special place in the political traditions of the people of England.

Looking back on these ideas from the vantage point of the present, and knowing that they came out of the minds and experience of working people, few of whom enjoyed the formal education available today, it is impossible not to experience again the intense excitement and the controversy, that those demands must have created when they were first formulated. It is also a real comfort for us to discover, that in our present social, political, human and industrial struggles, we are the inheritors of such a strong and ancient tradition of action and analysis …

The Levellers and Today

If the Levellers were here today they might be surprised to find so much attributed to their movement, which for them, must have seemed to have ended in abject failure.

They would be pleased at such progress as we have made since 1649, but, being analysts of the nature of society, they would also see that much of the power structure within the social and political system has survived unscathed despite the outward appearance of reform.

What would the Levellers say to us if they were here today? I hope this question will start a debate and lead on to a fuller examination of the nature of our present society. For my part I think the Levellers would have much to say about the issues which concern us here in England in 1976 – and I have selected ten issues which I believe would concern them.

First The Levellers would surely concentrate their attention on the huge accumulation of financial power in our society; and the continued exclusion of working people from effective democratic power over it, and link the present mal-distribution of wealth, here and world-wide, to the mal-distribution of power. They would champion all those in Britain and throughout the world who experience poverty.

Second The Levellers would view with deep suspicion the power of the military establishments to be found world-wide, sometimes incorporating political police forces which seem to believe that they have a divine right to secrecy served by a network of spies and agents, using bribery and corruption to serve their purposes without regard to moral principles.

Third The Levellers would immediately see the relevance of industrial democracy, by workers’ control or self-management, as a natural extension of the political franchise to replace the power of the new industrial
I am no historian

feudalism which has long established itself through the growth of giant companies. If the Levellers were to describe shop stewards, in this context, as agitators, they would be restoring an ancient and honourable word to its proper meaning, just as each Sunday Anglicans pray for ‘the whole state of Christ’s church militant, here on earth’ – despite the popular odium now attached to all ‘militants’.

**Fourth** The Levellers might see in the immense influence of the educational establishment, under the titular leadership of the universities, a new class of rulers in a self-perpetuating hierarchy, aiming to establish a claim to the ‘private ownership of knowledge’ which by rights is part of ‘the common store house’ belonging to us all.

**Fifth** The Levellers might see in the mass media a modern secular church seeking to control the minds of the people by standard sermons from television pulpits, day after day, and night after night, keeping out dissenters or spokesmen for the common people, imposing a technical monopoly censorship that frustrates the right to free speech because it denies the equally important right to be heard.

**Sixth** The Levellers would uphold the rights of constituents to recall and replace their Parliamentary candidates, on the same basis, and for the same reason, as dissenting chapels claimed the right to appoint and dismiss their Ministers, and because of the inalienable sovereignty of the people which no Parliament has any right to usurp. I imagine that for the same reason they would deeply suspect the law-making powers of the Brussels Commissioners who are not accountable to electors with power to remove them.

**Seventh** The Levellers, and still more the Diggers, would add a new and moral dimension to the movement for conserving the earth’s limited resources by reminding man of his duty to his fellow citizens and his descendants, not to squander the earth’s ‘Common Treasury’ – because it is God’s gift to each generation in turn, a powerful argument for common ownership and a classless society.

**Eighth** The Levellers would demand a far greater public accountability by all those who exercise centralised civil, political, scientific, technical, educational and mass media power, through the great bureaucracies of the world, and would call for the democratic control of it all.

**Ninth** The Levellers would warn against looking for deliverance to any élite group, whatever its origins, even if it came from the Labour movement, who might claim some special ability to carry through reforms by proxy, free from the discipline of recall or re-election. They would argue that all real reform comes from below, and that the self-confidence
of the common people in organising for themselves – in their unions, trades, crafts, local communities and civil and human rights groups, enlarging their own horizons by their own efforts, distilling their own wisdom from their own experience, and breeding their own collective leadership in the process, offered the only real guarantee of advance.

Tenth The Levellers would argue passionately for free speech and make common cause, world-wide, with those who fight for human rights against Tyrants and Dictators of all political colours, not sparing Stalinists who falsely seek to justify uniformity as a necessary defence for socialism.

To summarise all those lessons, the one connecting thread that united the Levellers to each other, and unites us to them, is a passion for democracy advocated for moral and practical reasons, both because it recognises the rights of man, and because democracy imposes responsibilities on those who exercise those rights.

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Alexis Tsipras writes from Greece

Tony Benn’s life graced post-war Europe during the century he lived. His thoughts and actions, inextricably connected until the end, inspired the struggles and embodied the hopes of every socialist, democrat and supporter of the Left, for peace, democracy, social justice and change, during turbulent and rough times for his country and Europe as a whole.

A great and sincere friend of the Greek people, Tony Benn stood by our side, without fail, whenever we really needed it. During the dictatorship, he played a leading role in the international isolation of the junta. More recently, in response to the financial crisis and the arrival of the Troika, he organised a European campaign of solidarity with the Greek people, as chairman of the ‘Coalition of Resistance’.

Tony Benn dedicated his life to serving people and truly embodied the ideals of socialism. He remains not just an emblematic figure to us in Greece, but to every socialist and Leftist in Europe. His politics and policies remain a beacon of hope and a necessary point of reference as European social democracy faces a strategic dilemma: either remain on the Thatcher-inspired one-way-street of Mrs Merkel – the way of austerity and fear – or join with the European Left in the non-negotiable political priorities Tony Benn himself emphasised, namely peace, democracy, dignity of labour, social justice, and development.

Alexis Tsipras is leader of SYRIZA
and the European Left Party’s candidate
for the Presidency of the European Commission